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MEDIA/CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND NIGERIAN WOMEN: WHOSE CULTURE, WHICH IMPERIALISM?

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ABSTRACT

Through colonialism and the assimilation of foreign values, people in the ex-colony are now a cultural hybrid. The local elites who occupy the commanding heights in policy/decision making in Nigeria have been at the forefront of the acceptance and transmission of this new cultural product through various channels, an important part of which is the media. Nigerian women are a growing and active part of this elite structure. One important consequence of the merging of the external component of imperialism which is still being fuelled in the neo-colonial setting by the reality of dependency and economic restructuring and the local component of imperialism, is that it is now difficult to continue to see imperialism strictly as an external imposition.

Introduction

Although the growing pre-occupation of developing countries with the dictates of survival and economic well-being have shifted intellectual focus from a subject like imperialism, that shift of focus does not detract from the importance of the subject. Post-colonial Africa has as a result of the interplay of international and local forces found itself torn between the pursuit of self-reliance on the one hand, and legitimacy and acceptance on the international arena, on the other. The result is that while African countries like Nigeria are battling with their post-colonial legacies by trying to look inwards, they still have to contend with noticeable consequences of their assimilation of the values and attachment to the original goals of colonial powers and neo-colonial forces.

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An example of this trend is provided on the economic front where many African countries, faced with a debt crisis and few economic options, are adopting World Bank/International Monetary Fund (I.M.F) inspired Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). While SAP aims at facilitating self-reliance, it also provides for a market-based economy characterised by a liberal philosophy and a logic of dependence on external capital and industrial hardware. These external relationships that are inevitable to the implementation of the economic philosophy of SAP have an implication for the sustenance of the imperialism that was actively promoted in the colonies and which have influenced the culture and media in Nigeria.

However, while it is convenient to continue to perceive imperialism as the manifestation of an external reality in a local setting, it has to be acknowledged that imperialism is no more just summed up as colonial exploitation and all it represented. There is what may be regarded as a local component of imperialism whose blending with the external component has been facilitated by the neo-colonial character of countries like Nigeria. It is in the treatment of the relationship between the local and foreign components of imperialism in the area of culture and the media and their significance for women, that the true character of imperialism can be defined as the twentieth century gets to a close.

In effect, is there a basis for continuing to see cultural/media imperialism as an external reality still being foisted on Nigeria and Nigerians in general and Nigerian women in particular? What degree of seriousness should in effect be assigned the consistent call for a new information order, considering the performances of the Nigerian media of communication and the cultural products they promote? Whose culture and which imperialism is the portrayed villain and how does this portrayal tally with the direction of criticism?

Foundations of imperial influence

Imperialism, on the cultural front, is about relationships, the unequal exchange of cultural products, and the super-imposition of an imperial over a dependent value system. It is about an objectionable process of acculturation that rationalises the erosion of elements of the recipient culture.

Probably one reason why the subject of cultural imperialism has attracted considerable interest is the implication that it has for the kind of citizens a country produces. Oyeneke and Shoremi (1985: 3) argue that apart from shaping the personality of individuals within society, culture serves to control their behaviour

and moderate inter-personal relationships within the group setting.

Because it is dynamic and acquired through the process of socialisation, it becomes significant that the socialisation process and agents of the process are sensitised to the development needs of society. This is to ensure that there will be minimum variance between the needs of development and the goals of cultural preservation.

Over the years, especially before the intellectual foundations that have enabled a clearer understanding of The New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) were laid, through among others the efforts of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the cultural products of imperialism, packaged and sold through a fledgling post-colonial media industry, were tolerated. In the developing countries, imported television programmes were treated casually (Contreras et al, 1976: 13). Radio and the print media were not dramatically different. The colonial government in Nigeria was an active mid-wife in the birth of radio. The first newspaper was established in 1859 by a foreign clergyman, the Rev. Henry Townsend in Abeokuta.

In spite of the nationalistic orientation of many of the early newspapers and their contributions to the struggle for independence, the newspapers and electronic media relied on foreign support to sustain their programming. This resulted in the use of exchange and other imported programmes. The structure allowed for a dependent media.

These developments were not as a result of the lack of nationalist objectives and goals. When Nigeria's first television station - the Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) was established, the then Premier of Western Region, the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo stated at the launching of the service that the station would not just serve as a medium of entertainment but also as a teacher and a stimulus for the transformation of Nigeria (Ikime, 1976: 6). In order to attain this objective, indigenous culture was expected to be promoted.

Television broadcasting, in fact, has as one of its objectives the seeking, identification and preservation of Nigerian culture, as well as the promotion of the study of Nigerian history and languages (NTA, 1981: 32). A similar goal of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (1984) is the comprehensive and professional coverage of Nigerian culture.

There was, however, a basic conflict between cultural preservation, nationalist ideals, development objectives and the message and general implications of the imported programmes. While it was true that the local stations needed these programmes and aimed at achieving the progressive reduction of this category of programmes on the broadcast schedule, efforts to sustain this depend

ence continued both internally and externally. One of the strategies employed was offer of superb programmes to the local station at no cost (Olusola, 1985: 143).

The result was that in spite of policies that on paper sought to stem the potential cultural influences that foreign programmes epitomised, these programmes were still being imported and aired. These included those programmes which look(ed) harmless but have been found to have their effects.

In a Latin American study by Matterlart and Waksman (Contreras et al, 1976: 14), "Sesame Street" a popular television programme which is still aired on Nigerian stations, was found to be "a ready-made cultural product from the heart of imperialism". The programme which is described as attractive, is said to represent "the invasion of international firms into education." Another conclusion from a study of Thailand noted that the cultural integrity of the people of that country has been put at stake as a result of the widespread dissemination of transnational information and cultural products, especially through the medium of television and the cinema (Guback and Varis, 1982: 44).

Nigerian Women: A Profile

In order to better situate the Nigerian women within the media/cultural imperialism context, it is important to construct a gender profile. This construction is the inevitable product of an attempt to aggregate the experiences of Nigerian women across the socio-cultural, religious, economic and political divide of the country. The amalgamation of the North and South of the country in 1914 led to attempts to fuse these experiences.

Karanja-Diejomaoh and Scott (1982: 70) in a historical analysis of the roles of the Nigerian woman in society, go back to the pre-colony. This period was marked by the active participation of women in the subsistence economy within the framework of the family unit. There was exploitation of female labour.

Even when the men shifted to the wage-earning class, women remained first in the traditional economy. The nature of their gradual integration into the economy tended even under colonialism to undermine their contributions. The distributive sector in which they exercised control was compromised by the activities of foreign firms. The importation of cheap goods dealt a blow to the traditional handicrafts produced by women.

In spite of these and other constraints, it is acknowledged that Nigerian women have made significant contributions to the development of the country (Olakunri, 1989; Inuwa, 1989; Obiegbo, 1989). But discriminatory policies, especially in the field of Western education to which women had little access,

hampered the integration of women into various spheres of society. Although access to Western education was supposed to have been greater for women in the southern half of the country, Obiegbu found, for instance, that Aba women had little access to such education. There was in the North, an original reluctance to allow the women access to Western education. Even where some attention was paid to women's education, the policy of the colonial administration was seen to have encouraged the low participation of women in the economy. This was because female "instruction was religious and oriented towards helping the girls to become better mothers and housewives" (Osineye, 1989).

Education was used by the colonial authorities as determinant of access to certain privileges and upward mobility within the colonial society (Awe, 1989: 316). Since women did not generally enjoy the privilege of access to such education, it is easy to assume that women were not likely to suffer whatever disadvantages or enjoy the advantages derivable from such access. This may have been so.

The gradual realisation of the importance of female education soon brought about a shift on the part of parents and the government, towards their education. The period since independence has, therefore, witnessed a gradual growth in the enrolment of females in schools. The result is that as at now, females are to be found in more professions than before, some of which were dominated by males.

A corollary to the latter development is what Awe has noted as the proliferation of professional societies or associations set up by women professionals in different fields. These aggregations are meant to facilitate increased participation by women in relevant disciplines and thereby reduce or eventually bridge the gap between male and female professionals in these fields. Examples of such associations are to be found in fields such as law, accountancy and journalism. A Nigerian Association of Women Journalists came into being in 1989. Women are now to be found in the officer cadre of the armed forces and the police and the commanding heights in the public and private sectors of the economy, the media and the arts. A National Commission for Women was established by decree in 1989.

Whose Culture?

One obvious casualty of colonialism has been the indigenous culture of the country. The introduction of the value systems of the colonising powers not only polluted or compromised elements of the indigenous culture but also contributed

in some way in making certain cultural practices in these places irrelevant or outmoded.

What emerged in the post-colony was a new and dynamic cultural mix whose influence appears to have varied in different parts of the country depending on the degree of acceptance of Western education and female participation in it. The encouragement of women in different parts of the country through sanctions, incentives and creation of special institutions to cater for the needs of women, is of course, now exposing more women to this neo-cultural reality. Although religion and traditional forces still serve as a cushion or constraint to the wholesale embrace of what may be seen as the obnoxious elements of this culture, it nonetheless is true that a female elite has emerged. These elites who are now occupying the commanding heights in their professions are not only opinion leaders but are also models for younger women who are being sensitised to the need for greater gender awareness and achievements.

These models are reference points in the definition of what constitutes appropriate dress patterns, what is dignifying, what standards women should aspire to. The highly visible roles of these women have been facilitated in some way by their educational advantage, which exposed them to foreign values.

Advertising also portrays women in a way that reveals a bias for models developed by the advanced commercial media of the West. Images of the sexy female model promoting various products are to be found on Nigerian television and in the newspapers.

The logic of advertising in Nigeria is based on the premise that an advert has to use a female model for it to be acceptable. The products for which these models, who are almost always attractive, feature, range from clothes, cigarettes, liquor, cars, petroleum products, courier services, drugs, airlines to computers.

When these factors are related to what Morgan (1984: 5) refers to as the indigenous feminism which is present in every culture, it becomes difficult to understand the cultural framework in the kind of neo-colonial setting that Nigeria represents. Little (1973: 179) explains that "the position of the African urban woman is fraught with ambiguity". This ambiguity, accentuated by her dilemma in resolving the cultural mix, has made her a complex subject to study. But it is possible to generalise her reality. As it has been observed, these cultural influences have not just resulted in a hybrid urban woman. The greater percentage of rural women are beginning to show symptoms of the new culture.

Little (1973: 180) captures this emerging dispensation thus:

"Irrespective of how their traditional role is construed,
African women are now on the march. They wish

for themselves a significant place in the new society taking shape, and these aspirations have been fed by the spread of urban influences into the countryside."

Probably one programme that exemplifies the spread of urban influences into rural areas is the Better Life for Rural Dwellers Programme (BLRDP) which was started in 1988. The programme, which focuses more on women, was initiated by the wife of Nigeria's military President, Mrs Maryam Babangida. Working on the idea that women have been marginalised, BLRDP seeks to create or evolve a "new" rural woman - active and self-actualised.

To achieve this goal, Better Life Leaders at both federal, state and community levels transmit messages to the women using the mass media and interpersonal communication. The result in Anambra State as reflected by Okunna (1990: 10) is the "creation of increased awareness by rural women of themselves as human beings with self-dignity". The implication of this development for the transfer of values is clear. It follows from an assumption that the improvements which women are said to be in need of are best moderated by planners of the development process (Dennis, 1982: 44 - 45). These "planners" are almost always external to the reality of those they seek to develop. But the larger implications of such an interaction is the assimilation of these women into values defined by the experiences of the matrons of the new dispensation.

Which Imperialism?

If Nigerian culture is increasingly being infiltrated by elements of various foreign cultures, the shape and character of imperialism is also becoming less prone to a standard definition. A number of factors are responsible for this. On the political, economic, technological (and cultural) fronts, Nigeria, like other developing countries, is finding itself increasingly woven into an international arrangement that emphasises varying degrees of dependencies. This is without prejudice to the efforts of these countries to be economically and political self-reliant and to preserve their cultures.

On the very strategic economic and political levels, the reality of the debt crisis and an industrial development premised on reliance on externally sourced inputs, and the wind of democratic resurgence midwived by Mikhail Gorbachev through his Perestroika and Glasnost, dictate the lowering of national and cultural barriers. These barriers which define(d) the sovereign character of countries are now subject to liberal market forces. The result is that it is now difficult and

becoming rather unpopular to identify imperialism. It is more popular to talk of the donors, creditors and cultural co-operation agreements.

When ex-President Shehu Shagari looked at the ensuing product of this interaction on the cultural front, his conclusions were reflected in this statement:

“It is clear from the current situation that the balance sheet shows considerable progress in our interaction with mainstream of world culture but also manifests a large short-fall in matters relating to culture as promoter of national morality and discipline.”

There is, therefore, a problem which we can examine from two angles. First are the dimensions of cultural/media imperialism as it exists. The second is the specific positioning of women within the framework provided by this thesis. But in doing this we are going beyond Shagari, even while identifying with his conclusions.

The argument that defines cultural/media imperialism by presuming that the recipient countries are reluctant recipients of the flow, who now being trapped, are really unable to “defend themselves against the onslaught of imperialists” (Boyd, 1988: 152), lends itself to re-examination.

It is known, especially since the Gulf war early in 1991, that the possession of satellite dishes has become a status symbol. The owners of these dishes receive news and programmes simultaneously with other dish owners in other parts of the world. A profile of owners of this technology shows that it is favoured by the elites, governmental and private institutions, mass media organisations and international organisations as well as embassies. The University of Ibadan students Union has a dish for the benefit of its members.

One of the explanations offered for the growing popularity of this medium is that it offers alternative and better produced programmes and the most current in world news. Although the television receivers are able to pick programmes sourced from different countries, Western channels like the Cable News Network (CNN) are favoured. Evidence from news and current affairs programmes, movies, sitcoms, musicals and other programmes show that the channels received via satellite show programmes that fit the mould of commercial television programming as already perfected in the West. The programmes are value-laden and reflect the image of women as defined by Western culture.

The transfer of these values through the elites who own this satellite technology and the mass media organisations who find ready materials for their pages or time slots, occurs directly or indirectly. But the fact of the voluntary transmission of these cultural products can no more be doubted.

The pirating of programmes from satellite by some television stations can be documented even though not widespread. It is known, for instance, that during the 1990 World Cup Finals in Italy, some television stations pirated the matches and broadcast them to their audience.

The influences of these programmes may not be computable in the proportion of their real impact on the audience, but for those who watch them, such influences can be said to be real. The conceptualisation of the "modern" woman becomes shaped and reshaped by consistent exposure. Since these elites play a role in the socialisation of society, they also become channels for defining the agenda for the Nigerian woman.

At the level of the mass media, the localisation of the realities portrayed on programmes from satellite is a function of editorial judgment. While reference can be made to the Western orientation of media managers through education and exposure, it is necessary to state that decisions on programming are inevitably a local affair regardless of the degree of external influences that are known to exist.

In a study of audience considerations in viewing different television stations, Ibie (1983: 21 - 39) found that NTA 2 Channel 5 was the most popular of the stations in Lagos. This popularity was attributed by viewers to the fact that the station screens mainly imported programmes. Over half of the respondents (51.1%) in the study were female. But, significantly, there were indications from the study that viewers would prefer local programmes to the foreign ones if the quality of these local programmes improved. It is necessary to state that NTA 2 Channel 5 was established as a commercial station. This means that the thinking underlying its establishment recognised the fact that the station would rely a lot on externally-sourced programmes. The station is, therefore, meant to capture and consolidate a local market for commercial purposes. From the performances of the station, it is evident that local programmes have to satisfy the criterion of commercial eligibility to qualify to be aired.

The position of NTA 2 Channel 5 is not limited to the station. In fact, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) has set for itself the task of critically selecting relevant foreign culture to enrich Nigerian culture. This should be seen as an unresolved dilemma of the media and Nigeria's entire educational apparatus.

Although this task is a self-assigned responsibility for the television medium, it is no doubt relevant to other media. The problem remains that of being able to tell where the harm could begin. For a long time, and maybe until *glasnost*, the Soviet Union and many Eastern bloc countries embarked only on the importation and use of those television programmes from the West which suited their ideological and educational purposes.

The difficulty with deciding what is critical may explain why some local television programmes which were based on foreign models attracted various responses, with the result that drama programmes such as "Second Chance " and "Spacs", had to be rested. "Spacs," which was fashioned as a detective/crime busting series, had an obvious cultural problem to contend with. The programme was like a half-baked intrusion into the television programme schedule. It never met the standard of quality of its Western counterparts which it was trying to emulate. It also did not register itself as a worthwhile entertainment venture to an audience - some of whose real-life experiences in the hands of gun - totting robbers, was not the kind of spectacle they wanted to re-live during leisure. Similar attempts at indigenizing foreign realities have not only been difficult to place culturally but are a reflection of the dilemma of an industry at the confluence of two cultures.

The portrayal of women in these programmes represented a poor attempt to recreate similar roles played by women in the foreign programmes that were being imitated.

At other levels, women columns in newspapers and magazines contain feature articles culled from foreign sources and which celebrate issues that range from achievement to sex. Elements of Western values are to be found even in analyses by female writers who sometimes find it fashionable to use foreign celebrities as models for their audience. Apart from that, musicals featuring known female sex symbols and other major actors on American and European television, are always on air.

These would explain the popularity of such acts as Madonna, Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston, Donna Sommer, Diana Ross. The exploits of lawn tennis stars like Steffi Graf, Martina Navratilova, Gabriella Sabatini and Monica Seles get to the Nigerian audience almost as they happen. Adequate coverage is given to the activities of the Royal Family in Britain and other key female figures from the West. *The National Inquirer* is a regular source of stories on the odd life.

Where local performers and female singers are used on "interludes" and music shows on television, it is common for critics to compare the quality of their performance with those of foreign artistes. The result is the emergence of musical videos which compete "favourably" with foreign ones. A look at the musical videos of such local female stars as Onyeka Onwenu, Stella Monye, Rasta Queen and Christie Essien-Igbokwe will confirm this. But while these cases could be rationalised because their music betrays elements of pop, rock and roll and reggae, the case artistes like Salawa Abeni who play Wak music - a local variant almost in the mould of the increasingly popular Fuji genre - needs to be scrutinised. A look at video clips from her more recent albums reveal a clear commercial orientation.

This can be explained. The pressure on musicians to sell their products has brought about a re-definition of the goal of music in society. Musicians are, therefore, torn between the need to be socially responsible and that to remain financially solvent. It is not uncommon now to have Fuji music being rendered in English. Some more recent Fuji albums also reflect the attempt to bring this music to the mainstream of cross-over acceptance. Two of the albums are "American Tips" by Wasiu Ayinde and "New Waves" by Sikiru Ayinde Barrister.

The use of female models at different stages of nudity also occur. The *Punch* newspaper for instance, ran a regular page three girl for many years. Some weekly newspapers, and even their daily counterparts, feature photographs of "radiant" and "beautiful" ladies to "brighten your day or weekend" as the case may be. For some years now, the *Sunday Tribune* has been publishing on a regular basis, such photographs on page three. *Vanguard* newspaper is also not an exception. Other periodicals devoted exclusively to serving the interests of women like *Every Women* newspaper and *Chanelle* magazine also devote varying degrees of attention to portraying the "modern" Nigerian woman in positive lights. An all-male magazine, *Crown Prince* not only features female models on its cover but on its inside pages as well.

The increasingly commercial orientation of the media and reliance on advertisements revenue, have also contributed in moderating the focus of drama programmes which appear to attract more sponsorship on the network than other categories of programmes. What could well be the "accord" between the media and their sources of revenue have had their costs, culturally. Some of the more popular TV drama series on the NTA network have been or are based on models of successful drama series in Europe and America. Examples are "Mirror in the Sun" and "Mind Bending", both created by Lola Fani-Kayode - a successful female producer and director. The same can be said of "Checkmate", which was introduced in the first half of 1991. The ladies in these series are cast in a way that guarantees their appeal to the local audience. In spite of their good local content, the subjects of love, romance, and intrigue which the series dramatise give them a universal character, as defined by Western commercial standards.

A related and culturally unhealthy trend is what would appear to be the undeclared battle for the audience and the advertiser's money through the use of imported programmes on television. This type of competition has been more apparent in places where state owned television stations exist alongside the NTA stations. Although such a use of imported programmes and musicals to "advantage" may not be intentional, the trend has helped largely to consolidate the gains of the foreign cultures promoted through such programmes. There are state owned

television stations that are popular for the variety of foreign programmes they air.

These all have implications for Nigerian women either as participants or teachers in the transfer of values or as recipients of such transferred values.

Conclusion

In whatever way they are viewed, the Nigerian media and other educational and socialisation instruments have made the task of identifying the source of cultural/media imperialism, more difficult. This situation erodes to an extent the credibility of the media, the intellectual class and the elites, male and female, and their justification for locating the sources of cultural/media imperialism elsewhere.

A change in the strategy for a genuine local-development-centred cultural preservation is, therefore, a challenge to the entire socialisation apparatus, on the short run.

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