

Re-thinking Communication Research and Development in Africa

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Introduction

Development for Africa is fraught with a multiplicity of exogenously generated ideas, models and research paradigms, all with the purported goal of “alleviating” or bringing about “the end of poverty ... in our lifetime” (cf. Sachs 2005). This discourse, which like fashion, goes round in circles, is carried on mainly by “development” agents and “experts” (mainly social and pseudo-social scientists moonlighting through consultancies) and who often limit the question of development to the problematic of achieving growth or “the end of poverty” within the context of neo-liberal economic principles. Notwithstanding the rise of “alternative development” thinking and practice, the problem is rarely studied in a holistic manner. This is especially true of Africa, where problematic “expectations of modernity” (Ferguson 1999) have engendered technicised, disembedded, depoliticised and sanitized approaches to “development” as a unilinear process of routinised, standardized, calculable and predictable practices (Ferguson 1990). There is more emphasis on teleology and analogy than on the systematic study of ongoing processes of creative negotiation by Africans of the multiple encounters, influences and perspectives evident throughout their continent. Africans are actively modernizing their indigeneities and indigenizing their modernities, often in ways not always obvious to scholarly fascination with dichotomies.

One of the important aspects of economic growth and development is investment in human capital, or more simply put, investment in education. But education is not just the inculcation of facts as knowledge but also a set of values that in turn appraise the knowledge being acquired. When the values are not appropriate for progress as understood by those who have sacrificed in pursuit of that education, the knowledge acquired becomes a cosmetic irrelevance. Using the example of African communication researchers educated in tune with exogenously induced (largely Western) cultural values, I argue that communication research steeped in western expectations of modernity (Ferguson 1999) has only resulted in mimicry and insensitivity to the very socio-cultural realities necessary for effective communication and the negotiation of change and continuity (Nyamnjoh 2004a&b). The result is that the knowledge needed for African development is rendered irrelevant by the dysfunctional set of values imbibed and reproduced by African “communication researchers”, “development experts” and the policymakers they influence (Moemeka 2000; Okigbo & Eribo 2004). In this regard, domesticated development in Africa is greatly hindered, even as the evangelicals of universalism claim ever more mileage and converts for their one-best-way development model. Hence, the need to seriously revisit the dominant epistemological underpinnings of prevalent development research and assumptions, that are not always sensitive to the complex realities, predicaments and expectations of Africans as laboratories for negotiating conviviality amongst competing traditions, identities and ideas of progress (Nyamnjoh 2004a&b, 2005a).

For over five decades Africa has attempted to build “nation-states” and pursue development along the path traced out by Western experience. The continent’s post-

colonial leaders have been persuaded by arguments which present the “nation-state” as the only form of political unit “recognized” and “permitted” in “the modern world” (Smith 1986:230; Deutsch 1969:171-2; Wallerstein 1964:4), and the modernisation thus inspired as the unilinear route to development. Today, as xenophobia and autochthony claim centre stage even as globalisation is celebrated, researchers are unanimous that the attempt by African states to build “nation-states” or to develop “à l’eupéenne” has met with little success in the short term), and that from current trends, there is hardly any reason to think that things would be different in the long term. This paper sets out to examine the workable link forward between communication research and development in Africa. But to do this properly, it first tries to answer why development has failed to occur despite multiple efforts and to evaluate the sort of communication research that has had little success in the African continent.

This contribution highlights two factors responsible for the failure of both communication research and development to make a positive and sustained impact on Africa in the last 50 years. The first factor is that the continent has relied on a notion of development and on development agendas that are foreign to the bulk of its peoples both in origin and objectives, and that have not always addressed the right issues or done so in the right manner. The second reason is that development communication researchers have adopted research techniques designed to answer to the needs of Western societies and which do not always suit African cultures or societies that are in the main rural and non-literate. This means that for most of the time communication scholars have either been asking the wrong questions altogether or asking the right questions to the wrong people. The paper seeks to establish to what extent communication researchers and the media have been willing colluders in modernisation, trying to convince local people that this is good for them, the right thing to do, the central value, the one-best-way. It contends that the communication scholars have hardly had the financial, cultural and intellectual independence to set their own agendas in the service of the African masses.

The exogenously induced development agendas have often established an inappropriate sense of problems. Good communication has been presented as a means of being able to break through blockages (backward attitudes and practices - customs, traditions, and philosophies) with knowledge. The question as to *whose* knowledge for *what* purpose has seldom been asked. The assumption has been that there can never be any such thing as the transmission of wrong (inappropriate, unwanted or unsolicited) knowledge through the media by agents of modernisation. Few ever query whether the knowledge is correct; as the government, development agencies and the development expert have the same idea that they know best the people’s problems and what to prescribe as solutions. Little or no attention is paid neither to background or indigenous knowledge nor to the need for active local participation in the conception, design and execution of development projects.

Even today when some may claim the situation is better, the attitude remains that of coming from the outside and knowing what is best in matters of local development. As Kasongo has argued, even when some participation by intended beneficiaries is claimed, this is usually “token”, “mobilised” or “directed” participation by external agents (Kasongo 1998:116). As he writes, “the much publicised participation of the intended beneficiary communities in their development takes but the form of selecting between

choices already established by the benefactors. The Key decisions regarding what the projects will deliver to the communities thus purported to be in need, remain prerogatives of the benefactors” (Kasongo 1998:25) This illusion of choice and participation is well captured in the illustration: “You will now decide for yourselves by majority vote. Do you want a clinic, a school or a bore hole?” (Kasongo 1998:115). Nothing seems to start from the base, or from grassroots research, even when those targeted by behaviour and attitude change communication are at the grassroots. There is much talking at, talking on, talking past and talking to, but little talking with the African masses targeted by the media and research evangelists.

Thus it is hardly surprising that many attempts at development have been an utter and unmitigated disaster year after year for five decades, and that today Africans are by every standard much worse off than they were in the 1950s (Nyamnjoh 2005b; see also various UNDP human development reports). The pursuit of modernisation and consonant World Bank and IMF strategies for development have proved inappropriate in Africa; indeed, it has been argued that this pursuit has served to excuse Western penetration and exploitation. I remember arguing in 1994, invited to present a paper on sustainable development, that this idea (or any of its other aliases) was another World Bank initiative, and that there was little reason for optimism that things would work this time, especially as when examined in detail the whole idea of sustainable development was nothing but modernisation theory in camouflage. For one thing the agenda was still from “experts” outside, which meant that the targeted populations might not have had the opportunity to scrutinise and prioritise it. Sustainable development stressed long-term effects, how to go about things in order to guarantee success and accountability, but was mute on the *why* of all this. The basic assumption here, like in modernisation theory, was that “modern” or “forward looking” people act in a rational and informed manner and that success inevitably results from careful planning. This “rationalist and positivist” approach where everything can be measured and uncertainty eliminated is hardly a reflection of real life.

This obsession with calculability not only mistakes short-term effectiveness for long-term effects, its focus is often too narrow to recognise other forces at play, as it assumes that only what can be counted counts. This quantitative obsession in which quality is sacrificed as unmarketable has not exactly departed with the new initiatives around millennium goals and poverty eradication. These are clearly standards set by the World Bank and like-minded others schooled to limit indicators of scientific rationality to the mathematical and the statistical for measuring success in the battle against poverty. Not only is there the possibility that the wrong things will be measured (which has been largely the case with modernisation in its various guises), but implicit is the assumption that should sustainable development or poverty eradication fail to materialise, the blame could be assigned to the inability of the backward-looking people targeted by development initiatives (structural adjustment programmes, poverty reduction strategy papers, millennium development goals, etc.) to free themselves of constricting customs, false beliefs and unaccountable governments, and to embrace good governance and the rational culture, the one-best-way of managing social change as ‘successfully’ experienced in the prescriptive West. For example, Summers and Thomas (1993:243) argue in support of the World Bank and IMF that “nations shape their own destinies” and “poor domestic policies, more than an unfavourable external environment, are usually to blame for development failure.” Supported and financed by the World Bank and the IMF, it is hardly surprising

that such neo-liberal attempts to minimise the impact of external forces and unequal power relations amongst states guarantee that globalisation shall, its rhetoric of flows and flexible mobility notwithstanding, ensure that devalued African labour does not graduate from their geographies of poverty that flexible accumulation makes possible for multinationals to exploit with impunity (Amin 1997a&b 2005).

African Development in the image of Modernisation Theory

Current calls to re-think African development are in tune with past efforts in this regard, just as current poverty eradication initiatives share much in common with the modernisation theory that has assumed the status of a dinosaur in what Mamdani (1996:12-13) has termed scholarship by analogy. As Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier (1993:6-8) have pointed out, following the Second World War the gap between the rich, fast-growing industrialised countries and countries of the Third World buried in their poverty and underdevelopment became evident. Western sociologists saw in the success of the Western countries the result of a modernisation process. By modernisation Western theorists understood the process of change towards the types of social, economic and political systems which developed in Western Europe and North America from the 17th to the 19th century, and which subsequently spread to other regions of the world. According to this definition, modernisation touches on all aspects of existence: social and political organisation, family, kinship, belief systems, and economy. It possesses an original model: that of Europe and North America. This model is placed under the sign of scientific rationality, inherited from the century of Enlightenment and perceived as universal. Consequently, it is potentially detachable from the civilisation in which it was born. It promises the only rational way, the one-best-way, therefore the universal way of doing anything. The Modernisation model is generally seen to be spreading beyond its area of origin through diffusion, thanks to its scientific rationality, which imposes itself on particular civilisations founded on other systems of thought, qualified as “pre-scientific”, “pre-logical”, or simply “irrational” (Lerner 1958:45). Modernisation is thus seen as a giant compressor determined to crush every other civilisation in order to reduce them to the model of the industrialised West. That is the reason why modernisation theory can also be termed *the theory of the convergence of civilisations* since every other civilisation is considered to be moving towards the unique model. A reasoning very much in tune with the prevalent colonial belief that “European civilisation was the culmination of all human progress and that the new African nations could have no better pattern and should aim at nothing different” (Ajayi 1966:606). Modernisation is also seen as a process of change and innovation, where what is new is perceived as progress, regardless of its real impact on the recipient individuals and communities, as emphasis is on measuring effectiveness, not on effects which may not always be measurable even if more relevant. A modern society is that which is (quantitatively, not qualitatively) forward looking, not backward looking.

Thus according to modernisation theorists, since the purely participant society is more or less a utopia, it is only appropriate that the societies of the West, which happen to be the most modern, serve as models or pacesetters for the emerging nations. Westernisation is therefore their prescription for difficulties in development in Africa. By assuming a unilateral path in development, such theorists imply that the problems of

political instability, cultural pluralism, and socio-economic underdevelopment in Africa can only be overcome through the infusion of “rationalist and positivist” Western policies, institutions, and values. Africa’s only chance is in seeking to become like the West, since “modernism, dynamism and stability tend to go together” (Lerner 1958:84).

Since independence, keen to cover mileage on the unilinear path to the universal civilisation into which they have bought, African educational systems have excelled at the sort of mimicry Okot p’Bitek (1989) decries in *Song of Lawino*. If ancestors are supposed to lay the path for posterity, inviting Africans to forget their ancestors has been an invitation for them to be born again and socialised afresh, in the image of the West, using Western-type academic institutions and rituals of ancestral worship. In general, the extraverted nature of African scholarship has favoured the Western knowledge industry tremendously (Teferra & Altbach 2003; Zeleza & Olukoshi 2004; Odhiambo 2004). It has allowed Western intellectual traditions and practitioners to write themselves into the past, present and future of Africa as civilisers, saviours, initiators, mentors, and arbiters (Chinweizu 1987; Mudimbe 1988; Schipper 1990; Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986; Crossman & Devisch 1999; Mbembe 2000: 7-40; Magubane 2004). Europe and North America have for decades dominated the rest of the world with their academic traditions and products. In the social sciences, the West has been consistently more “advanced” and “expansionist” than the “underdeveloped” and “dependent” regions of the world. In the late 1980s, American social science, in its “unrelenting one-way traffic”, was able to penetrate regions and countries with cultures as different from its own as those of Africa, France, India, Japan and the Republic of Korea (Gareau 1987: 599).

Seen in terms of modernisation theory where those who “know best” about the one-best-way arrogate to themselves the right to prescribe, it is hardly surprising that the study of Africa continues to be dominated by perspectives that privilege analogy over the historical processes that should qualify Africa as a unit of analysis in its own right (Mamdani 1996: 12-13; Zeleza 1997). Although research on and in Africa has shaped the disciplines and our convictions of a supposedly universal truth (Bates et al. 1993: xiii-xiv), the quest for such universality has meant the marginalisation of African alternatives. What obtains has been nothing short of an epistemological imperialism that has facilitated both a Western intellectual hegemony and the silencing of Africans even in the study of Africa (Chinweizu 1987; Mafeje 1998:26-29; Copans 1990: 305-395, 1993; Mkandawire 1997; Zeleza 1997; Obenga 2001; Amin 2005). This makes the situation particularly precarious for young and upcoming African scholars, who are confronted by histories they cannot just ignore and write as if debates had never previously taken place. Epistemologically, they are compelled to start by knowing what is documented already, for them to see if there are any differences from or similarities with the African perspectives envisaged (Cf. Owomoyela 2001).

Understandably missing have been perspectives of the silent majorities (because of whose backwardness, or should we say inadequate modernisation, that is, westernisation) find themselves deprived of the opportunity to tell their own development predicaments in their own ways or even to enrich defective accounts by others of their own life experiences. Correcting this entails do more than paying token attention to the popular epistemologies from which ordinary people draw on a daily basis, and the ways they situate themselves in relationship to others within these epistemologies (P’Bitek 1989; Hountondji 1997;

Nyamnjoh 2004a&b; Okere et al 2005). The implication for African countries of taking their political, cultural, economic and intellectual cues from the West as modernisation theorists suggest, is the risk of losing any political autonomy, cultural identity, economic independence and intellectual creativity that they may have. Yet as others argue below, these very qualities are the necessary preconditions for development in tune with the expectations, dignity and humanity of Africans.

Modernisation Theory as a Stubborn Illusion

Modernisation theory has mastered the art of recycling, camouflaging or disguising itself under various labels, as its disciples refuse or are simply incapable of changing their spots. Any alternative to modernisation theory today when globalisation has become its latest camouflage, should seek to build upon past critiques of its models of development. In this light, a number of criticisms are possible. This theory was designed originally to account for social change in the West during the emergence of capitalism. Its assumption that “traditional” societies will (and should) converge on modern Western forms is ethnocentric. As a theory it does not correspond very well with the empirical facts, and tends to confuse ideal types with reality (Portes 1976).

It is the belief in and quest for homogeneity, the expressed or implied assumption that other societies should reproduce Western systems and institutions regardless of feasibility or contextual variations, which proponents of alternative perspectives have criticised in the modernisation as the theory of homogenisation, as the West claims monopoly over “freedom of imagination” (Chatterjee 1993:13). By restricting the concept of the rise of nations to that of the birth of capitalism, Western researchers have developed concepts and theories that extrapolate the parochial European experience (considered as “normal”), and that “reduce” the experiences of Africa, Asia and Latin America to those of the West (Abdel-Malek 1967:250; Chatterjee 1993; Amin 2005). Instead of restructuring, modifying, enriching and remodelling their concepts and theories in order to accommodate the broader experiences and contextual variations of the contemporary world, these researchers have stubbornly insisted on Western intellectual hegemony or the comforts of studying down (Abdel-Malek 1967:259; Portes 1976:55-6; Gareau 1987:596-7; Riggs 1987:607-9). As Abdel-Malek (1967:250-64) puts it, the European origins of the social sciences lead to Euro-centrism, whereby “the world is conceived in the image of Europe” to which others are expected to conform, and where exceptions are not tolerated. This is very much in evidence in the current proliferation of “scholarly” prescriptions on the so-called “failed states of Africa”, as blame is systematically taken away from the problematic assumption that “nation-states” are possible and that they could be anything but dysfunctional in the current neo-liberal configuration of global power relations, and that Africans are at fault for not attaining functional nation-states. And so, everything must be done to bring about “functional states” in Africa, even if this entails placing “failed” or “dysfunctional” states under some kind of “international trusteeship” (see Ellis 2005).

In the light of the weakness of African states vis-à-vis Western states and institutions in particular, many scholars recognise the need to form large economic, political and military units as Africa’s only chance of effective intervention in the world today and of winning respect as real partners. They call for a break with “the narrow

ideology of the nation” inherited from 19th Century Europe (Amin 1985:107; Doumou 1987:57; Goulbourne 1987; Cobban 1969:124-9; Gabou 1987:76-85; Hadjor 1987:139). And some would argue that, their shortcomings notwithstanding, the African Union and NEPAD constitute the baby steps towards an eventual realisation of this dream.

The issue of popular democratic participation as a prerequisite for economic development has remained a recurrent theme in the literature on Africa since the 1980s (Goulbourne 1987; Hadjor 1987; Nyong'o 1987; Soyinka 1994; Olukoshi 2005). Observers of the liberal democratic process in Africa, especially since the 1990s, have borne witness that enfranchisement does not necessarily lead to empowerment and universal suffrage does not guarantee access to political decision-making (Ake 2000). Political equality almost everywhere has been confined to the right to vote, as autocrats have chosen to ignore the right of most to be voted for or to enjoy civil liberties in between elections. Although statements have been made to the contrary, ordinary people and alternative social and political organisations continue to face enormous difficulties exercising their rights: to hold and express opinions contrary to those held by the state and its leaders; to assemble freely and organise themselves in accordance with the law; to disseminate views and suggest alternative political strategies that may be contrary to those held by the leadership; and to expect protection from the state against the excesses of its own zealots (Goulbourne 1987:46; Englund 2002; Fawole & Ukeje 2005; Nyamnjoh 2005a). Despite the rhetoric and alleged reality of liberal democracy, the state remains “an interfering irritant, a source of corruptly obtained advantage or a massive irrelevance for many people” (Barnett 1997:45), floating with impunity above civil society like a balloon in mid-air (Hyden 1983:19), extracting loyalty and pleasure, exercising corrupt control at all levels of everyday life (Mbembe 2000). To Claude Ake, for all but a few, the postcolonial state “is alien and remote, uncaring and oppressive”; it is encountered by ordinary people “as ruthless tax collectors, boorish policemen and bullying soldiers, corrupt judges cynically operating a system of injustice, a maze of regulations through which they have to beg, bribe or cheat their way every day”; and has forced most of them to commit their loyalties to their home villages or ethnic groups (Ake 2000:114). And who is to blame when a dress made to fit the slim, de-fleshed Hollywood consumer model of a Barbie doll-type entertainment icon cannot fit the body of a full-figured person, rich in all the cultural indicators of health Africans are familiar with? Curiously, under modernisation theory, neither the tiny dress nor its designer, nor the person who made a gift of it is to blame, as the assumption is that the Barbie-doll figure is everyone’s dream and aspiration, the one-best-way of being (Nyamnjoh 2005c, 2005a: 25-39).

In the mid 1980s Goulbourne made an observation which is still very relevant. He noted that African governments have often justified repression with “spurious arguments”, one of which claims that to ensure “rapid development it was necessary first to put controls in place”, because any political differences were likely to divert attention from development, the main national pursuit. This view gives the impression that the leaders intended to tackle the issue of national development with total seriousness, and that it was only appropriate to “consider putting aside some less pressing issues” for its sake. It was unwise for a country with limited resources, “to dissipate its energies in the niceties, or luxuries, of allowing all and sundry to put their views about national matters when the task of prosecuting development is the national project over which independence was fought.” But as Goulbourne maintained, the very exclusion of a “high degree of popular democratic

participation” is in itself an obstacle to national development. Were democracy indeed the problem, its repeated suppression should have brought about rapid economic development (Goulbourne 1987:36-7). Soyinka is known for his critical views about the “near-mystical linkage” which African leaders have tended to make between human rights and development, daring to imply that it is immoral to withhold aid from them because they withhold rights from their citizens. Soyinka compares this attitude to that of a mendicant mother, who with one hand “holds out her beggar’s cup to you”, while “the other is busy dealing vicious blows to the head of the wretched bundle that complements her own misery.” He purges the African intelligentsia of any claim to innocence, and accuses them of often providing the “conceptual noises which legitimate” the costly rounds of “competitive alienation” that African leaders impose on their peoples (Soyinka 1994:7-9).

Writing in the late 1980s, Peter Anyang Nyong’o blamed African policy-makers for failing to understand the structural character of the national and international milieu in which they operated, and for the rigid suppression of the contending social forces in their own societies. Dependency notwithstanding, he believed that the lack of accountability on the part of those in power exacerbated the failure to bring about “more positive social transformation and more auto-centred processes of accumulation”. He found “a definite correlation between the lack of democratic practices in African politics and the deteriorating socio-economic conditions” (Nyong’o 1987:19). He stressed the need for a state capable of planning an “inward-looking, self-centred and self-sufficient development” (Nyong’o 1987:24); but one which at the same time must be controlled by and accountable to the popular forces which have been marginalized in the contemporary political arena, despite the enormous contributions they made to “the national democratic struggles for independence” (Nyong’o 1987:20). Armed with these convictions, Peter Anyang Nyong’o could not have had a better opportunity to prove himself when he joined the post-Moi government of Kibaki in 2002 as minister of Planning and National Development.

Also of increasing concern to African scholars is the missing or often inadequately stressed link between culture and development. Writing on this issue, Mazrui not only sees an inevitable link between culture and development in Africa - especially as “Africans have demonstrated that they respond more to *socio-cultural* ideologies than to *socio-economic* ideologies” - but argues that instead of seeking the political kingdom first as prescribed by the late Kwame Nkrumah, Africans “need to seek first the cultural kingdom, in the hope that much else will be added unto it” (Mazrui 1994:127-136). On his part, Nyang argues that although “the colonization of Africa was a serious challenge to African cultural autonomy”, the emphasis by the post-colonial African leadership on the primacy of politics and their fascination with things foreign, has meant that “cultural changes in many African societies are not always deeply rooted in the local soil or home-grown”. He concludes that governments must show their commitment and seriousness “to the development of their peoples by coming to terms with local cultures”, and by seeking “effective and meaningful domestication of the theory and practices of modernization” (Nyang 1994:429-446).

Communication Research and Development

According to the Modernisation Theory, for traditional Africa to develop people had to change their attitudes and ways. To achieve this, they needed vast amounts of information and persuasion which could only be obtained through the mass media, “the great information multipliers” (Schramm 1964:246-7). This conception of development gave rise

to a type of communication research that focused mainly on the *effectiveness* of the techniques of persuasion, diffusion and adoption of innovations (Rogers 1962; 1973). Researchers influenced by this approach have tended to see social structure as an impediment to development and the traditional power elite as gatekeepers against modernisation. When such researchers seek to understand the social structures of the societies they study, it is in order to determine how best these structures could be replaced by “modern” ones (Rogers 1973). Most prevailing uses of communication in development have relied heavily on this theory of “exogenously induced change” which suggests that some societies are “static” and that such ‘static societies are brought to life by outside influences, technical aid, knowledge, resources and financial assistance and (in a slightly different form) by the diffusion of ideas” (Golding 1974:43).

Some examples of the use of communication in this connection have been analysed. In 1977, under the auspices of UNESCO, Diaz Bordenave published the results of a critical evaluation of projects in 10 countries where different mass media were used to promote rural development. The countries in question were Colombia, Brazil, India, Senegal, Peru, Iran, Tanzania, Canada, Tobago and the Philippines. Diaz Bordenave looked at the origin, background and reasons for each of the projects. He discovered that in none of the 10 case studies did the request for a rural development programme using communication originate with the rural populations most concerned. A usual pattern was for a government to decide on a development scheme and then search out a locale and a team to carry out a communication programme to promote the scheme. Another was for an international agency or group to become interested in a communication technique or a development problem currently arousing interest and then find a country willing to embark on a programme centred around this technique or problem. In the light of these inadequacies, Diaz Bordenave argued for countries, bilateral, and international organisations to take a closer look at overall priorities in rural development and at communication resources so as to determine where rural development communication efforts are most needed and will have the greatest effect. Concerning sponsorship, he remarked that communication agencies involved with development programmes were often more interested in testing and promoting new “hardware” than in analysing the realistic needs of the populations under study. In some of the case studies, the sponsors did not devote enough time to specify clearly what they really wanted and why, and thus found it difficult to prevent or attenuate divergences in opinion and expectation between sponsors. Government support in one form or another was the norm.

Most criticisms of development communication theories (see Servaes 1983, 1986, 1994; Kasongo 1998; Moemeka 2000; Okigbo & Eribo 2004) are similar to criticisms of Modernisation Theory in general. Their Western-centredness, their neglect of the international dimensions of both communication and development, and their emphasis on the attitudes rather than the structures that account for underdevelopment, have been heavily criticised. Development communication studies have tended to emphasise “person-blame” rather than ‘system-blame”, and have failed to recognise that “In the circumstances of many developing countries, existing patterns of power and exploitation mean that poor people have little reasonable prospect of self-betterment; and an attitude of fatalism may be the only realistic one” (Hartmann et al 1989:28). As Mamdani (1972) observed in the *Myth of Population Control*, a critical re-study of an earlier American sponsored survey of birth control practices in a region of India that had reached problematic conclusions, it takes a

critical predicament-oriented study to understand that people are not poor because they have large families. They have large families because they are poor. The tendency by researchers has been to treat all “progressive change as unproblematic” and to assume that every innovation communicated is necessarily beneficial to the populations they affect. But as Hartmann et al (1989:255-69) argue, “Changes that benefit one section of the community may leave others untouched or even damage their interests” (1989:255).

Hartmann et al (1989:256) thus advocate the inclusion of “social structure and structural conflict in discussions of development”, and criticise the widespread tendency to “treat the people as an amorphous mass” and to encourage a false sense of “harmony of interests”. The rural population for example, are often credited with a harmony of interests that is more mythical than real. In their study of India, Hartmann et al realised that not only are village societies “highly differentiated in terms of access to resources and by caste and other divisions,” but that they are “characterised by competition for resources among different interest groups”.

Hartmann et al (1989:257-63) have also criticised the tendency in this model to consider those targeted by communication for development “as essentially passive, an audience to be manipulated into compliance with the development nostrums of those who know best”. Such a tendency has made of the advertising campaign (social marketing) the dominant model for development communication, where everything is seen in terms of “injecting” the development “message” into communications directed at the “target audience”, as though development were a commodity to be sold like beer, soap or any other.” Communicating development “is seen as an essentially mechanical process” in which the individual audience is treated both as passive and as detachable from his social context. This approach is reflected in communication studies, where the lion’s share of research has gone to “assessing audience response to deliberately persuasive “messages” of the campaign type,” with emphasis on “the KAP formula - knowledge, attitude, practice - which is deemed to be the sequence in which effects occur”. Yet the effects of communication are much larger than the rapid spread of information, and could include the gradual socialisation into alternative ways of seeing and doing. Like individuals and communities everywhere, Africans targeted by development communication “may welcome, accept or collude in some cases, but in others they may ignore, select, reshape, redirect, adapt and, on occasions, even completely reject [media content]. Even when the same material is available to all and widely consumed, the eventual outcome, may vary considerably both within and between countries” (Halloran 1993:3).

In view of the rising disenchantment with the fact that modernisation has encouraged an orientation of mass media and communication that “is essentially vertical, directive, aimed at manipulation and indoctrination” (Diaz Bordenave 1977:21-22), Diaz Bordenave recommends Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” as a way out. Freire argued that the mere transfer of knowledge from an authoritative source to a passive receiver does not promote the receiver’s growth as an autonomous person conscious of the need to contribute to and influence his society. He proposed a “pedagogy of the oppressed” wherein the emphasis is on participation, democracy and dialogue. Freire’s approach suggests that not only may exogenously induced research methods be inappropriate to African conditions, but also that strict adherence to dominant research models may preclude the asking of the really important questions (see also Masilela 2000).

Halloran, using the example of comparative international research which is quite common in development communication studies, echoes this point. Such research is by nature very difficult to conduct, but certain assumptions in orthodox research tradition have made it even more so. "At the heart of the problem is the failure to recognize that social research is embedded in cultural values and that the fundamental differences (culture, language, demographic structure, experience, expectations, etc.) which obtain in different societies preclude the use of carbon copy survey or interview methods which assume that genuine comparability can be achieved only by administering the same questions in the same way in all participating countries. One has only to take note of the relationship between language and culture to realise that this approach is patently absurd" (Halloran 1981:9). Thus methods of data collection no matter how appropriate in one context (say Western), are not necessarily so in another (say African). In adopting our research methods in development communication in Africa, how much attention have we paid to the continent's fundamental cultural, linguistic and demographic diversities, specificities, experiences and expectations?

The conventional quantitative techniques of data collection are not always adapted to the realities of Africa, much as we might like to use them. The cultural, linguistic and social cleavages in Africa are such that a researcher must exercise special care when applying research methods developed to suit the needs and expectations of mainly Western societies. Take the questionnaire for example. It can only be administered selectively, given the widespread rate of illiteracy in Africa. In the case of Cameroon, if the results of the 1987 census are to be believed, almost 50 percent of the entire population can neither read nor write French and English, the official languages. Of the 45 percent or so who have been to school, less than 20 percent have gone beyond primary level. Indeed less than 3 percent of the population have been educated further than secondary school. This not only seriously questions the use of questionnaires drawn up in French and English, but also their relevance as a research method in a largely oral society. And Cameroon is amongst the most literate societies in Africa. Translation is arguably a way out, but given Cameroon's mosaic linguistic situation and ethnic complexities, as well as the fact that many words and concepts in French and English do not have ready equivalents in indigenous languages, it is hard to see of what significant use translation could be. And if one were to stubbornly insist on using the questionnaire, these drawbacks notwithstanding, it would be a case of attempting to extrapolate or generalise from a most unrepresentative sample; so that any decision taken as a result of any such study is most unlikely to have grassroots support or endorsement. The elitist nature of such research methods compounds rather than alleviates the marginalization of the African masses. And should one be surprised if development did not result from such research?

It is in this regard that as far back as 1963, Cheikh Anta Diop perceptively suggested a multi-methodological approach in African sociological research. He questioned the tendency to make *a priori* distinctions between sociological and anthropological methods and to equate the latter with the study of "primitive" or "archaic" societies. Every research situation, he maintained, should determine its methods. He argued that nowhere else better than in the study of African societies, can anthropology and sociology combine their methods and collaborate more effectively; for in Africa where indigenous elements co-exist with Western ones, changes are in process that are only inadequately understood with research methods drawn from both disciplines (Anta Diop 1963:181). Such

methodological buffets offer better prospects than the insensitive insistence that certain methods must go with certain disciplines or certain types of inquiry.

Anthropology and its methods have certainly served to foster imperialist appropriation of Africa, but as a discipline, it has undergone critical self-appraisal and re-orientation that should be instructive for communication research, other disciplines and fields of study interested in Africa, especially in the age of flexibilities and contestations of essentialisms. Anthropology has progressed from functionalist models of evolutionary change through binary oppositions of structuralism, to an understanding of “cultural and social organisation as dynamic rather than fixed or determined by a set of essentials” (Gardner & Lewis 1996:51-52). Discussing anthropology and development, Gardner and Lewis have argued that both have little choice but to re-focus to enrich each other in our era of flexibilities and fluidities. Post-modernism they argue, has contributed the celebration of difference and diversity to understanding of development processes and the relevance of anthropology therein. The result has been a demise of the unitary- or meta-narratives that accounted for the dominance of modernisation and dependency paradigms from the 1960s to the 1980s. Unitary theories of development have “reached a profound impasse”, as “Emphasis on diversity, the primacy of localised experience and the colonial roots of discourses of progress, or the problems of the Third World, have radically undermined any attempt at generalisation” (Gardner & Lewis 1996:22).

Far from being neutral and selfless, Gardner and Lewis argue, development and anthropological representations of development processes are embedded in power relations. To them, development is “an enormously powerful set of ideas which has guided thought and action across the world” for the best half of the 20th century. It “involves deliberately planned” political, economic and social change, and continues to affect the lives of millions of people around the world, regardless of what critiques think or say of it (Gardner & Lewis 1996:2). They perceive development as “a series of events and actions, as well as a particular discourse and ideological construct” that are “inherently problematic”, and in certain regards, “actively destructive and disempowering” (Gardner & Lewis 1996:25). Far from being simple, homogenous, wholly monolithic, static and encompassing, as is often thought, development decision-making, policy and practice actually comprise “a variety of countervailing perspectives and practices, as well as a multiplicity of voices” (Gardner & Lewis 1996:78). In other words, “development discourse is heterogeneous, contested and constantly changing”. Hence their conclusion that development processes “are working in several directions at once - both towards and against change. At times and in some ways the dominant discourse and the power relations it involves are maintained; at other times, in other ways, they are challenged and slowly transformed”. For, “contrary to the impression given in much contemporary analysis, discourses of development are not all the same; nor indeed are they fixed. Instead, they are constantly being contested and are therefore open to change”. Also, just as development “does not involve a unitary body of ideas and practices,” so too developers “are not a unitary body of people”, and should not be treated as such, as has often been the case (Gardner & Lewis 1996: 125-128).

Gardner and Lewis recognise the need for a new anthropology of development that serves “to deconstruct the knowledge of developers as well as those ‘to be developed’”. For “development plans are often far from rational, and relationships within development institutions are as hierarchical, unequal and culturally embedded as any of the societies usually studied by anthropologists. The interface between developers and those to be

developed is not simply a case of binary oppositions: modern ('scientific') versus traditional ('indigenous') thought. Instead, the paradigms within which developers work are as contextually contingent, culturally specific and contested as those of the social groups whom they target" (Gardner & Lewis 1996:154-155). They suggest that in this process anthropologists could use gender and poverty as their stopping points to endless cultural relativism (Gardner & Lewis 1996:24-25). In and of development, anthropologists could "help change the representations that development institutions produce", as being involved would facilitate both the adoption of anthropological perspectives by various development actors, and the shifting of "discussions away from 'development' and towards a focus upon social relations of poverty and inequality." They see "the anthropological eye" and its focus on particular issues to be "invaluable in the planning, execution and assessment of positive, non-oppressive developmental interventions" (Gardner & Lewis 1996:76-78).

Gardner and Lewis invite anthropologists to challenge the "the social and political relations of poverty, through generating and applying anthropological insights" (Gardner & Lewis 1996:25). Anthropologists, they argue, "can suggest alternative ways of seeing and thus step outside the discourse, both by supporting resistance to development and by working within the discourse to challenge and unpick its assumptions". They note as encouraging the fact that "anthropologists are increasingly picking away at development agencies, infiltrating their decision-making bodies, lobbying them from the inside and contributing to their reports". However, the risk remains, of "the dominant discourse coopting anthropological concepts by translating them into simplified and homogenising categories" (Gardner & Lewis 1996:76-77), given that "ideas which start their life as radical alternatives all too often become a neutralised and non-threatening part of the mainstream". "Thus, although challenged by alternative perspectives, the extent to which the discourse has so far been significantly transformed is open to question" (Gardner & Lewis 1996:103-104).

Whatever the risks of cooptation, they argue, the attitude and outlook which anthropology promotes is a lesson worth learning: "a stance which encourages those working in development to listen to other people's stories, to pay attention to alternative points of view and to new ways of seeing and doing." It is an attitude and outlook that continually question generalised assumptions that researchers and development agents might wittingly or unwittingly draw from their own cultures and seek to apply elsewhere, and call attention to the various alternatives that exist in marginalized cultures. The lesson that anthropology could offer the development communication research "is a continuous questioning of the processes, assumptions and agencies involved in development", while at the same time playing the role of "unpicking, analysing and changing development practice over time" (Gardner & Lewis 1996:167-168).

Alternative Communication Research in Africa

As Servaes and Arnst (1994:2-3) have argued, it is about time the poor and the illiterate, who "have always been researched, described and interpreted by the rich and educated", became actively involved in, and why not take over, research on their predicaments, especially, as often, "they best know their situation and have a perspective on problems and needs that no outsider can fully share".

This call for participatory research is in tune with the call for more representative communication systems and the need for group, local or community media, in the face of

increasing centralisation and synchronisation (Unesco 1980:55-7). Since the 1970s in Latin America for example, researchers have expressed the need for an “alternative communication” system that is democratic, participatory and decentralised, and that is rooted in the masses who are currently marginalized by a communication system that serves the preponderant interests of the transnational corporations and the dominant internal economic and political power groups (White 1980; Diaz Bordenave 1977; White & McDonnell 1983; Reyes Matta, 1986; Simpson Grinberg 1986). It is a type of communication that would serve the interests of “the oppressed sectors of society at the national level, and the dominated countries at the international level”, one that guarantees “a process of dialogue and widespread creativity” (Reyes Matta 1986:190-1).

To attain this alternative communication, Simpson Grinberg for example, reiterates Golding’s call for research (Golding 1974), by stressing “the need to study the current extent and impact of native communication systems that predate the coming of the mass media” to the Third World (Grinberg 1986:183). The “marrow of alternative communication”, he writes, “is the decentralization of communication power, which implies a decentralisation of the technological know-how” (Grinberg 1986:184). In White’s words, “*Comunicación popular*” does not consist merely of an incorporation of “many elements of the folk culture”, but must be seen above all, as “an attempt to set up communication channels independent of the hierarchy of intermediaries” (White 1980:3). This entails a system of communication that is managed by the people, is horizontal, decentralised at every level, participatory, and free from the shackles of domination by either external or internal forces. Writing about the whole of the developing world, Hamelink calls for an emancipatory science (Hamelink 1983a), and prescribes “dissociation” as the only real alternative to the process of “cultural synchronization” perpetuated by the industrialised states, and as the sole guarantor of the autonomy and self-reliance “essential for a process of independent development” (Hamelink 1983b).

The main characteristic of participatory communication is that the media arise from and are controlled by the locality. It comprises peasants or worker groups addressing themselves or other groups with similar concerns and aspirations. The media are socially horizontal in that they do not “go ‘up’ to a communication centre controlled by higher-status individuals and then back ‘down’ again to other lower-status groups” but direct from one lower-status group to another. The language of communication is the language of the people, freely chosen by them to communicate amongst themselves; it is not introduced or imposed by any outside leadership. If sympathetic specialists or professionals offer any expertise, it is purely technical and strictly on the terms of the locals (White 1980:4; Criticos 1989:36-7; Moemeka 2000).

For participatory communication to take root in Africa, there is the need for participatory research into how best to realise this aim. For, to adapt Hadjor (1987:38-40), only through “an intimate acquaintance with everyday life and the experience of the masses”, can the communication researcher recognise “what people want and how much they want it”, and so be able to recommend towards sustainable development or poverty eradication. Servaes and Arnst (1994:4-5) consider participatory research as an educational process that is “cyclical, continuous, local, and accessible”, in that it comprises three interrelated facets namely: i) “collective definition and investigation of a problem by a

group of people struggling to deal with it”; ii) “group analysis of the underlying causes” of the said problem; and iii) “group action to attempt to solve the problem.”

This sort of research has a lot to borrow from anthropology as discussed by Gardner and Lewis (1996) above, especially as anthropology is noted for the long periods its practitioners take to understand, multifacetedly and in detail, the communities or institutions they study. In addition to the attitude, outlook and other indicators highlighted by Gardner and Lewis above, Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier (1993:367) talk of “prolonged familiarity, within, in a face to face relationship and communication with a group, a region, a political, linguistic or residential community,” as the most distinctive characteristic of anthropological studies. Unfortunately, most people and organisations who recognise and appreciate the originality of the anthropological approach, have failed to recognise what accounts for that originality: the prolonged familiarity within a given community which is only possible if the researcher can get him/herself accepted into the group of study, and participate in its daily life. Only by so doing can the researcher uncover the solidarity that accounts for the dynamism of the group, or the tensions and conflicts that perpetuate underdevelopment. Findings from such research would certainly contribute towards the organisation of local or community activity that “enlists the active participation of the people most in need of better opportunities” (Hartmann et al. 1989:268).

Doing participatory research requires re-socialising and reappraising certain alternatives that we have either ignored in the past or simply never really thought of. It means that we must increasingly question certain basic assumptions, conventional wisdom, academic traditions and research practices, which we have uncritically and often unconsciously internalised, but which remain largely ill-adapted to our research contexts. We need to critically examine such “canned” (Ramos quoted in Gareau, 1987:603) communication research methods imported from Europe and North America and see how they could best be harnessed or domesticated to serve Africa in its quest for sustainable development and poverty eradication.

The bulk of communication research on the continent remains heavily coloured by the American tradition where the tendency has been and remains “to assume uncritically that social action can be understood mainly in terms of individual beliefs and attitudes”, while largely ignoring in which ways such “attitudes may be the product rather than the cause of economic conditions and power relationships”. Such “simplistic psychologism ... takes insufficient account of the social and political dynamics of change and lacks an adequate conception of the relationships between ideas and actions, between culture and social structure.” It has produced the false belief that “ideas may be manipulated more or less independently of structural factors” (Hartmann et al 1989:23).

What America has exported to Africa has been summarized by Kunczik (1993:39) as research that emphasises the collection of “commercially and politically quickly usable, methodically unexceptionably obtained facts, without reflecting further on them.” The result is usually, “a cornucopia of individual findings gained with the aid of sophisticated research instruments; findings that, because of the absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework, cannot be integrated.” The focus is on “discovering short-range, quick and dependably identifiable effects”, while “the consideration that the mass media are part of an over-all social framework is completely ignored. The approach deals simply with the reactions of isolated individuals or groups to specific communications.” As Kunczik further

points out, the emphasis on “miniature surveys of little experiments that are quickly, routinely evaluable and usable whether for publication or for practical purposes” socialise the communication researcher in favour of “an ‘atomistic’ perspective that does not take into consideration the over-all social aspects.” Questions of how the research results can contribute to progress in the field, or how they can be integrated within a comprehensive theoretical framework, are generally ignored (Kunczik 1993: 40-41).

Such narrowly focused and superficial studies fall within what Halloran has termed “conventional research”. This is a type of research that stresses efficiency and practicality, is mostly atheoretical in nature, hardly relies on well-formulated or tested hypotheses, and is usually aimed at resolving a precise policy or commercial problem. Hence, it tends to be more concerned with sampling than with conceptualisation, and with description than with analysis. It is piecemeal in approach, scarcely integrated, and does not emphasize continuity. “Irrespective of the nature of the social phenomenon under investigation, the final research report is usually confined to quantitative statements about amenable but relatively superficial aspects of a complex issue” (Halloran 1974:8). Its “positivistic/behaviouristic” approach has tended to blind its practitioners to the “value assumptions ... implicit in every research question and that ... enter into the formulation of every research design” (Halloran 1983:274). The researchers in this tradition hardly bother to redefine the research problem brought to them by governments and other agents of development; and their research tends to serve the “interests that pay for it and find it useful in optimising their security and profitability” (Smythe & Dinh 1983:118-121).

Conclusion

Some familiar with the culture of branding that characterises consumer capitalism where difference is less in the content of a product than in the fact that it is patented and identified under a unique brand name, are bound to question why in the 21st century where “globalisation” is the latest brand in town, one should be discussing African development under an outdated conceptual model as “modernisation theory”. It is not because the modernisation hydra loses a tentacle or two in a bout with a poorly organized and less self-confident rival, that its creative self-reinvention should be counted for dead. Just as leopards, scholars seem glued to their conceptual spots even when harkening to the rhetoric of theoretical re-orientation, especially when such spots feed on and are comforted by prejudices of relative superiority and ambitions of dominance as informed by race, culture, geography, class or gender.

However, my choice to discuss “modernisation theory” is motivated less by brand loyalty than by a reluctance to be swept away by appearances. A closer examination of the content beneath the brand name leaves little doubt that globalisation is nothing but a misleading label for the same basic modernisation package. Like a hydra modernisation has simply refused to lose out on the brand war by repairing and multiplying itself so profusely that even its staunchest critics are inclined to mistake its pluralism for diversity. It refuses to die simply because it has been decreed dead by analysts to whom rhetoric has always mattered more than reality. More importantly, modernisation is nurtured and sustained by vested political, economic, cultural and intellectual interests, who find in it an outlook, a way of life, a civilisation that all must be deployed to defend, maintain, reproduce and disseminate aggressively and deafly round the globe. Its survival and

triumph lies in its ability to standardize and routinise research and scholarship, so that emphasis is shifted from thinking to doing, and from quality to quantity. Given such formidable forces at its service, it is hardly surprising that the touch and go, bite and blow attacks by those whose ways of life it assaults with intentions of co-optation or annihilation, have only toughened its resistance and ingenuity.

As a branded methodological import from America, modernisation has survived in Africa more because it suits the purposes of its agents than because of its relevance to understanding the African situation. Those who run international development programmes along the Western model inspired by Modernisation Theory, “are not interested in challenge, stimulation and provocation at any level” (Halloran 1981:18). They want their programmes to go on without disturbance, and would only select as researchers or accept only those research questions and findings that confirm their basic assumptions on development in Africa. But the development communication researcher has the responsibility to challenge such unfounded assumptions based on vested interests and hidden agendas. This is an easy task by no means, especially since we rely on these very agents of development to fund our research. As Halloran observes in general, anyone in a position of power and control would hardly accept research that is critical of them. They therefore are more likely to sponsor only such research that would produce results that justify their position and/or help them in their defence when challenged (Halloran, 1981:20). To paraphrase Susan George (quoted in J. Barry Riddell, 1992:723), it matters not how many “mistakes” mainstream researchers or development theorists make, for “protected and nurtured by those whose political objectives they support, package and condone, they have a licence to go on making them, whatever the consequences...” Thus “research frequently tends, in some way or other, to reflect the values and reinforce the system within which it is conceived, supported and executed. In fact, in some countries it is deliberately intended that it should do this and it is important to look at research as a possible form of social control (Halloran 1981:14). As development communication researchers, we cannot afford to be partial, blind or naive whatever the pressures on us, and regardless of our level of misery and need for sustenance. Thus for communication research to contribute towards a genuine, multifaceted liberation of the African, we ought to start not by joining the bandwagon as often we do, but with an insightful scrutiny of the whole idea of sustainable development or poverty eradication - its origin, form, content, assumptions, practicability and articulation; and then be able to decide whether to accept, reject or modify it.

Thus depending on the national, regional or cultural context wherein they operate, social scientists “adopt contrary research designs and methodologies” (Gareau 1987:598). This writer sees the social sciences as marked by profound ideological conflicts, and their practitioners as looking in different places for evidence, and using contrasting methods to determine whether or not they have found it (Gareau 1987:598). Gareau’s global view of social science thus ‘sees its initiates as undergoing divergent professional socialization processes, reading different bodies of literature, and often coming to contrary conclusions’ (Gareau 1987:598). And thanks to unequal power relations, some countries (USA for example) and regions (Europe and North America – The West) have succeeded more than others in rendering their ‘social science sects’ more visible and dominant globally, without necessarily being more legitimate. Hence, as Schiller (1977) has pointed out, America for example, has used its rhetoric of “Free Flow of Information” as a “highly effective

ideological club” to promote its political, economic and cultural values by whipping “alternative forms of social organization” into a ridiculous defensiveness. This is certainly comfort enough in our quest for development perspectives in tune with African predicaments through scholarship stripped of mimicry.

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