

Francis B. Nyamnjoh, 2005, *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*

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Francis B. Nyamnjoh: *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. London: Zed Books, 2005, 308 pp. (ISBN 1 8427 583 9)

The book, *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, is a well-researched exposition and analysis of the role and place of media in Africa. It brings to the fore the political intrigues within mass media that have bedeviled liberal democratisation in Africa. Though the book focuses on Cameroon—a country the author has undoubtedly studied in detail—there is no question that

“the state, the media and their relationship in Cameroon are...informative towards understanding media, belonging and democratisation in Africa [in general]” (19).

Indeed, much of what the author asserts in relation to Cameroon is applicable quite well to other nation-states in sub-Saharan Africa.

In social-political parlance, the 1990s is often referred to as the second phase of liberation in Africa. It is an era characterised by concerted struggles against various dictatorial and increasingly autocratic regimes; struggles ostensibly leading to the opening up of democratic spaces in independent African nation-states. *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging* examines the media in action in the African scene paying particular attention to the second phase of liberation. In so doing, the book seeks to comprehend the extent to which the media con-

tributed to the continent's efforts at liberal democratisation bearing in mind Africa's obsession with politics of belonging.

In the introduction of the book, the author notes that there are two broad functions that the media can play in any democratisation process. One of the functions is positive and the other negative. On the positive, he asserts that they have the enormous potential to make available information and knowledge that would enhance meaningful participation in and constructive discussion of public issues and concerns. On the negative side, he posits that

“the media can...be a vehicle of uncritical assumptions, beliefs, stereotypes, ideologies and orthodoxies that blunt critical awareness and make participatory democratisation impossible” (2).

Unfortunately, the author decries that the media even during the second phase of liberation have been engaged in service of the negative function by those in governments and opposition alike and hence in dis-service to the continent in general.

In the democratisation of Africa along liberal lines in the 1990s, the author identifies two internal factors (besides external ones) that have hindered the process. These are: ethnic belonging and what he refers to as undomesticated nature of liberal democracy. On the ethnic belonging, he believes that the solution would be introduction of a political culture that

“should demand the involvement of everyone in promoting the common good and people should participate not because they are individuals whose interests need to be asserted, but because they are part of an interconnected whole” (36).

On liberal democracy, he opines that in truth it is a limited democracy; it is not a democracy in all its forms and possibilities. What it stresses—the uncompromising autonomy of the individual—is incompatible with the lives of people on the ground (37).

The author is emphatic that there has not been any meaningful difference in the role of the media in both the colonial and postcolonial spaces in Africa. Whereas during the colonial days radio and print media were used by the colonial powers for propaganda purposes so as to contain the rising spirit of nationalism and clamour for independence, after

attainment of independence right up to around 1990 the task of broadcast and print media was essentially that of implementing government policies.

“They merely served to manipulate the people into compliance with the state’s notion of unity embedded in ‘pseudo-institutions’ that hindered the process of integration” (136).

Even after the 1990s, despite the introduction of multiparty politics, things have not changed as such. The broadcast and print media have fundamentally still remained state organs and machinery. Quoting from Eonè, the author concurs with the observation that

“chronic overpoliticisation of the press in the aftermath of the 1990 reforms led to a situation where few in the media were able to respect the empirical evidence” (245).

And this has worked against democratization.

According to the author what has actually changed within the media since the advent of the second liberation struggle in the 1990s is that there is now a marked increase in the numbers of private newspapers as well as private broadcasting stations. This increase in quantity has however not had a corresponding increase in quality for a majority of them are partisan with fixed ideas that hardly entertain or accommodate the views of others. The author identifies several factors that, according to him, have generously contributed to the shortcoming of the role of media in democratisation. Some of the factors that have abetted the negative function of the media are: (i) Difficulty in obtaining information from government and other high ranking officials hence journalists are forced to write from a typical speculative standpoint. (ii) Despite widened freedom-space there are still restrictions imposed by governments; laws that are inimical to journalism or media practice in general and a disincentive to the development of the profession. The repressive laws are, according to the author, to blame for the rise of the ‘underground press’ that ‘practice junk or gutter journalism’. (iii) Because of job insecurity, poor salaries coupled with poor working conditions, journalists abandon all professional ethics. They are therefore susceptible to compromise, bribery and corruption. (iv) Interference by the international community has been

another factor. This has been made easily and readily possible by the fact that the code of ethics for African journalists is a mimicry of Western and international codes. Western donor countries usually withdraw or reduce aid to African governments that do not toe the line. Hence,

“mimicry is the name of the game so far as the African codes are concerned” (88).

On the mimicry factor, the author discusses the solution offered by Francis Kasomo. According to Kasomo, the African codes should draw from what he terms ‘Afriethics’. The author, however, argues that Kasomo’s view is based on a romantic reconstruction and a frozen view of pre-colonial Africa. The author instead advocates

“a creative adoption of global influences and the rehabilitation of the best elements of mainstream cultures of Africa that are victims of marginalisation and unfair corruption...one cannot ignore Western influences given the hybridity of contemporary African identities” (91).

A recurrent theme throughout the book is that the media in Africa has assumed highly partisan, over-politicised and aggressive militant roles. And as a result they have diametrically and neatly divided the citizens in ideological, regional, cultural and ethnic lines. This in turn

“has without doubt affected their liberal democratic responsibility to act as honest, fair and neutral mediators” (231).

In the final chapter of the book, the author underscores the desirability of democratic practices and media ethics that are in tune with popular notions of personhood and agency in Africa. He also recommends Cecil Blake’s prototype communication policy framework for Africa which the author (quoting from Blake) believes

“will help to prevent ugly confrontations not only between the government and the private media, but also between the government and the various forces in civil society” (272).

True to the author’s concern regarding the partisan role of media in Africa and the subjective interest of journalists, *Africa’s Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging* is a fitting case of leading by example. The book is a commendable exercise of a research painstakingly under-

taken, the findings well sifted and presented in an objective and analytical fashion. Though on the first impression journalists from both sides of the political divide would find the book to be too critical, a careful reading of it points to the contrary. It is my sincere desire and hope that the book will not only (re)generate meaningful discussions regarding the role of media in the democratisation in Africa, but that it will raise the level of discussions well beyond the partisan and political level. The text should not only be an indispensable handbook to journalists and high ranking government officials, but should be a worthwhile companion to all those who are genuinely interested in the liberal democratisation in Africa regardless of their specific research and academic endeavours.

