Politics and the Media in Sub-Saharan Africa

Anthony Obilade

Politics and the Media in Sub-Saharan Africa

Cover Page Footnote

Anthony Obilade is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Departments of English and Political Science at Sacred Heart University. This paper was first presented at Sacred Heart University on March 21, 1995 as part of the Third World Institute Lecture Series sponsored by the Department of Global Studies. The printed version of this paper has benefitted from the comments of Drs. Louise Spence, Katherine Kidd, John Kikoski, Marianne Russell, and Judith Davis Miller.

ANTHONY OBILADE

Politics and the Media in Sub-Saharan Africa

One of the most remarkable events in the political history of Africa in recent times is the dismantling of the apartheid system and the establishment of a multi-racial democratic system of government in South Africa. The fact that long queues of prospective voters could replace graphic media images of riots and general mayhem in the streets so soon after the various parties have reached agreement on the future of the country seems to have engendered a lot of hope about the survival of Western-type democracy in Africa. Yet, significant as the peaceful transition to majority rule in South Africa is, Africanists and political observers alike tend to see this event as just another milestone in the continent-wide preoccupation with the search for a more accountable and representative form of government which would allow popular participation in policy formulation and implementation. This movement toward democracy has rekindled an interest in the role of the media in the establishment and maintenance of a stable democracy in Africa (Voster 33).

That attention should be focused on the media as an essential element in the search for political stability in Africa is a natural outgrowth of a global culture that has learned to rely on the media as the catalyst for change. In recent history, the Western media have, perhaps inadvertently, taken it upon themselves to champion the cause of democracy in Eastern Europe and to speak out for the poverty stricken Africans who were more often victims of bad government (as in Zaire, Somalia, South Africa and Sudan) than of the forces of nature (as in Ethiopia, Mali, and Somalia). This _____

Anthony Obilade is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Departments of English and Political Science at Sacred Heart University. *This paper was first presented at Sacred Heart University on March 21, 1995 as part of the Third World Institute Lecture Series sponsored by the Department of Global Studies. The printed version of this paper has benefitted from the comments of Drs. Louise Spence, Katherine Kidd, John Kikoski, Marianne Russell, and Judith Davis Miller.*

interventionist stance of the media has imprinted in our minds a

somewhat bloated image of an activist media that can not only confront any government on the question of human rights but is also capable of appealing to the conscience of the countries of the North (which include Britain, France, Canada, Japan, the United States, and other industrialized western nations) to suspend economic and political considerations and contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of the less fortunate. African people, if not African governments, certainly owe a lot to the western media in the matter of an improved quality of life effected either through direct relief assistance programs or indirectly through pressures put on African governments to respect the rights of the people to a decent living.

There is no doubt that democracy as we know it today could not have survived in the western world without the constant vigilance of the media. And in highlighting the plight of the oppressed peoples of Zimbabwe, South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, and several other African countries, the media have been instrumental in forcing the United States government in particular to change her African policy, making it more consistent with her ideals of individual freedom and equality of opportunity. Yet, in spite of the positive changes that the western media have brought about, we cannot expect the African media to play exactly the same role of sustaining democracy as defined by Europe or America. We need to bear in mind that when it comes to the role of the media in African political systems, it is necessary to be conscious of the fact that the ability to effect meaningful change depends, ultimately, on how acceptable to the people the functions the media seek to perform in society are.

The acceptability of the functions would depend on the nature of specific socio-cultural conditions in Africa. For example, we may note that although it took a lot of commitment on the part of the global media to influence world opinion to the level that pressure was put on the minority government of South Africa to allow an all-races election at all, the success of the election was due in large part to the South African media which donated ``an estimated $20 million in creative talent, air time, and print space for a campaign for peace in South Africa." According to Voster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) ``played a major role in communicating voter education programs to the vast voting public of which more than 50% were functionally illiterate" (33). As a matter of fact the campaigns of

the 28 political parties were said to have been extensively covered on radio and television. The media considered it a part of their duty to educate the people (who were ignorant of the terms of the National Peace Accord signed by all major political parties as well as church and labor groups in September 1991) and to ensure that no political organization felt ignored by the media because of financial considerations. We need to note that some of the roles we have learned to associate with the media — as the repository of public opinion, the clearinghouse of information to which the public should have access, and the forum for the expression of individual right to free speech — are situation specific; these are roles conferred on the media by the American society. In short, it is debatable if a chaotic situation might not arise when a media system attempts to assume a role its parent society does not necessarily sanction.

The new interest in the role of the media as an essential element in the search for democracy in Africa is not based solely on the achievements of the media in other parts of the world. Rather, it appears that there is a more fundamental reason to focus on the media in Africa today. From an ideological standpoint, a free and independent media system is assumed in the concept of the ``new world order," as conceived by President Bush (Slater 161-62). Implied in the new world information order, a contentious issue in the North/South debate, is the requirement that access to information should not be denied by any government. Access to information is expected to result in more political participation. The economic component of the new world order package suggests that the media should be privatized rather than remain under government control. Although the privatization of the media is just an aspect of the general economic requirement to cut government waste in Africa, it seems that it would also result in more press freedom, enabling the press to perform its traditional watchdog role. A privatized media system would obviously result in access to a plurality of opinions, a refreshing idea for those who have for decades been exposed to propaganda from government-controlled media. Strengthening the media appears, at least on the surface, to be a major factor in the search for a solution to Africa's economic and political problems: creditor countries have tied economic assistance to structural adjustment in economic and political behavior and have even pledged support for a free press which would

ensure compliance with the wishes of the electorate.

Viewed from the perspective outlined above, it appears that the media have a major role to play in the search for political stability in Africa. Western democracies, however, seem to expect the media in Africa to play exactly the same role they play in the established democracies in Europe and North America. As far as can be ascertained, African governments agree that the media should be part of the development process. Some heads of state as well as government officials would even affirm that the media are an indispensable part of the political system (Opubor 80). The opposition media, on the other hand, seem to think that governments in Africa typically pay lip-service to the idea of a free press merely to please the increasingly critical creditor countries who have tied the observation of human rights (including the right to free speech) to economic assistance and debt relief (Riley 175).

However it might appear that African governments and the Western governments are speaking the same language, there is a great deal of misunderstanding especially regarding what each side means by such loaded terms as ``freedom,'' ``democracy,'' ``human rights,'' or even the ``media.'' In short, while everybody agrees that information management has a major role to play in participatory government, there is considerable disagreement as to what the relationship should be between the government and the media and what should be the role of the media within the political system itself.

As can be expected, media scholars are almost unanimous in their condemnation of African governments as well as the the poor state of the media in African politics. Governments are blamed for their high-handedness in dealing with the media, intolerance of opposition, manipulating the media, and creating conditions that make publication almost impossible (Ayitteh 185). Media personnel are depicted as being cowardly and subservient by choice. The media are at best presented as institutions filled with timid groups of ill-trained personnel who have lost their bearing and who cater to self interest rather than the people's interest. At worst, journalists are presented as corrupt collaborators in the mass enslavement of the population.

Governments are also criticized in similar terms. Ayitteh has documented scores of cases of media abuse by the government in several African countries. The government arbitrarily confiscates

newspapers, revokes publishing licenses, tortures and detains journalists at will, and generally discourages the publication of material critical of government activities (Ayitteh 185). There seems to be a subtle suggestion that unless there is some external intervention in the form of an insistence on democracy, the media in Africa cannot be effective.

The Problem

The conclusion that the media need a democratic environment to function appears to be justified, given the persistence of authoritarian tendencies in governance in Africa even in the midst of the so-called democratization process. We may note that there have been persistent complaints about censorship and slanting in favor of the new majority in South Africa since the new government came to power last year. But when the same facts are considered in light of the socio-cultural situation of each of the countries of Africa, one might come to quite a different conclusion with respect to the effectiveness of the media and the true nature of their relationship with the government in Africa.

There are several problems with the predominant view that sees the press as a potentially democratic force rendered ineffective and corrupt by a tyrannical government which wants to remain in power at all costs. First, it would appear that we have neglected the idea that the media cannot function effectively without a consideration of the nature of their audience. And the functions of the media can only be determined in accordance with the wishes of the people, based largely on their world view or vision. To assume at the outset that the media are democratic by nature is to miss the point. In the final analysis it offends reason to expect the press in Kinshasa and Kansas City to play exactly the same role regardless of the facts of history and culture. Since media and political behavior can reflect deep-seated cultural values, it is debatable whether perceptions regarding media effectiveness in Africa may not have been colored by sheer ignorance on the part of the analyst of the social vision of the specific African society as well as the adoption of inappropriate analytical tools in investigating the relationship between the media and the political system.

Although it is generally agreed that the media do have a role to

play in the democratic process, this role is yet to be fully defined by African societies and so also has each country to evolve its own model of democracy. We should realize, as scholars have warned, that it is wrong to assume that democracy will function only when underdeveloped states become developed and by implication traditional man is transformed into ``modern man."

We may mention that the true nature of the role of the media in an African society cannot be appreciated as long as we operate from a tradition that sees development as a linear process in a ladder-like structure where we have western democracies as the final stage of progress toward democracy (Hyden 20). A lot of the people in African countries would not want their society to reach the final stages of democratization within such a framework if these stages are characterized by loss of social bonds, excessive state control in the raising of children, and unbridled freedom that may result in an atmosphere of excessive social violence, a once fictional nightmare fast becoming a fact of life in developed countries. It is instructive to note that the proliferation of the media, as in Ethiopia where over 100 newspapers appeared after multipartism was introduced, has not led to greater freedom nor has the absence of private media affected the quality of life in Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and Angola. And as Sussman observed, decentralization of governmental control would not necessarily produce news media independent of the new ruling parties (28).

Thus, in studying the role of the media in Africa, it is necessary to pose questions in the most neutral terms and to avoid the use of terminology that may not be applicable to the situation being studied. Obviously, previous studies that simply assume that the locus of political power and structures of decision making in Africa can be found within the state's formal institutions, as is the case in American and European democracies, are not likely to come up with an accurate interpretation of the nature of governance and the role of the media in Africa, where traditional nonformal institutions normally enjoy a greater degree of legitimacy than imposed ``democratic" structures (Davidson 9).

The primary focus of this study is the nature of the relationship between media and political systems in Africa at the present time. Also, since the idea of the modern nation-state and the modern media

are legacies of Africa's colonial past, it will be important for a study of this kind to explore to what extent western notions of the role of the media in society have been modified to suit the particular regimes or even political systems in Africa. More specifically, this study examines the following questions:

1.How have the media in Africa been shaped by the political functions they have evolved to serve?

2.How should we evaluate the media in Africa in terms of their effectiveness?

3.To what extent have the media in Africa served as agents of democratization?

4.To what extent are the differences in media practices in Africa and in more advanced democracies due to a conflict of visions?

5.How has the issue of conflict of visions influenced media-regime relations in Africa?

6.How has the idea of a new world order affected the media in Africa?

In exploring the nature of the media within the African political system it would be interesting to examine just what factors have shaped the media in Africa today. In essence, I will argue that the predominant view that sees the unending conflict between the media and the government as deriving from the tendency of the government to want to cling to power (Ayitteh 185) is a somewhat simplistic interpretation of a complex phenomenon. Similarly, seeing the conflict in Africa as a question of an inherently democratic media trying to function within a power-hungry autocratic system will be an inaccurate assessment of the situation in Africa. Rather, the real source of conflict between the press and government in Africa has more to do with the struggle between two elitist forces in an effort to attract the support of the vast majority of the African people who are as alienated from their

government as they are from the elitist formal media. Far from being an embattled system, the media in Africa are actively struggling for political space (Bayart 242), catering to special interests and very frequently playing the catalysts in the change of government.

I will argue that there is a need to be more sensitive to the nature of power relations as well as the world view of the people of Africa before any pronouncements on the nature of the relationship between the media and the political system can be accurate. Due to a conflict of visions as well as some unanticipated developments in the global political economy, some of the western ideas that are supposed to lead to free speech and democratization may actually be having the opposite effect.

Media and Political Behavior: Some Preliminary Issues

The media in Africa do not necessarily refer to the same entities (abstract or concrete) that people are used to in Europe and America. The media in Africa still perform the basic functions of information dissemination to a mass audience but the priority given to such features as entertaining, informing, professional ethics, and credibility may be different from what a product of the western society would expect. Perhaps the most significant difference between the western media and the African media lies in their relationship with their respective political systems.

It is only natural that media systems would differ in terms of structures and practices, since whatever is published must have an audience in view. But we may note that while the people's right to know is a long-cherished African tradition (Biakolo 89-96), not even the most revolutionary of thinkers would admit the possibility of an African leader, elected or self-imposed, being forced out of office because of some media revelations. The explanation lies in the fact that the right to know is defined differently in Africa than in western countries. In Africa, the right to know is tempered by a consideration of such factors as age, respect for office, consideration of consequences for the family, and other integrating factors in the society. Just as the American media have self-imposed restraints governing good taste, the African journalist also knows the limits of his or her freedom to publish. The major difference lies in the source of

the restraint. Whereas the American journalist may choose not to publish what the First Amendment properly permits, the source of the African journalist's restraint is, most likely, the fear of sanctions by the society itself if not the government.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the African media-government conflict has to do with the interpretation of the term ``democracy'' by African regimes, an interpretation that tends to justify what advanced democracies would call human rights violations in the pursuit of the national interest. Authoritarian regimes in Africa have consistently exploited the vagueness of the term ``democracy'' and have characteristically argued that they were acting ``in the interest of the nation'' or for the common good. Various military and civilian regimes in Nigeria (for example, the Buhari and Babangida regimes of the 1980s), Ghana (the Nkrumah regime of 1957-66, the Rawlings regime of the 1980s), and Zimbabwe (the Mugabe regime from 1980 to date) have tortured media personnel, proscribed publishing houses, and generally terrorized the media in their so-called pursuit of national interest (Ayitteh 175; Sussman 29). These regimes even claim that they enjoy the support of the people and consistently justify the overthrow of elected civilian governments by citing the people's desire for change. The people are always presented as the source of their authority, a somewhat blatant perversion of one of the most admirable features of the democratic form of government.

In view of serious differences between African and western nations in the conception of key terms such as democracy, freedom, and human rights that generally determine the limits of journalistic practice, it would be difficult to determine precisely just how the media in Africa ought to be evaluated. As indicated above, it would be unrealistic to apply western criteria to an indigenous system which evolved from a very different set of historical and cultural circumstances. But equally unacceptable is the idea of explaining away obvious human rights violations under the aegis of cultural relativism. One cannot maintain that torturing journalists and operating a system that clearly expresses intolerance of criticism of government is justified either ``in the interest of the nation'' or ``at this stage of our development,'' as many government officials in Africa have claimed.

The Media and Politics in Traditional Africa

Long before the great scramble for Africa began in the middle of the nineteenth century the peoples of Africa had recognized the pivotal role of information dissemination in the formulation of public policy. In the aristocratic kingdoms of the Yoruba in Nigeria and present-day Benin Republic, there was provision for the king's chief information officer, who ensured that important announcements on such matters as town meetings, planting season, yam festivals and the like reached the masses. This mass-oriented information process is independent of the other channel of information management which operates through members of the King's council who were supposed to keep the people informed through the heads of individual households.

Similar arrangements existed among virtually every other society with a centralized system of government such as the Hausa, the Asante, and the Zulu (Davidson 74). Even in societies without a central government, such as those of the Ibo of southern Nigeria, the Tallensi of Ghana, and the largely pastoral peoples of eastern Africa, public enlightenment was an essential aspect of political participation. In short, the absence of a literary tradition did not preclude the human need for information dissemination. African peoples have developed an elaborate oral media system with five major strategies that are still in use today in disseminating political information (Wilson 87). Thus, we can safely conclude that, traditionally, the media have always been recognized as an indispensable factor in shaping the political behavior in Africa (Biakolo 90).

More relevant for our present study is the tradition of endowing information handlers with political power. Invariably, bearers of the king's message enjoy a lot of political power and this perception of the managers of information as symbols of political power still persists today. In light of this, it should not come as a surprise that most journalists in Africa identify with the government of the day. Furthermore, it does not seem out of place to consider the private press as the enemy of the state, especially since traditional rulers (who now remain in office only at the pleasure of the government of the day) almost invariably identify with the government, however repressive that government might be. In short, to oppose the government is to oppose tradition as symbolized in the traditional ruler.

To the educated elite who control most of the information on the continent, the traditional ruler is hardly relevant in the new political dispensation, where political power is supposed to belong to the party that wins the election and not to whomever the king decrees. Whereas the traditional ruler cannot challenge the military, the press can. The educated elite realizes that the traditional ruler is frequently an obstacle to modernity, especially as they sometimes give their blessing to autocratic regimes. Thus, the press which was mainly responsible for leading the people to independence often finds itself in the awkward position of advocating progress as determined by erstwhile colonial masters in the face of opposition from the people who have been asked by the traditional ruler to support autocratic regimes. Because of the great disparity in education in Africa as well as many areas where the relatively uneducated have a monopoly on power, conflict between the media and the largely autocratic ruling class is inevitable. What further complicates the situation is that whenever a journalist of note is detained in Africa, only foreign media organizations or foreign governments are capable of putting enough pressure on the African government to release the victim. While this represents victory for the media it also exposes media
agencies to charges of trying to subvert the government and threatening the independence of the country. It is doubtful if the situation can improve without a more educated and politically sophisticated population.

World View, Visions and Media Behavior

Investigation of the world view of a newspaper columnist is necessary to anticipate how that journalist will approach an issue. There is strong tendency among scholars to form an extremely strong attachment to a single world view, a phenomenon that has been described as the intellectual version of the ``law of the hammer."

Our world view determines the meaning we ascribe to common items in the political lexicon. As Anyaoku, the Secretary General of the (British) Commonwealth has pointed out, the concept of ``loyal opposition" is alien to Africa. Opposition in the English parliament tradition simply translates as ``the enemy." Would it have helped the west which has prescribed multi-party democracy as a condition for aid

to Africa if they had known that factionalization would breed enmity?

A world view or vision, as defined by Thomas Sowell in his book, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggle*, is ``like a map that guides us through a tangle of bewildering complexities . . . and, like maps, they enable us to focus on a few key paths to our goal" (1-7). Social visions reflect reality as conceived by the people. In the case of Africa, visions are their picture of reality and are embodied in ancestral charters, and it is the vision, the symbol of unity, rather than any national boundaries or ideological pronouncements by latter-day dictators that define the people. For example, the fact that the colonial governments divided the Somali people and parceled them into four different countries (Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Kenya) does not diminish Somalia's agitation for greater Somali.

One method of extracting information about the world view of a people is by observing their behavior. For example, people tend to agree that the American society places a high premium on individualism. This is true, not because people say so but, rather because features of individualism are a constant factor in social behavior to the extent that this has been institutionalized; indeed, it forms the bedrock of democracy in America. This individualism is reflected in architectural style, the judicial system, the economic system and, indeed, in all aspects of American life.This is in direct contrast to the Africa-wide world view, which reflects collectivism rather than individualism. Traditional political systems reflect a decision making system based on consensus building rather than applying the majority rule. Kings and chiefs often held lengthy debates on issues of importance and, as Chinua Achebe says, the village meeting is the birthright of every Ibo citizen. After everyone has had his or her say, a joint decision is reached only after every effort has been made to convert everyone to the predominant view. The decision thus reached becomes the decision of the society. If there are extremely strong views, the matter may be unresolved and may lead to separation; people may have to move to other lands where they can govern themselves according to their own principles. But there are criteria. The major argument has to do with what position reflects the good of the people in terms of centuries-old principles laid down in the ancestral charters. Even with this preliminary analysis we may begin to realize the inadequacy of the analysis of Anyaoku, the Secretary

General of the Commonwealth, who said that in Africa, opposition means enemy. Taking the analysis further, could we claim that since individualism and its corollary, free speech, have sustained the world's oldest democracy, that principle must apply to all people of the colonized world? Could we maintain the presumption that those societies where individualism is discouraged are less concerned about individual freedom?

If, as stated, traditional Africa had found it expedient centuries ago to discourage public opposition while maintaining freedom of expression within the various institutions that are represented at the highest level of government, should it surprise anyone if the journalists often wonder whether the society would support public attack on leaders who are supposed to be political as well as spiritual leaders? In relatively closed societies such as we have in Africa, a society that believes in cycles of boom and burst, is it possible that the press is actually not in bondage but in government as it has been right from the period of colonization?

Analysis of African media must also take into account the culture's strikingly non-western conception of time. In contrast with the ``time is money'' attitude dominant in western societies, in African society time is not linear but cyclical. Most of the languages are not inflected for tense. The future does not concern the people. Time is a possession, a part of the unending cycle of nature, an infinite commodity. Consequently, journalists do not risk being fired for failing to meet deadlines, interviews are not cut off to make room for commercials, and the Seven O'Clock News in Nigeria or Ghana or Niger Republic may come on at 7:05 on Monday and 7:17 on Friday without so much as an apology. Similarly, a one-hour episode of *Dallas* or *Dynasty* may last only thirty-five minutes if it is considered necessary to interrupt the program to present pictures of two or three little children who may have wandered off while their parents were in the market. An editor of a daily newspaper in Africa need not worry if a flat tire slows down the distribution process. In Nigeria, two-day old newspapers would sell just as much as today's newspaper. Indeed, some readers regularly receive their newspapers up to four or five days late. Is this an inefficient system? Should we conclude that the media are constrained by infrastructural inadequacies? Is it really desirable for the media to respond differently from the demands of the society?

And where does the practice of journalism end and advocacy begin? It is possible for the African media to become irrelevant in their society if they try to impose the competition-driven clockwork efficiency of the western media. In a continent that emphasizes cooperation rather than competition, negative advertisement would backfire, even in politics. It certainly would be risky to initiate policies that would conflict with the vision of time of the people. If, as in the case of Nigeria and several other West African countries, people in certain parts of the country could still continue to transact business in the old currency years after this has ceased to be legal, an editor need not lose sleep over publishing a weekly magazine several months late.

In general, African political culture as well as her media exhibits more of the features of the unconstrained vision than the constrained, as defined by Sowell (``Conflict of Visions" 2). Their pronouncements on the media, the economy and democracy emphasize sacrifice, sincerity, and nationalism, features the developed world would consider unrealistic. They are strong on intention but weak on costs. They seek solutions to poverty and tend to blame their predicament on others, in accordance with the Africa-wide belief that other people are responsible for one's predicament because of their behavior. They tend to stress with conviction Rousseau's dictum about man being everywhere in chains although he was born free. The constrained vision of the west stresses free enterprise as the cause of peace, wealth and political stability. This vision assumes the inherent weakness of the African environment and prescribes what has worked for Europe and North America as the key to development. Development itself involves costs which no democratic government in Africa has been willing to take.

Herein lies the key to the success of the military in Africa. Since only the west could reasonably remove them (by economic and military material starvation) they need only please foreign governments. It is instructive to note that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other foreign lending agencies find it easier to do business with Africa's autocrats, since these dictators are the only ones who could enforce the harsh social measures prescribed by the West to revive Africa's economy. As a matter of fact, virtually every substantial loan that precipitated the debt crisis was negotiated with dictators in Africa. This is one of the reasons why there is absolute

distrust of government in Africa.

It will be difficult to maintain the position that the press is ``subservient'' or ``irresponsible'' in Africa if we consider the fact that the press has always been an arm of government throughout Africa's history. Information may be conceptualized in politics as power, but in the African context the global information explosion that has neither empowered the masses nor encouraged openness and accountability in government. Instead it has made the media more elitist and more prone to confrontation in her dealings with the government. Information glut does paralyze the system as conflicting signals fill the air waves. The United States Information Service regularly feeds information to the African continent on the dynamics of a democratic system as evidenced in the live telecast of presidential election returns, the confirmation hearings of a Supreme Court nominee, Clarence Thomas, the concession speech of defeated politicians, and the inauguration of a new president. The same medium provides information on the violence in America's big cities, ethnic cleansing in eastern Europe, and the storming of the Russian Parliament. While American journalistic ethics would normally compel reporters to present even the ugliest sides of democracy, this comprehensive view of democracy in action is usually exploited by anti-democratic forces in Africa to perpetuate themselves in power.

Finally, let us consider another perspective of the vision of the universe shared by several African cultures. Contrary to the western tradition of scholarship, which defines objectivity in terms of the separation of the observer from the observed, African cultures in general do not necessarily analyze phenomena within this framework. Since the observer is part of the phenomenon being observed, so the reasoning goes, it is impossible not to intrude into the situation and impose one's interpretation. And the main reason why the African political system is based on consensus rather than the majority system has to do with the fact that everybody may be right. The major goal of humanity is to find harmony within nature and so separating the self from the environment is an aberration. Applied to the media, an elitist institution in a largely illiterate environment cannot but function as gatekeepers, translators and opinion leaders. Maintaining objectivity in the western sense may render one irrelevant.

The Media Today

Because of the peculiar historical situation in Africa, the press has to take on more responsibility than is usually associated with the profession (Opubor 80). Some scholars feel this was a mistake on the part of the African media but others like the British media scholar, Peter Golding, believe that the press in Africa was ``born of anti-colonial protest, baptized in the flood of nationalist propaganda and matured in party politics" (quoted in Dare 42). The press cannot afford the luxury of distancing itself from the problems of the community it professes to serve. Some other people even claim the press is irrelevant since it is just a part of the government. To people under forty years of age in Africa who have had to live their entire life under one form of dictatorship or the other, this makes sense. Opubor rightly notes that in Africa, people generally assume that the government is acting in the best interest of the people and anyone who questions the government is an enemy. There seems to be very little the media can do if the people have agreed with the government that the objectives of media services ``should be the fostering of national harmony and the promotion of the spirit of national reconciliation" (Opubor 80). If, as Opubor has noted, African people have been led to believe that the media are to be regarded as partners or collaborators with government in serving the interest of the nation, then the media cannot raise questions about government actions without appearing to be working against the interest of the nation.

There are certain other basic differences between the media in Africa and the media in other parts of the world. In terms of Maslow's framework, media agencies are engaged in serving lower level human needs like disseminating information on survival, food, shelter, security, and physiological needs. Self-esteem and self-actualization are far from the minds of the masses. The increasingly loud call for the developed world to assist in getting rid of Africa's dictators is an aspect of this new realization: that sovereignty is of little help in places like Ethiopia, Rwanda, Liberia, and Somalia.

The press is not business oriented in Africa: very few people can afford the costs. In most countries, privatization is being discussed in accordance with the new requirements of the developed world, but even in Nigeria, where privatization has been approved for over five

years, private radio and television stations have not taken off because of financial constraints. The economy may be the final determinant of the future of democracy in Africa.

The press performs very little of the watchdog role in view of the factors described above: Africans rarely criticize leaders in public and, of course, the repercussions from the society could be severe. Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Laureate, has affirmed like many other media scholars that Nigeria and South Africa have the freest press in Africa. If South Africa which proclaimed Mandela as a ``banned person" for decades and Nigeria which still regularly accuses the U.S. of providing publishing material to Nigeria's independent newspapers can qualify as ``free press" societies, the situation in other parts of Africa must be really bad.

The press is still elitist because most of the people cannot relate to the contents of the newspapers: world issues, democracy, political squabbles, and entertainment. Most people are just too busy trying to eke out a living under severe economic constraints to care much about the media and their messages.

The masses in Africa do not trust the media at all. They turn to foreign stations to listen to news about their country. The BBC, Voice of America, and the International Service of France and Germany are the main sources of information about inflation, the amount of foreign debt, how much Africa's politicians have in foreign banks, election dates and arrangements, and other such sensitive information. Africa's rulers would rather grant interviews to the foreign media than the local agencies. Virtually every change in government by military coup has been announced first by the foreign media.

On the question of censorship, African governments have devised sophisticated techniques but sometimes the excuses they provide are still ridiculous. Editors in Angola and Mozambique were dismissed for providing too much reporting on the events in eastern Europe. It was obvious that these two Marxist-oriented countries did not want their people to know of the ultimate fate of their Marxist economic structure. More common is the technique of revoking the license of all news organizations and requiring fresh registration at exorbitant fees. Of course only a few carefully chosen organizations will be re-registered. But legal requirements have never prevented publication in Nigeria or South Africa. A sizeable number of the magazines in

Nigeria today are underground publications. Proscription and lock-outs are the favorite methods of censorship in Liberia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Zambia, and countless other countries. Daily newspapers have now been reduced to only a few pages because of the hazards of publishing.

Even foreign artists are sometimes blacklisted. Bob Dylan's ``Blowing in the Wind" contained lyrics that the government thought gave rise to riots on campuses and in the streets in western Nigeria in 1965 after the elections which had been massively rigged. Government promptly proscribed the record, along with any songs or performances that appeared to advocate resistance or suggest that anything was wrong in the society. Just a few months into the citizens' revolt, the military took over the government (on January 15, 1966) and Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Jimmy Cliff were back on the air in Nigeria long before they reappeared on TV in America.

Censorship is an outgrowth of the African attraction to power. In Africa, ministers of information are normally experienced media personnel but it is they who come up with decrees that muzzle the press. As a Nigerian minister for information put it, ``journalists can write whatever they like as long as they do not criticize Nigeria. To criticize Nigeria is to criticize God" (quoted in Ayitteh 184). And yet several studies have claimed that criticism is a traditional African ideal, for there can be no consensus without free speech.

The New World Order and the Media

Autocrats have found a new ally in the west because they have something to blame the poor economic conditions on. An unintended consequence of the IMF conditions has been the monumental increase in the cost of publishing, since all the materials are imported. Thus, newspapers are beyond the reach of the ordinary African and some publishing houses have had to close down voluntarily because of the shortage of newsprint. Some currencies have been devalued by about 10,000 percent within five years. The consequence is that the press is becoming more alienated than ever from the public.

The only positive development is the service that foreign nations provide directly to the people through government and nongovernment agencies. Of particular importance is the United States

Information Service which regularly presents tapes on democracy in action in the major cities of African countries. Watching live the presidential election process, the debates, the inauguration, and Senate confirmation hearings must have a profound effect on those who yearn for democracy, especially since these are people who have been told by their leaders that multiparty politics is divisive. In short, the American media have been the beacon of hope, the symbol of assurance that the transition from ancient systems to modernity is not only possible but desirable. The media cannot afford to be apolitical in an environment where political decisions may mean the death of hundreds of thousands, and possibly millions, within a period of a few days.

Finally, the implementation of the provisions of a new world order probably needs the suspension of the illusion of equality of states based on the legitimacy granted by membership of the United Nations. In June, 1993, under pressure from prominent African- American organizations and pro-democratic organizations in Nigeria, the U.S. abandoned, at least temporarily, the myth of sovereignty and issued a statement through an embassy official in Nigeria that any further postponement of the Nigerian presidential elections would be unacceptable to the U.S. government. As tens of millions of Nigerians trooped to the polling stations a few days later, they knew that but for the intervention of the United States, they would once again have been denied the chance to formally renounce military dictatorship. Although the officer who made it all happen did leave the country on the orders of the Nigerian government about ten days later and even though the United States' elections observer team was denied its status, Nigerians were able to demonstrate to the entire world that contrary to military propaganda, the society warmly welcomes foreign interference on the side of greater democratization. More significant is the warm applause the intervention of the United States on the side of freedom received from the local media. The Nigerian public agreed that diplomatic protocol may need to be breached more frequently to achieve democracy in Africa.

Conclusion

The African media scene is extremely dynamic and this is a

reflection of a continent in transition from post-independence euphoria characterized by blaming economic and political woes on colonialism to a more realistic acceptance of its share of blame in the sorry state of the continent in developmental terms, regardless of the criteria applied. The media are at the center of this universal search for solutions to the economic and social problems of Africa which, many believe, have to do with governance. One voice that reflects the media's search for relevance in an African society is that of Major-General Haruna, a former minister in charge of information in Nigeria. He asked in what direction African media should go:

> Americans project freedom, the British believe it is for them to civilise others and the French say they have a culture to protect. . . . what is the core of our existence? What are we doing to the artist, the writer, etc. They are not being involved in our political existence. Our intelligentsia think in English but communicate with those who think in other languages . . . . (Opubor 159)

To be aware of the universe of the media practitioner in Africa is to appreciate the fact that historical, economic, social and philosophical considerations make it highly unlikely that any outside source can be a catalyst for any significant change in the status quo on the foreseeable future.

Works Cited

Ayitteh, George. *Africa Betrayed*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.

Bayart, Jean-Francois. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. London: Longman, 1992.

Biakolo, Emovon. ``Issues in the Communication of Democracy in Third World Societies: The Example of Nigeria." *Understanding Democracy*. Ed. Ayo Fasoro *et al.* Ibadan, Nigeria: Bookcraft, 1992.

Dare, Olatunji. ``126 Years of Patchy Service." *Newswatch* (October, 1988): 41-46.

Davidson, Basil. *Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*. New York: Random House, 1992.

Hyden, Goram. ``Governance and the Study of Politics." In *Government and Politics in Africa*. Ed. Goram Hyden and Michael Bratton. Boulder, CO: Lynne Renner, 1992.

Opubor, Alfred. ``Public Communication Policies and the Mass Media in the New Nigeria." *Nigeria in Transition*. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1979.

Riley, Stephen. ``Africa's New Wind of Change." *Annual Editions: World Politics 94/95*. Ed. Helen E. Purkitt. Guilford, CT: Dushkin, 1994.

Slater, Robert *et al. Global Transformation and the Third World*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Renner, 1993.

Sowell, Thomas. ``A Conflict of Visions." *Dialogue* 79, No. 1 (1988): 1-7.

Sowell, Thomas. *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1987.

Sussman, Leonard. ``Press Freedom is set Back Worldwide." *Editor & Publisher* 127 (Jan., 1994): 28+

Voster, Theo. ``Helping the Miracle Happen." *Communication World* 11 (September, 1994): 33-35.

Wilson, Desmond. ``Survey of Trado-Modern Communication in Old Calabar Province of the Former Cross River State, Nigeria. Ms., 1988.