

Communication

Mass Media & Democratization in Cameroon in the Early 1990s

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Francis Beng Nyamnjoh is the author of *Mass Media & Democratization in Cameroon in the Early 1990s* (2021). He was born in Bum, Cameroon, in 1961. He graduated from the University of Yaoundé in Cameroon with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1984 and a Master's of Arts degree in 1985, as well as a Philosophy Doctorate degree in 1990 from the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom. He was Associate Professor and head of publications and dissemination for the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) from July of 2003 to July of 2009. He is a writer, playwright, and educator. His works are in both nonfiction and fiction as a writer, and he has authored a number of books about Africa's political predicament, particularly in his home country of Cameroon. He writes on issues of democratization and ethnicity, as well as the social and political significance of the media in Africa (Encyclopedia.com, 2021).

In terms of his position as an African writer, Nyamnjoh agrees with Chinua Achebe that given the fact that Africa has suffered and continues to suffer from misconceptions, we Africans must be there to chronicle the story of the African community, both at home and abroad, with the respect, decency, and sensitivity that it deserves. As a result, it is our job to recognize and promote our society's beneficial elements. Nyamnjoh has taught Sociology, Anthropology, and Communication Studies at universities in Cameroon and Botswana, and has conducted substantial study and writing on Cameroon and Botswana, for which he received the Senior Arts Researcher of the Year Award in 2003 (Encyclopedia.com, 2021).

Nyamnjoh moved to the University of Cape Town as Professor of Social Anthropology in August of 2009 after serving as Head of Publications at CODESRIA from July of 2003 to July of 2009. He earned an Excellence Award from the University of Cape Town in October of 2012 for "Exceptional Contribution as a Professor in the Faculty of Humanities." He was named African Studies Union African Hero for 2013 by the African Students Union (ASU) at Ohio University in the United States. He has been a Fellow of the Cameroon Academy of Science since August of 2011, a Fellow of the African Academy of Science since December of 2014, a Fellow of the Academy of Science of South Africa since 2016, and Chair of the Editorial Board of the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) Press since January 2011. The South African National Research Foundation (NRF) has given Nyamnjoh a B1 rating as a Professor and Researcher (Encyclopedia.com, 2021).

Also, Nyamnjoh earned an Excellence Award from the University of Cape Town in October of 2012 for Exceptional Contribution as a Professor in the Faculty of Humanities. For his book titled *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa*, he received the ASU's 2013 African Hero Award, the 2014 Eko Prize for African Literature, and the ASUK's 2018 Fage & Oliver Prize for the best monograph (Langaa RPCIG, 2021). His works have also

been widely cited by 8,958 authors (see Google Scholar, 2021c). Nyamnjoh is the author of a number of academic books including *Africa's Media, Democracy, and the Politics of Belonging* (2005) and *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (2009).

Book Review

Nyamnjoh's *Mass Media & Democratization in Cameroon in the Early 1990s* is the outgrowth of an empirical study conducted from April of 1994 and completed in June of 1995 of the mass media in Cameroon to show what significant role the media play in the democratization process. The objective is to assess both the measure of tolerance in society at large and the practice of journalism as a profession at the dawn of multipartyism and democratization. Nyamnjoh looks into how well media leaders were informed about the necessity of democratic pluralism, how well they worked to build a democratic consensus, and how well they worked to decrease social tensions and cleavages in the society. He also views the political and legal context, the economic and financial position of the media, and the level of professionalism among media practitioners as variables impacting the preceding difficulties. The basic assumption in this work is that the media must play a significant and positive role in the democratization of Cameroon (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Another assumption is that the media are a reflection of their society and if the political and legal frameworks or cultures of the larger society are not democratic, it is very unlikely that the mass media would be any different or that they would have the freedom to set their own agenda. Nyamnjoh states that the main hypothesis in the study is that the media have not contributed in any significant and positive way to the democratic process in Cameroon. His findings uphold this null hypothesis indicating that the media have not contributed in any significant and positive way to the democratic process in Cameroon because they are still divided along ethnic lines, with positions linked to government and opposition policies. He concludes that adequate training is necessary to improve standards of professionalism for democracy to thrive in Cameroon. He believes that Cameroon's one-party logic has prevented multipartyism from addressing the major issue of how best to bring about real participatory democracy and that Cameroon's media have failed in their democratic responsibility through their complacency with the opposition or the government (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

In Chapter 1 of the book, Nyamnjoh records that multipartyism in Cameroon saw the country having over 100 political parties, most of them sponsored by the government. In order to quell and silence opposition from every quarter, Cameroon's ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), attempted and succeeded in having every party in parliament represented in its administration in 1992. Nyamnjoh points out that the momentum generated by multipartyism petered out shortly after the 1992 presidential election. He says that members of the public were forced to buy opposition party cards during the "ghost towns" period, which was a phase of opposition stay-at-home action. This experiment appeared to work against the opposition, and the administration used it to consolidate its grip on the country (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Nyamnjoh observes in Chapter 2 that the absence or scarcity of objective information through the official conventional channels of Mass Communication pushed the public to invent information by way of rumor. He shows that the lack of trust in the mainstream media by the public was to the extent that some members of the public corrupted the government mouth-piece,

the CRTV, to mean “Confused Radio-Television,” while Beti journalists from the French-speaking region of Cameroon were referred to as “griots” (praise-singers). Nyamnjoh writes that CRTV’s Anglophone journalists have tended to distance themselves from the sort of pro-government journalism defined by the government and largely taken for granted by their Francophone colleagues. The turbulent history of critical English language CRTV programs such as “Cameroon Calling” is sufficient testimony of government discomfort with Anglophone critical-mindedness (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Nyamnjoh notes that Anglophone journalists use English language private newspapers to insert Anglophobic issues on national political, cultural and economic agendas. But, he adds that the ability of liberation journalists to give all sides of a story has been crippled by the need to present Anglophones as a righteous community struggling to stay good and upright. In addition, according to Nyamnjoh, the political and economic challenges such papers face make it difficult for them to operate. Thus, newspapers such as *Cameroon Tribune*’s political and economic problems have made the paper even less credible. The paper’s political role has not allowed it to play the neutral role it needs to play (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

In Chapter 3, Nyamnjoh records that Cameroon has taken exception from most African countries by taking censorship outside the jurisdiction of the law courts. Publishers as a matter of law must deposit for censorship already printed copies of a newspaper before the paper is published. And the law is silent on who is liable in cases of republishing libelous material. Nyamnjoh regrets that neither the penal code nor the Freedom of Mass Communication Act protects the journalist and the press; rather, government officials believe that freedom of expression must be curbed because such a gap if allowed will cause newspapers to bypass censorship without any worry. Copious cases abound of seized or banned newspapers. For example, the *Cameroon Post*, *Le Nouvel Independent* and *Cameroon Mon Pays* were either seized or suspended for “non-respect” of censor’s decisions. Nyamnjoh notes that in 1991 and 1992, in Douala, Cameroon, more than 3,000 copies of “undesired papers” were seized every day. He wonders how the press can play a positive role if the law is not applied in a just manner. Furthermore, Nyamnjoh finds it worrisome that Cameroon’s private press was being used as a tool by government officials to settle scores and embarrass the government while they deny the private press formal access to official government information and groups close to it (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Chapter 4 is about the private press in Cameroon, which has been accused of “uncivilized behavior” by seeking to confront an indecent government with indecent language. Some argue that the profession should be allowed the free hand to deal with these “lavishly libelous” press reports. Nyamnjoh argues that the lack of professional organization and solidarity among journalists is partly responsible for the media’s failure to play a positive role in the democratization process in Cameroon. He suggests that a consensus code of conduct be established that would help to minimize the risk of internal divisions and manipulation by forces from without. He finds that the lack of unity within the profession has led to a catalogue of problems. The absence of a professional association has made journalists particularly vulnerable to manipulating forces in the political arena. He aligns with the notion that only as a body united in values and interests can journalists function as effective watchdogs for society (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Cameroon’s private press played a vanguard role in the struggle for multiparty democracy which led to the manipulation of journalists and the press to pursue their own interests, and not the interests of the population. Nyamnjoh records that private press has forgotten the need for

honesty in the practice of journalism and has failed to serve as a platform for promoting tolerance and conviviality in multiparty democracy. He writes that journalists in Cameroon are often ill-equipped to learn from their more experienced colleagues and role models and they lack an understanding of the basics of journalism, which has led to the publication of half-truths and distorted facts. In addition, the ambition to excel is stifled by poverty and the ambition to succeed is hampered by hardship (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Nyamnjoh's thoughts at the time of writing suggest that journalists are yet to agree on what constitutes the ethics of their profession. Furthermore, he points out that the main challenge facing publishers under which journalists work is the cry by them that their structures have remained archaic and unprofessional. He proffers as a solution to these challenges the organization of seminars and workshops as the best way out, but that the journalists must be practical not theoretical (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

In Chapter 5, which entails his general conclusion, Nyamnjoh restates the main hypothesis or guiding idea of the study that the mass media have not contributed in any significant way to the democratic process in Cameroon. What follows is a recapitulation of the findings and a prescription of how best the media could function in the interest of democracy. Nyamnjoh maintains that Cameroon's one-party logic has prevented multipartyism from addressing the major issue of how best to bring about real participatory democracy. Consequently, democracy is yet to become a way of life—a culture—in Cameroon; so far, it has served mainly superficially. One camp alone argues that all the government does is good and in the best interest of Cameroon (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Nyamnjoh notes that the Cameroonian government's selective application of the Freedom of Communication Law has made it very difficult for the private press to operate freely. This has caused the private press to see democracy in purely political terms and, thus, defines the democratic process as a struggle between those who have Cameroon's best interests at heart and those who are out merely to satisfy their selfish interests. Nyamnjoh asserts that journalism in Cameroon has become an exercise in turning a blind eye on the shortcomings of those a paper supports, while highlighting and exaggerating the weaknesses of those it opposes. Multipartyism in Cameroon, he says, has gone hand in hand with ethnic divisions, regionalism or sectarianism; adding that the ability of journalists to give all sides of the story has been crippled. He concludes by affirming that the media have failed to serve as a platform for the promotion of tolerance and conviviality in the multicultural, multiparty and multilingual Cameroonian society. He adds that Cameroon's media have failed in their democratic responsibility through their complacency with the opposition or the government and through their failure to educate politically the Cameroonian people. Therefore, few Cameroonians can claim to have learnt from the media any basic lessons on democracy, its virtues, and its exigencies (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

For Nyamnjoh, the media must give themselves the responsibility of collecting, processing and disseminating information in a way that does not compromise the aspiration of people thirsting for democracy. He maintains that the media must acquire and live the virtue of tolerance, for democracy also means respect for the rights and opinions of others. It must never be forgotten that a person's freedom ends where that of another begins, and this is handled by law. Nyamnjoh reminds us that media commitment must be to truth and freedom for all and sundry which is why journalists are taught in school to separate their own opinions from their reporting of that issue. Although Nyamnjoh agrees that the media are just as liable to be corrupted by external financial interests and by the opposition as they are by the government, he also emphasizes that the media must unfetter themselves to become veritable champions of

democracy and public interest. According to him, if the media are to make a positive contribution to democracy, they must understand that democracy has its cultural, social and economic dimensions. They must avoid sensationalism and the deliberate falsification of facts. Also, they must avoid giving the impression that there is an individual, group, or section of society responsible for all their problems (Nyamnjoh, 2011).

Nyamnjoh's extraordinary ability to present a real and intricate story via the eyes of other characters in the story is the work's strength. This necessitates exceptional abilities. The only flaw in the book is that there appears to be a lot of code-switching from English to French, which makes it a little difficult for non-French speakers to understand the entire import and meaning of some parts of the story. Nonetheless, this problem can be easily solved by using Google translator to better grasp the narrative.

Book's Greatness

The book satisfies a purely academic interest following the rigors of research and makes a great contribution to a better understanding of the difficulties confronting the institution of a veritable democratic culture in Cameroon in particular and Africa in general. Furthermore, this work is a call to action for Africans, not just Cameroonians, to seriously reexamine the role the media should play toward the institutionalization of participatory democracy and seek to facilitate the media's task in this regard. It is no doubt that this book will be of interest to scholars of African politics, public law, and legal history.

Furthermore, the fact that the book has gotten a lot of attention adds to my decision to select it as a great work. On October 20, 2021, for example, a focused search using quotation marks on the title of the book to isolate only those sites where it is mentioned produced 1,390,000 results in 1.50 seconds on Google.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The foregoing analysis leads to the obvious conclusion that the book reviewed here provides substantial understanding of basic Communication as well as the sophisticated idea of Mass Communication that affects Africans' daily lives. The analysis shows the endemic nature of Communication, as well as the widespread influence of Mass Communication and its accompanying technology on Africans who had previously lived in harmony with no discordant tones in their Communication systems. The analysis also reveals that despite its drawbacks for Africans, Mass Communication has served as a tool in the hands of Africans to liberate their minds from hegemonic dominance, leading to a new consciousness of freedom from neocolonialism and media imperialism, as well as a strong commitment to an "alternative narrative on Africa's potential and prospects" (Bangura, 2018, p. 205).

The chapter also explains how and why great African scholars are engaged in writing books as a means of Mass Communication to sensitize and educate their fellow Africans about the relationships between leaders and the governed in the continent's nascent democracies; where oppression still exists, why it exists, and how it emerged and transmogrified. Furthermore, the analysis provides readers with cognitive mental stimulation and knowledge expansion in a long-lasting, transferable Mass Communication format in the form of books for future generations.

Two significant recommendations for future researchers are made based on the foregoing findings. First, the book examined can be included in future studies on the role of

Communication and media in emerging African democracies as part of the literature review and analytical sections. Second, since Communication foregrounds different disciplines as they affect human activities, future researchers will benefit from using Cheikh Anta Diop's Pluridisciplinary Approach in their analyses, which is defined as "the systematic use of two or more disciplines or branches of learning to investigate a phenomenon, thereby contributing to those disciplines" in light of the peculiar nature of African sociocultural and political features highlighted in the books (see Bangura, 2020, p. 1).

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