AFRICAN JOURNALISM

Modernity, Africanity

The basic assumptions underpinning African Journalism in definition and practice, are not informed by the fact that ordinary Africans are busy Africanising their modernity and modernising their Africanity in ways often too complex for simplistic dichotomies to capture, says ***Francis Nyamnjoh***. 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 there is an assumption that there is a One-Best-Way of being and doing to which Africans must aspire and be converted to in the name of modernity and civilization. This

An embracing Africanism

by Larry Strelitz

"African journalism" is a composite term, each element of which is problematic, and is open to differing interpretations.

I'll deal with each in turn.

An identity of any sort is always relational.

Thus "Africa" and things "African" have meaning in relation to what is non-African – usually European or American.

Difference is not necessarily absolute. The politics of interpretation is thus about how one understands that relation. Is it oppositional; is it a mimicking; or is it syncretic?

Writing about the Makgoba affair at Wits University in 1997, Mahmood Mamdani suggested that Africanism comes in two types.

The one simply usurps the power and roles occupied by what was non-African, without transforming relationships and practices in any way, and is thus vulnerable to the same pitfalls of exclusivism and racism of the "Europeanism" that it replaces.

"But," he writes, "there is a second type of Africanism, one that repudiates and transcends racism. It heralds an African identity more inclusive than exclusive. Rather than a birthmark, African identity becomes a mark of belonging to a community, a commitment to forging a common future."(*Mail&Guardian*, 5-11 September 1997: 25).

I think it is the anti-essentialism of this second understanding of Africanism that we should hold onto in trying to make sense of the two terms "African" and "journalism" that come together in the phrase "African journalism".

"Journalism" is an equally problematic term – prone to its own essentialist understandings.

But, as a cultural phenomenon, it too cannot but be the product of its social context.

As a form of public communication, it might have a particular site of origin, but its trajectory has been global: European, American, Asian, African.

And as it has travelled, it has kept some founding elements, and transformed and changed others.

In other words, journalism also does not have a unitary, "universal" (European) identity.

Furthermore, all forms of cultural production only make sense in relation to other cultural practices and to the social structures of which they form a part. In this sense, journalism has a profoundly historical identity.

The challenge we face is to see it, and emerging journalisms, in these terms, and to enable or promote the flowering of an "African journalism" that is imbued with the non-essentialist qualities of Africanism described by Mamdani.

So, I am arguing against a singular understanding of "African journalism", particularly when we see forms of media now in Africa that challenge a single understanding – tabloids and blogs to name just a few.

The kinds of media we have are reflective of their social and political contexts and micro and macro struggles occurring within this space.

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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. This constraint renders African Journalism a journalism of bandwagonism, where mimicry is the order of the day, as emphasis is less on thinking than on doing, less on leading than on being led.

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 relevant to civilization.

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.

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 it privileges a hierarchy of humanity and human creativity, and if such journalism believes that African humanity and creativity are at the abyss of that hierarchy, such journalism is bound to be prescriptive, condescending, contrived, caricatured and hardly in tune with the quest by Africans for equality, 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. And if one convinces one's self that one is at the abyss, at the veritable heart of darkness, one doesn't need much convincing on how to fish one's self out, especially if such prescriptions are by those one has been schooled to recognise and represent as superior.

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 practised 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 are 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.

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 scrutinise the democratisation projects with which they've been involved since the early1990s 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 de-fleshed Hollywood consumer model of a Barbie doll-type entertainment icon. They would also agree that, instead of blaming the tiny dress or its designer, the tradition among journalists has been to fault the popular body or the popular ideal of beauty, for emphasising 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 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.

Thus, for democracy and journalism to succeed

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in the present context, it 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 straddle 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 that journalism can best be relevant to Africa and Africans.

Citizens, Subjects

You, as journalists, would agree that in Africa, 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 community interests is likely to impair and frustrate the very recognition and representation it celebrates.

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. If African philosophies of personhood and agency stress interdependence between the individual and the community and between communities, and if journalists identify with any of the many cultural communities all seeking recognition and representation at local and national levels, they are bound to be torn between serving their communities

"To democratise means to question basic monolithic assumptions."

and serving the "imagined" rights-bearing, autonomous individual "citizen" of the liberal democratic 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, which is a lot more complex than provided for in liberal democratic notions 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.

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.

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 among 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 creolising inherited European languages and enriching local languages through borrowings.

Everywhere the spoken word has also perfected its intermarriage with the unspoken through body language and other nonverbal forms.

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.

Cosmo-local

It appears that no one is too cosmopolitan not to be local as well. We only have to note the creative ways Africans have harnessed the cellphone 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" 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 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, melting-pots and creative manipulators or jugglers 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.

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 a reality, 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 high-handed and repressive to their populations.

When this happens, journalists are at risk of employing double-standards 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. If meaningful democracy and journalism in Africa require fundamental changes, as they should, such changes usually entail a challenge to vested interests, be these local, national or foreign, private or public.

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 democratise 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. 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.

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 – 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 celebration of difference and diversity) journalism promises. They want life to go on without disturbance or fundamental change. And they are well placed to ensure this, thanks to their power to 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. ■

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