

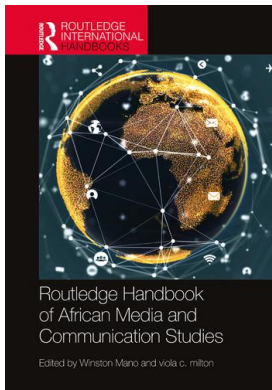
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To be or not to be

Decolonizing African media/ communications

Kehbuma Langmia

Introduction

In June 2009, Facebook Swahili was launched by Swahili scholars in the west (BBC News 2009). This marked a major step towards decolonizing media dissemination and consumption in the horn of Africa from the claws of western domineering languages (English, French and Portuguese). If Cheikh Anta Diop is reputed to have said “no nation ever developed using the language of another people” (Asante 2007a, 13) then this is a major step in the right direction. This decolonized mindset would go a long way to debunk Curtin’s (1964) assertion that there “never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white” (42). The African person is ‘civilized’ as he/she is conscious of his environment in the same light as Jomo Kenyatta knew that the English language was not making him authentic before his people and so “broke into Swahili to the applause of his auditors” (Skinner 2001, 31). Given the fact that Facebook opened the Afrikaans version on March 15, 2009, and since there is a possibility that in the near future Facebook will also be available in other African languages like Wolof, Hausa and Yoruba, one could say that the process of media decolonization in Africa has begun. Language is the vehicle of culture and culture is the mores of a people. Apart from language, African media content needs to be decolonized. African electronic media systems are the offshoots of ontological, and to a much larger extent, the axiological tenets of the west, thereby making African communication a pseudo-western system devoid of African culture. Examples abound: The west did not only colonize Africa to supplant political and economic control, they wanted assimilation in all spheres of African life. The newspaper, radio, television and now the Internet-mediated platforms on African soil are structured and programmed to fit and align with what pertains in the west. After all, there is no one transmission device for radio, television and Internet manufactured in Africa. So, African media organizations import finished products, including program materials from Europe, America and China, for wider dissemination on the continent in their original western languages. The same goes for news programs. According to Mazrui (2009) “Nigerian media (electronic or print) cannot afford to have their own correspondents in major African capitals, or war reporters in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo” (15). My own country, Cameroon, has never deployed its own reporters to major UDEAC, Francophonie or ECOWAS summits to cover the entire event beyond the short stay of its

president and entourage. All other information from those events, including major conflicts in the region, is reported through the camera lens of western sources. With this type of mediascape in Africa, we can never decolonize. Ali Mazrui continues to state that: “Much of Africa has borrowed western tastes without western skills. It has borrowed consumption patterns without production techniques. It has promoted urbanization without industrialization and has learned capitalist greed without capitalist discipline” (21). These are the realities that Africa after more than 50 years of self-rule is witnessing after the colonial experience. To borrow western taste without mental re-evaluation is nightmarish. To continuously consume western digital communication gadgets in colonial languages without interrogating our minds and challenging western manufacturers to involve Africa and African languages in the process is to fall prey to Thomas Sankara’s (Akomolafe 2014, 66) saying that “he who feeds you controls you”. We have reputable African languages like Kiswahili, Yoruba, Hausa, Wolof, IsiXhosa, Zulu, Amharic etc even being taught in western universities, yet they are being paid lip services on digital media on the continent. Africa has been feeding fat on western production materials without looking back to where she belongs in the world gamut of world productions and consumption patterns.

Manufacturers of telephones, computers and most especially hardware and software destined to countries in Asia and Middle East integrate Arabic, Chinese, Korean and Indian languages etc in them, but when it comes to Africa, anything goes; so long as they are in English, French, Portuguese or Spanish, they will be consumed in Africa. I was impressed to see Arabic keyboards in Morocco, but unimpressed to find French and English keyboards in Internet café’s in almost all of the tropical African countries (Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Uganda and Kenya) that I have visited in the last six years. Some parents in Africa have cell phones but only a handful can actually send text messages in English or other European languages because of their incapacities to use western languages, let alone send emojis, yet no alarm bells are being sounded. Africans seem to be content with the status of being at the receiving end of imported western-mediated products. The continent of Africa is awash with imported mediated goods and services, none of which addresses Africa’s indigenous communication needs. Just look at the modern media companies; none is designed to fit the communicative sociocultural contextual realities of the continent. From the studio construction to the broadcast green rooms, no research has been systematically carried out on African soil to integrate past communicative patterns like folktale night, moonlight storytellings, grandfather’s fireside tales, mothers’ lullabies, courtship wooing sounds, chieftaincy ritual dirges, divination songs, funeral drum sounds, war and mourning communicative techniques to align with western-imported stylistic studio designs in African media organizations. The continent is *forced* to only adapt (if possible) by working with letters and alphabets borrowed from Greeks and the Romans in order to survive in what Marshall McLuhan calls the “global village” (Antecol 1997, 455). But Africans are struggling to accommodate their unique village realities to that of the west that seems to embody what we now know as the world.

Electronic and digital media engineers from abroad never take pains to spend years and months in our countries to study our communicative cosmologies. When our own engineers are educated in the west they return and bring with them western ideologies on how our studios should be constructed. African countries continue to walk behind and not beside the west, and there is no end in sight. Our consumption patterns, as noted by Ali Mazrui, have been the sole driving force for our collective dependence on the west, and the effects of colonization on our minds, the brainwashing of our minds even after independence, has increasingly pushed us to the brink of creating pseudo-western states in Africa. Big media companies like Google, Apple, Verizon, Amazon and AT&T are leaving footprints all over the world, including Africa, especially with respect to online-mediated communications. Africa and Africans are

only adapting and assimilating their erstwhile communicative patterns by westernizing African communications patterns and systems. Therefore, if we truly wish to decolonize mediated and communication systems in Africa, we need a paradigm shift made up of three approaches which I will be able to demonstrate using secondary data analysis i.e. (1) produce African-centered content in African languages like Kiswahili, Yoruba, Wolof, Zulu etc with subtitles in western languages; (2) fund, promote and deploy Afrocentric journalists in African countries for regional reporting; 3) internationalize the African News Agency (ANA); and (4) create more Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) whose server and content are operated and managed by Africans. The answers provided by these research questions should provide clues to the validity of Molefi Asante's theory of Afrocentricity. According to Asante (2007b, 16), "Afrocentricity is . . . a consciousness, quality of thought, mode of analysis, and an actionable perspective where Africans seek, from agency, to assert subject place within the context of African history". He goes further to state that ontological and epistemic priorities that involve and include Africa as agency should consciously attempt to make it Africa centered. The emphasis of the theory of Afrocentricity is on Africa and Africans conscious state of being.

Background/literature

"Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language" (UNESCO 2010, 4). Reasons given by this organization include Africa's colonial past and the urgency of globalization. Because education is the foundation of human growth, foreign language education has been deeply seeded in the African academic soil and in almost all mediated facets of life. In order to stem the tidal wave of foreign languages in Africa, the 2015 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa meeting in Addis Ababa came out forcefully in support of the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) resolution of encouraging the teaching of African languages in schools. This was done because the lack of online content in African languages for Africans in Africa is dismal. A plethora of media scholars (Asante 2013; Mazrui 2009; de Beer and Saliba 2000; Park and Curran 2000; Carey 1992) have decried the omnipresence and content of Western media on African soil that have stymied the growth and development of local Afrocentric media organizations. Their main criticism is similar in style with the lamentations of Lawino in Okot p'Bitek's poem "Song of Lawino". In that poem, Lawino mocks at her husband Ocol for rejecting her rich African food because he is in love with the food of a white woman called Clementine. In short, he is in love with the white man's way of life. Ocol speaks the local language with a white man's accent. All this is happening with the backdrop of Africa's knowledge economy and the quest to modernize the continent by following deeply ingrained western value systems. Africa can hardly disentangle herself from the cocoon of westernization if modernity is tied only to the Euro-American standard of evaluation. The continent continues to be the mullato or the imitator of everything western in terms of architecture, education, infrastructure, economic and political systems, culture, social status, class and value systems. In a study by Mbinjama (2013) carried out in a rural setting called King Williams Town in South Africa, participants preferred to be readily associated with western modernity than to associate themselves with that town. In fact, as the author states:

It was also mentioned that being associated with King William's Town was like living in the "*Larlies*", a slang word often used by isiXhosa-speaking people to refer to the townships or squatter areas and signifying backwardness, lack of worldly wisdom and modernity. The adolescents want to belong to a modern society.

(Mbinjama 2013, 62)

The colonial experiment on the continent of Africa created an epistemic inferiority in the cognitive abilities of her citizens. That surreptitious vicious experiment was to absolve them from knowing and respecting anything African. They were reduced to what Mazrui (1986) has referred to as passive participants in world affairs. African men and women, including their children, were brainwashed so as to feel ashamed of themselves vis-à-vis their colonizers. The only way for Africans, according to the imperialists and missionaries who invaded the continent, was to make them speak and act western before they could be recognized as human. According to the study by Mbinjama (2013), this is evident more than 60 years after Africa gained independence. Mbinjama (2013) also found that young South Africans also changed their identity while on social media because, according to them, “changing who they are online gratifies the need to appear richer, more westernized, and educated. In so doing, they create the illusion that they are of high status in the virtual community” (62). This is what has become ubiquitous in the geo-socio-psychological hemisphere of these natives. Language use online was equally a primordial consideration for users. Mbinjama’s study also revealed “that adolescents would judge a contact’s online writing, spoken dialect or accent to determine where they come from” (62). So, users prefer those proficient in English online but at the same time they would not like to interact with “whites” because it is symbolic to English and not isiXhosa. In fact, they preferred someone who can mix the two languages. It is this dichotomous ideological imbalance that African media users find themselves in today.

The colonial experiment imposed western language as the vehicle for educational quests in all schools. Birgit (2012), citing the World Bank report of 2011, discusses a rather disquieting phenomenon about language challenges for kids in Africa. Several studies illustrate the seriousness of the learning challenge. More than 30 percent of Malian youths aged 15 to 19 years who completed six years of schooling could not read a simple sentence; the same was true of more than 50 percent of Kenyan youths (World Bank Group 2011, 6–7). These kids grew up learning and speaking their mother tongues only to confront another new language in the western-style elementary schools. This classic display of cognitive dissonance as reflected is emblematic of the average African learning in schools and consuming western-driven media.

The tragedy is much more dire as more Africans seek to become information rich in an environment where the Internet comes in a foreign language. Halvorsen (2012) makes the case for Internet content to be in African languages:

There is a call for more contributions from African scientists, scholars and creators of Internet content which is relevant, readily assimilated and in languages and contexts users can relate to and understand. The assertion is that a Western cultural and information imperialism, enabled through African countries’ dependence on the more established and rich countries, still prevails.

(316)

Halvorsen (2012) also remarks

that it is imperative that the Tanzanian intellectual elite is active in creating Internet content which is relevant, readily assimilated, and in languages and contexts users can relate to and understand. To participate in information and knowledge societies people need to be able to create as well as utilize knowledge. As pointed out in the introduction it is essential for a participant not to regard Internet content as being predetermined and unchangeable, but to see the possibility of being an active participant rather than a passive consumer.

(319)

Lor and Britz (2006, 18) suggest: “Ideally African countries should reduce their dependence on the information infrastructure of their former colonial rulers by improving national bibliographic control and developing regional resource-sharing schemes”. This seems to be the panacea for closing the loopholes between the information-rich and information-poor countries with respect to media consumption. This is because Halvosen states “there is an ongoing cooperation between the Department of Kiswahili and the Faculty of Informatics and Virtual Education in creating Kiswahili software” (320). From the traditional media perspective, Kiwoya and Makokha (2009) make a strong case for creating a Kiswahili Broadcasting regional hub with member countries in East Africa which they called the East African Regional Broadcasting Service (EARBS) (28). We need to do this because, according to a speech by Bokova (2010), “We need to protect the over 201 African languages in danger of being extinct” (Kandybowicz and Torrence 2017). In an article on #RhodesMustFall published in *The Guardian*, Chaudhuri (2016) argues on the merits of the new epistemic dispensation post Cecil Rhodes, who is more often than not associated with racism in South Africa. The call for a new vista to dispense knowledge also includes language that is used in African universities to inculcate wisdom and values of the African world into the minds of African people. This of course should include the media that constantly bombards the people of Africa with images and sounds primarily emanating from the west. In support of this stance, two years later, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) published “Epistemic freedom in Africa: deprovincialization and decolonization” and raised the issue of globalizing Africa’s knowledge. The world should not deprive Africa’s epistemic potency, and that should include African language perception across all new media platforms.

De-Europeanize mentality

Africans are still suffering from mental incarceration brought unto them by European conquest of the continent. For decolonization of the mind, according to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, to materialize on bona fide Africans at home and in the diaspora a mental tsunami is needed to clean their mental hemispheres (Ngũgĩ 1988). The effect of European mental subjectivities and the inter-necine magnetic neocolonial machinations to subjugate Africans to secondary ‘inferior’ positions vis-à-vis global epistemologies has crippled us for decades. If W.E.B Dubois characterizes African Americans as suffering from double consciousness, the African in the continent and in the diaspora is suffering from triple consciousness, i.e using African, mulatto and Euro-American lenses to perceive the world. When Franz Fanon underscored the philosophical perceptions of the colonizer and the colonized in Africa, he was, in fact, seeking ways for mental liberation for the African. Presently, the African government-sponsored media reporter in the continent has three audiences to satisfy: the neocolonial master (to ensure continuous flow of foreign aid), the Black African on the continent (still suffering from the prestige of anything that is gold from Europe/America glitters) and the African in the diaspora (who worships and dines with the neocolonizer). When Water Rodney published his now famous “How Europe underdeveloped Africa”, he was laying the ground rules for the decolonization of the mind of the African, but after his death, as well as after the deaths of his predecessors such as Chinua Achebe, Ali Mazrui, Bernard Nsokika Fonlon, Cheikh Anta Diop and Amilcar Cabral – all clamoring for decolonization – nothing has changed and ‘things are still falling apart’ on the continent. Presently, no amount of preaching and writing about mental awareness about total and unconditional dependency on the colonial master even after more than half a century of independence has helped to change the African mind. The average African on the continent still looks up to Europe and the United States as the model for development; after all, don’t we still cling to the same European cultures and languages at our major summits, education,

commerce, politics, culture and media on the continent, including the African Union? In fact, speaking English or French on the continent brings prestige, and one can lose a job/status for speaking African languages (see the example of Kings Williams town in South Africa) and also the Kamuzu Banda Academy in Malawi discussed in Nyamnjoh (2012), where kids are taught in schools to dress, think, write and act British. I propose a three-step process that can quickly bring an end to mental slavery in Africa.

1 Curriculum redesign

All elementary/primary schools on the continent should employ teachers of young children who can teach using what is popularly known as translanguages. This is the tendency to infuse local languages and realities in the pedagogy. By the time these students get into journalism schools, writing for the media, broadcasting in the electronic and digital media platforms will be well handled. They will be able to write and report using a mixture of local and international languages. At present, very few African languages have made it through the international vocabulary dictionary. Students should be able to have two or more dictionaries in schools, i.e. local languages, English or French. Courses in communications and journalism, such as public relations, ethical issues in journalism, introduction to African media and journalism, broadcast and print journalism, can be taught using translanguages. In rural parts of the continent, students find it hard to succeed in courses with colonial languages because these languages do not reflect their realities. Translanguages, or what Chinua Achebe calls “transliteration” (adapting what pertains in the west with local realities), can be very helpful in this regard. This is the only way to push forward local African languages like Kiswahili, Wolof, Amharic etc in print to force their way into the international vocabularies. After all, don't we have French-borrowed words in English and vice versa?

2 African Union and African languages

Kiswahili, Wolof, isiXhosa, Hausa, Yoruba and Amharic should become the official languages of the African Union. These languages are already enjoying wider appeal because they are being taught in schools. African slavery cannot end with our elected leaders still hanging onto the thread of English and French at the African Union Summit at Addis Ababa. They can employ a translation services, if need be, like China, North and South Korea, India and all Middle Eastern countries do when they have European/American visitors.

3 Recruit bilingual media gurus

All major media organizations on the continent of Africa, whether electronic or digital, should uphold Afrocentric standards of recruiting bilingual reporters, writers and broadcasters. For instance, in East Africa, such persons should have bilingual degrees in Kiswahili and English; in South Africa, IsiXhosa or Zulu or any other South African language and English. In West Africa, they should be bilingual in Hausa/Wolof and English or French, and in North Africa, in Arabic and English or French. In East Central Africa, they should be bilingual in Amharic/English, and for Lusophone countries, in local languages and Portuguese. These are the African media experts who will be deployed across the continent to cover events on behalf of their media organizations. These are the writers who should decolonize and recontextualize African events that are now covered by foreign news media like CNN, the BBC, Aljazeera, German DW, and Chinese STVs and CTVs. We cannot allow an entire continent to be covered by

reporters educated in the west, living in the west and under the payroll of the west. Ministers of communication and culture, new media and information in all of Africa should hold regular summits to discuss plans to have their various governments fund reporters based in conflict-ridden parts of the continent. When major crises erupt on the continent, foreign media organizations rush to the scene to report with covert agenda.

Media and Afrocentricity

According to Asante (2007b, 16), “Afrocentricity is . . . a consciousness, quality of thought, mode of analysis, and an actionable perspective where Africans seek, from agency, to assert subject place within the context of African history”. Therefore, consciousness of Africa’s identity and centrality in anything that relates to the continent constitutes the overall aim of his Afrocentric theory. Mazama (2003) calls it a “paradigm” because it deconstructs and reconstructs the notion of African reality through a process of reconceptualization. It is a theory rooted in African culture and cosmology. Thus, traditional and new media activities on the continent ought to mirror Africa’s socio-historical, anthropological and geo-political nature. Again, Asante (2007b) situates his theory as “a theory of agency, that is, the idea that African people must be viewed and view themselves as agents rather than spectators to historical revolution and change” (17). It is through this that proper identification and representations of African media by African media experts can be authenticated. The most efficient way to achieve such a goal is first and foremost for journalists and broadcasters to recognize the power of African languages and culture in print, radio, television and the online platforms. In the age of new media globalization, the use of African languages, as well as some European languages when needed, especially in the urban cities, is crucial. African languages such as Kiswahili, Yoruba, Wolof, Africaans, Zulu, Hausa and Amharic already have wider appeal and are taught in schools, so there is no need not to use these languages. If decolonization of African media needs to be a reality and not just a slogan, then pursuing this is the primary objective. The effect of Arab/European missionary activities and colonization of Africa left the continent eagerly yearning for authenticity, and that includes getting rid of impact and imbibe of colonial languages and culture. The indelible mark that it has created in the minds of Africans is palpable, but it is now time to cleanse, otherwise the continent will forever be dependent on outsiders.

Media content and adaptations (government policy)

The fact that in a continent of more than 54 nations only a tiny fraction has placed emphasis on developing their ethnic-driven languages for official use is regrettable. This is why development has forestalled. “There is a close relationship between language and development and meaningful development cannot take place where linguistic barriers exist” (Erastus 2013, 41). Vast populations of Africans in rural settings, suburban communities and cities have stuck to their indigenous languages. However, these populations are marginalized because priority is given to those proficient in the colonial languages. These communities do not read newspapers offline or online in either English, French or Portuguese. Countries in North Africa have Arabic languages that are used officially and in daily activities. While colonial languages have become the official languages of politics and commerce in mostly tropical African countries, Arabic has become the official languages of countries like Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Lybia. Only three countries in the tropical regions (Tanzania, Ethiopia and Somalia) do not have English, French or Portuguese as an official language. In a continent of more than 54 countries, this is an enormous tragedy with respect to development. For the African Union to still be using English and

French as its official language of operation, with no plans to Africanize its language policies, decolonization and development may still be a distant dream. Note that the majority of Africans live in the rural settings where indigenous languages are the only languages they can function with. If we wish to decolonize media in Africa, we need content, both online and offline, that is in African languages.

Conclusion

A new dawn needs to break in Africa for decolonization of the media to yield meaningful and long-lasting dividends. Years of subjugation of the African people to occupy the inferior position on the ladder of human progress has had a serious toll on them and the mental evolution of its subsequent generations. The curricula of most African countries still emphasize mastering western civilization in order to achieve any kind of developmental goals. The books written by westerners and teachers who have been educated abroad seem to have more credibility than those written by those trained at home, and this applies to professional schools, like journalism, and mass communication programs at universities. In 2015, I was a Fulbright Scholar at a mass communication department in a West African university, and 85 percent of the books used from first year to the final year were written and published by westerners. Even the pamphlets written by the instructors were heavily influenced by the so-called western mass media standards. These books are taught by those trained at home and abroad, but the emphasis was on what pertains abroad. These students when they graduate are the ones to influence media policies on the continent. They are the ones sitting in boardrooms and crafting legislation meant for the government. These students are the future journalists to be deployed to conflict regions and to accompany power wielders like ministers, governors and MPs to various national, regional and international summits and conferences. Africa does not need to rely on CNN and other foreign media entities to report events on the continent when we have tons of broadcast stations for electronic communications and blogs for digital communications. The same goes for creating URLs for digital communications that serve the needs of the African people. Africans studying journalism abroad have the duty to adapt their skills on Afrocentric requirements for the continent. The colonial conquest of the continent of Africa has been long gone since the 1960s. All African countries are now independent. If independence means subservience to the erstwhile colonial masters to achieve full sovereignty and restore dignity to Africans, then we are doomed. The pain of playing secondary roles as the means of achieving cherished dreams will be detrimental in the long run for generations to come. If globalization of media means that each continent plays an active role on the world stage in order to be recognized and valued by the international community, then Africa has a meaningful role to play. According to Afrocentricity theory by Molefi Kete Asante, the four research questions have provided sufficient responses that have adhered to the assumptions of the theory to put Africa and Africans in the epistemic and ontological sphere of influence through conscious awareness of the role Africa media should play in the world.

In my discussion of solutions to decolonize media content for African consumers, I have placed a lot of emphasis on language, dependency and culture. If we agree that language is the canopy under which all other elements of the cultural mores of a people are contained, then we only have to agree with Cheikh Anta Diop that for Africa to attempt at decolonizing, and in the same process create an atmosphere for mental reassessment and renewal for its people, language has to play a pivotal role. We cannot after 60 years of colonial rule still rely on foreign-imposed language for communication on the media and our educational institutions. One cannot avoid but hear the echo of the voices of Julius Kambarage Nyerere, Namdi Azikiwe, Osagefo Kwame

Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara, Jomo Kenyatta and Patrice Lumumba about nationalism and pan-Africanism in all spheres of our lives, including mediated communications. We seem to glorify the west, as evidenced in the majority of our clothing, food and shelter consumption on the continent, and that is affecting our dignity and reputation on the world stage. The languages that are used on mass media, whether on television, radio, newspaper or the Internet, are largely western and, as Anta Diop warned, we will not achieve development with that, because things will continue to fall apart, even after the deaths of Chinua Achebe, Ali Alamin Mazrui, Nelson Mandela and Walter Rodney, who is famous for having written the magnum opus “How Europe underdeveloped Africa”. We pride ourselves with wearing western suits; writing and speaking impeccable English and French on our national televisions, seminars and classrooms; making these foreign languages official national languages in some of our countries, and worst of all at the African Union.

The second most important challenge facing Africa in the age of globalization, as discussed earlier, is dependency. One of the tenets of the theory of dependency is that what you have is considered inferior and what comes from somewhere is more valuable, and that is the fate of the media system in Africa. We produce films and television programs in Africa, yet we relish in importing Hollywood, European and Chinese films and programs because they are sold to us at a cheaper rate. This type of dependency makes Africa and Africans look to these foreign entities as the standard bearers, and what is produced at home is considered substandard and more expensive. For this mentality to change, a lot of effort is needed from power wielders on the continent to engage in a complete paradigm shift for us to be Afrocentric first and foremost before we can accommodate anything foreign. In this way, the decolonization of our minds and that of the media we use in Africa would see a new dawn.

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