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Media, Crime and Africa's Development Crisis: The Need for Social Reconstruction

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Introduction:

Every society is desirous of development and African societies do not constitute any exception. In spite of the strong history of leadership in early civilisations, Africa over time degenerated to an abysmal level in terms of development, thus, surrendering its leadership to other parts of the globe. The realities of the triangular trade and colonialism speak volumes herein.

It is perhaps common knowledge that the eighteenth century industrial revolution in Europe led to the emergence of the Europeans in the African society with imperialist and capitalist consequences. As Akpan (2004) captures it, the Europeans came to Africa with three "Cs" - implying: Commerce, Christianity and Colonialism. Arguably, while commerce pulled through with ease and succeeded in depreciating the quality of African-made products; Christianity met some form of resistance in some areas; and colonialism coercively took hold of everywhere except Ethiopia and Liberia. Details are chronicled in the aftermath of the Berlin Conference of 1884 and 1885 under the leadership of Otto Von Bismarck. African-based historians summarise this as *the scramble and partition of African States*.

In the 19th Century, African societies developed at their paces (Offiong, 1980). The Europeans, however, saw nothing really good about the structures, institutions, values, systems, and in sum; the culture(s) of African societies. With the contestable seemingly shiny and superior value systems, the Europeans forced the erosion of their African cultures. In the circumstances, Rodney (1990) argues that Europe underdeveloped Africa; Dumont (1988) writes that Africa had a false start; and Fanon(1989) records Africa as the wretched of the earth. All in all, this sordid picture cuts across all facets of the society - including: crime and the media. The result has been the distortion of the African social fabric - hence, Africa's development crisis.

This discourse seeks to juxtapose the media and crime with a view to critically appraising the impact of such relationship on the development of Africa - in this case, the inherent crisis. The rest of this article emphasises the following: conceptualisations, theoretical framework, the need for social reconstruction, and conclusion.

Conceptualisations: here the concepts of crime, development, and the media are highlighted.

Crime

In every society, certain human conducts are in violation of the criminal law of a state, the federal government, or a local jurisdiction that has the power to make such laws (Schmallerger, 1999). This means that without a law that circumscribes a particular form of behaviour, there can be no crime, no matter how deviant or socially repugnant the behviour in focus may be. Put differently, all behaviours made so by law, and acts for which a society provides formally sanctioned punishment constitute crime. Thus, crimes are made so by law (Wrobleski & Hess, 2003). The proof of crime is usually incumbent in establishing the act itself (*actus reus*), and intent to commit crime (*mens rea*). In terms of classification, crime could be

bad in itself (*mala in se*) or bad because it is forbidden (*mala prohibita*).

Crimes come in a variety of types. These include: violent crimes, crimes against property, (Gardner & Anderson 2000), white collar crimes (Neeley, 2000), occupational crimes, cyber crimes (Rusnell, 2001) environmental crimes, organised crimes (Albanese, 2000), hate crimes (Hohler, 1998), ritualistic crimes (Szubin, Jensen, Carl and Gregg, 2000), political crimes, conventional or street crimes, corporate/organisational crimes (Simon, 1996; and Kendall, 1999), social crimes and victimless crimes (Marshall, 1998). Irrespective of the classification, crime is held to be an offence which goes beyond the personal and into the public sphere, breaking prohibitory rules or laws, to which legitimate punishments or sanctions are attached, and which (usually) requires the intervention of a public authority. Marshall (1998) further observes that for crime to be known as such it must come to the notice of, and be processed through an administrative system or enforcement agency. It must be reported and recorded, and may then be part of the criminal statistics; may or may not be investigated; and may or may not result in a court case. In which cases, recorded crime cases are socially constructed, and the non-recorded one becomes hidden. The legal definition of crime is, therefore, not sufficient. Its definition can be influenced by ideas of morality, religious faith, and scientific or logical claims.

Whether recorded or not, the rate of criminal activities are on the rise in Nigeria and, by extension Africa (Odekunle 2008). This rise in rate, this article contends, is induced by the lopsided world information (media) order which places the African continent at the receiving end of crime reportage from the Western world.

Development

Development is one concept which has over the years attracted global attention. It pays attention to questions bordering on poverty, unemployment and inequality (Seers, 1969). It is a multi-dimensional process which involves quantitative and qualitative changes in the structures and institutions of a society. Little wonder Todaro (1981) states that development is a process of improving the quality of all human lives in a society. Put more explicitly, Ake (1996) submits of development as the process by which people create and recreate themselves and their circumstances to realise high(er) levels of civilisations in accordance with their own choices and values. This, Idode (1989) further suggests could

only occur when individuals and societies confront their problems and attempt to solve them and become able to control their environment.

Contributing to the debate, Odekunle (2008) conceptualises of development as the continuous improvement in the quality of live and existence, and which improvement is increasingly and evenly distributed among the overwhelming majority of the population. In addition, there is necessarily the element of sustainability whereby the continuity in the improvement and its increasingly even distribution can be maintained, upheld, and nourished over an appreciable period of time. This is generally anchored and/to which succeeding leaderships of the society are committed.

An attempt at fusing Ake's (1998) and Odekunle's (2008) views presents a vintage value of the concept of development. One could therefore argue that Africa historically had sustainably improved the quality of live at its pace. This was done at the instance of succeeding leaderships - the stories of the Old Ghana, Old Mali, Songhai and Kanem-Bornu empires (Crowther, 1976) are evident. This sustained drive was, however, frustrated upon the interruption by European interests which erased the africanness in Africa and Africans then opted for Europeanisation. This process of Europeanisation has been greatly pivoted by the communications media.

Crime/Media Nexus

Much of what is known about crime comes from the media (Wrobleski and Hess, 2003). Ordinarily, the relative infrequency of violent crime in society increases its newsworthiness. This informs the position that crime news checks the rare crime event and turns it into the common crime image (Lawrence, 2000). In another study, Gest (2001) contends that the media have contributed to the failure of state crime programmes by headlining lurid crimes that simultaneously panic the public and encourage politicians to offer another round of quick-fix interventions as solutions.

Added to this scenario is the copycat effect which are attributed to films. Scenes in movies may not necessarily advocate crimes, but one cannot totally ignore the fact that the criminally minded may recklessly choose to imitate criminal acts (*USA Today*, 1993). This is not limited to the broadcast media. The print media are also culpable. Lichter and Lichter (1983) submit that the media weigh the crime information they receive in terms of newsworthiness and they selectively report. The resulting "reality" is far from the truth. Crime worthiness suggests violence, greed, and corrupt people picking on victims all with exceptional superlatives. The image

projected becomes more distorted. And at best, crimes are sensational, and the criminals are only brought to justice because exceptionally talented police, tenacious lawyers, wily private eyes were involved (Barlow, 1995). Sadly, the copycat syndrome is more successful in the negative.

In the light of the above, Ferrell (2000) holds that while the media have emphasised crime and justice in their content, there have been regular attempts to criminalise popular media and to define the social effects of arts, music, and visual media as criminogenic. While acknowledging that the relationship between crime and the media is complicated, Surrette (1998) submits that crime is embedded in larger historical and social forces and phenomena, and the media are only one component of a larger symbolic information system that creates and distributes social knowledge about the world. Granted that the media constitute just one of the factors, they occupy a prime position because they dominate the mental life of the modern world. This is made possible by the "mass" status of the media which involves sharing mass messages from mass sources in mass ways to mass audiences, often to make mass money (Marshall, 1998).

Finally, if reality is a collective hunch and the components of the mass media form a popular culture web that ensnare everyone, then media influence reaches even those who are neither exposed to broadcast nor published messages (DeFleur and Dennis, 1995). Social constructionism, thus, becomes a logical explanation.

The preponderance of Western styled media has undoubtedly negated African virtues. This arguably gave rise to the sense in the development media theory which seeks to promote indigenisation and local action in the global context. The structure of the present world information order, however, proves very unbearable on the African structure. Hence, the fallacious ideas in modernisation, westernisation and coalesced have amalgamated into a strong discouragement for Africa's development.

Expressed in crime news reportage, crime and violent films, as well as other uncensored projections, the media have so effected a social construction of crime in such a way that crime which is normally secret and hidden is now in the full glore of media reportage. While this paper maintains that social aggression is not necessarily criminal, it believes that the media have negative effects on aggressive behavior, violence and crime. In this light, W. I. Thomas, writing in *American Magazine* states: "the condition of morality ... in a community depends on the prevailing copies of the newspaper (mass media). People are profoundly influenced by whatever is persistently brought to their attention ... advertising crime, vices, and vulgarity on a scale unheard of before in the annals of history has the same effect - it increases crime ... enormously."

Television-Aggression researches have affirmed this (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1963); Henningan, Heath, Wharton, Del Rosario, Cook, and Calder (1982). In sum, the very nature and reality of copycat crime attest to this (Perez - Pena, 1995). The media could also serve as a cure for crime. However, since bad news makes good news, media anticrime efforts are hardly placed ahead of the perpetrating efforts. Thus, while the media expose Africans to crime scenes (from which criminally-minded Africans imitate), there is no corresponding institutional preparedness to combat crime actively, proactively, and retroactively. Here in lies need for social reconstruction.

Theory and Method

In probing the problems of sociology of knowledge, Scheler (1980) holds that social constructionism takes as a point of departure the social basis of all human knowledge. Knowledge is necessarily conditioned by the structure of society and the social conditions that at least partly determine what constitute knowledge by a particular group. Thus, Stewart and Mickunas (1994) submit that understanding of the world is sought by studying its shared meaning.

From the foregoing, this discourse appreciates the cultural norms theory which holds that though with selective presentation and tendentious emphasis on certain themes and issues, the mass media create the impression among the audience that such themes are part of the structure or clearly defined cultural norms of the society. This is a semblance of the Agenda-Setting theory. In this case, impressionable members of the public tend to pattern their own behaviour along the lines of such media presentations. This article acknowledges that: on the one hand, the mass media tend to escalate negative consequences; but also inherent in the mass media on the other hand, is the experiential value of potential benefits (Folarin, 1998).

As a Minneapolis Police Officer in the dearth of newspapers for a few months, McLuhan (1964, p. 205) in Folarin (1998, p. 69) states: "... sure I miss the news, but so far as my job goes, I hope the papers never come back. There is less crime around without a newspaper to pass around the ideas." Thus, much as the media have powers for the good; they also possess enormous potentials for evil.

This article argues that the media (in the light of the present world information order) is less given to the promotion of African values and seeking solution to its development crisis. Rather, they tend to be more disposed to distorting the very social fabric of Africa.

It should be noted that secondary data, observation, and content analysis were, in the main, the methodological pivots for this work.

The Need for Social Reconstruction

African values emphasise hard work, commitment, dedication, love, and community spirit. The Western media are imperialistic and capitalistic and portray Western values of materialism, individualism, commercialism, consumerism, and hedonism which tend to erode African virtues. Africa's development crisis stems from this. Therefore, to help stem the tide, the following are proffered:

I.   Crime should be less constructed by the media. Rather, the anticrime efforts of institutions should be emphasized. Such efforts include: offender deterrence, victimisation reduction, and participation programmes.

ii.   The criminal justice system should be reconstructed. Here, surveillance and law enforcement programmes should be emphasised by the media.

iii.   There should be a stronger use of media technology by the judiciary system by presenting physical evidence and testimonies as permanent records.

iv.   Legislation should be fashioned towards the enhancement of the process of re-africanisation - the re-establishment of the virtues earlier enumerated.

v.   Finally, there is need for an African philosophy. A successfully evolved African philosophy would help dissipate the overbearing effects of Western culture. This would be achieved by imbibing the virtues of development media theory.

These would, undoubtedly, effect the requisite social reconstruction of the media/crime relations. It would, by extension, reenact the African social structure - roles, status, and institutions, and ultimately engender its development strides - hence, a solution to Africa's development crisis.

Conclusion

This article has acknowledged that Africa is experiencing development crisis. Blaming Africa's development crisis on Western interruption and Africa's unsifted embrace of Western culture, this discourse contends that with the help of the media, the Westernisation of Africa had never been more complete. This has inescapably taken its negative toll on the crime situation in Africa, hence the deepening of Africa's development crisis.

In order to mitigate the situation, this article recommends the reduction in the portrayal of crime by the media by way of giving more prominence to anticrime efforts; the reconstruction of the criminal justice system by the media; pro-African legislation that would enhance the process of re-Africanisation; as well as the need for an African philosophy which would help in minifying Western culture. Though Africa has had its fair share of crime, the imperialist Western media have aggravated this problem as crime-fighting capabilities do not correspond with media-aided criminal learning. This has worsened Africa's development crisis and the way forward is the social reconstruction of crime by the media as pivoted by the evolving of an African philosophy.

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