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"Towards Evolving an African Communication System for the Pressures of Development"

Abstract

This paper examines the need for an African development communication which will be anchored on cultural and language protection, before the West nails the coffin of neocolonialism through globalization. Researchers and scholars believe that every continent has a period of economic development and from all available records, Africa was ahead in all forms of physical development. This was before new development theories were introduced by the West, which are ahistorical and measure standards of development in isolation. Mass communication survey conducted shows that economic and material growth by themselves should not be viewed as sufficient conditions for development, rather growth of Africa and indeed, the Third World must be brought about through culture and language; ways which promote self-reliant capabilities of developing countries. The paper recommends that authentic, self-reliant processes of development inevitably must result in the transformation of the people who bring about the change; their culture, language, attitude to work, their savings and investment habits, their concepts and skills and their social patterns and systems. When the people become the end means of development, their interests, values and aspirations necessarily determine the content, strategies and modalities for development and this starts with an effective indigenous communication system competently anchored on indices of language, which African leaders, scholars, strategists and researchers have to help the continent evolve.

Introduction

The desire for an African Communication System needs cultural protection; it is not just necessary but most urgent at this time when the West is trying to nail the coffin of neocolonialism through globalization or cultural synchronization as they put it. No doubt, radio, television, newspapers, magazines, posters and all other vehicles of mass communication midwifed by transnational corporations and advertising concerns play leading roles in the process of modernization. Communication scholars insist that only the face-to-face community device based on indigenous languages can offer effective channels of communication for the African development needs. It is only through an effective African Communication System that the people can retrace their steps towards development. To understand this paper well, the key segments have been targeted separately, namely: development, communication as it has so far been done; language and its relevance to development communication as well as suggestions as to the way out and forward.

Development

Seen as a general process, development has wide applications. It entails in the first place, natural development which at the level of the individual implies movement from immaturity to maturity or adulthood. In the second place and at the societal level, it means movement of the whole society from a primitive to an advanced level. In the third instance, development entails putting in place physical structures like roads, mechanized farms, schools, hospitals etc.

Today, however, the term is used in an exclusive economic sense, implying that the type of economy is itself an index of the social features. A society may be considered economically developed when its members show increased capacity for dealing with the environment. This is however dependent on their understanding of science, technology and patterns of organizing work. Historically, it can be said that there has been constant economic development within human society because man has multiplied his capacity to manage the environment. This is because he first progressed from crude stone tools to the use of metals; changed from hunting and gathering to the domestication of animals and farming; and improved the organization of work from being an individual activity to an activity which assumes a social character.

Walter Rodney (1972:3-14) points to a fact that every continent had a period of economic development and from all historical records, Africa was the focus and ahead in all forms of physical development. But at the moment, there have emerged developmental theories that point to the Western and Eastern countries of the World as reference points in development. These theories also hold the rest of the world as either underdeveloped or developing nations. The criticisms of these theories are however that their assumptions are ahistorical and measure the standards of development in isolation. In the first place, such theories are not sufficient in promoting the development of Africa and the Third World, because they fail to recognize the exploitative activities of the capitalist societies, which invaded Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Secondly, they forget that future societies will not be able to attain stages reached by other societies at earlier times, since almost all societies move towards the future and new forms, and the factors that constituted the experience of developed capitalist societies such as foreign trade, incorporation of vast masses of labour in industrial production etc. no longer constitute options for Africa today.

Moreover, it is on record that it is through capitalism that the developed societies attained their position through exploitative relationship with underdeveloped societies and not through their own internal ingenuities as nation-states. This exploitative relationship developed into direct colonialism which further led to the emergence of dependency relationship between these two groups of societies, making the underdeveloped ones perpetually dependent on the developed ones for their basic needs even after political independence. In the neocolonial era, multi-national corporations emerged which have taken over the management of these dependency relations and this cancels any chance of any third world nation developing in the capitalist way. Through these multi-national corporations (w'.at could be more appropriately called trans-national corporations) have emerged such elusive concepts as globalization, World communication order and cultural

synchronization aimed at confusing the African sense of direction.

African Developmental Needs

Now, what must not be mixed up is the understanding of what constitutes the African developmental needs. This will be the basis on which communicators and scholars who are to fashion out a responsive communication system must start.

A renowned economist and noble son of Africa, former Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, EGA, Professor Adebayo Adedeji (1982:295) states that *"the ultimate purpose of development must be the development of man and his society"*. According to him, economic and material growth by themselves should not be viewed as sufficient conditions for development; rather growth must be brought about in ways which promote self-reliant capabilities of developing countries in order to be of lasting value. For African development, Adedeji (1989:127) argues that it should start *"with human experience that is synonymous with the fulfillment of individual mental, emotional and physical well-being and not just the growth of things which are merely means"*. In other words, development is not merely a transformation of the structures and material attributes of a society. Authentic self-reliant processes of development inevitably must result in the transformation of the people who bring about the change - their culture, language, attitude to work, their savings and investment habits, their concepts and skills and their social systems. When the people become the end and the means of development, their interests, values and aspirations necessarily determine the content, strategies and modalities for development and this starts with an effective indigenous communication system competently anchored on indices of language.

Therefore, Africa's basic need of development, in all its generic sense, is the proper integration of the people through a convenient communication based on language and language concepts as we cannot continue to rely on the trans-national media corporations and their communication system, which after all, never existed to serve the needs of Africa and even the third world.

African Languages and Development Trends

Perhaps because bilingualism in Africa tends to be found only among minority groups, a country like Nigeria is often assumed to be a single homogenous speech community where everyone speaks English and all radio and television broadcasts and all newspapers use Standard English. It appears to be a monolingual and independent language concept. This is a mistaken view which ignores the existence of large communities such as Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Ijaw, Fulani, Tiv and Kanuri etc. for whom English is not the first language of the home. To cite one concrete example, the majority of the population in the six states of the South-West Nigeria and 13 states of the North-Central, North West and North-East Nigeria, are more likely to listen to radio broadcasts in Yoruba and Hausa respectively. This simple fact has significant repercussions in terms of the organization of local representative government, educational system and organization of work and strategies.

Consider a similar question in the context of Guatemala where, in addition to Spanish, there are 26 Mayan languages spoken. If in this situation, Spanish is selected as the language of education, are all those Mayan speakers not put at an early educational disadvantage within the society? Questions of this type require answers on the basis of some type of language planning. The government, legal and educational bodies in many African countries have to plan which varieties of the languages spoken in such countries are to be used for official and development policies and programmes.

The process of language planning may be seen in a better light when the series of stages are implemented over a number of years. A good modern example has been provided by the adoption of Swahili as the national language of Tanzania in East Africa. There still exist a large number of tribal languages as well as the colonial vestiges of English, but the educational, legal, communication and government systems have gradually introduced Swahili as the official language. This is playing a strategic part in not only social and economic development, but also national identity. It has been observed that the foreign communication systems have no provision for large illiterate populations in Africa living in rural areas and living on subsistence farming.

The Role of the Mass Media in Development through Language

The mass media in Europe has always been part of the socio-economic and political machinery. From time to time, there had also existed an opposition press, but such a press has always failed to live long due to obvious reasons. Under capitalist structures, opposition to accumulation of wealth is abhorred and persecuted, even subtly. Apart from that, from the earlier known history of the press in 59 BC when Julius Caesar set up the first newspaper, the ACTA DIUNA, the concept was not for genuine interest of the peasants. It was for exploitation and manipulation. From the era of the popular press around the 17th century and up to the era of mass media in the 19th century, the press has been to legitimize ruling class interests. Today, the mass media operate in Africa in form of trans-national corporations and as capitalist structures meant to legitimize capitalist ideology. Without going into the controversies, it could be seen by current mass media philosophy, products and performances that apart from legitimizing the international monopoly, capitalist system that incorporates these poor regions through the distortion of their cultural values, the media industry and communication system as constituted at present, are more of a commercial orientation serving as agents of cultural synchronization. Whatever that means to the welfare of Africa is yet to be explained.

Now that we have discovered that the European communication media have been transferred to Africa through capitalism and colonialism and now serve as supporting structures of the dependency relationship emblematic of neocolonialism, it is only proper that leaders, scholars and strategists evolve a way necessary for the continent to progress in its system. There has to be a restructuring of the economic and social systems including communication, so that the dependency structures could be turned into independent structures. The mass media in Africa today are either European oriented or American oriented. In fact, most media institutions were designed, funded, established and are being maintained by Britain, France, Germany or USA etc. How do

we expect them to function for the people of Africa? This is why public enlightenment programmes in foreign languages are targeted at the ignorant lot and on deteriorating sectors of the economy, such as agriculture.

The central location of the democratic participant media theory is mainly in developed liberal societies, but it joins with some elements present in development media theory, especially its emphasis on the basis of society, on the value of horizontal rather than vertical communication. This theoretical framework provides an anchorage for this paper. A primary stimulus has been the reaction against the commercialization and monopolization of privately owned media and against the centralism and bureaucratization of public (foreign language) broadcasting institutions, established according to the norm of social responsibility.

Thus, public broadcasting raised high expectations of media systems that could assist in the long process of social improvement and democratic change. This began with the economic and political revolutions of the 19th century. These expectations have been disappointed by the tendency for some public media organizations to be at times too paternalist, too close to the 'establishment' of society, too responsive to political and economic pressures, too monolithic, too professionalized.

Thus, the central point of a democratic participant theory lies with the needs, interests and aspirations of the receiver in a political society. It has to do with the right to relevant information, the right to answer back, the right to use the means of communication for interaction in small-scale settings of community, interest group and sub-culture.

Radio and television messages are used for intensive campaigns for fanners. Everywhere in Africa, these campaigns focus on answering questions and advice on improved seeds which are usually imported and the benefit of fertilizer and farming machinery. Apart from the blatant ignorance of the cultural values and traditions of the peasants, these programmes basically introduce large scale mechanized farming to a population which comprises mostly peasants who live on subsistence agriculture. The Nigerian case in the early 1980s when the peasants protested their relocation for a mechanized farm project resulted in a national disaster during a showdown between villagers and soldiers. That is now popularly referred to as the Bakolori dam disaster. It happened in the North-West of Nigeria. In Nigeria also, many other media campaigns ridicule the people, instead of integrating and mobilizing them for change and development.

According to Claude Ake (1987:27), what is before us now is primarily a political crisis; its economic consequences are serious as we know only too well, but they are nonetheless incidental. Not only is the crisis essentially political in character, it is also political in origin. He was referring to development crisis. Here also, the communication and language problems could be solved politically. African elite need to recognize that a communication system that does not recognize the indigenous cultures, judicial system, language and values of the people cannot ever succeed to mobilize them because it is without roots and borrows from the elusive concept of cultural synchronization which deceives and exploits the people. At least, we are yet to hear of any language

synchronization.

The over-reliance on the mass media for publicity of development information in Africa is a misplaced priority, except such dependence is based on the development participant media theory earlier discussed. Moreover, the issue of the importation of technology at a time most economies in the Third World are in disarray makes the chase of an efficient mass communication system an illusion. This lack of resources in conflict with the desire to communicate through the European agents of communication forces our leaders to mortgage the people and their cultures in sponsorships from the capitalist structures of dependency.

African Communication System

Communication is the process through which we effect understanding among ourselves as individuals or groups of individuals; it is an interactive process involving the imparting of ideas, information, values, knowledge and feelings. By its interactiveness, communication is a multi-track process, which entails feedback component without which the effectiveness of communication will be incomplete. In other words, this means communication is not restricted to mass communication alone, but embraces and refers to all forms of communication including traditional communication, theatre and drama. This is why it is a fundamental social process covering large areas of human interaction. Therefore, as pointed out earlier, over-reliance on mass media is a misplaced priority. The mass media only constitute some agents of communication. Forms of traditional communication which rely solely on indigenous languages are still very competent in realizing the African development dreams.

The basic social effect of effective information flow is to liberate rather than to manipulate man; it is to free him from ignorance and possible exploitation. That is why the UN Commission on Human Rights refers to information as a basic right. Communication in Africa should therefore be appraised through consideration of the most significant aspects of African society, especially language and language indices which anchor and promote African development needs.

For overall development to be taken seriously, the culture and language of the people must be taken into consideration by the planners of an African communication system. Because of this, it will be discovered that most of the Third World Communication systems have to follow the two-step format before reaching the ultimate consumer. Researches conducted by Ivris Rodgers and studies carried out in Nigeria have shown that sometimes the human propagator is believed to be ahead of the mass media. This is because the human being will answer questions and clarify follow-ups as well as even respond to emotions expressed. After all, the mass media are dependency structures we have to replace. The two-step floor requires the Third World and indeed Africa, in particular, to think about producing technology that will match our own culture and be relevant and responsive to our needs. The present situation where we have a technology designed for the Western World effectively transplanted to the Third World will not benefit our development plans.

In as much as one is not advocating for a retrogressive move back to the old and somewhat primitive forms of communication or those forms meant for small villages or hamlets such as the town crier system, it is necessary to point out that Leonard Doob's study disclosed that Africans had lived and evolved their own forms of communication, in their languages, which for them at that time were adequate. What this means is that such forms could be improved upon, using new forms of technology, because as he puts it, it is only "as they (Africans) accept more and more practices and values from the West, that they come to be intimately dependent upon the extending and especially upon the mass media of the culture they absorb..." (1988:114).

The Third World, at the time it decides for development, must begin with a communication system which is somewhere between that of the village and that of the modern civilization. This means Africa has to draw between the traditional and modern civilization in order to realize the urgent change, swiftly, broadly, but as painlessly as possible. And it can draw on resources that the tribe/village never had, which is modern communication techniques already in use in the world. As development gets underway, it is not the functions of communication that change, but rather the amounts of communication. Firstly, the watchman function/role expands. The elite in the urban areas/cities and the farmers in the traditional villages find themselves very much interested in each other. The urbanized realize that the village and its work must be modernized before the base of national industry can be greatly enlarged.

Secondly, there is the policy function. When a developing country finds that it must spread its essential decision making more widely, it wants the active participation of its people. Beyond that, it is asking its people to make individual decisions that are of the greatest difficulty and importance. In effect, they have to decide for modernity, and to change their lives and beliefs accordingly. They are being asked to accept new goals, new attitudes, new customs, new responsibilities. This requires both information and persuasion. Moreover, the information must flow and the changes must be distrusted, not only through a downward channel from the leaders to the villagers, but also upward to the leaders, and laterally so that people can talk things over and arrive at group discussions.

In the third place is the teaching function. When development is going well, almost everybody in a country is learning. But perhaps the most general way to describe what the enormously increased flow of information does in a developing nation is to say that it provides the atmosphere for national development. Knowledge is made available where it is needed, and provides a forum for discussion, leadership and decision making. It helps to raise the general level of aspiration.

Conclusion

To draw the conclusion on this paper, therefore, it is a humble submission that, while radio, television, newspapers, magazines, posters and all other agents of mass communication midwifed by transnational media corporations/advertising concerns may play a leading role in the process of accelerated modernization - and the establishment of regional media outfits may be a major step forward —, it is only a patient face-to-face explanation and demonstration based on indigenous languages that can provide

effective channels of communication for the African development needs. This is what the two-step floor suggested offers. We have to break from the yoke of capitalism and its dependency structures that now perpetuate cultural imperialism in the elusive concept of globalization. It is a call for the deployment of the creative energies and thoughts of the people in the Third World towards proffering a solution against the imminent enslavement which is likely to leave us without identity.

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