***Indigenous Language Media,
Language Politics and Democracy in Africa***
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At the centre of the project of democratisation in sub-Saharan Africa, as elsewhere, lies participation. Since the 1990s, along with the growth of multi-party democracy, African media have become much more diverse, with a proliferation of FM radio stations and TV channels. The expansion of media channels in African languages ('indigenous language media') has opened up possibilities of cultural and political expression to communities that since colonial times were marginalised by state-owned media privileging an indigenous elite that knew and used European languages. This book offers a collection of perspectives from which to assess the opportunities opened up, while also highlighting certain obstacles that limit the effectiveness of indigenous African language media as agents of community participation.

The book is organised into three parts: 'Indigenous Languages, Media and Democracy in Africa', 'The Media, Language, Inclusion and Exclusion in Africa' and 'The Indigenous Language Media in Political and Cultural Expression in Africa'.

Part 1 consists of two chapters which critically consider indigenous media in relation to political and economic contexts. In Chapter 1, 'Indigenous Language Media and Democracy in Africa', Salawu surveys the political roles that indigenous newspapers have played, both before and

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after the opening to democracy. As early as the 1920s, Yoruba newspapers provided a platform for ideas of popular rights and liberation and, in the 1950s, newspapers in Nyasaland and Kenya were vehicles of political agitation against British colonial rule. Post-independence, the vernacular press stirred opposition to autocratic rule in Kenya and Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s. Following the annulment of the 1993 Nigerian Presidential elections and seizure of power by General Abacha, criticism of military rule came from the Yoruba newspaper *Alaroye* and private radio stations, along with forms of oral arts – grassroots theatre and popular music. Besides these positive roles, Salawu adverts to the risk that indigenous media can be used to intensify ethnic tensions. In the 1990s, certain indigenous language radio stations helped to inflame the ethnic conflict between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda; *Alaroye* helped stir up Yoruba animus towards the northern Hausa in the early 2000s; and in recent times, radio has incited inter-ethnic conflict in South Sudan.

Salawu believes that indigenous language media can fulfil an emancipatory goal: ‘to ensure effective participatory democracy so that people can be involved in their own governance, make informed decisions, and make governments accountable’ (p. 23). However, he recognises that, in Africa, certain factors hamper the realisation of the potential that exists for addressing the needs of diverse groups and meeting these needs through relevant content. One negative factor is the domination of independent media by corporate interests; this has led to profitability as the main goal and lurid tabloid journalism. The second negative factor mentioned by Salawu is the weakness of indigenous languages in social and digital media in sub-Saharan Africa. This assertion is, however, only partially true; while most people lack internet access, mobile phones enable users to communicate not only with each other, but with radio and television stations via SMS.

In Chapter 2, ‘Indigenous Language Media and Freedom of Expression in Uganda’, Chibita adopts a critical political economy perspective in discussing the results of a 2014 nationwide study which solicited the views of the public on how broadcast media performed in relation to control of the media, diversity of content and freedom of expression. Data sources were interviews with key national figures in media production and regulation, and focus group interviews involving ordinary Ugandans. The chapter offers valuable insights into the political and structural constraints affecting the media in a country which has been ruled by a single political party and one President since 1986. In spite of the greatly increased number of radio and television stations, a majority of respondents felt that there was insufficient diversity in terms of ownership and content. Commercial pressures

operate against the use of less widely spoken languages, and domination by government and its supporters means that commercial radio must take care to broadcast politically safe content. Regulation weighs heaviest on stations remote from the capital, nearly all of which broadcast in local indigenous languages. The non-commercial community radio sector could enable participation by marginalised groups, but their dependence on funding by donors or local politicians limits the diversity of views they can express.

At their best, indigenous language media can offer content that educates, raises awareness of community history and identity, and addresses local concerns, including questions of rights and the denial of justice. These all relate to 'inclusion', the main theme of the four chapters in Part 2. In Chapter 3, 'IsiZulu Language and the *Ilanga* Newspaper as Catalysts for Participatory Democracy in South Africa', Buthelezi describes how the newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natali*, started in 1903 by J. L. Dube, first president of the ANC, played a major role in struggles against white oppression. Today, *Ilanga* continues to provide a space for constructive criticism of the government, offering a forum for discussion of Zulu culture, history and social development. The author refers to 'social uplifting' (p. 76), citing examples of how reporting of cases of individual distress enabled connections to be made with people or organisations that were able to help. The tone of the article is laudatory, although there is a suggestion at the end that *Ilanga* should continually review the relevance of its content.

The establishment of non-profit community media not only legitimises local languages and identities, but may even create a sense of solidarity among hostile ethnic groups speaking different languages. Such is the case of two groups of San people (Bushmen) who for their protection were relocated in South Africa after the Namibian War of Independence. In Chapter 4, 'The Return of the Local: Community Radio as Dialogic and Participatory', Mhlanga describes how the establishment in Platfontein of a bilingual community radio station for !Xûn and Khwe speakers created a space for sharing discourses of cultural survival while confronting social problems. For these extremely marginalised cultural groups, the radio station XK FM has come to be seen as a voice of empowerment, in spite of the state broadcaster retaining ownership of the radio station. This interesting chapter unfortunately contains a lot of ill-absorbed theory.

In Chapter 5, Onwukwe and Okugo consider "Englishisation" of the World Wide Web: Implications for Indigenous Languages in Nigeria.' At present, the lack of any indigenous language versions of government or parastatal websites alienates the mass of the population, while the online predominance of English reflects the neglect of indigenous languages as a

resource for development. UNESCO's recommendation for the 'creation of national and multilingual websites', part of their 'information-for-all' initiative, could encourage Nigerian youth to value their languages and help to counter media acculturation to Western values (p. 118).

As explained in Chapter 6, 'Indigenous Language Broadcasting in Ghana' by Akpojivi and Fosu, official policies in that country favour the development of indigenous languages in the media, and in practice 'foreignisation' has been resisted, at least in radio. Ghana has over fifty languages, nine of which enjoy government-sponsored status. However, most broadcasts on commercial radio are in Akan or Ewe. Linguistic diversity and the high cost of production and distribution in the regions hinder the production of radio programmes in all languages, which community radio stations should ideally provide. In spite of this, the authors maintain that 'to a large extent the use of local languages in radio broadcasting has empowered the illiterate and peasant population in participating in the media and political sphere' (p. 132). This seems rather over-optimistic. Further empowerment may be achieved through the authors' proposal of a national language policy that would, *inter alia*, provide funding for broadcasting in minority languages.

Part 3, 'The Indigenous Language Media in Political and Cultural Expression in Africa', consists of four varied chapters. In 'Indigenous Language Radio in Kenya and the Negotiation of Inter-group Relations during Conflict Processes', Oburu describes how three indigenous language radio stations, representing the Luo, Kalenjin and Kikuyu ethnic constituencies, played a role in escalating and de-escalating tension before, during and after the 2007 Presidential elections, which led to over 1,000 deaths. Before the election, and in the violent conflict phase that followed it, the media in all three regions used 'differentiated framing' (p. 175) to generate polarisation between ethnic groups. Once peace negotiations were underway, the ethnic radio stations changed to 'concerted framing', foregrounding nation-building and playing religious songs in place of political songs. Oburu ends by listing the positive roles that indigenous radio narratives can play in peace-building. Yet all that has been demonstrated for certain in the chapter is that indigenous radio may either exacerbate or mollify inter-community tensions through their use of framing in discourse.

Chapter 8 by Sunday, 'Mobilising Nigerians towards a National Population Census', focuses on the function of the media in 'agenda setting', which includes educating and mobilising the public to participate in certain state-led public activities. An example is the national census, an event which is widely seen in Nigeria not as a tool of national planning, but as a means of justifying increased revenue and political representation

to particular regions, and considered to be subject to manipulation and falsification (p. 184). Investigative features in the media before the 2006 census may indeed have heightened these negative stereotypes. The author suggests that to ensure clear public understanding of the projected 2016 census (which has, in the event, been put back until 2018) communication needs to prioritise use of indigenous languages, with both traditional media and social media being used in a responsible manner.

Chapter 9 is entitled 'Language Politics in Religious Expression in African Indigenous Churches'. Idumwonyi and Ikhidero explain how the African Independent Churches, in breaking the mould of mission Christianity, acculturated their faith through indigenous languages; in doing so, they purposefully resisted colonialism. 'Translation' of Christianity – both linguistically and culturally – has played an important role in cultural renewal and in what the authors rightly refer to as 'the phenomenal growth of African Independent Churches' (p. 206). This chapter is not well structured and bears only a tenuous relation to the main themes of the collection.

Part of the appeal of religion is freedom of access for those without power. In contrast, the poor lack access to elite media, largely for reasons of language. Their voice, the voice of the oppressed, can be represented in forms of 'orature' or 'oramedia' (Salawu 2006). In the final chapter, 'Poverty, Prophets and Progress', Lwanda draws on examples of popular song lyrics from 1994 to 2012 to illustrate how lyricists from the *azimwale* class (proletariat) have protested against the injustices suffered by the poor in Malawi's divided society. He points out that it is rare to find the same candour, anger and audacity among writers, who may criticise but continue to enjoy membership of the elite patronage network.

Most of the chapters are of value, although the quality is uneven. Nearly all address indigenous language media and democracy, but in spite of the book's title, language politics is barely discernible. Its inclusion in the title is therefore misleading. Second, although Salawu and Chibita point to a theme that runs through many of the ten chapters – 'a distinction between access that enables consumption as opposed to access that enables plurality and diversity' (p. 4) – the volume lacks a coherent conceptual overview. Another weakness is the absence of any discussion of the new practices that Mudhai (2014) refers to as 'networked-convergent journalism.' This is a rapidly developing area with clear implications for democratic participation, and merited some coverage.

Although the case studies offer useful insights for researchers and post-graduate students on specialist courses in Journalism or African Studies, the volume seems somewhat diffuse. The contrast between 'access that enables consumption as opposed to access that enables plurality and

diversity' could have been sketched more keenly and discussed in depth in relation to the central questions of media ownership, political involvement and popular access and participation.

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