



# Indigenous language media, participation and democracy in Africa

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Indigenous Language Media in Africa Research Entity



# Introduction

- The beginning of African language press is usually associated with Christian missionary activities.
- The missionaries chose to establish the local language press for their evangelical activities.
- The missionaries knew that the only way they could, effectively, diffuse the beliefs and tenets of their religions among the natives was to communicate with them in the indigenous languages.
  - Christian Missionary Society (CMS) [Yoruba], Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM), later known as the Church of Christ among the Tiv or the Nongo U Kristu Ken Sudan Hen Tiv (NKST) [Tiv, Chiyanja], United Mission for Central Africa (UMCA) [Chiyanja], Catholic Church (isiZulu, Chichewa, Ewondo), Overtoun Institute of the Free Church of Scotland [Chiyanja], The Wesleyans and Presbyterians [isiXhosa], Church of Scotland Mission [Efik]former Qua Iboe Mission (now United Evangelical Mission) [Igala]etc.

# Intro (contd)

- It is the same idea of effective communication in indigenous languages (Prah, 1996; Djite, 1993; McNamara, 1965; Mlama, 1978 in Okombo and Rubgumya, 1996; Fafunwa et al, 1989; Salawu, 2004) that made local language press a veritable tool for democratic mobilization.
- Political theorists (Herbst, 1993, Kovach and Rosentstiel, 2007; Jamieson and Waldman, 2004; Entman, 2005, Omaera, 2010; Voltmer, 2010, Olukotun, 2000) have established connection between democracy and the media
- The media are increasingly replacing political parties in stimulating and organizing the participation of broad masses in the political system.

# Intro (contd)

- Issues of participation which are central to the democratic project have evolved around the creation of alternative media as well as the use of creoles and local languages.
- In this vein, an effective public sphere is created when there is a press established as a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate (Habermas, 1989).
- The public sphere is the source of public opinion needed to “legitimate authority in any functioning democracy” (Rutherford, 2000:18).

# Intro (contd)

- This presentation attempts to place indigenous language media in Africa in a particular historical context with a view to highlighting their role in enhancing the participation of Africans in the political process in their local environs
- This paper looks at the involvement of the African language media in Africa mainly in the two epochs of nationalist struggle and post-independence politics.
- It also considers the pitfalls of the participation of local language media in ethnic politics.

# Local language media in the nationalist struggle

- African politicians in the colonial period regarded the local language media as an important tool for mobilization against colonialism
- **Nigeria**
  - Folarin and Mohammed (1996), for instance, remarked that a major purpose of the early local language newspapers in (colonial) Nigeria was for the expression of nationalism
  - For instance Yoruba newspapers like *Eko Akete* (1923), *Eletì Ofe* (1923) and *Akede Eko* (1931) proclaimed in their mottos that they were for liberation and defence of people's rights
  - A foremost nationalist, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, also established *Iroyin Yoruba* in 1945 to further the nationalist struggle and later his own political agenda among the Yoruba people

# Local language media in the nationalist struggle (contd)

- In **Malawi** (Kishindo, 2006)
  - Political parties in colonial Malawi recognised the need to have their own media in the battle for the minds of African masses
  - The Nyasaland African Congress began *Kwacha* (Dawn) in 1955 for the purpose of counteracting damaging propaganda emanating from newspapers established by the colonialists. *Kwacha* had enormous influence
  - It was, for example, credited for being responsible for mobilising massive support for the Congress candidates in the first elections that took place in the country in 1956 when five Nyasas were elected into the Legislative Council

# Local language media in the nationalist struggle (contd)

- When *Kwacha* was banned in 1959 during the State of Emergency, it was replaced by another indigenous language newspaper, *Mtendere Pa Ntchito* (Freedom at Work) to continue the political agitation
- The NAC was replaced by the Malawi Congress Party which within a month of its formation launched *Tsopano* (Now) as its unofficial organ. *Tsopano* was a militant mouthpiece which was widely accepted by the people
- The United Federal Party also saw the virtue of publishing in indigenous language. It published a Chinyanja monthly journal called *Timvane* (Let's Listen to Each Other).



# Local language media in the nationalist struggle (contd)

- In **Kenya** (Ugangu, 2006)
  - During the struggle for independence starting in the early twenties to the late fifties, nationalist leaders like Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, Harry Thuku and Tom Mboya started news publications in various local languages which they used as forums to galvanise the support of African constituency against the existing oppressive political conditions
  - Since the colonial administration could not permit African leaders to organise formal political meetings, the indigenous language press platform became a useful forum through which they could explain the African grievances against the colonial administration in a manner and language that local people understood

# Local language media in the nationalist struggle (contd)

- The indigenous language press thus became the vehicle through which the emerging class of political leaders were able to communicate the central issues of the African grievance like land, poor wages for African workers, harassment by local authorities, lack of self-determination and the need for liberation
- The early African-owned indigenous language press did not only succeed in reaching out to the masses; they also succeeded in making the struggle a collective responsibility for the majority of Kenyans
- Overtime, this created a critical mass of Africans with a growing sense of awareness of their rights such that they would in later years, organise and arm themselves to fight the colonialists during the Mau-Mau rebellion in the fifties. The fervent political atmosphere, in turn, provided ample ground for mushrooming of indigenous language press.

# Local language media in the nationalist struggle (contd)

- In **South Africa**

- *Imvo Zabantsundu* (1884 - 1997)
- *IkwezeLe Afrika* (1928 - 1932) was established by Pixley Seme, ANC President-General (1930 - 1937)
- *Ilanga* (founded in 1903) was bought over in 1987 by the Inkatha Freedom Party
- The newspapers in the fourth phase (of the black-oriented press) tagged The Progressive Press were platforms for the expression of community struggles. They were located in the wider struggle for democracy. This phase started in the 1980s. The newspapers in this phase were connected to popular political movements. They were non-profit and largely relied on subsidies and grants from churches, foundations and trade unions. *Ukusa*, published in Natal between 1982 and 1985, was a newspaper during this phase

# Local language media in the post-independence period

- **In Kenya**

- There was a lull in the indigenous language press in the period immediately after independence. This lasted between 1963 and 1987
- The period (1963 - 1987) saw the gradual development of a very conformist mainstream press in Kenya and very little indigenous language press development
- However, the agitation for multi-party democracy from the late eighties to the early nineties saw the re-emergence of the indigenous language press as a tool in the agitation for greater democracy and political change in the country

# Local language media in the post-independence period (contd)

- As a result of the conformist stance of the mainstream press, even under the Moi regime, many Kenyans in need of more objective and courageous reporting started moving towards a re-emerging alternative press for news on what was happening in the country
- At the height of agitation for democracy in the mid-1980s up to the early 1990s, many publications – some in English, but many others in the various native languages (particularly Kiswahili) spoken in Kenya – started appearing on the newsstands as the alternative press. *Pambana* was one of such newspapers

# Local language media in the post-independence period (contd)

- In **Nigeria**

- The publisher of *Alaroye* newspaper said he started the newspaper (in 1996) to fill a gap that existed because there was no independent and in-depth coverage of the political development of the time in Yoruba newspapers (Adedayo, 2006)
- This was a time when there was a fervent agitation for the de-annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and the enthronement of democracy
- The election happened to have been won by MKO Abiola, a Yoruba man. Therefore, it was understandable that the struggle was more alive in Yoruba land
- The publisher noted that the people yearned for information and thorough analysis of events as they unfold

# Mobile telephony, Digital and Social Media

Salawu, A. 2013. Access, local language and public sphere: Phone-in R/TV programme as a platform for citizen journalism in a Nigerian election. *Telematics and Informatics*, 30: 267 – 274

# Pitfalls

- Could also be used to counter democratic movement
  - *Bwalo la Nyasaland* (Nyasaland Forum) was a European settler newspaper published (between 1953 and 1962) to disseminate propaganda, extolling the virtues of colonialism and counteracting the liberation movement in Malawi
  - *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* (a Hausa language newspaper in the Northern Nigeria) was also used to counter anti-colonial propaganda from the Southern press
  - Rwanda, 1990s; Kenya 2007
  - DRC; South Sudan
  - Tribalism (Ethnic chauvinism) [Rwanda, Kenya, *Alaroye* in Obasanjo vs Ghali Na'aba, Obasanjo vs Ekwueme]



# Conclusion

- Notwithstanding these challenges, indigenous language media still remain a potent vehicle for mobilising people for positive (developmental) goals which include democracy
- Colonialism may have been dislodged in Africa but there is still the need to ensure effective participatory democracy so that people can be involved in their own governance, make informed decisions and make governments accountable.
- A major factor that can militate against local language media playing this positive role is the growing phenomenon of the corporatization of the local media. In order to ensure the profitability of the media business, corporate media organisations which venture into this kind of publishing end up pampering the readers/audience to 'funky' contents that more often appeal to base instincts

# Conclusion (contd)

- However, in this age of digital technology, the crusading role of local language media can be extended to the online and social media (Examples of digital forms of legacy media, blogging, mobile telephony and social networking sites)
- UNESCO realised the importance of indigenous language media to the advancement of democracy when it included the module, *Indigenous Language Media and Democracy in Africa*, in its four-course Reporting Africa syllabus
- The specific objective of the particular module is to experiment with culturally and linguistically innovative media forms which lend themselves to a more democratically engaged journalistic practice

# THANK YOU !

- THANK YOU FOR LISTENING