

# Rich history, uncertain future

*The colonialists and missionaries introduced writing and printing to Africa but they realised fairly quickly that effective communication with and among Africans meant using local languages. But, says **Abiodun Salawu**, today's media in Africa don't promote the use of African languages as much as they could.*

**The governments in Africa must be more serious about the enhancement of our cultural heritage, of which language is the single most important factor.**

The indigenous language press in Africa has a rich history. *Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* was the first newspaper in Nigeria and the first indigenous-language newspaper in Africa. It started in 1859. And, in South Africa, among the earliest papers were *Imvo Zabatsundu* (1884) and *UmAfrika* (1888). *Imvo Zabatsundu* (Native Opinion) was a Xhosa paper which existed for 113 years until 1997.

The colonialists and missionaries introduced writing and printing to Africa but they realised fairly quickly that effective communication with and among Africans meant using local languages. Reverend Henry Townsend of the Anglican mission started *Iwe Irohin fun awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* in 1859 to encourage the Egba and the Yoruba people to cultivate the habit of reading for the purpose of information acquisition.

*Mtenga Watu*, the first indigenous language newspaper in Malawi was founded by the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) in 1895.

But in Kenya, it was the nationalist struggle which was responsible for the development of the indigenous language press in the country, with the establishment of *Muigwithania* in 1928.

The indigenous language press in Nigeria has been categorised into five 'waves'. *Iwe Irohin* stood on its own in the first wave (1859-67) while the second wave covers the period 1885-92 and featured two Efik papers, *Unwana Efik* and *Obukpon Efik* as well as a Yoruba paper, *Iwe Irohin Eko*. The third wave started with the founding of *Eko Akete* in 1922 and ended with the second and final death of the paper in 1937. The fourth wave began with the entry of *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* (1937/38) and went on till Nigeria attained independence and republic status in the 60s. The rest of the development till the present time may be conveniently subsumed in the fifth and the last 'wave'.

Of all the newspapers in the first to the fourth 'waves', only *Iwe Irohin* (said to have reincarnated in *Iroyin Yoruba* in 1945) and *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* still exist till today. *Gaskiya Tafi kwabo* ("Truth is worth more than a penny") was established by the quasi-official Gaskiya Corporation, which had an objective of promoting the development of literature in the northern part of Nigeria. Even most other indigenous language newspapers which had come after *Gaskiya* and *Iroyin Yoruba* had ceased to exist.

In 1930 in South Africa, there were 19 registered, African-language newspapers. Today, most of these newspapers are non-existent. The multilingual (isiXhosa, isiZulu, seSotho and English) newspaper *Inkundla ya Bantu*, edited by President Thabo Mbeki's father, Govan Mbeki, only existed for six years (1939 to 1944).

*Leapnews*, the newsletter of the Language in Education in Africa Project, reported that there used to be newspapers in 15 Ghanaian languages as recently as 1990s. Today, none of them is in existence.

## The power of English

Problems facing indigenous-language media in Africa are a reflection of problems facing the languages of the continent in general. In most parts of

Africa communication in indigenous languages has been adversely affected by the choice of the colonial language as the official language.

Indigenous languages are not highly esteemed and – for example in Nigeria – English and western education remain the vehicles of power and progress in life.

Samuel Uzochukwu, a retired professor of Igbo language, told the Nigerian *Guardian* (27 August 2004) that in Igbo land, English was being used in 85% of transactions; in Yoruba land, 75%, and in Hausa land, 37.5%.

## Broadcast media

The situation is much better in the broadcast media. Radio stations, across Nigeria, for instance, have contributed to the promotion of the nation's languages. But the FM stations are almost exclusively for the English language. Most private television stations are heavily guilty of this. The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission is also not helping matters. Even though the commission stipulated a 60:40 ratio for local and foreign content of broadcast stations, it does not stipulate what percentage of local content should be in indigenous languages. So, if a programme is produced in English, but by Nigerians, it is still considered local content. This stance is not helpful to the development of the local languages. The broadcast media in Cross River and Akwa Ibom states of the country are no longer giving prominence to the local language known with that area, Efik. In a 2002 survey, out of a total of 7 560 minutes expended in broadcasting in the week, only a total of 425 minutes was allocated to the indigenous language, leaving a total of 7 135 minutes for programmes in English. This translates to 5.6% for local language and 94.4% for English.

Generally, however, the fact still remains that indigenous languages fare better in the broadcast media than in the print media, indicating that African culture still remains, largely, an oral culture. An interesting feature is the programme *Koko inu iwe irohin* ("Major highlights in the newspapers") in Yoruba which tells audiences of the news in the English-language newspapers every morning on Bond FM, in Lagos. It also used to be on Metro FM and Radio Nigeria 2, both also in Lagos. On all the stations, the programme is anchored by the same set of presenters. There is no doubt that the programme is well received and has attracted advertisers.

The presentation of the programme is laced with a heavy dose of humour and classical (excellent) use of the Yoruba language. The newspaper headlines as read out by the presenters (in Yoruba language) sound screaming and sensational. The presenters have a good grasp of the lore and traditions of the people. They are a delight to listen to.

Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, indigenous languages do well in the broadcast media, as compared with the print media. This is a country that one account credited with having more than 150 periodicals in indigenous languages during the colonial era. Whereas the indigenous language newspapers in the country (*Kimpagi*, *Beto na Beto*) are either dead or comatose, there is a growth

of community radio stations throughout most of the country. And in Uganda state radio is mandated to broadcast in as many of the indigenous languages of the nation as possible. Thus, on Radio Uganda you can hear 27 languages (including English and Kiswahili). A study done on Cameroon's indigenous language media also noted that there is hardly a remarkable indigenous language press in the country. There has, on the contrary, been a "medium-shift" from indigenous language press to indigenous language broadcasting.

## Some print successes

Not all is gloomy in the arena of print media. There are some relative success stories. Ethiopia is a case in point. Of the 125 newspapers in the country, 108 are in Amharic, two in Oromo and one in Tigre. Ethiopia is one of the three countries in Africa (with Tanzania and Somalia) where a local language is used as a medium of instruction to a high level and for official and administrative purposes.

Another success story is the publication of a daily Zulu newspaper in South Africa. The report has it that *Isolezwe*, launched in 2002, has even lured readers away from established English newspapers.

The emergence of *Alaroye* in 1996 marked a milestone in the affairs of Yoruba and, indeed, indigenous language press in Nigeria. Within a short time this newspaper became popular because of its arresting cover design and styles of headline-casting and story presentation. It popularised reading of Yoruba. It is the largest local language newspaper with a circulation of 150 000 a week. It sells in Europe and other West African countries where Yoruba is spoken. Its publishers, World Information Agents, have also added other Yoruba publications to their stable. They include: *Alaroye Magasini*, *Atoka Alaroye*, *Iririr Aye Alaroye* and *Akede Agbaye*.

The success of *Alaroye* and the frenzied political situation in the country before the return of democracy in 1999 triggered the emergence of other Yoruba publications: *Ajoro*, *Alaye*, *Ofe* and *Olooto*, just to mention a few. A number of them, however, were short-lived. *Kwayedza* is another success story in Zimbabwe. It has an 80 000 circulation figure and a readership of 121.4 readers per copy.

## Encouraging indigenous communication

In order to encourage communication in African languages, the first step is to promote, vigorously, these languages through educational policy. The governments in Africa must be more serious about the enhancement of our cultural heritage, of which language is the single most important factor. In fact the African situation is, no different from other countries which have been colonized. The story, for instance, is the same in India. The only grace that the Indian indigenous language press has is that it enjoys subsidy from government; and this is what has been keeping it vibrant.

The promotion of a reading culture in African languages is a programme that should be pursued vigorously. Media campaigns should be mounted, among other things, while encouragement should be given to creative writing and publishing in ➡➡➡

➡ African languages.

Public and private sectors, including media operators, should also come together to organise seminars and workshops where there can be cross fertilisation of ideas on how to improve the lot of media using African languages.

African linguists have an urgent task in producing glossaries of scientific and technological terminologies in African languages. These will aid journalists handling stories in areas that are scientific and technological.

Publishers of African language newspapers – government and private – should strive to make the newspapers easily available and affordable. Through this, the newspapers can serve the information needs of the people and become a familiar part of their lives.

Proprietors of African language media should make deliberate efforts to popularise and educate the public about their operations while journalists working in the media should be more aggressive in their information gathering.

Public and private sectors should also encourage the existence of African language media through advertisements/commercials and supplements in these media.

The various institutes and departments of journalism and media studies in Africa should also help in this crusade through admission policies and curricula. They should make a pass in an African language compulsory for candidates seeking admission into their programmes. And, in their curricula, they should make compulsory the taking of courses in an African language. ■

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recently-published book  
**Indigenous Language Media in Africa.***

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