

January 2010



fesmedia **Africa** series

Africa's Media:
Between Professional Ethics and
Cultural Belonging

By Francis B. Nyamnjoh

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT** 
STIFTUNG

© 2009 fesmedia Africa
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
P O Box 23652
Windhoek, Namibia
Tel: +264 61 237 438
Email: fesmedia@fesmedia.org

All rights reserved.

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this volume do not necessarily reflect the views of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or fesmedia Africa. fesmedia Africa does not guarantee the accuracy of the data included in this work.

fesmedia Africa

fesmedia Africa is the media project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Africa. We are working towards a political, legal and regulatory framework for the media which follows international human rights law, the relevant protocols of the African Union (AU) and declarations of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) or other regional standards in Africa. Our office is based in Windhoek, Namibia. Read more about us

FES in Africa

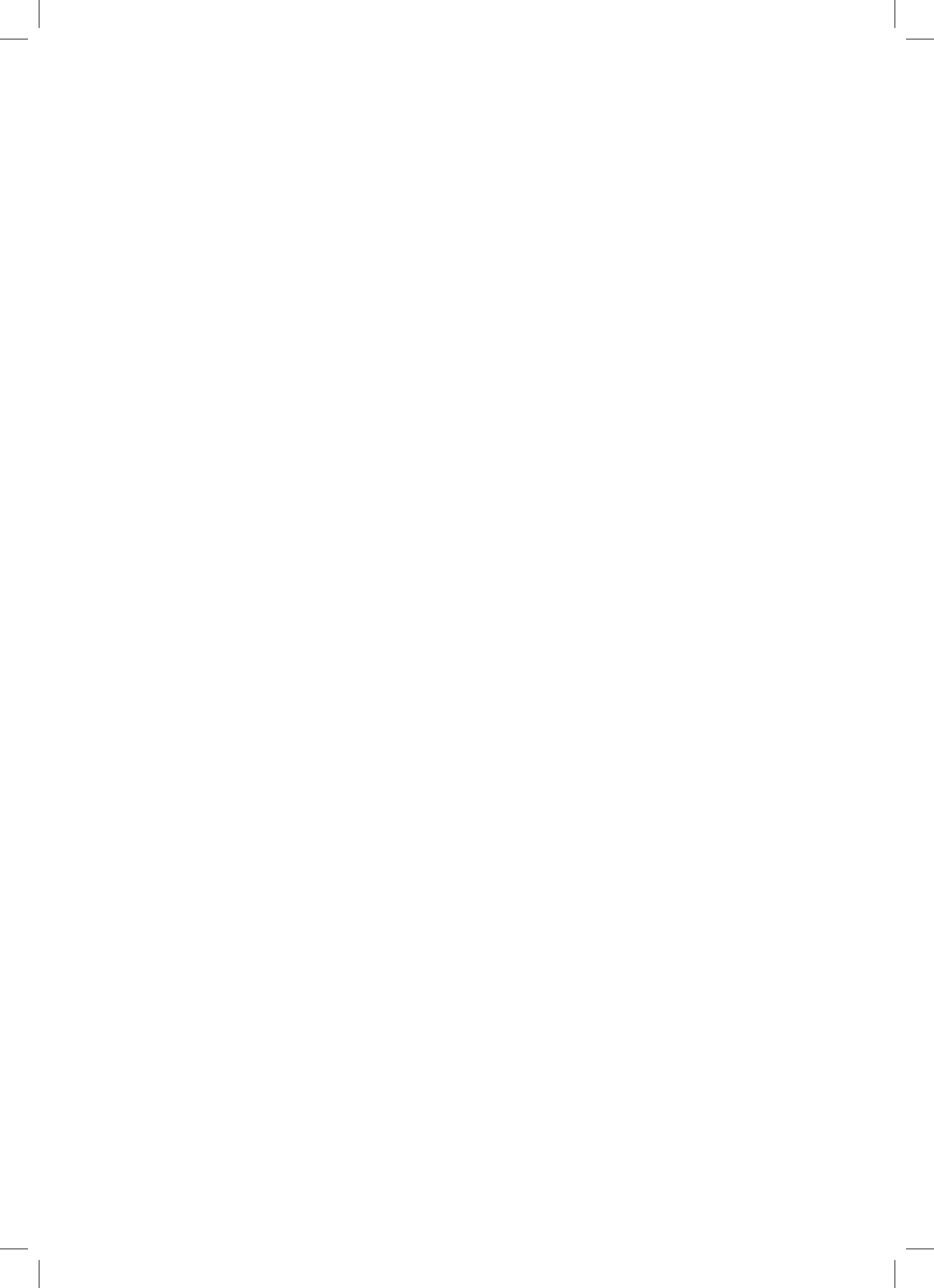
Africa has traditionally been at the centre of the international activities of *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*. In 19 Sub-Saharan African countries, FES is supporting the process of self-determination, democratisation and social development, in cooperation with partners in politics and society.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

The *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* is a non-governmental and non-profit making Political Foundation based in almost 90 countries throughout the world. Established in 1925, it carries the name of Germany's first democratically elected president, *Friedrich Ebert*, and, continuing his legacy, promotes freedom, solidarity and social democracy.

Africa's Media:
Between Professional Ethics and
Cultural Belonging

By Francis B. Nyamnjoh



CONTENT

1	ON THE POLITICS OF BELONGING IN AFRICA _____	5
2	RECONCILING PROFESSIONALISM AND CULTURAL BELONGING IN AFRICAN JOURNALISM _____	8
3	WHAT IS AFRICANITY? _____	10
4	PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS IN AFRICAN JOURNALISM _____	12
5	HUMANITY, CREATIVITY _____	13
6	BARBIE DOLL DEMOCRACY _____	14
7	NAVIGATING CITIZENSHIP AND SUBJECTION _____	15
8	CREOLISING _____	16
9	COSMOPOLITAN AFRICAN _____	17
10	ENRICHED REALITIES _____	18
11	A HOSTILE HEARING _____	19
12	CREATIVE APPROPRIATION OF ICTS: LESSONS FOR AFRICAN JOURNALISM _____	20
	REFERENCES _____	23

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Francis B. Nyamnjoh joins the University of Cape Town from the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), where he served as Head of Publications from July 2003 to July 2009. He has taught sociology, anthropology and communication studies at universities in Cameroon and Botswana, and has researched and written extensively on Cameroon and Botswana, where he was awarded the “Senior Arts Researcher of the Year” prize for 2003.

His most recent books include *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity* (Brill, 2003), *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa* (Zed Books, 2004), *Africa’s Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging* (Zed Books, 2005), *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (CODESRIA/ZED Books, 2006). Dr Nyamnjoh has published widely on globalisation, citizenship, media and the politics of identity in Africa.

He has also published six ethnographic novels, *Mind Searching* (1991), *The Disillusioned African* (1995), *A Nose for Money* (2006), *Souls Forgotten* (2008), *The Travail of Dieudonné* (2008) and *Married but Available* (2009), a play, *The Convert* (2003), and a collection of short stories, *Stories from Abakwa* (2007). For further details visit: www.nyamnjoh.com.



1. On the Politics of Belonging in Africa

In 2005 I published *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. One of the main findings of that study was that the media have assumed a partisan, highly politicised, militant role in Africa. They have done so by dividing citizens into the righteous and the wicked, depending on their party-political leanings, ideologies, regional, cultural or ethnic belonging. By considering the Cameroonian experience, the book sought to understand how scapegoatism, partisanship, and regional and ethnic tendencies in the media have affected their liberal democratic responsibility to act as honest, fair and neutral mediators – accessible to all and sundry. It did this by looking at polarisation in the press and at how the media have shaped and been shaped by the politics of belonging since the early 1990s.

Almost everywhere in Cameroon, citizens expect the urban elite – including journalists and media proprietors – to make inroads into the modern centres of accumulation. Since the state is a major source of patronage and resources, it, together with other economic institutions, must be manipulated to divert the flow of finance, jobs and so forth to the home regions from which the heterogeneous urban originally derive. Thus these elites are under pressure to act as facilitators and manipulators with respect to the state. Through elite development associations, they lobby foreign agencies and NGOs to provide their home villages or regions with new sources of wealth and livelihood. In return for so doing, they may be rewarded with neo-traditional titles in their home villages. These honours confer on them symbolic capital that is not expressed in material wealth but sustained by what Fisiy and Goheen have termed 'the conspicuous display of decorum and accompanied by public respect' (1998:388), that in turn can always be exploited for political ends at regional and national levels. In certain cases, investing in the village is a way of consolidating success in the city, especially in the politics of ethno-regionalism.

As many scholars of Cameroon have observed, these modern big men and women who live with one foot in the city and the other in the village, are able to redistribute their personal wealth to those back in the home village in exchange for neo-traditional titles, while continuing to take advantage of the economic and political opportunities made available by the city. In this way, they continue to take an active role in the cultural affairs, government and development of their home areas. At the same time their rural ties lead them to consider customary law and local opinion when making national decisions. They thus become, in the words of Mitzi Goheen, 'mediators between the local and national arenas, the interpreters as well as the architects of the intersections between customary and national law.' This is a project for which the elite concerned recruit journalists and the media for purposes of information, communication and public relations within and between communities, and also with the state and the outside world. In Cameroon, almost every appointment and promotion into high office is the prerogative of the President, and most appointed ministers and director general

of state corporations have the tendency of returning to their home villages to celebrate and express gratitude to the President with kin and kith. This would seem to suggest that they are appointed primarily to take care of the interests of their home villages or regions at the centre of power, and are only marginally at the service of all and sundry.

In the light of this reality of primary patriotism to the home village by the power elite, the book points to a tension between dominant normative theories of journalism that demand of journalists professional independence and detachment, and the conflicting loyalties to cultural and ethnic communities. The result is a situation where:

African world-views and cultural values are hence doubly excluded: first by the ideology of hierarchies of cultures, and second by cultural industries more interested in profits than the promotion of creative diversity and cultural plurality. The consequence is an idea of democracy hardly informed by popular articulations of personhood and agency in Africa, and media whose professional values are not in tune with the expectations of those they purport to serve. The predicament of media practitioners in such a situation is obvious: to be of real service to liberal democracy, they must ignore alternative ideas of personhood and agency in the cultural communities of which they are part. Similarly, attending to the interests of particular cultural groups risks contradicting the principles of liberal democracy and its emphasis on the autonomous individual. Torn between such competing and conflicting understandings of democracy, the media find it increasingly difficult to marry rhetoric with practice, and for strategic instrumentalist reasons may opt for a Jekyll and Hyde personality. (2005:2-3)

The Cameroonian case study points to the interconnectedness and interpenetration that one might expect between citizenship and subjection, the cosmopolitan and the local, the individual and the collective, that make popular understandings of democracy in Africa far more complex than simplistic notions of liberal democracy would otherwise suggest. While the book clearly highlights the shortcomings of ethnicised and politicised media in liberal democratic terms, it also points to the limitations of liberal democracy in a context where people are obliged or ready and willing to be both citizens and subjects. They identify with their ethnic group or cultural community on the one hand (ethnic or cultural citizenship), and the nation-state on the other (civic citizenship). The argument for democracy both as an individual and a community or cultural right cannot simply be dismissed when there are individuals who, for one reason or another, straddle both the realm of individual rights (liberal democracy) and the realm of group rights.

As the book maintains, a major characteristic of Africa's second liberation struggles since the 1980s has been a growing obsession with belonging and the questioning of traditional assumptions about nationality and citizenship almost everywhere. Identity politics are central to the political process. Exclusionary conceptions of nationality and citizenship have increased. Group claims for greater cultural recognition are countered by efforts to maintain the status quo of an inherited colonial hierarchy of ethnic groupings. As ethnic groups, either local majorities or minorities, clamour for status they are countered by an often aggressive

reaffirmation of age-old exclusions informed by colonial registers of inequalities amongst the subjected. This development is paralleled by an increased distinction between 'locals' and 'foreigners' and between 'indigens' and 'settlers' within and between countries, with the emphasis on opportunities and economic entitlements.

Even in South Africa and Botswana where the economy is relatively better off than elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, xenophobia is rife against migrants from other African countries with economic downturns. Referred to derogatorily as 'Makwerekwere' (meaning those incapable of articulating local languages that epitomise economic success and power), some of these migrants come from countries that were very instrumental in the struggle against apartheid. Such tensions and boundaries between 'undeserving outsiders' and 'entitled nationals', are eloquently captured by the late Phaswane Mpe in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, a novel about a part of Johannesburg where 'citizens' fear to tread because criminal and violent Makwerekwere have welcomed themselves to and imposed a reign of terror (Mphe 2001).

Even South African nationals from the ghettos, townships and bantustans of the former apartheid dispensation, who are yet to graduate from subjection into citizenship in real terms, have been co-opted by the rhetoric of abundance and success under threat from unregulated immigration. Polarisation and tensions are exacerbated by the racialised lexicon, categorisation and registers of the apartheid era that have fed into the new South Africa, where even progressive academics and media are in no hurry to deconstruct and reconstruct. A consequence, by no means the only, is that South Africans of Indian descent came under a scathing attack in a pop tune by Mbongeni Ngema, a popular Zulu musician. Titled *Ama-Ndiya*, the controversial song claims to 'begin a constructive discussion that would lead to a true reconciliation between Indians and Africans', and accuses South African Indians of opportunism and of enriching themselves to the detriment of Blacks, who are presented as more indigenous but most exploited nationals. If the Indians are to be taken seriously as belonging to South Africa, they must display greater patriotism and stop straddling continents. In this way, elite capitalism becomes less of the problem, as black nationals for whom socio-economic citizenship remains an illusion scapegoat Makwerekwere and increasingly Asians. This raises questions about the meaning of the juridico-political citizenship guaranteed by the constitution (often touted as the most liberal in the world) of the new South Africa where the socio-economic and cultural cleavages of the apartheid era are yet to be undone in a way that is beneficial to the majority of the victims of apartheid.

Everywhere in Africa, traditional policies of inclusion and emphasis on wealth-in-people over wealth-in-things are under pressure from the politics of entitlements in an era of accelerated flows of capital and migrants, and a context where governments of weak states feel obliged to be repressive while keeping up appearances of democracy. The book argues that in discussions of the media, democracy and rights, this heightened sense of cultural identity cannot simply be dismissed as 'tribalism' and consigned to the past. Again, the Cameroonian experience offers interesting empirical material to inform discussions of how to marry liberal democracy with African cultural, historical, indigenous political and economic realities.

2. Reconciling Professionalism and Cultural Belonging in African Journalism

In view of these tension and conflict between professionalism and cultural belonging in African journalism, I would like, in this lecture, to critically examine conventional journalism in Africa, discuss its shortcomings, and point to the creative processes underway in the lives of ordinary Africans as the way forward for meaningful journalism on the continent and on Africa. The lecture also explores the role of innovations in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in mitigating victimhood and promoting more democratic journalism from the standpoint of how ordinary Africans appropriate the ICTs as individuals and communities. My experience with journalism in Africa and Africa in journalism (JAAJ) is primarily as a consumer of journalistic production and also as an observer of journalists and journalism at work. As a little boy crumpled newspapers were always the bearers of good news, as I would watch in anticipation as my mother unwrapped them to reveal their contents of akara beans, puff balls, bread, groundnuts or whatever other consumer goodies she had bought from the market woman, shopkeeper or street vendor. Then unsold newspapers were simply worth their weight in gold, even though I couldn't quite read them, unless of course they contained interesting pictures.

I grew up appreciating newspapers in other ways too. I remember making clips of newspapers that had brought me good news, such as when they published the results of the various examinations in which I had succeeded, including, in 1986 when I obtained a Cameroonian government scholarship to pursue a doctoral degree in media and communication studies. I proceeded to the Centre for Mass Communication Research at the University of Leicester, where consuming JAAJ became a scholarly compulsion, and observing journalists a professional impulse, graduating with a PhD, which some would insist stands for: 'Permanent Head Damage' or 'Phenomenal Dumbness'. Back unemployed in Cameroon in the early 1990s when the winds of democratization were rustling the baobabs of dictatorship, I was able to sustain my appetite for the multiplicity of newspapers that proliferated the newsstands with colourful and screaming headlines, only thanks to the fact I could pick them up a few days later at almost no cost from market women and storekeepers who were used to buying the unsold in devalued bulk, determined to put them to better use.

As for the broadcast media, I grew up listening to national radio on shortwave band, which was as liberating as it was dictatorial, as I recall how state functionaries used to be hired and fired, promoted and demoted mainly through the radio, which faithfully and regularly broadcast the thunderous outbursts of 'The Great Dictator' or his dogs of war against freedoms. Civil Servants would breakfast, lunch and dine glued to their radio in a mixture of expectation, uncertainty and foreboding, as radio could make them eat with joyous relish, just as it could make them lose their appetite, throw up or faint. Television, which came much later in the mid 1980s to crown the reign of 'Face Powder Democracy' with coloured vision, simply enshrined the dictatorship

of the radio, as functionaries have failed to know any better in real terms. Not to mention the masses swimming at the margins of freedom and opportunity.

Behind every newspaper, radio or television, behind every journalism, African or otherwise, is The Journalist as a socially produced being desperately seeking professionalism in a context of often competing and conflicting demands on their talents and calling. Often, I have wished I were a journalist, but when I watch African journalists at work, when I scrutinize the challenges facing them daily and fathom the compromises they have to make, I thank God I am only a journalist to be.

African Journalism is like swimming upstream most of the time, given all the hurdles journalists and the media face in our various countries. A lot of media freedom advocacy groups, journalists and media scholars, myself included, have catalogued the daily economic, political, institutional and professional constraints confronting African journalists. Amongst these are the tendency by African governments towards excessive centralization, bureaucratization and politicization of state owned media institutions, making it very difficult for state-employed journalists to reconcile the government's expectations with their professional beliefs, or with the expectations of the public. Also stifling, especially for the critical non-government media and journalists, are the legal frameworks regulating the press in many an African country. The craving by most states to control leaves little doubt about how the lawmakers see journalists as potential troublemakers who must be policed. In some countries, even when certain draconian aspects of the press laws of the one-party era have been replaced with new provisions that are relatively more tolerant of opposition views and of criticisms, often the selective application of the laws, together with the use of extra-legal measures, have been to the detriment of the critical private press, and have made it very difficult for this press to have the professional independence its needs. Other factors adversely affecting African Journalism include widespread job insecurity, poor salaries and poor working conditions of most journalists. Financial difficulties, lack of personnel and inadequate specialization or professionalization, ignorance of the market, and the uncertainties of life in the age of flexible mobility and its paradoxes, have only compounded the predicaments of African Journalism. Even when NGOs and other organizations intervene to assist the media financially and otherwise, they often resort to abstract and rigid notions of freedom that make them appear more like religious fundamentalists – what Harri Englund as termed 'Human Rights Fundamentalists' in his study of rights activists in Malawi and their deafness to alternative perspectives and the lived experiences of those they seek to convert.

These, however, are not the challenges that concern me in this lecture. Of concern here are the basic assumptions that underpin African journalism in definition and practice, and the consequences on journalists as socially and politically shaped beings who are part and parcel of the cultural communities in which they pursue their profession. To what extent does journalism as defined and practiced in Africa, adapted to the lived realities and ideas of personhood of the various individuals and communities that claim Africanity?



3. What Is Africanity?

What does it mean to be African? Who qualifies to claim Africa? Is being African or claiming Africa an attribute of race and skin colour (black, white, yellow), birth (umbilical cord, birth certificates, identity cards, passports), geography (physical spaces, home village), history (encounters), culture (prescriptive specificities), economics (availability and affordability, wealth and deprivation), sociology (social configurations and action, inclusion and exclusion), psychology (mind sets), philosophy (world views), politics (power relations), collective memory (shared experiences and aspirations), or a category through which a world that is not rigidly geographical, racial or cultural is constructed, to name just a few of the many possibilities that present themselves? These are questions which have deep roots in debates on citizenship and identity – and, therefore, in the definition of rights, entitlement, duties, and responsibilities. The questions are, of course, not uniquely African – indeed, similar issues have been posed and debated with considerable passion in other parts of the world both historically and currently, and contestations around them have also often been played out in violent communal confrontations, civil wars, and inter-state conflicts. And while they may seem straight forward to answer, the questions have been rendered much more complex by the dynamic inter-play of race, ethnicity, gender and religion in the structuring and exercise of power and opportunity. Precisely for this reason, they are not questions that can be addressed in the abstract.

How one answers the questions that are generated by any attempt at grappling with Africanity is not only situationally determined, but is also a function of how selective one is with regard to the various indicators available. Some individuals and communities on the continent and elsewhere might claim Africanity or have it imposed upon them for various personal, collective, historical and political reasons. But it is not always straight forward to say which of these claims may be legitimate and why, especially as identity is not only how one sees oneself, but also how one is seen and categorised by others, particularly where the absorption of new populations is involved. This is all the more so as identities are themselves always in mutation, shaped as they are by changing historical contexts and circumstances, such as internal and international migrations, shifts in social power relations.

It is, however, safe to say that to most ordinary people in Africa, Africanity is more than just a birth certificate, an identity card, or a passport – documents that many of them may not have, even as others coming from elsewhere and waving the flag of Africanity may have all of these documents and more. For the ordinary person, to be African is not simply to be labelled or merely defined as such. It is to be a social actor/actress enmeshed in a particular context that has been and continues to be shaped by a unique history that, among others, is marked by unequal encounters and misrepresentations often informed by the arrogance and ignorance of the economically and politically powerful who take the liberty also to arrogate a cultural superiority to themselves. For the masses of Africans, Africa is above all a lived reality, one that

is constantly shaped and reshaped (socially produced) by their toil and sweat as subjected and devalued humanity, even as they struggle to live in dignity and to transform their societies progressively. For these people, the fact of their Africanity is neither in question nor a question. And the least they would expect from concerned journalists is to refrain from adding onto their burdens in the name of a type of journalism which, in being ahistorical, also trivialises their collective experiences and memories in the guise of a socially and culturally disembedded professional ethic.

4. Problematic Assumptions in African Journalism

The basic assumptions underpinning African Journalism in definition and practice, are not informed by the fact that ordinary Africans are busy Africanizing their modernity and modernizing their Africanity in ways often too complex for simplistic dichotomies to capture. The precepts of journalism that apply currently in Africa are largely at variance with dominant ideas of personhood and agency (and by extension society, culture and democracy) shared by communities across the continent, as it assumes that there is a One-Best-Way of being and doing to which Africans must aspire and be converted in the name of modernity and civilization – and this, despite the fact that the very modernity and civilization which they are called upon to embrace actively produces and reproduces them as ‘different’, ‘inferior’, and belonging to the ‘margins’ of the forces shaping global processes.

This divorce is at the heart of some of the professional and ethical dilemmas that haunt journalism in and on Africa, a journalism whose tendency is to debase and caricature African humanity, creativity and realities. It is a constraint that renders African Journalism a journalism of bandwagonism, where mimicry is the order of the day, as emphases is less on thinking than on doing, less on leading than on being led, less on defining than on being defined. African Journalism lacks both the power of self-definition and the power to shape the universals that are deaf-and-dumb to the particularities of journalism in and on Africa. Because journalism has tended to be treated as an attribute of so-called ‘modern’ societies or of ‘superior’ others, it is only proper, so the reasoning goes, that African Journalism and the societies it serves, are taught the principles and professional practices by those who ‘know’ what it means to be civilized and to be relevant to civilization in a global hierarchy of humanity and cultures.

Aspiring journalists in Africa must, like containers, be dewatered of the mud and dirt of culture as tradition and custom, and filled afresh with the tested sparkles of culture as modernity and civilization. African journalists are thus called upon to operate in a world where everything has been predefined for them by others, where they are meant to implement and hardly ever to think or rethink, where what is expected of them is respect for canons, not to question how or why canons are forged, or the extent to which canons are inclusive of the creative diversity of the universe that is purportedly of interest to the journalism of the One-Best-Way. And that is not all, since they are defined a priori as inferior and marginal to the forces that shape global journalism, their best journalism is at best second-rate even when they are competing with second-rate others.



5. Humanity, Creativity

How well journalism is relevant to Africa and Africans depends on what value such journalism gives African humanity and creativity. If a journalism is such that privileges a hierarchy of humanity and human creativity, and if such journalism believes that African humanity and creativity are at the abyss of that interconnected global hierarchy, such journalism is bound to be prescriptive, condescending, contrived, caricatured and hardly in tune with the quest by Africans for equality of humanity and for recognition and representation. And if African journalists were to, wittingly or unwittingly, buy into that hierarchy, they would in effect be working against the interests of the very African communities they claim to serve with their journalism. But if one convinces one's self that one is at the abyss, that one is a veritable heart of darkness, one doesn't need much convincing buying into prescriptions on how to fish one's self out of the abyss or the heart of darkness, especially if such prescriptions are by those one has been schooled to recognize and represent as superior, and especially if the latter are in a position of power – if they have the yam and the knife, as Chinua Achebe would put it.

A closer look at democracy in Africa is a good indicator of how journalism has tended to articulate and appreciate African realities through the prescriptive lenses of those who believe their ideas of humanity and creativity to be sufficiently rich and practiced for uncritical adoption by 'emerging' others. In Europe and North America, liberal democracy is said to guarantee journalism the best environment it needs to foster freedom and progress. Liberal democracy's colossal investments in the making of the 'Independent Individual' is projected as the model to be promoted and defended by journalism in and on Africa. Yet the more African Journalism strives to implant liberal democracy, the less the successes it has had to report, and the more one critically examines that prescription, the greater it is contradicted by the colonial and postcolonial histories of unequal relations between Africa and the prescribing West .



6. Barbie Doll Democracy

Even the most optimistic of African journalists would hesitate to term liberal democracy and Africa good bedfellows. If African journalists were to scrutinize beyond minimalism the democratization projects with which they've been involved since the early 1990s for example, they'd agree that implementing liberal democracy in Africa has been like trying to force onto the body of a full-figured person, rich in all the cultural indicators of health Africans are familiar with, a dress made to fit the slim, de-fleshed Hollywood consumer model of a Barbie doll-type entertainment icon. They would also agree, that together with others, instead of blaming the tiny dress or its designer, the tradition amongst journalists has been to fault the popular body or the popular ideal of beauty, for emphasizing too much bulk, for parading the wrong sizes, for just not being the right thing.

Not often have African journalists questioned the experience and expertise of the liberal democracy designer or dressmaker, nor his/her audacity to assume that the parochial cultural palates that inform his/her peculiar sense of beauty should play God in the lives of Africa and African cultures.

In Africa, the history of difficulty at implementing liberal democracy and the role of journalism therein attests to this clash of values and attempts to ignore African cultural realities that might well have enriched and domesticated liberal democracy towards greater relevance. By overstressing individual rights and underplaying the rights of communities (cultural, religious and otherwise), African Journalism and the liberal democracy it has uncritically endorsed, have tended to be more of liabilities than assets to the aspirations for recognition and for a voice by the very Africans and communities they target. Yet, given the fact that Africans (journalists included) in their daily lives continue to emphasise relationships and solidarities over the illusion of autonomy, it is difficult to imagine the future direction of democracy outside a marriage or conviviality between individual aspirations and community interests, especially in a context where whole groups were, under colonialism and apartheid, dispossessed not as individuals, but as racial, ethnic and cultural groups, imagined or real.

Thus, for democracy and journalism to succeed in the present postcolonial context of the 21st century, their proponents must recognise the fact that most Africans (and indeed everyone else) are primarily patriotic to their home village (region, province, ethnic, cultural community, etc), to which state and country in the postcolonial sense are only secondary. It is in acknowledging and providing for the reality of individuals who, like Barack Obama, negotiate and navigate different forms of identity and belonging, and who are willing or forced to be both 'citizens' and 'subjects', that democracy stands its greatest chance in Africa and the world, and that journalism can best be relevant to all and sundry in Africa and beyond.



7. Navigating Citizenship and Subjection

Despite the tendency to distinguish between what Mahmood Mamdani has termed ‘citizens and subjects’ in scholarly circles, in Africa (and indeed everywhere else at a closer look), we find individuals who are both citizens and subjects, who straddle ‘cultural’ and ‘civic’ citizenships, but who would not accept sacrificing either permanently. Sometimes they are more the one than the other and sometimes more the other than the one, but certainly not reducible to either. They appropriate both in the most creative and fascinating ways. A democracy or journalism that focuses too narrowly on the individual and is insensitive to the centrality of group and community interests is likely to impair and frustrate the very recognition and representation it celebrates. It pays to go beyond prescriptions to describe the lives of actually individuals seeking to make sense of the competing and often conflicting demands of on them as social beings.

Regardless of the status of those involved in ‘rights talk’ and ‘culture talk’, they all are convinced of one thing: ‘cultural citizenship’ is as integral to democracy as political and economic citizenship, irrespective of how they came by their cultural identities. If African (or marginal) philosophies of personhood and agency stress interdependence between the individual and the community and between communities, and if journalists each identify with any of the many cultural communities all seeking recognition and representation at local, national and global levels, they are bound to be torn between serving their cultural communities and serving the ‘imagined’ rights-bearing, autonomous individual ‘citizen’ of the liberal democratic civic model. A democracy that stresses independence, in a situation where both the worldview and the material realities emphasise interdependence, is bound to result only in dependence.

The liberal democratic rhetoric of rights dominated by a narrow neo-liberal focus on ‘The Individual’, does not reflect the whole reality of personhood and agency in Africa (imagined and related to as marginal), which is a lot more complex than provided for in liberal democratic prescription of rights and empowerment. Instead of working for a creative mix with indigenous forms of politics and government, liberal democracy has sought to replace these, posing as the One-Best-Way of modern democratic political organisation, the right way of conducting modern politics, yet failing to de-marginalise Africa enough to fulfil its prescriptions. So also has the journalism it inspires, stayed narrow and asphyxiating to alternative outlooks and practices of sharing news and information, and of entertaining and educating.



8. Creolising

In the use of language alone, few African journalists have dared to write the way Chinua Achebe suggests is a popular mode of communication amongst the Igbo, where proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Fewer still have dared to contemplate using English, French, Portuguese or Spanish the creative ways that the ordinary Africans whom they purportedly target with their journalism do. While journalists mark time with linguistic orthodoxy, African communities have been busy creolizing inherited European languages through promoting intercourse with African languages, and in turn enriching local languages through borrowings. Everywhere the spoken word has also perfected its intermarriage with the unspoken through body language and other nonverbal forms. And with the introduction of the cell phone, instant and SMS messaging, the youth are adding onto such creativity through their innovative use of language codes to communicate with one another.

When African journalists begin to reflect such popular creativity among Africans, and without a sense of guilt that they are violating journalistic taboos, they would be helping towards a democracy and journalism of relevance to, in and on Africa. In this, there is much in how Africans relate to their cultures and home village to inspire African journalists. Instead of seeing it as a problem to be defined out of the realm of acceptability, African Journalism must recognise and provide for the fact that, the home village in Africa has retained its appeal both for those who have been disappointed by the town, as well as for those who have found success in the town. It takes going beyond prescriptiveness to capture the lives of urbanites and villagers to see the relationships and practices that link them, making of them navigators and negotiators of multiple spaces and identity margins.



9. Cosmopolitan African

Recognising indigenous African forms should not be mistaken for throwing the baby of adaptability out with the bathwater. African popular musicians for example have evolved and continue to develop musical idioms that capture ongoing processes by Africans at modernising their cultures and traditionalising their modernities. Indeed, the mechanisms developed by Africans in response to the above scenarios are complex, fascinating and informed by ideas of personhood and agency that simply refuse to be confined to the logic of, dichotomies, essentialism, the market and profitability, as the rich personal account of one of Africa's leading contemporary musicians, Manu Dibango, demonstrates. As an African musician who has lived the best part of his professional life in Paris and whose music has been enriched by various encounters, Manu Dibango describes himself as "Négropolitain," "a man between two cultures, two environments," whose music cannot simply be reduced to either, without losing part of his creative self (Dibango 1994:88-130).

It appears that no one is too cosmopolitan to be local as well. We only have to note the creative ways Africans have harnessed the cell phone to interlink town and home village, to know how disinterested in a culture of winner-takes-all Africans are. Faced with the temporality or transience of personal success in the context of African modernities, even the most achieving and cosmopolitan of individuals hesitate to sever their rural connections entirely. The city and the 'world out there' brought closer by accelerated mobility and interconnections are perceived as hunting grounds; the home village is the place to return at the end of the day. Investing in one's home village is generally seen as the best insurance policy and a sign of ultimate success, for it guarantees survival even when one has lost everything in the city and abroad, and secures and makes manifest a realisation of success through satisfying obligations and fulfilling requests.

Thus, although successful urbanites may not permanently return or retire to the rural area as such, most remain in constant interaction with their home village through all sorts of ways. Some leave express instructions with kin to be buried or re-buried in their home village. Prescriptive journalism that denounces this reality instead of understanding, adapting and relating to it, is bound to be a liability to Africans and their ways of life. The narrow insistence on individual rights and freedoms has thus impaired understanding of the interconnectedness of peoples, cultures and societies through individuals as products, negotiators and creative manipulators or navigator of multiple identities.

Discussing democracy and journalism in Africa calls for scrutiny of the importance of cultural identities in the lives of individuals and groups. This argument challenges reductionist views of democracy and journalism, acknowledges the fact that democracy and journalism may take different forms, and most particularly, that they are construed and constructed differently in different societies, informed by history, culture and economic factors.



10. Enriched realities

The way forward is in recognising the creative ways in which Africans merge their traditions with exogenous influences to create realities that are not reducible to either but enriched by both. The implication of this argument is that how we understand the role of African Journalism depends on what democratic model we draw from.

Under liberal democracy where the individual is perceived and treated as an autonomous agent, and where primary solidarities and cultural identities are discouraged in favour of a national citizenship and culture, journalism is expected to be disinterested, objective, balanced and fair in gathering, processing and disseminating news and information. The assumption is that since all individuals have equal rights as citizens, there can be no justification for bias among journalists. But under popular notions of democracy where emphasis is on interdependence and competing cultural solidarities are provided for, journalists and the media are under constant internal and external pressure to promote the interests of the various groups competing for recognition and representation.

The tensions and pressures are even greater in situations where states and governments purport to pursue liberal democracy in principle, while in reality they continue to be highhanded and repressive to their populations. When this happens, journalists are at risk of employing double-standards as well, by claiming one thing and doing the opposite, or by straddling various identity margins, without always being honest about it, especially if their very survival depends on it.

To democratise means to question basic monolithic assumptions, conventional wisdom about democracy, journalism, government, power myths and accepted personality cults, and to suggest and work for the demystification of the state, custom and society. To democratize African Journalism is to provide the missing cultural link to current efforts, links informed by respect for African humanity and creativity, and by popular ideas of personhood and domesticated agency. It is to negotiate conviviality between competing ideas of how best to provide for the humanity and dignity of all and sundry. It is above all to observe and draw from the predicaments of ordinary Africans forced by culture, history and material realities to live their lives as 'subjects' rather than as 'citizens', even as liberal democratic rhetoric claims otherwise. The mere call for an exploration of alternatives in African Journalism, is bound to be perceived as a threat and a challenge.



11. A hostile hearing

In particular, such a call would receive a hostile hearing from those who have championed the cause of one-dimensionalism nationally and internationally – that is, those who benefit from the maintenance of the status quo, and who stand to lose from any changes in African Journalism. They cannot withstand the challenge, stimulation and provocation that a more democratic (as the effective – as opposed to token – celebration of difference and diversity) journalism promises. They want life to go on without disturbance or fundamental change, especially by or in favour of those at the margins. And they are well placed to ensure this, thanks to their power to define and regulate journalism, the power to accord or to deny a voice to individuals and communities.

Only well-articulated policies informed by public interest broadly defined to include individual and community expectations, and scrupulously respected, would guarantee against such abuse and misuse of office and privilege. The future of democracy and the relevance of journalism to Africans and their predicaments will depend very much on how well Africans are able to negotiate recognition and representation for their humanity and creativity beyond the tokenism of prevalent politically correct rhetoric on equality of humanity and opportunity.

12. Creative Appropriation of ICTs: Lessons for African Journalism

Journalism, to be relevant to social consolidation and renewal in Africa, must embrace professional and social responsiveness in tune with the collective aspirations of Africans. In a context where economic and political constraints have often hindered the fulfilment of this expectation, the advent and increasing adoption in Africa of ICTs offer fascinating new possibilities. While journalists are usually open to new technologies in their work, their practice of journalism has not always capitalized upon the creative ways in which the public they target for and with information adopt, adapt and use the very same technologies. The future for democracy and the relevance of journalism therein would have much to learn from the creative ways in which Africans are currently relating to innovations in ICTs. The same popular creativity that has been largely ignored by conventional journalism in the past is remarkable today all over Africa and amongst Africans in the Diaspora. The body of literature informed by empirical research is considerable to suggest that individuals and the cultural communities they represent often refuse to celebrate victimhood. They seek to harness, within the limits of the structural constraints facing them, whatever possibilities are available to contest and seek inclusion. Hence the need to highlight the importance of blending conventional and citizen journalism through the myriad possibilities offered by ICTs to harness both democracy and its nemesis. The current context of globalization facilitated by the ICTs offers exciting new prospects not only for citizens and journalists to compete and complement one another, but also an opportunity for new solidarities to challenge undemocratic forces, ideologies and practices that stand in the way of social progress.

Thus, although Internet connectivity in Africa is lowest compared to other areas of the world, Africa's cultural values of sociality, interconnectedness, interdependence and conviviality make it possible for others to access the Internet and its opportunities without necessarily being connected themselves. In many situations, it suffices for a single individual to be connected for whole groups and communities to benefit. The individual in question acts as a point of presence or communication node, linking other individuals and communities in a myriad of ways and bringing hope to others who would otherwise be dismissed as not belonging by capital and its excessive emphasis on the autonomous individual consumer.

In parts of the continent where resident telephone lines are grossly inadequate and defective at best, and where Internet connections are difficult and expensive, literate and illiterate people eager to stay in touch with relations, friends and opportunities within and in the Diaspora flood the few Internet points with messages to be typed and emailed on their behalf. Replies to their emails are printed out, addressed and pigeonholed for them by the operators who cannot afford to check for mails regularly because of exorbitant costs. What is noteworthy, however, is that the high charges do not seem to temper the determination of those involved to stay in touch with the outside world.

Through such connections, people are able to exchange news on family, projects, events and developments of a personal and general nature. They are also able to exchange news on different cultural products and to arrange on how to acquire the products for one another. It is mainly through this means that many Africans abroad or in the Diaspora do not miss out on local music releases, publications, satirical humour, artifacts and fashion. Each visit to the home village is armed with a long list of cultural products to take back for oneself, fellow Africans and friends. Many unmarried young men and women in the Diaspora would have given up hope of marrying someone from their home village or country and doing so in accordance with local customs and traditions, had email not been there to facilitate contacts and negotiations with parents and potential families-in-law.

In addition, the cosmopolitan identities of Africans in the Diaspora personally and through websites serve as itinerant billboards or as evangelists seeking converts for the cultures of their home villages. Thanks to such advertisements and websites, marabouts, sangomas, ngangas have been drawn to the West and other centres of modern accumulation where the rising interest in the occult is creating demand and opportunities for their muti or magic from Africa. The growing need for magical interpretations to material realities under millennial capitalism has meant creating space on the margins for marginalized cultures and solutions. This would explain the back-street shops and dealers in African cultural products, ranging from foods to charms and amulets. It also explains the fact that not all the customers visiting these shops and markets are Diasporic Africans. The Diaspora and the rest of the world are thus connected to the local, and both can work actively to ensure continuity for cultures and communities marginalized at the national and global levels by the big players. Lesson: it does not have to be big to be noticed.

The same creativity displayed in relation to the Internet is true of the cell phone, which has rapidly become the new talking drum of everyday Africa. Africa has the fastest growth rate in the world for cell phones. The latest technology to be domesticated is the cell phone, which almost everywhere on the continent is being used creatively by poor urban dwellers and Diasporic Africans to stay in touch with relatives and channel remittances, and through them maintain healthy communication with the living-dead. Even those who cannot afford a cell phone stand to benefit thanks to the sociality and solidarity of the local cultures of which they are a part.

Most cell phone owners in West Africa and central Africa for example, tend to serve as points of presence for their community, with others paying or simply passing through them to make calls to relatives, friends and contacts within or outside the country. Thus although countries in these regions might actually own fewer phones than most countries in the West or elsewhere, and despite their relatively low level of economic activity relative to other parts of the world, the economic and social value of a cell phone in them as single-owner-multiple-user countries is much higher than that of a cell phone in countries with single-owner-single-user communities. Contrary to popular opinion, sociality, interdependence and conviviality are not always an obstacle to profitability.

The lessons for African journalism of such creative appropriation processes under way are obvious. Comprehending the overall development, usage and application of

ICTs within African social spaces would take the fusion of keen observation and complex analysis to capture structural, gendered, class, generational, racial and spatial dimensions of the phenomenon. A dialectical interrogation of the processes involved promises a more accurate grasp of the linkages than would impressionistic, linear and prescriptive narratives of technological determinism. If African journalism pays closer attention to the creative usages of ICTs by ordinary Africans, African journalists could begin to think less of professional journalism in the conventional sense, and more of seeking ways to blend the information and communication cultures of the general public with their conventional canon and practices, to give birth to a conventional cum-citizen journalism that is of greater relevance to Africa and its predicaments.

I think “citizen journalism” brings a whole new dimension to the mainstream journalism in Africa of which I have been critical for being so neatly detached from what is really going on in the ordinary lives of people and how they make news, how they gather news and how they communicate. It is because our journalists, by sticking too narrowly and indeed hypocritically to liberal democratic normative canons of journalism, miss the point of African value added in terms of how people communicate and how they share communication with one another. And Africa has a much richer landscape in this regard that can inform journalism. Before citizen journalism became popularised, you had citizen journalism all over Africa. Ordinary people used forms such as “radio trottoir”, social commentary, rumour and various other forms of political derision and art to obtain information, share it and create possibilities where normal channels were beyond their reach. So citizen journalism provides an opportunity to revisit an old problem, that of understanding popular forms of communication and how they blend in with conventional media for the best of society.

Indeed, thanks to innovations in ICT, the structure and content of the big media are being challenged and compelled to be more sensitive to cultural diversity. The very same innovations facilitate new media cultures and practices through the possibilities they offer radical, alternative, small independent, local and community media. Through their capacity for flexibility and accessibility, the ICT that make possible new media, cultural communities hitherto marginalised are better catered for even within the framework of dominance by the global cultural industries. The current advantage being taken of the ICT by cultural communities the world over seeking recognition and representation should be seen in this light, and above all, as an example from which conventional journalism draw.

REFERENCES

De Bruin, M, Nyamnjoh, F.B. and Brinkman, I. (eds), (2009), *Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*, Langaa/ASC Leiden: Bamenda.

Dibango, M. (in collaboration with Danielle Rouard) (1994) *Three Kilos of Coffee: An Autobiography* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago)

Mamdani, M., (1996), *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Capitalism*, Cape Town: David Philip.

Mamdani, M. (ed.) (2000), *Beyond Rights Talk and Culture Talk*, Cape Town, South Africa: David Philip.

Miller, D. and Slater, D. (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Oxford : Berg. Mpe, P. (2001), *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of Natal Press.

Nyamnjoh, F.B., (2005a), *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, London: Zed Books.

Nyamnjoh, F.B., (2005b), 'Images of Nyongongo amongst Bamenda Grassfielders in Whiteman Kontri', *Citizenship Studies*, Vol.9(3):241-269.

Olukoshi, A. and Nyamnjoh, F.B., (2004), "Editorial", *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No.1&2 2004.

Fisiy, C. and Goheen, M., 1998, *Power and the Quest for Recognition: Neo-traditional Titles among the New Elite in Nso', Cameroon, Africa*, Vol. 68(3):383-402.



January 2010

fesmedia  Africa *series*

www.fesmedia.org

© 2009 fesmedia Africa, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung,
P O Box 23652, Windhoek, Namibia
Tel: +264 61 237 438
Email: fesmedia@fesmedia.org

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT 
STIFTUNG**