ON THE ORIGIN OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS TONE IN NIGERIAN MEDIA: RE-EXAMINATION OF ÌWÉ ÌRÒHÌN PERIOD TO 1914

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Abstract
In 1914, the Northern Protectorate, the Southern Protectorate and Lagos colony were merged together to form what is known today as Nigeria in an exercise known as amalgamation. The 53 year period that predated that event beginning from 1859 saw the establishment of the impetus that gave birth to Nigerian media of mass communication. This paper re-examines the notion that Europeans who were the custodians of the first impetus for the Nigerian media of mass communication set the tribal tone which left us with the legacy of the current media divides that oftentimes contribute in heating the polity. The paper examines the actual contributions of those 53 years of media activities in the formation of the current media divides. Questions as to whether or not setting tribal tone in Nigerian media by Europeans was a premeditated one is carefully considered. The paper argues that the evidence as to the indictment of Europeans in this respect is far from complete or conclusive. In the few cases where the evidence seems clear, other factors such as personal interest often over rides the idea of promoting a broad agenda by the custodians of the then media. The paper therefore, recommends re-examining and challenging the content and context of the nationalist press between 1914 and 1960 for possible new conclusions.

Key Words: Nigerian press, media, ethnic, tribal, religious tone, sectionalism, colonialism

Introduction
Nigerian Media historians generally consider the establishment of Ìwé Ìròhìn a Yoruba language newspaper in 1859, the beginning of the history of Nigerian media of Mass Communication. The notion that becomes very basic while teaching the history of Nigerian media in the Nigerian universities is the fact that Europeans set the first tribal and regional tone in the earliest established media outlets (Egbon, 2001, Okidu, 2011) which left us with the current media divides. Often cited as example are the terminologies that are crafted to help express this reality. These include Lagos-Ibadan axis Newspapers, Some section of the press, Mgabi-mgabi¹ newspapers and the likes (Yusuf, 2011).

What is quite disturbing about this assumption is the fact that Nigeria as a political entity was not born until 1914. Simply put, the media activity that gave birth to Nigerian media of mass communication was 53 years older than the nation state known today as Nigeria. To assume the

¹ It is a local language (Yoruba) phrase meaning complain. It is coined to classify the southern Nigerian press characterized for their criticism of the government mostly headed by northern Nigerian figures.
interconnectivity between that activity and today’s media divides is to assume a sense of premeditated conspiracy by Europeans before their arrival to the African soil.

**Research Methodology**

In the course of this research, qualitative research method is adopted. The paper applies Case Study research method to investigate the process of the historical origin of ethno-religious tendencies of the Nigerian press. However, the result serves as a pointer to the direction the phenomenon under study came from as well as the directions that require further research.

**Research hypothesis**

The European settlers established and set the first tribal tone to the earliest Nigerian press.

**Limitation of the work:**

The scope of this work is the 53 years of media activities that predated the amalgamation of the different regions around Niger area which culminated into the birth of the nation known as Nigeria. The paper focuses on the extent of the involvement of Europeans in the Nigerian media activities and their influence in creating the current media divides along ethnic and religious lines. Naturally, the paper focuses attention on print media rather than electronic which has no existence in the country at the time under review.

**Social responsibility: the theoretical framework**

This paper examines the origin of ethno-religious tone in the Nigerian media from the background of Social Responsibility theory. This theory originated from the Robert Hutchins commission of 1947. Established in 1942 by the publisher Henry Luce and reported in 1947, the main aim of the commission was to investigate the circumstances of failure and successes of the press of the United States. Since the attainment of the press freedom, the work of the commission was the first time the need for government intervention to the press activities was contemplated (Yusuf, 2011).

Generally speaking, the report of the commission made a significant contribution to media theorization process. Social Responsibility Theory opened up a new line of enquiry on the extent to which or not the media was responsible to its host community. In the words of Yusuf (2010):

> For the first time in the history of the media, the public interest was shifted from the notion of free press to that of adequate press; the one which is responsible and whose work is to provide full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s event in a context which gives them meaning and benefits the society (Yusuf, 2010).

**Literature review: the anatomy of ethno-religious tone in Nigerian press**

Nigerian political communication study has necessarily includes the theme media bias in Nigerian media coverage. Media coverage bias in Nigeria has touched on so many issues that have to do with the wellbeing of the country as a nation. More obviously, ethnic and religious biases in media coverage are more devastating and can be compared only to ownership and control under the military junta in the history of media coverage in Nigeria.

In his seminal work, “One State Many Nations: Media Portrayal of Multiple Identities,” Okidu (2011) did a good job paraphrasing through the narrations with graphic explanations of tribal and ethnic tone in the early days of media activity in Nigeria. With special emphasis on Yoruba and Igbo ethnic groups who were the earliest actors in the media industry, vituperative and derogatory remarks about either of the ethnic groups or their individual members were full of the pages of
newspapers representing the ethnic groups, right from the pre-independence days. In the description of such a situation, Okidu (2011) explains that:

The political animosity which developed between the Yoruba and Igbo... saw the media taking sides with their various ethnic groups. On the pages of West African Pilot, the leaders of the Egbe Omo Odudua, a Pan-Yoruba organization, were individually and severally abused and castigated, using words that were impudent, intemperate and thunderous. Adeyemo Alakija, the President of the organization, became a target of bitter crude and vulgar personal insults. For example, he was dubbed “Nigeria’s enemy number one,” “a negrophobist, a political eunuch forever doomed for political sterility”. The leaders of the Egbe were described as being “morally derelict, socially descript, politically frustrated and intellectually bankrupt”. The Egbe itself was described as “the bane of our age”. It was labelled “a nihilist”, a “totalitarian”, “a fascist Pakistani organisation” as well as “dirty exhibition of egocentric stupidity, ethno centric arrogance (Okidu, 2011: p.55 in Oso & Pate eds, 2011).

Naturally, such derogatory expositions will not go unchecked by the members of Yoruba ethnic group. The Star of Oduduwa retaliated with similar derogatory remarks to the then leader of the Igbo people, Mr. Nnamdi Azikwe by describing him as “chief danger” to the unity of Nigeria. He was also named the “Don Quixote” of Nigerian politics and “counterfeit messiah” whose temperament was ridiculously unsuitable for the position he was aspiring (Arifalo, 2001, as quoted in Okidu, 2011). Olayiwola (1991) provides an insight into the fabrics of this sentiment. Unlike Okidu (2011), Olayiwola (1991) focuses attention on the religious manifestations of this sentiment in Nigerian press. In this respect, he has to say:

Just as the voting trend in the elections took on a 'strong ethnic coloration', much of the country's press reflected the same pigmentation in their reports and comments. Religious affiliation has also been a very serious problem for communication and politics in Nigeria. Issues that affect Muslims – the Shari'ah, the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the holy pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina (Haji), and the question of Muslim rights in the Constitution - are often treated with levity, derision and contempt by the media, most of which were dominated by Christians. In the same vein, those Nigerian media which have Muslims on their editorial boards retaliate by being critical of anything Christian. Religious crises were becoming so rampant in the country that the Federal Government had to set up a Religious Advisory Council. Nigeria's Muslims constitute the largest Muslim community in sub-Saharan Africa.......Although they are in a majority, the country since independence has been governed by its rulers.... as if it were a non-Muslim country. The symbols and trappings of state, the style of diplomacy, the direction of foreign policy, the political, legal, economic and education systems, the structures of the working week, are all seen to be based on a western, secular model.”

Olayiwola is certainly not the only scholar who holds such opinion. You will equally encounter such a graphic description of media bias and ethno-religious media tone in the works of media scholars from different parts of the country. For the fact that Nigerian press is a free one as against being responsible to a large extent, the trend continues unchecked despite it is devastating negative effect on the national unity. It is becoming more obvious that the loyalty of at least, the newspapers owners is more to the sectional identities rather than the nation as a whole. In Malam (2006), you will read for example:

Since independence but particularly from 1970s, the media have come to constitute one of the major platforms for the propagation of religious ideologies and identity representations.
The media tend to have elevated the religious conflict discourse which sometimes exacerbates tension at different levels in the society (Malam, 2006:p.94-95).

The very cardinal question that remains central to the thesis of this paper is to find out where this idea of using media for ethno-religious sentiment came from, when and how the idea became deeply rooted into the body of the Nigerian media of mass communication.

A cursory survey to the works of indigenous scholars of Nigerian press reveals that there is semi-consensus about the fact that Europeans are responsible for this ethno-religious and sectional tone in today's Nigerian press. As some scholars of Nigerian media insinuate a deliberate attempt by the Europeans settlers who were the custodians of the earliest media establishments to set the Nigerian tribes and ethno-religious groups against one another for their political and economic gains, others accuse them of fashioning out the media landscape in line with the regional divisions of the country namely Northern Protectorate, Southern Protectorate and Lagos Colony for the same purpose. In Malam (2006), we read such insinuations by emphasizing the Western oriented news worthiness such as sensationalism which may not align to the Nigerian sensitive multiethnic culture as responsible for the lack of responsibility of the Nigerian press towards the multiplicity of religious and ethnic groups:

In Western... oriented media such as Nigeria’s, journalist are said to practice value exclusion. This kind of journalism attempts to define and select news in accordance with its conformity to some specified news worthiness criteria termed news values. These...include conflict drama/action [and] sensationalism... [T]he most apparently applied news values...seem to be conflict/drama (Malam, 2006:p.95-96).

This opinion although not very explicit for not directing the blame to a particular person, newspaper or media activity, is very radical by indicting the ideology based on which the media activities are practised. From this perspective, no Western media will escape the blame for being the basis of the media practice in Nigeria. In a rather more blatant and more radical perspective, Nigerian scholars would have us believe the existence of a broad agenda at work which crowned with the media activity arrived at the calculated result of ethno-religious conflict tone in the Nigerian media. As Egbon (2006), set out to explain the situation, he sounds like a whistle blower against a conspiracy theory. In his words:

The major forces operative in Nigeria’s disharmony could be seen as stemming from unequal rate of development of the component ethnic groups and between the different regions with regard to economic development, cultural values and above all Western Education introduced by colonial powers... And mutually reinforcing these tensions were geographical, economic, political and religious differences that were created at the beginning of the twentieth century by British colonial administration which after creating Nigeria also nurtured its government along divisive ethnic and religious dimensions. The results of this practice in later years cause a lot of upheavals which the country is grappling with to date (Egbon, 2006: p. 51).

Yet, more radical opinions are giving the impression that there is a direct link between the Europeans’ established and operated newspapers and the ethno-religious tone in the modern day Nigerian newspapers. The scholars promoting this opinion would make the “conspiracy” sound more like a fact rather than a theory. To them, it is a grand plan designed from the beginning to the end with the sole aim of dividing the nation along ethno-religious line using newspapers as the primary tool for the job. In this respect, Okidu (2011) would have this to say:
The early mass media in Nigeria were those owned and exclusively operated by the European settlers. These media set the ethnic and/or sectional tone... In the same vein, the pre-colonial identities were not lost on the indigenous newspapers that emerged but were however, more loud on the anti-colonial crusade. While it is agreeable that anti-colonialism was the primary focus of the Nigerian media in this period, to say that the Nigerian media transcended indigenous ethnic and religious sentiment is doubtful (Okidu, 2011: p.53).

Generally speaking, most Nigerian scholars of the media, regardless of the different levels of their radicalism hold the opinion that the earliest European settlers set the bad example of the first ethno-religious tone in the current Nigerian media, the opinion this paper intends to re-examine in the subsequent pages.

Ìwé Ìròhìn to Amalgamation: The Journey Hitherto

About 12 years before the establishment of Ìwé Ìròhìn, the evangelical Church of Calabar in 1847 had executed a project that gave birth to what would become the first printing press in Nigeria under the mentorship of the famous missionary, Hope Waddell (Nwagbara, 2010). This naturally served as the basis upon which newspaper business could thrive. Ìwé Ìròhìn Fun Awon Egba ati Yoruba, a Yoruba language newspaper then arrived in December 3rd, 1859 to declare the stage open for mass media activities in Nigeria (Ismail, 2011; Oso, 2013; Nwagbara, 2010). The paper was established by another missionary Rev. Henry Townsend by name in the city of Abeokuta whose primary aim was missionary. The paper run for eight years from 1859 to 1867 and printed a separate English edition in 1886.

At this point, this paper argues that Ìwé Ìròhìn was more of cultural paper than political. Its involvement in political issues was mostly aiming at personal gains than a mission with a broad agenda as some scholars want to have us believe. Salawu (2004) speaks of Ìwé Ìròhìn as an eight page fortnightly paper with concentration on religious activities, births, deaths and local politics of Abeukuta town. In the accounts of the earliest critics of the paper, the paper had outgrown its primary aims of evangelising, educating and encouraging reading culture among the Egba and Yoruba people, as well as cultural awakening to get involved in the politics of the day concerning the Egbas, the Yorubas and the Europeans themselves. The paper made itself a name for being vanguard of anti-slavery criticisms and advocacy of the diversion of trade from human beings to merchandise. In the words of Oso (2013: p.12):

A close reading of Ìwé Ìròhìn will put a lie to the ecumenical and philanthropic argument advanced for its establishment. The real impact of the Ìwé Ìròhìn was in local politics rather than in evangelism and education. The paper, according to an account, was Townsend's "chief weapon in his ambitious political propaganda and shrewd manoeuvring for power in Egba land". He also used the paper in his involvement in Egba/Lagos politics. This earned him the displeasure of the Lagos colonial governments; thus attempts were made to control it based on the government accusation that it was aggravating problems of foreign policy. (Oso, 2013: p.12)

Although, neither the paper nor Townsend, its proprietor was a perfect example of what a newspaper or ownership should be, it is not making sense reading from the context of events of those days, to accuse the paper of an activity of setting people apart. The evangelical origin of the paper as well as that of the first printing press maybe dismissed as irrelevant in the argument, but this paper also dismisses the circumstances in which the paper died during the 1867 political uprising by the Egba people. This is because the uprising aimed not at Ìwé Ìròhìn in particular, but expelling all Europeans, the struggle of which resulted into destroying the printing press of Townsend’s missionary (Oso, 2013). Clearly, imperfection of Ìwé Ìròhìn and Townsend should be
seen in the latter’s inability to transcend the personal interest of power mongering and financial aggrandizement. The philanthropist inclination of the paper maybe defeated as postulated by Oso (2013), but hardly would conspiracy theory be established as a substitute as postulated by Egbon (2001) and Okidu (2011).

The demise of Ìwé Ìròhìn brought about a breakage in the Nigerian press tradition for the next 13 years. The tradition picked up again in 1880 with the establishment of The Lagos Times edited by Andrew Thomas (Nwagbara, 2010). In the subsequent 34 years that culminated to the amalgamation of 1914, Nigeria witnessed the establishment of about 17 different newspapers (Oso, 2013) with some by the Europeans while others were by the native educated Africans. The ones by the Europeans include The Lagos Observer in 1882, edited by Blackwell Benjamin and The Mirror in 1887, which was started by Adolphus Mark. All the papers that followed did not prove as effective as Ìwé Ìròhìn. Perhaps, the papers that followed were more of reactionary activities, rather than purposeful and well focused activities. They were trying to reemphasize the position of Ìwé Ìròhìn in its approach to issues. By then, the voice of the indigenous educated Nigerians was forming a resistance to the colonial government hence the need of the new newspapers to side with the government, advance the government’s argument and present it to the world. The need became stronger with the growing antagonizing indigenous African voice making their way into Nigeria.

What followed this experience were the natural indigenous efforts to take over Nigerian press. In this regard, Nwagbara (2010) has this to say:

After the establishment of these projects came what could be described as indigenous journalistic efforts that were galvanised by nationalistic consciousness. Nationalistic sentiment and struggle for decolonisation found resonance in the establishment of some newspapers. The first one was The Nigerian Chronicle, which was set up by Johnson Brothers in 1908, while Kukoyi Ajasa inaugurated The Nigerian Pioneer that was bedevilled with Lugardist influence. (Nwagbara, 2010: p.15)

These efforts culminated in the official birth of nationalist activism. The media activities that followed these events helped fought for the independence of Nigeria for about half a century of persistent struggle.

Conclusion

This work has been a search for answers between 1859 and 1914 about the origin of the ethno-religious tone in the media of mass communication in Nigeria. The work has followed closely, the activities of the earliest established newspapers in the area that later became Nigeria, especially the one solely established, run and controlled by Europeans. This has been done with the view of tracing any clue that may indicate an agenda or a grand plan to set the natives against one another along religious and ethnic lines. Ìwé Ìròhìn being the first, the most prominent and with more literature available, is given a lion share in the analysis.

It is established that it is a common practice among Nigerian media researchers regardless of their ethnic group or the part of Nigeria they come from to assume that these earliest communication activities by European settlers set ethno-religious tones in the Nigerian mass communication of today as clearly shown in Olayiwola (1991), Egbon (2001), Malam (2006) and Okidu, (2011).

The analysis of the papers within the period in question revealed gross unethical newspaper dealings which emanated from the overzealous tendency of the papers proprietors to promote their personal interest and betray the purpose for which the papers were established.

But to assume that those early papers by Europeans had set ethno-religious tone in the newspaper activities in Nigeria is either sentimental or at the very least, should be described as
unfounded speculation. There seems no reasonable evidence to support this assumption. This work is of the opinion that the idea might have originated from the description of the BBC diffusion that came much later and then mistakenly, the idea was generalized by the later researchers without going back to the roots of the matter. This can be attested to by the fact that all the works promoting that idea came much later; more than quarter of a century after independence. It would be more reasonable if such criticism is labelled against the Europeans’ newspapers by their antagonist; the indigenous newspapers of the time starting from 1908. This work therefore, recommends researching the subsequent period of media activity, the period that covers the nationalism activity for answers as to the origin of ethno-religious tone in Nigerian media.

References


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