

A CASE FOR AFRICAN CULTURE IN JOURNALISM CURRICULA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the need to teach African culture as a module in journalism schools based on the African continent. Assuming that journalists need to be cognisant of the cultural environments in which they operate, this article argues that failure on the part of journalists to be culture-aware results in inaccurate journalism that is loaded with journalists' own cultural baggage and bias. Using cultural framing as a theoretical basis, the article shows how ignorance of African culture by journalists reporting on indigenous African communities has manifested itself. It is argued that journalistic misrepresentation of Africans perpetuates the colonial project of the dehumanisation of Africans of projecting them as inferior beings – mentally, spiritually and physically. Journalists educated about diverse cultures are more likely to link and create common understanding among culturally diverse communities than journalists who are ignorant of others' cultural norms.

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INTRODUCTION

Two events gave birth to the idea of writing this article. The first event was the firing of South African weekly (*Sunday Times*) newspaper columnist, David Bullard, by the newspaper's editor, Mondli Makhanya, for writing an article that suggested that "black people are indolent savages" (Makhanya 2008: 18). The second event was the Stellenbosch University's Department of Journalism conference celebrating its 30 years of existence in October 2008. Among the topics covered by the conference was the "Africanisation of the curriculum of journalism education". This topic was discussed amid observations by some African scholars of journalism education that most journalism ethical codes adopted on the African continent "are heavily inspired by Western codes or Western-derived international codes" that "dwell on ethical issues of relevance to Western concerns in the main" (Nyamnjoh 2005: 87).

In his hypothetical article, Bullard (2008a: 1) wrote that had white people not come to South Africa, black people would have had no cars, no roads and no television. In cases where children died, a black "family would mourn for a week or so and then have another child". He contended that the various tribes of South Africa would live happy and peaceful lives, "only occasionally indulging in a bit of ethnic cleansing". He further pointed out that African people's "Praying to the ancestors is no help because they are just as clueless". Bullard's article drew strong reactions from black Africans who felt that they and their culture were insulted by a white racist journalist of British origin.

This article examines some implications of Bullard's article. The author asserts that journalists have a responsibility of reflecting fairly on the culture of people they write about. Failure to do so contributes to readers being ill-informed about their fellow human beings, especially those who live in distant lands either visiting the country written about or reading about it on the Internet. Because much of what we write locally is accessible globally, our local journalism is simultaneously global journalism. As such, the images that we project locally are also projected globally.

The dominance of Western paradigms at the expense of other world-views in journalism education in Africa has contributed to journalists' insensitivity when dealing with African cultures. Bullard's article is a case in point. His article is a distortion and misrepresentation of African cultures, a factor which is psychologically and spiritually damaging to Africans. The misrepresentation of African cultural practices has, in the eyes of its practitioners, devaluated African beliefs. Prah (1995: 54) argues that this devaluation through the media has established strong feelings of inferiority and a denudation of cultural confidence amongst Africans. It has contributed to a situation where, as Biko (2005: 44) observes, Africans find it difficult "to talk with authority on anything to do with African culture". The right of Africans to speak with authority on African culture was usurped by colonial Christian missionaries and scholars. They did this through the act of "colonis(ing) world scholarship, especially the writing of history" (Mzamane 1999: 173). In doing so, the missionary colonialists and scholars were aided by colonial education and colonial media (Rukuni 2007: 146; Biko 2005: 76).

Mass media was used to create a wrong and negative image of the African continent and its people through a “sustained negative campaign of presenting Africans as being culturally and mentally inferior” (Mbennah, Hooyberg & Mersham 1998: 20). This was done by elevating Christian civilisation and denigrating African belief systems as “savagery and darkness” (Ainslie 1966: 30). African culture was labelled by colonial historians and missionaries as “pagan” and African dress and languages declared “uncivilised” (Pityana 1999: 137). The result was that African “cultural systems and values were subordinated and marginalised in the land of their birth” (Pityana 1999: 143). This condemnation and marginalisation of African belief systems, argues Pityana, gave birth to “the dehumanisation of the conquered African subjects”.

Long after colonialism was dismantled and Africans gained independence, African belief systems continue to be on the receiving end, as evidenced by Bullard’s article. Against this background, Nhlapho (2000: 143) observes that “with the possible exception of a few scholars to whom a deep understanding of the African value system seems to be important, much of the condemnation appears to come from people with little real understanding of African culture and, sadly, with no intention of attaining such understanding”.

In this article it is argued that including African culture in the curricula of journalism schools in Africa could help to liberate journalists writing about Africa and African values. It will help journalists covering Africa and Africans do their job with a sense of cultural sensitivity. Cultural sensitivity refers to “familiarity with the historical and cultural context of another society and implies not only awareness but also respect, if not empathy, for other ways of life” (Starck & Villanueva 1993: 19). By referring to works of established journalists the author will demonstrate that journalists have perpetuated colonial prejudice, albeit inadvertently. This they have done through cultural framing, which will be defined below. E-mail interviews were conducted with the heads of departments or co-ordinators of African institutions that offer journalism courses. The enquiry was about whether or not African culture as a module was offered to their journalism students. The institutions consulted were the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (South Africa); Makerere University (Uganda); Rhodes University (South Africa); Tshwane University of Technology (South Africa) and the University of Nairobi (Kenya).

CULTURAL FRAMING AND JOURNALISM EDUCATION

Having noted that “culture” is one of those concepts that has become “notoriously difficult to define” Starck and Villanueva (1993: 6) refer to culture as encompassing language, social act, history, art, religion, ritual, knowledge, experience, technology, etc. Framing involves persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, selection, emphasis and exclusion (Starck & Villanueva 1993: 7). Cultural framing, therefore, refers to the extent to which journalists, consciously or unconsciously, present news to their audiences in a manner determined by their own frame of reference.

During the course of Starck and Villanueva's (1993: 23) research, which included interviews with several foreign correspondents, the respondents "criticised journalism education for neglecting to include in the curriculum courses that deal with cultural sensitivity". One of the respondents emphasised the need to teach such courses at colleges. In the absence of cultural education about the countries in and on which foreign correspondents report, there is a risk that journalists may give a skewed picture since they construct a "window on the world" (Louw 2004). Cultural education for foreign correspondents is crucial because, as Starck and Villanueva (1993: 9) observe, "foreign correspondents ... are not merely communicators of news but interpreters of other cultures". When they enter into foreign environments, they misread situations of those places because, as Louw (2004: 154) notes, "journalists carry their cultural biases with them when reporting on foreign contexts".

Exchange programmes should enable journalism students from outside the African continent to study African cultures in journalism departments. That is because, as Hawk (2002: 163) notes, with deadlines, travel and technological obstacles, foreign correspondents in Africa have little time for studying culture or reflecting on the consequences of their work. If journalists were culturally educated, more specifically on the environments about which they report, harm could be avoided or minimised.

Advocating the importance of cultural education for journalists, Claassen (2001: 10) notes that a common problem for the media when dealing with the public is the fact that journalists today are compelled to work in cultural environments where their cultural framework of reference lacks certain absolute necessities to be able to report news. The reporting on African cultural issues by white South African journalists is a case in point.

Specifically addressing a South African case, Claassen observes that one of the lacunae for white journalists in South Africa has been their general inability to speak indigenous African languages. The other, which is relevant for this article, is their ignorance of African cultural practices. It is for this reason that white South African journalism students need to be exposed to African cultural education in journalism. But this education should not be limited to white South African journalism students. Black South African journalism students need this education just as much as their white counterparts do. That is because, as Dandala (1996: 77) observes, "Africans themselves have, on a large scale, become alienated from their own roots":

Many have chosen to look down on their unique heritage in their quest to be integrated in western patterns. But to be fair, some have not had an opportunity to acquaint themselves with their roots, even if they wanted to; others were frightened off their heritage by apartheid and the corrupted interpretations of African heritage that were meant to deny Africans a right to share in the global innovations of human development (Dandala 1996: 77).

A critical goal of journalism education is to instil in students a sense of social responsibility for all groups that make up the society (Bramlett-Solomon 1989: 26). If

this goal is to be realised, Bramlett-Solomon points out that journalism students should be exposed to reporting approaches that recognise the experiences of all racial groups in societies. Cultural education is crucial for all journalists whether they operate on an intercultural or intra-cultural level. That is because journalists are “human bridges” (Kexiong, as cited in Starck & Villanueva 1993: 12). Being a “human bridge” for a journalist means “to enable the traffic of thought and ideas to cross barriers and circulate both ways”.

In a significant observation made by Sims (1981: 6), who taught a course called “Reporting cultures” at the University of Massachusetts, he noted that “cultural reporting, as opposed to feature writing, stresses the participant’s interpretations of events rather than the reporter’s”. In the Massachusetts course, students were taught the importance of not relying on their own observations about social groups, but to double-check the validity of those impressions with the people they interviewed. That is because, as Eason (1981: 48), who taught cultural reporting at the University of Wisconsin, noted, “it is quite easy to interpret (other people’s) culture in terms of what one expects to find, one’s own stereotypes, than in terms of the way the social actors reveal and understand their culture”. To prevent that, students at Massachusetts were taught the value of overcoming the “sense of self-assurance by which we assume we know all about other cultures” (Sims 1981: 47).

Africa inherited journalism and journalism ethics from the West (Mwaura 1994: 95). The journalism and journalism ethics bequeathed to Africa was not value-neutral. As Kasoma (1994: 29) observes, “the journalism ethical values that Europeans and Americans brought to Africa were embedded in their long cultural history and tradition”. In adopting journalism from the West, Kasoma (1994: xv) notes that little was done to adapt journalism to the African situation. Instead “many African journalists (sought to) emulate Western journalists” (Mwaura 1994: 95).

Mogekwu (2005: 15) has also observed that a “cursory look at the different curricula of various media programmes on the continent gives the impression that many African institutions are striving to produce clones of American or western journalists in most parts of Africa”.

In their responses to the enquiry on whether African culture is taught as a stand-alone course in journalism, all five the institutions said that they do not offer African culture as a separate module though issues pertaining to African identities are addressed in their curricula (Diederichs 2008; Johaar 2008; Lugalambi 2008; Strelitz 2008; Kiai 2008). The School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Nairobi in Kenya and the Department of Mass Communication at Makerere University in Uganda indicated that they were, in 2008, engaged in a review of their curricula and intended to strengthen and emphasise the component of African culture in journalism studies (Lugalambi 2008; Kiai 2008).

As mentioned earlier, the need for journalists to be taught to understand other cultures is particularly significant for journalists who cover the African continent. That is

because, for example, they would appreciate the names which Africans use for their rituals and beliefs and not use names that are offensive such as “animism” or “ancestor worship” whose connotations distort African cultural practices, as will be discussed below.

“ANIMISM” AND “ANCESTOR WORSHIP” AS CULTURAL FRAME

A number of commentators who reflected on Bullard’s article echoed one sentiment: they asserted that his article exhibited racism towards black people (Harber 2008: 11; Malala 2008: 29; Mangcu 2008: 7). Echoing the racist charge, the then Minister of Arts and Culture in South Africa, Dr Pallo Jordan, noted that he “was quite alarmed for a very long time that Bullard could write like that in a newspaper edited by an African” (Ngalwa 2008: 1). To his credit, following his firing and criticism levelled against him, Bullard (2008b: 9) wrote an opinion piece in the *Business Day* newspaper in which he expressed his “sincere and heartfelt apologies to those who were offended”. In particular, Bullard apologised for what his critics referred to as his “cavalier disregard for ancestor worship”. While offering this sincere apology, Bullard committed another offence, that is, referring to African traditional religion as “ancestor worship”. But Bullard should not be blamed for the usage of this word. Remnants of colonial education should be held responsible.

It was the colonial missionaries who distorted the Africans’ world view by inventing the term “ancestor worship” (Ntuli 1999: 191). Prior to their encounter with the universal religions, namely Christianity and Islam, Africans “have always believed in one and only one God whose many aspects are seen in the many aspects of nature...” (Kamalu 1990: 9). They worshipped God, not their ancestors. Africans believed that things and beings were created out of water by the One “who was not created, who has neither father nor mother” (Diop 1991: 310). Africans knew that departed ancestors were not worshipped and that they could scold their ancestor-spirits when perceived not to be doing right and praised when doing well (Ntuli 1999: 192). Missionaries confused “ancestor reverence” with “ancestor worship” (Mqhayi 1981: 64; Williams 1987: 231). The former concept means that Africans performed rituals in honour of their departed ancestors, and also spoke to them to intercede on their behalf to God, whilst the latter means worshipping God. Williams (1987: 230) explains:

When food was periodically placed at the graves, nobody expected the ancestral spirits to eat it (only fools outside Africa allege that they did). What they were doing was a demonstration that the communal spirit of sharing was being maintained. Furthermore, if the ancestors approved their behaviour, they were in a position to intercede on their behalf with the deities in times of crisis.

These explanations by African scholars have, regrettably, been outlived by colonial legacy and remain alive in journalistic discourse.

In his book *The shackled continent*, Robert Guest, a British journalist, and the Africa editor of *The Economist*, notes that Nigeria is “split between Muslims in the north and

Christians and *animists* (this author's italics) in the south" (2004: 18). Unlike many foreign correspondents who could be dismissed as "parachute journalists" in Africa, Guest lived on the continent for three years while reporting on political issues. Yet, he used the word "animism" to refer to African traditional religion.

According to Ntuli (1999: 191) animism is one of the terms invented by colonial missionaries, which implies that Africans "worship nature" in the same way that African traditional religion is misrepresented as "ancestor worship". Mutwa (1996: 13) observes that in the Africa of old, Africans did not regard themselves as "superior to animals, the trees, and the fishes and the birds" but as "part of all these living things". Far from believing that human beings were superior, Mutwa (1996: *ibid.*) says Africans believed that humans "were the weakest of the creatures that God created. This feeling of weakness instilled in our souls a deep dependence upon the living nature around us. Africans believed that human beings could not exist without animals, birds and fishes, or the greenery that whispers all around us."

Rukuni (2007:117) observes, "African wisdom tells us that all God's creations are intelligent and therefore are sacred". It is against this background that Kamalu (1990: 25) notes that it is "unfortunate that foreign writers through great ignorance have failed to understand this great religious insight of our peoples, and have often ridiculed it or naively presented it as 'nature worship' or 'animism'".

But it is not just foreign correspondents who get it wrong – so do journalists born and bred in Africa. Allister Sparks, born and educated in the Eastern Cape Province, employs the term "animism" in reference to African traditional religion. In his book *Beyond the miracle – Inside the new South Africa*, Sparks (2003: 50), speaking of "animism," describes it as an activity "in which people of the same tribe, or from the same village, can bond together and find solace through the intercession of their ancestors buried back home". Reading through both Guest's and Sparks' books, one did not get a sense of hostility or contempt towards African traditional religion. In fact, both writers express admiration about African families' networks. Paying tribute to these networks, Sparks (2003: 50) observes that people "stand by one another, help one another, share what little they have". For his part, Guest (2004: 98) notes that not even Aids can break the extended African family.

The observation on Sparks' and Guest's books applies to Mark Gevisser's biography of former South African president Thabo Mbeki's biography, *Thabo Mbeki: The dream deferred*. While one cannot fail to notice Gevisser's great effort and keenness to learn about African traditional practices, to the extent of using isiXhosa words to describe them, albeit with misspellings, Gevisser (2007: 51) falls into the trap of using the term "animism" to refer to African traditional religion: "In Mpukane to the south and Mangoloaneng to the north, virtually the entire community had become Christian during the eras of Skelewu Mbeki and Jacane Moerane. At Mbewuleni, however, most remained tied to traditional authority and *animist* (this author's italics) religion."

The problem here is that even though Sparks, Guest and Gevisser write admiringly about Africans' social systems, their cultural framing has the unintended effect of damaging the African image. To argue that Guest could be excused on the basis of being British, and Sparks and Gevisser on the basis of being white South Africans only partly explains the problem. In a recent *Sunday Times* news report (Mahlangu, Mkhabela & Harper 2007: 10) authored by one white and two black South African journalists, former Gauteng premier Mathole Motshekga was profiled as an "outspoken animist".

CONCLUSION

This article sought to argue that some African cultural practices are misrepresented both abroad and in Africa, this being done by both foreign correspondents covering Africa and African journalists themselves. Reference to journalistic accounts in the forms of books and newspaper reporting were cited to illustrate this point. It was established that the works referred to in this article were examples of the ignorance demonstrated by the journalists covering Africa. The author argued that the inaccurate representation of Africans was not only a result of malice in some cases, but that of genuine ignorance. But genuine as this ignorance might have been, it betrayed – even if unintended – journalism's ethical values. For journalists to have a sense of right and wrong about different cultures they need to be exposed to the kind of journalism education that would enable them to meet the requirements of ethical journalism: accuracy, fairness, balance and promoting understanding. This article recommends that African schools of journalism should address this gap as a matter of urgency.

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