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Materiality turn: Community artifacts as indispensable media for communicating societal culture

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Abstract

Globally, cultural heritage is often expressed through artifacts that embody the historical antiquities, traditions, and collective identity of the society. Artifacts are understood as carriers of community memory, social relations, and identity, rather than passive objects. Therefore, Artifacts function as non-verbal multimodal media of intergenerational transmission, helping societies to communicate cultural knowledge and collective memories across historical periods. Human artifacts are, thus, powerful conveyors of human activities over time. Moreover, Artifacts offer a tangible testimony of how people have interacted with their environments. From time immemorial, anthropologists have attempted to decode the materials and craftsmanship to uncover the symbolic meanings embedded in these crafts. This paper explores how community artifacts communicate community culture from an anthropological lens. These objects, ranging from tools, weapons, clothing, and art to monuments and pottery, signify the political, social, economic, and spiritual dimensions of human civilizations. The theories that underpin anthropological value and communicative role of artifacts include the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT Framework), Property Transmission, and the Embodied Cognition Theory. Artifacts as Media for Cultural Communication help preserve the societal patrimony. The museums, heritage collection institutions, and archives, therefore, need to take up the role of conserving artifacts. This will ensure cultural continuity for future generations. Moreover, preserving artifacts promotes intercultural dialogue by communicating both the uniqueness and connectedness of cultures worldwide.

Keywords: Materiality turn; Artefacts; Antiquities; Traditions; Media; Material culture

1. Introduction

For many millennia, communities have been influenced by the *materiality turn*. Visual or digital media, artifacts serve as channels of communication, enabling communities to convey abstract beliefs and historical experiences into tangible and perceptible forms. Culture is deemed to be hidden in a community's diverse practices. Anthropologists scrutinise artifacts to interpret social structures of a community, recognising that such items often help to decode knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and social roles. The wide array of community artifacts demonstrates the multifaceted landscape of human culture. This diversity of community artifacts and symbols underpins how meaning is communicated beyond language alone and reinforces the shift toward recognizing material artifacts as key communicative media that actively mediate meaning, shape cultural dialogue, and contribute to the production and transmission of cultural knowledge.

1.1. Artifacts Preservation: A Brief Overview

Across the globe, many countries have preserved artifacts not only to protect and celebrate their cultural heritage but also to communicate it to future generations by maintaining a tangible connection to their past. For instance, in the United States of America, programs such as the U.S. Department of State's Art in Embassies initiative and the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation often utilize art and cultural heritage in promoting mutual respect and

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collaboration among nations. These efforts underscore the role of cultural exchange in fostering international diplomatic relations and communication of shared values (US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' (ECA) 1961) [1]. The program increases mutual relations between the United States and the people of other countries using educational, cultural, and professional exchanges, supporting the development and sustainment of mutual relations. In India, Karmwar & Saurav (2025) [2] explored how artifacts such as inscriptions, sculptures, coins, and architecture embody India's cultural narratives, reflecting the Indian historical craftsmanship, community diversity, and identity.

Quintana Morales (2024) [3] examines how, in Latin America, the Pre-Columbian and Amerindian artifacts, such as mound effigy bottles or Jaguar effigy ceramic vessels, act as agents of identity and meaning among indigenous communities. The artifacts are not items of mere aesthetic value; they function as symbolic media, emending religious worldviews, cultural transformations, and social relations. Through their materiality and ritual use, these objects act as active agents in social life, by facilitating cultural memory, negotiation, human connection, and identity across historical times. Anthropologically, these artifacts are deemed to be material anchors revealing how communities use tangible cultural forms to align with belief systems, historical narratives, and continuous intergenerational belonging.

Lusaka (2023) [4] focuses on ethnographic artifacts and museum displays in Malawi, including traditional regalia, dance paraphernalia, domestic utensils, and ceremonial objects. These curated artifacts function as cultural communication media interpretive texts that communicate the spiritual, ethnic, and national identity of the people of Malawi. The ethnological items help in fostering dialogue between past and present generations. The museum displays of the objects strengthen cultural awareness and nurture collective historical memory.

In Kenya, there are notable institutions including the national museums Kenya, with ethnographic, and contemporary art exhibits from various Kenyan communities including traditional musical instruments; the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Service (KNADS), apart from preserving Kenya's documentary heritage such as manuscripts, government records, photographs and maps, it displays many physical and artifacts presenting Kenyan historical and cultural identity. Murumbi African Heritage Collection, now housed at the Nairobi Gallery, showcases a rich array of African artifacts, such as books, stamps, sculptures, and paintings, reflecting the diverse cultural heritage from various countries across the continent, including Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Benin, etc. as Namande, (2012) [5] observes, these institutions have digitized these resources (Isoka & Namande, (2022) [6].

2. Theoretical Framework

Several theories underpin the communicative role of artifacts in cultural information. By outlining some key concepts, assumptions, and relevant theories and establishing a foundation for understanding the power of artifacts as agents of communication, cultural knowledge.

2.1. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT Framework)

The Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework helps understand the interplay between human learning and behavior as shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. The CHAT advances that artifacts are mediational tools in human activity, such as cultural artifacts. Artifacts reveal the mental processes and interactions among communities and cultural contexts. Therefore, artifacts are often active communicative tools rather than inactive vessels.

According to Stetsenko (2023) [7], artifacts are mediating tools that not only transmit existing culture, but also help in the transformation of cultural conditions. It is, therefore, possible to find meaning emerging from the uses of artifacts in social contexts, hence transmitting cultural knowledge embedded in practices represented by the material tools. This theory, therefore underscores that artifacts link the subject matter and the object in communicative activities. Artifacts are therefore embedded in community norms across users and generations.

The CHAT theory further offers a framework for understanding that artifacts both reflect and reproduce community culture in action, facilitating transformative social praxis. Aguayo & Eames (2024) [8] situate physical and virtual artifacts as effective mediators of social interactions and cultural discourses by supporting cross-cultural narratives. According to Cliffe et al (2024) [9], museums are adopting a technological concept of "audible artifacts" that uses sound-based Audio Augmented Reality (AR). This concept supports mediating cultural communication within museum settings, enabling museum and gallery visitors to engage within a CHAT framework.

2.2. Property Transmission Theory

The Property Transmission Theory (PTT) explains how properties such as meaning, value, or status may be inherited or transmitted from a person, an object or an event to another. This theory conceptualises artifacts as carrying properties of their creators. This included both physical and mental intentions. People perceive and interpret artifacts as physical embodiments and expressions of the maker's "extended self." Therefore, artifacts convey cultural meaning through imprints and symbolism associated with individuals' creation processes.

Kreuzbauer & Keller (2017) [10] delve into understanding the interplay between the individuals' psychological mechanisms of perceiving the authenticity of community artifacts and property transmission expectations. The authors look into whether the perceivable features of the cultural product truthfully capture a respective set of cultural knowledge and the inferred agency control, and the intention of the producer. Judgments of authenticity of cultural products are fundamental psychological judgments to determine whether the sign-vehicle accurately reflects the sign-object.

Newman et al (2022) [11] explore how human intuitions, specifically the mental and physical effort involved in the creation of artifacts, affect the perceptions of the value of those artifacts. The central concept discussed is the idea regarding artifact creation and how beliefs influence judgments of ownership, authenticity, and the significance of properties to the cultural contexts. This explains how cultural communication is believed to occur through symbolic attributions where artifacts mirror the identity or values of their creators. Even where there is no direct contact, people can read the intentional representations of culture, ideas, and mental blueprints produced by the makers.

This lens explains why and how crafts, art, or handwork articles are valued conveyors of culture. Clune (2019) [12] describes how cultural artifacts among indigenous communities transmit ancestral knowledge and community identity, acting as active mediators of societal cultural continuity. The author also explains how cultural objects embody and transmit the collective memory of the community and social relations. Myers (2002) [13] explores how cultural artifacts communicate spiritual and social properties transmitted particularly through community ritual and craftsmanship. The author highlights how the cultural objects pass both material and immaterial cultural properties and knowledge, reinforcing social cohesion and cultural identity.

2.3. Embodied Cognition Theory

The Embodied Cognition Theory posits that cognitive processes are deeply anchored in the sensory interactions with the physical and social environment. This perspective emphasises how perception, cultural artifacts and action shape human thought. This illustrates how practices are influenced by socially meaningful objects and contexts. This theory assumes that meaning arises through sensory, bodily, and action-based engagement with artifacts. Raczaszek-Leonardi, et al (2019) [14] tie material artifacts to social sensory behaviour and norms in a cross-cultural service context, illustrating how artifacts help in shaping communicative embodiment.

Ma et al. (2023) [15] observe that, in the cultural heritage context, traditional dance props or musical instruments and artifacts are considered communication tools when mediated through gestures, virtual-real interactions, and multisensory experiences. This framework functions using Virtual Reality (VR)-enabled technology, where gesture-recognition and Virtual Reality technologies enable users not only to experience and internalise various cultural practices naturally and instantaneously. Artifacts, therefore, become effective cultural communicators, mimicking real-world embodied practices. This indicates that artifacts are not just symbolic but are also sensorially embodied and particularly ground cultural learning in the physical interaction of individuals, where cultural meanings are both cognitively and experientially learned.

2.4. Community Artifacts and Culture

Many communities communicated and transmitted their cultural heritage through the preservation of their artifacts. Cultural artifacts are items that contain important information about the way of life of a society. Cultural artifacts are diverse in nature. Artifacts, therefore, play a crucial role in cultural communication since they serve as tangible representations of communities' beliefs, values, and practices.

In America, Asia, and Africa, critical narratives provide a more inclusive and accurate representation of human experiences. In this way, artifacts are not only remnants of the past but are historical records, preserving the achievements, voices, and struggles of human societies across generations. For instance, the discovery of ancient hieroglyphs in Egypt not only provided insight into the Egyptian language but also ushered in a vast knowledge about worship and religious ideologies, governance, economic and daily life. Smith (2004) [16] underscores the importance

of indigenous perspectives in history and research, particularly the interpretation of artifacts and prompting narratives that respect indigenous artifacts across the world. Enriches the voices and experiences of people, positioning artifacts not just as remnants but as active historical records.

Although Foucault (1972) [17] doesn't explicitly focus on physical artifacts, the work analyses discourses, the systems of information and language that shape how societies interpret and assign meaning to objects, including artifacts. The author maintains that artifacts gain significance not inherently, but through the historical and cultural frameworks; hence, they reveal the power relations and the rules governing what counts as valid history or truth.

2.5. Culture as a concept

Culture is a great resource in communication. The way of a people's life is communicated through their cultural manifestations. Spencer-Oatey & Kadar (2021) [18] view culture as a concept that is complex, multifaceted and difficult to define. The authors note that culture deeply shapes human behaviour, values, and social norms. Culture is not only about community traditions or identity, but also encompasses shared beliefs, practices, and communication styles that guide how societies interact and interpret the world around them.

According to Hanrahan (2021) [19], culture comprises beliefs, values, attitudes, and traditions shared by a group. Culture also involves psychological aspects and expectations of the communication context. The context of the communication interaction governs behaviour. (Weinland, 2023)[20]. These components provide a framework for communicating community behaviour, influencing social norms, and upholding cohesion among members of a society. Through their transmission across generations, these elements contribute to the continuity and identity of the cultural groups, though remaining open to transformation over time.

Culture can be divided into two broad categories: Material and non-material culture. Macionis (2018)[21] distinguishes between material culture and non-material culture. The author indicates that material culture consists of tangible items such as physical objects, while non-material culture consists of intangible aspects. According to Conerly et al. (2021) [22], primarily, material culture includes the visible culture. It includes physical or tangible items such as arts, food, attire, symbols, objects, architectural designs, etc. Non-material, on the other hand, comprises the non-tangible-attitudes, perceptions, thoughts, values, customs, norms, and beliefs.

Culture has various attributes highlighted below:

Culture is shared as a social phenomenon and experience by the members of a society. According to Haviland et al (2017)[23], cultural beliefs, customs, values, and practices are not always individual traits but are communally held among members of a given society. Culture is therefore developed and maintained through collective interactions, communication, and participation in communal existence. Sharing culture provides a sense of community identity and belonging, giving individuals an understanding of their roles within a group. The roles are coordinated through the sharing of commonality in their symbols, language, or traditions. This collective aspect of culture ensures continuity and social cohesion across generations.

Culture is also dynamic and adaptive, as it is constantly changing and progressive. Griffiths et al (2019) [24] indicate that culture is not a static set of customs, norms or values but a constantly changing concept, where society adapts to new ideas, technologies, and interactions. Therefore, culture evolves as society consistently adapts to new ideas and environments. Culture is thus not fixed; over time, traditions and beliefs, and practices are continuously reshaped through interactions and shared experiences. This change persistently makes culture dynamic and helps reflect both the past and the present.

Culture is learned (acquired). It is not inborn and intuitive like racial characteristics, which are genetically inherited, but rather is acquired through socialisation and interactions with other members in a community. Individuals absorb cultural values, norms, language, and other behaviours by observing and imitating those with whom they are in contact. This learning process continues throughout life, although it varies across societies, shaping individuals' perceptions and worldview, and their behavior in particular cultural contexts. Since culture is learned, it can also adapt and change over time as people encounter new experiences and ideas (Ferraro & Andreatta, 2018) [25]. Culture is, therefore, transferable or transmissible from generation to generation through the process of communication and interaction or historically derived.

Culture is guided by values (Ethos). Ethos deals with the qualities that pervade the whole culture. As Spradley & McCurdy (2012) [26] note, culture is guided by values, often referred to as ethos, which are particular principles and

moral beliefs that shape the society's behaviour. The values influence what a society holds right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, or acceptable or unacceptable. It is the Ethos that provides a moral compass that guides individuals' behaviour and their collective decision-making processes, solidifying cultural expectations. Through the shared values, members of a cultural group develop a sense of oneness, purpose, and direction in their daily interactions.

2.6. The intersection between Materiality Turn and communication

The paper "*Materiality Turn: Community Artifacts as Indispensable Media for Communicating Societal Culture*" is grounded in the rationale that communication is not always confined to written, spoken or digital symbols but is also embedded in the non-verbal, tangible objects and environments that communities produce and interact with. Material artifacts serve as physical carriers or conveyors of meanings, community norms, and histories. This enables people to express and transmit culture across generations, even in the absence of direct interpersonal interactions.

The intersection of materiality-turn with the field of communication helps expand to embrace non-verbal and material forms of meaning-making. It illustrates how artifacts function as enduring conduits that shape dialogue, interpretation, identity, and community cohesion. This helps in recognizing materiality as an active agent in communicative processes. Moreover, it provides a framework for understanding how societies construct, propagate, preserve, and communicate cultural meaning through material culture. Artifacts offer strong insights into social evolution from ancient civilizations, making them invaluable for current and future historical research and cultural continuity.

2.7. Artifacts in Communicating Cultural Essence

As Barthes (1972) [27] observes, artifacts are mythic signifiers and are understood as cultural signs that hold both denotative and connotative meanings within a given community. When viewed through Barthes' semiotics, these objects may be considered powerful media of cultural communication. Therefore, societies' artifacts have not been inert objects but active agents of the expression of historical knowledge.

Hasty & Snipes (2022) [28] underpin the role of anthropological studies in examining people's way of life by using certain research strategies to represent and distinguish people from cultures different from their own. Anthropologists also explore controversial topics that challenge individual assumptions and values. The ultimate goal is to understand fully the experiences of humanity, setting aside personal perspectives and maintaining an open mind while learning about human diversity.

Anthropology incorporates several disciplines of study: social-cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, archaeology, and bioanthropology. Since Anthropology is the study of human societies and cultures, it is intensely associated with the interpretation of human artifacts. Ingold (2013) [29] notes that human artifacts serve as tangible evidence of cultural practices. Artifacts may range from community crafts such as tools and pottery to artworks and other objects. Since culture is quite complex, anthropologists apply various inquiries to integrate the products of specific environmental and historical conditions. Anthropology, therefore, offers crucial insights into the social behaviours, including belief systems and practices, and social structures across time. It is through the material culture that anthropologists reconstruct the community's historical context and interpret symbolic meanings embedded in the society's objects, thus bridging the gap between the exhibited tangible evidence and intangible cultural knowledge. This underscores the fact that artifacts are not merely physical remnants but active agents in conveying human experiences and identities.

2.8. Significance of Artifacts as media for cultural communication

McLuhan(1964) [30] famously asserted that "the medium is the message," signifying that the form of a communication medium (e.g., tool, artifact, technology) influences the way information is perceived. In this view, artifacts serve as extensions of human senses and cultural practices, determining how societies communicate and evolve. Artifacts, therefore, communicate culture in some of these ways:

2.8.1. Symbolism

Cultural symbolisms manifest through various physical manifestations in the form of communities' artistic expressions, rituals, language, and general material culture. Cultural symbols are, therefore, the tangible representations that are observable, experienced, and interpreted by individuals within a given cultural context. Artifacts often embody articles and symbols that communicate specific meanings. These include religious artifacts such as sacred crosses, prayer beads, which convey spiritual beliefs, while traditional attire, props or ornaments reflect cultural identity and mannerisms.

The analysis of symbols in Late Bronze Age Mesopotamian glyptic has allowed the uncovering of symbolic heritages peculiar to different cultural periods and has deepened comprehension of the complex system of relationships and integration of different cultures, trespassing their chronological boundaries. As Pizzimenti (2013) [31] notes, interactions are attested between cultures, chronologically and geographically overlapping, leading to the continuous transformation of symbols and symbolic patterns through centuries, often with a total loss of the original meaning but still with their ancient power. These symbols are strictly connected to the nature of people and to their way of thinking. The symbols surround us, and we use them to express ourselves. The symbolic heritage is therefore an imperative element in understanding the culture of mankind, since it is a deep expression and a mirror of the relationship of men with their surrounding world.

Oparaocha(2023) [32] observes that, overall, cultural symbolisms provide physical manifestations of tangible presence in community art, language, rituals, and material culture, allowing their interpretation, engagement and communication within a cultural context. These physical expressions of cultural symbols play a critical role in shaping and communicating human cultural experiences and identity by providing visible and tangible representations of the symbolic values and meaning associations inherent in community in cultural symbolisms.

According to Krumrey (2023) [33], human beings do share some universal habits like eating and sleeping, but these habits are biologically and physiologically based, not culturally based. Culture communicates the ways of what to eat, how to sleep, and what individuals usually view as normal. Culture becomes so entrenched within communities that often they do not even recognise that they have a culture or how it affects their everyday lives and choices. Some scholars have viewed culture as a pair of glasses that are worn and the user forgets that they are wearing them. Only when someone mentions it, wearing glasses, do they remember the difference they make in their sight.

Cultural symbols play a fundamental role in enhancing connection and communication within a given community by providing societal tangible expressions, representations and interpretations that support engagement with and understanding deeper meanings and values embedded in the symbols. The physical presence of these tangible symbols in various forms, such as community art, rituals, language, and material culture, provides auditory, visual, or material stimuli that facilitate interactions, connections, and shared experiences among individuals and groups within certain cultural contexts.

Christie et al. (2014) [34] observe that cultural symbols are crucial tools for facilitating social cohesion and communication among communities. These symbols, whether expressed in rituals, art or material objects, convey shared meanings and community values that help people to interpret and engage more deeply with their cultural surroundings. The symbols provide tangible representations of abstract concepts, creating a common ground for human interaction, promoting a sense of belonging as well as mutual understanding. According to the authors, the sensory experiences induced by symbols, such as auditory or visual stimuli, have the power to connect people, supporting social solidarity and collective identity across different cultural settings.

2.8.2. Storytelling

Many artifacts talk about a culture's stories, often incised in community myths and oral traditions. Community objects such as carvings of masks, pottery, basketry, and other tools can reveal insights into societal practices and norms. Mizrahi (2019) [35] explores how storytelling varies across world cultures. The manner in which a story is told is as significant as the content. A community's cultural background influences its narrative style. For instance, while Anglo-Americans might prefer explicit storytelling, Latin American narratives often focus on details and contexts. This underscores that these different ways to reflect deeply on cultural values and communication community traditions underpin storytelling as a crucial tool in the expression and preservation of cultural identity.

2.8.3. Community Identity

Culture functions as a medium for expressing and negotiating identity within a social context. Communities strengthen tangible connections through artifacts, which are primarily physical representations of society's experiences, traditions, and values, allowing members to connect deeply with the community. Kennedy (2018) [36] describes how cultural artifacts such as art, symbols, and rituals represent a society's shared values and experiences, supporting identity negotiation and social connections within communities. Therefore, community artifacts that are produced and owned by society communicate a sense of belonging and identity within a cultural group. Although community identity is not always static, such items as flags, emblems, totems, or traditional crafts enable individuals to connect with their own roots and reinforce community bonds.

Hall (1990) [37] observes that cultural identity is not always a fixed essence but rather a positioning anchored in a historical community's narratives. Community identity may be shaped by the continuous interplay of historical antecedents, culture, and power, often leading to a dynamic and evolving distinctiveness. This perspective portrays that cultural identity is mostly constructed through the community discourses and symbols that a group adopts to define itself, making it a crucial tool for preserving cultural uniqueness in a continuously globalised world.

2.8.4. Rituals and Traditions

Artifacts are integral to community rituals and traditions and primarily serve functional and symbolic purposes. Valeri (2018) [38] notes rituals can communicate and facilitate cultural practices while enhancing the communal experience during certain events, such as the mark society ceremonies and festivals, including their rites of passage, such as birth, initiations, weddings, or festivals. The communicative role of religion is realised above all in the system of practices in community worship, as they provide the unique contexts in which communication occurs. They also incorporate the implicit or unconscious notions that are not reduced nor reducible to the propositional forms of beliefs *sensu stricto*. Hall et al (1980) [39] encoding-decoding model becomes crucial for understanding how cultural products, including artifacts, are encoded with meaning by the creators and decoded by the audiences, whether in negotiated or oppositional ways. Artifacts, in this particular framework, can be viewed as cultural texts with meanings, though not fixed, but interpreted in different ways depending on the social context.

3. Conclusion

Community artifacts, besides reflecting culture, actively participate in its construction, negotiation, and transmission. They not only chronicle the evolution of artistic materials, but their presence in public spaces, ceremonies, or everyday life reinforces both personal and shared identity, allowing communities to engage with their heritage. Thus, through the anthropological lens, artifacts are not static remnants of communities' historical past, but dynamic components of human experiences that continuously shape societies' identity. People. In this view, artifacts are recognised as primary media for communities to articulate their historical experiences and identity-making; thus, making it essential to both cultural preservation and interpretation. Communities, therefore, encode, negotiate meaning, and transmit their cultural beliefs and practices through these objects. Artifacts act as non-verbal media texts, communicating cultural codes and values across historical times and spaces. These objects, therefore, allow collective interpretation and emotional resonance by giving meaning, shaping, and keeping alive the communities' cultural heritage.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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