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## **THE MASS MEDIA, AND THE REINVENTION OF DEMOCRATIC CULTURE FOR CREDIBLE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

**By**

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### **SUMMARY**

Universally, and through the ages man had always expressed a desire to be a part of how he is governed. This is the urge for democracy and good governance. While the mass media could be used to motivate and mobilize the people towards the attainment of democratic ideals it could also be used otherwise. Thus, it has both prospects and limitations. It can reach the masses who are spread across long distances instantly, with efficiency and effectiveness. Its limitations include, interference of media owners in the duties of media practitioners, illiteracy, poverty and lack of professionalism. Democratic culture is said to exist in a society where the basic tenets and ideals of democracy have been practiced and entrenched over a relatively long time. This paper argues that the mass media have important roles to play in the reinvention of democratic culture and have a more important role



in the evolution of credible political leadership which is arguably lacking in Nigeria. The paper recommends that journalists in Nigeria, apart from basic education also require professional training. Furthermore, media ownership should not interfere with media practice which should be seen as public trust. Journalists in both print and electronic media should demonstrate more objectivity in news reporting. It is equally important to license journalists as it obtains in other professions. Finally, the paper opines that erring journalists should be sanctioned while those who excel in the performance of their duties should be rewarded.

### **Introduction**

The urge for self determination is one of man's most pressing desires. Through the ages, man had always sought with varying degrees of success to either directly govern himself or at least be seen as exerting some measure of influence on the way he is governed. This is the quest for democracy and it is about mass participation in the process of governance. Similarly, the mass media of communication, formally and informally, have always played very important roles in societies, as means of cultural expression and transmission. This is apart from its traditional functions of entertainment, education, and information. It could work both positively and negatively as agents of cultural change.

In this paper, we shall attempt to raise a number of questions. These are: how democratic are traditional Nigerian political systems? Did Nigeria and other African societies and communities have their first taste of democracy following their contact with the western world? What is democratic culture? We shall focus on the role of the mass media in promoting and protecting democracy in Nigeria and we shall further examine the nature of democracy and political leadership in Nigeria. Our findings show that political elites in Nigeria are more of rulers than leaders and that in an environment of illiteracy, poverty, election rigging and general lack of awareness, democratic culture cannot be said to be institutionalized. We end the paper with some recommendations.

Mcquail (2000) defines the mass media as "the entire system within which messages are produced, selected, transmitted, received and responded to". Similarly, another school of thought sees the mass media as "encompassing any agency, modern or traditional that operates for the articulation and dissemination of ideas and information, generally with the intent to influence or control an audience or the institution that constitute legalized power and authority" (Obasanjo and Mabogunje: 1992, p. 144)

Based on the above two definitions we could deduce and infact agree with Findlay (1986) that the mass media is a web of human society. It promotes the free flow of information and messages within a society. In modern times, it is increasingly becoming a

store of knowledge and a source for the expression and transmission of cultural values from one generation to the other. Thus, the mass media are very important organs of society. Their importance is so pervasive that Schramn (1964) stated that:

A nation that wants to accelerate the process of social (and economic) change should try to make people quickly and widely aware of needs which present customs and behaviours cannot satisfy, make opportunities for meeting the needs, facilitate decision process and help the people to put the new practices smoothly and swiftly into effect (p. 115).

The significance of the mass media could be further appreciated if they are seen as agents which promote learning voluntarily and involuntarily. Beyond that, the mass media are change agents and Findlay succinctly pointed out that it is doubtful if any modern form of government could have developed without the conquest of time and space by the mass media. The ability of the media to serve as an agent of change is derived from its ability to mobilize and motivate. This is further dependent on its power to report correctly, efficiently, and speedily over a wide area. The power of the media is such that it could alter for either good or bad the views and ways of life of a whole community.



It could be seen that the mass media are very powerful organs of society with very wide prospects for promoting democratic culture in Nigeria. For us to understand these prospects and limitations we should first understand the extent to which indigenous Nigerian political systems were democratic or otherwise. Democracy has to do with mass participation in governance. It is a process and a system which guarantees that while the majority rules, the minority must be heard, and their views and interests adequately safeguarded. However, in most cases, democracy has been mistakenly associated with elections and majority rule alone, real or superficial. The un-informed sees it only as the process whereby the majority through an election forms the government of the day without taking into consideration that the interest of the minority is equally important. Empirical studies have shown that, in the final analysis, the so called majority rule is in reality government by the minority. This could be further explained as follows: Let's take the example of a hypothetical scenario of a country with 5 million people. Out of this, one and a half million people registered to vote in an election with three political parties. The voter turn-out was one million and the election figures are as shown below:

Party A	450,000
Party B	300,000
Party C	250,000

From all indications, Party A would have won the election with 450 votes. But 550 voters did not vote for

it. When further compared to the total population figure of 5m, the 450 who voted for the ruling party pales into insignificance. In essence, there is a confusion of "electocracy" with democracy. It is our view that democracy goes beyond mere elections no matter how free and fair. Thus, we shall once again identify with the school of thought led by Obasanjo and Mabogunje (1992) which sees democracy as a way and system of governance whether in an organized setting or otherwise, based on the following essential elements:

- (i) Right of choice
- (ii) Freedom from ignorance and want
- (iii) Empowerment and capability
- (iv) Respect for the rule of law and equality before the law
- (v) Promotion and defence of human rights
- (vi) Creation of appropriate political machinery
- (vii) Sustained political communication to create trust and confidence
- (viii) Accountability of the leadership to the followership
- (ix) Decentralization of political power and authority
- (x) Periodic and orderly succession through secret ballot

At this stage, it is important to make a brief evaluation of the extent to which traditional societies in Nigeria were democratic. The impression is that, traditionally most African political systems including

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At this stage, it is important to make a brief evaluation of the extent to which traditional societies in Nigeria were democratic. The impression is that, traditionally most African political systems including



Nigeria, were totally undemocratic. But this assertion is not fully supported by empirical evidence. In different parts of Nigeria, different systems were adopted in the choice of leaders. For instance, in the old Oyo Empire, rulers were not just imposed on the people. Rather they were chosen through a well established process that made provision for openness and fair play. Similarly, in much of northern Nigeria, following Usman Dan Fodio's Jihad and the subsequent subjugation of the area, a theocratic state evolved. The choice of leaders in the state was not arbitrary but clearly spelt out to ensure some measure of good governance. In traditional Igbo society, there was the village square system of governance. Though premium was placed on age, decisions were collectively reached. In the same manner, among the Edos of Nigeria though the choice of leaders was based on primogeniture, the powers of the Oba were not absolute. He must consult with the council of chiefs (Uzama) who were representatives of the people. The list extends to other areas where the Obi, Obong had to listen and consider the views of the various segments of the society before final pronouncements were made. In some parts of ancient Yoruba Kingdom, a king who betrayed the people was forced to commit suicide. It might be argued that committing suicide was not democratic, but then it goes to demonstrate the significance and importance of the interest of the masses in governance. Some kings even had to abdicate their thrones. All these have been highlighted to show and illustrate that the welfare of the

people was considered more paramount than any other interests. From the above, it could be deduced that, in some traditional Nigerian societies there was a measure of accountability by the leadership to the people. Though separation of powers was not institutionalized, there were traditional practices that ensured some form of good governance. These societies were hierarchically arranged and the leaders enjoyed some measure of wide powers, such powers could not be abused and used arbitrarily as they were subjected to some checks and balances. Therefore, the view that Nigerian societies before the advent of colonialism were completely undemocratic is erroneous and the product of a number of factors. It has been used to justify modern day tyranny. More importantly, such accusations betray a lack of in-depth understanding of the dynamics of traditional Nigerian political systems. There is also the error of using models which exist elsewhere to evaluate the pattern of governance as operated in what came to be known as Nigeria. We therefore submit that some form of rudimentary democracy had existed in some parts of Africa (though not exactly as found in Europe or America) before contact was made with the western world.

It should be stressed that many factors were responsible or acted as checks to the arbitrariness of rulers in ancient times. The rulers were believed to be representatives of the gods. They were therefore accountable to both the gods and to the people. As a



result, the awareness and conviction that misrule could attract reprisals and sanctions from the gods influenced and indeed compelled the rulers to act in ways which promoted the best interests of the masses. We therefore conclude this section by stating that it is not until a political system conforms wholly with systems in the West before it could be considered democratic.

### **Conceptualizing culture**

At this stage, it may be useful to define and explain the concept of culture. In its most common usage, culture refers to the shared ways of life of a group of people. It is different from individual idiosyncrasies. Culture approves right conduct and sanction for misconduct. It is dynamic and diffuse, universal yet specific. The culture of a people keeps changing, affecting and being affected by external influences. Culture permeates the totality of human existence and there is no society without culture. Culture makes the distinction between us and them and between those people and the other people.

We defined democracy in the earlier parts of this paper. If we combine the concepts of culture and democracy, we would state that a society could be said to have a democratic culture if the essential elements of right of choice, freedom from poverty, justice, equity and equality before the law have been accepted by the vast majority of the populace and entrenched over a relatively long period of time (say fifty years) and seen as part of the political system of that society.



Against this background, the democratic status of contemporary Nigeria is questionable. For instance, an essential element of democracy is freedom of choice but to what extent are people free to choose when votes could be sold to the highest bidder? It is not possible to talk of freedom of choice when illiteracy in Nigeria is still high thus making the people highly gullible. It is also difficult to say that we have full blown democracy when our institutions, such as the judiciary is weak. It is a known fact that in some cases, judgment favoured the highest bidder. It is equally true that cases in our law courts, especially the ones of election petitions have lasted up to two years or more before final resolution. Yet, it is obvious that justice delayed is justice denied. In a true democratic setting, the doctrine of equality before the law should be taken for granted. There are manifest evidence (such as the case of James Ibori, former Governor of Delta State) that in Nigeria some people are clearly above the law. The structure of the Nigerian economy has not helped to advance the ideals of democracy. An environment where the richest 15% controls more than 85% of the economy and 95% of the populace are in charge of less than 5% of economic resources, only paints a scenario of pervasive poverty where the masses would be highly gullible and easily manipulated by unscrupulous politicians for the satisfaction of their narrow political interests.

## **Prospects**

The mass media have very wide prospects for the promotion of democratic culture in Nigeria. They are agents of mass mobilization. Because it is possible for the media to reach a cross section of the society at the same time they could be used to propagate and mobilize the masses towards the ideals of democracy. Related to this, is that the media could educate the populace on their rights, sensitizing them on the avenues to claim and defend such rights. True democracy has never thrived in an environment of ignorance. Therefore the promotion of learning is a key function of the mass media which has positive implications for the promotion of democratic culture. By the performance of its watchdog functions, the mass media serves as a check on politicians, either when they deviate from their election promises or when they go counter to the laws of the land. The mass media could be used to raise the level of political consciousness and participation. It needs be stressed that the media in Nigeria performed this role creditably during the colonial era. There is no gain saying the fact that the founding fathers of Nigeria used the mass media extensively in their fight against colonialism. It has also continued to play the same role in the post independence era by motivating and mobilizing the people towards more involvement in politics.

## **Limitations**

Despite the very wide prospects of the mass media in the promotion of democratic culture, they are also faced with a number of constraints. Before going into specifics, it may be safe to draw two conclusions. First, the mass media in Nigeria exhibits the weaknesses of its strengths, because, just as the mass media can work for good by mobilizing the people for the attainment positive ideals, it can also do otherwise. Secondly, the mass media operates within a socio-cultural and political environment. It is thus not insulated from the problems of the larger society.

One of the problems facing the mass media is that they have to serve populations that are predominantly illiterate. The ability to read and write makes it possible for the media to get across its messages to the masses. Where this is lacking and or insufficient, it becomes a limiting factor to efforts that are made to mobilize the people. Though the first newspaper (Iwe Irohin) to be published in Nigeria was in an indigenous language, it is equally true that, until very recently, the messages of most mass media agencies in Nigeria were in foreign languages and understood by only a negligible percentage of the populace. In this respect, credit must go to the broadcast media for being the first in the attempt to overcome the literacy barrier on a large scale. It is equally gratifying to note that some newspapers are now venturing into publications in indigenous languages. This has very great potentials for the



arousal of political consciousness and for the promotion of democratic ideals.

Another problem facing the media is the general level of poverty in Nigeria. This affects the exposure of the populace to the mass media. For instance, until recently, it was only a few people who could afford to buy radios and television sets and newspapers. Rationality demands that the basic needs of food, clothes and shelter must first be met before other things such as radio, television and newspapers which were the prerogative of the elites. The issue of poverty naturally leads us to a discussion of economic democratization which entails the following:

- (a) Equality of access and opportunities to the resources of the state
- (b) Openness
- (c) Equity
- (d) Empowerment and capacity building (see Obasanjo and Mabogunje, 1992, p.134).

For the limitations of time and space, we cannot go into all the details of the above. Taken at their face value, we find that most of them are lacking in modern day Nigeria. It is as a result of the very high poverty level that we have landed in a situation of "cash and carry" politics. Put otherwise, politics has become a game of he who pays the piper also calling the tune. Because of the low level of education and agonizing poverty, votes are sold and bought by the highest bidder. This does not augur well for the advancement

of democracy. Our view is that, with more economic democratization, access of the citizen to the resources of the state, a more conducive environment would be created for the media to establish and reinforce a democratic culture. Therefore, political democracy and economic democracy must go hand in hand. We have equally found that media ownership is one problem area. Though media owners could make the media to serve or at least promote their interests, this should not be done at the expense of the ethics of the profession. It has been found that most mass media agencies interfere with news reporting to suit the purposes of their owners thus compromising the journalistic ethics of fairness and objectivity in terms of information, education and entertainment. The ownership of the media should not be equated with ownership of other things like houses or cars. Media ownership should be seen as a public trust and should as much as possible be used to promote the overall interests of the public. The electronic media is not insulated from the interference of media ownership in the performance of professional duties, our view is that the print media is more culpable in this respect. For instance, during the second republic, such newspapers as "The Nigerian Tribune", "National Concord" and "New Nigeria" reflected only the views and interests of their owners even in news reporting. While the interests of media owners should not be completely thrown overboard, this should be restricted to mainly editorials. News

reporting should be done with all amount of objectivity that professionalism demands.

Training for media practitioners is yet another limiting factor. Most media practitioners until very recently did not possess the requisite professional training. In recent times, some of them have obtained university training but, the absence of professional training has been found to be a constraining factor.

Nigeria's plurality is also a limiting factor. For instance, Nigeria, according to Onwuejeogwu, (2001), is estimated to have about 450 languages and ethnic groups. Media owners and their employees seem to reflect mainly the views and interests of their ethnic groups while relegating the views and interests of other groups. The mass media should rise above ethnicity and partisanship if it is to discharge its duties creditably. Anything short of this amounts to a dis-service to society.

### **Political leadership**

Political leadership refers to those persons and group of individuals including the totality of political elites who occupy positions of authority and influence in the political process. By this definition we refer to the occupants of such positions as the President, Vice President, Governors and their deputies, ministers, advisers, and political party executives. Because of the peculiarities of Nigeria's politics, this definition also includes those powerful political figures who operate from the background yet their influence is overbearing.



These are, individuals who may or may not be occupying any known appointive or elective office, yet they can influence those who become elected or get appointed into such offices. With all these, it could be argued that Nigeria does not have credible political leadership because, in most instances, those posturing as political leaders do not actually have the mandate of the people. Moreover, members of the political class function in a manner that, they do not owe allegiance to the masses. More often than not, apart from seeing themselves as overlords, they operate in a self serving manner. It is the duty of the media to sensitize the populace on democratic ideas and assist in the evolution of a truly democratic culture. This will ultimately give rise to credible political leadership which will engender sustainable development.

The envisaged credible political leadership have certain fundamental characteristics. Their powers are derived from the people. They have not directly or indirectly imposed themselves on the masses through election rigging. To that extent, they are accountable to the people. They report and give account of their stewardship to the people who have the power to call them to order or insist that certain lines of actions be followed. A corollary to the above is that, they are responsible and responsive. Responsibility entails awareness on the part of the leaders that politically they are servants of the people and be prepared to do their bidding at all times. Responsiveness on the other hand entails that political leadership must respond to

the yearnings and aspirations of the masses as the need arises. With ignorance in a situation where how much money that one is ready to part with plays a key role in his political fortunes and in an environment where the wrong people emerge as political leaders as a result of election rigging, responsiveness to the people becomes a forlorn hope. Closely related to this, is that political leadership which emerged under the above circumstance will not have the interest of the masses at heart and will not be ready to protect it. Furthermore, credible political leadership entails statesmanship who are futuristic in their policies and who are not just concerned with how to win the next elections.

We argue in this presentation that, a polity with a well entrenched democratic culture will naturally develop credible political leadership that will move the Nigerian state to growth and sustainable development. The importance of credible political leadership cannot be over emphasized.

Unfortunately, as has been stated above, these are in short supply in Nigeria. The country's poverty and general underdevelopment becomes easily understandable in this context. It must be stressed that, because of lack of democratic consolidation caused mainly by election rigging, poverty, ignorance the so called political leaders are not true representatives of the people. Indeed, those claiming to be leaders of the people could more appropriately pass as their rulers. Therefore, the spate of political violence, insecurity,

corruption and instability may be traceable to the foregoing causes. It is the duty of the political leadership acting in concert with mass media to offer political education to the masses. Such education covers their rights, duties and privileges and essentially things to be done to ensure that democracy is sustained and consolidated. The relationship also includes forging a healthy synergy between the political class and the masses.

The need for credible political leadership is very important because of its implications for a number of issues. These encompass, the political, economic, socio-cultural, peace and security, including planning and developmental issues. In fact, it could be argued that Nigeria's plethora of crises, be it ethnic, communal or religious could be ultimately traced to weak political leadership.

Nigeria's political leadership has used the mass media in various ways. During the colonial days, the mass media particularly the print and to a large extent the electronic media were used to fight colonialism and to promote development. But the post colonial media especially the second republic was rather ambivalent. While promoting the interest of the masses through information, entertainment and education, it was to some extent fanning the embers of ethnic and partisan interests. This again is due largely to the nature of media ownership. For instance, while the National Concord, owned by Chief MKO Abiola, a frontline member of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) which



was the ruling party was used to promote the interest of the central government, the Nigeria Tribune, owned by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) was used to promote the interest of the UPN and the states under its control. The same could be said of the New Nigerian Newspapers owned by the northern states was actually promoting the interest of the north in a manner that like other media houses subordinated national interest.

### **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations**

In this paper, we have attempted to define or at least explain the concept of the mass media and the many useful roles it could play in the society. We also took a look at the concepts of democracy and culture. We combined the two in our effort to give an operational definition to democratic culture. It has been found that democracy was not introduced into Nigeria following her contact with the West. On the contrary, some traditional Nigerian societies had democratic features in their political systems long before the advent of colonialism. The paper also highlighted a number of prospects for the media in its role in the promotion of democratic culture. The mass media are veritable agents of change, organs for the education and mobilization of the masses. It could arouse consciousness by reaching the masses speedily and accurately. Similarly, our studies show that the media also have a number of limitations. These include illiteracy, poverty, low level of technology, the nature

in research to know and understand the needs of the people and the best ways to meet them. It is the duty of the media to engage in sustained public enlightenment of the masses on their rights, duties and privileges. In the process, political education with special emphasis on democracy should be pursued. The media should demonstrate more respect for the truth in reporting and in the expression of opinions. Since some journalists have either demonstrated lack of professionalism or have deliberately violated their professional ethics there is an urgent need for mass media associations to engage in self censorship. Apart from the regular awards given to journalists there should be an honours list for deserving journalists. Journalists should be licensed as it obtains in other professions. Those found to have aggravated cases of professional misconduct should be black listed and their licenses withdrawn.

The freedom of information bill which gives journalists unfettered access to public information is a welcome development.

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