

REMINISCENCES OF WESTERN NIGERIAN
TELEVISION: 60 YEARS AFTER

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It was not always like this. Nigerians were not always at home, watching over South African-owned DSTV or GOTV so many television stations from all-over the world. Nigeria had not always had to bother about the media imperialism and cultural colonialism associated with the so many foreign TV channels over which Nigerian Governments or even parents have no control. It has not been the pattern for Nigeria's air waves to be dominated by so much nudity, raw sex and debased moral values that characterize the much-hyped "Big Brother".

There was a time Government could prohibit the relay of BBC News on Nigerian radio stations. There was a time Nigerian TV stations-debated whether they should broadcast SESAME STREET. The TV stations were worried that a continuous exposure of Nigerian Youths to this programme would lead to cultural debasement because of exposure to foreign values and culture. They were afraid that the independence fought for and got could be lost in through media imperialism and cultural domination that comes through the TV Antenna. Those were day-long ago and far away.

These days Nigerians have unfettered access, and unrestricted exposure to the foreign radio and TV channels through South Africa's DSTV, GOTV or even the handsets. Nobody cares any longer about this continuous exposure to foreign cultures and values. Nobody cares of the dangerous inherent in this new media imperialism. Even if some people care, there is nothing any one can do about it. Nigeria has gone the whole length from exclusive ownership of TV stations by Federal Government, to concurrent ownership by State Governments now to full privatization that has brought ownership by private companies, licensed by National Broadcasting Commission, through a process that is opaque and very open to political manipulation. Many people would have preferred the process used by Independent Broadcasting Authority or Canadian Broadcasting Commission.

They would have loved that available frequencies are publicly advertised. This will allow every one interested to participate in a competitive bidding process. After a thorough screening, all the bidders would face a public forum of stakeholders where they would present their proposals that will indicate programme content, financing base, management structure and ownership structure.

What do we have? A private confidential processing by NBC for the approval of the President. Because of the opaque nature of the process, nobody knows who owns the stations, their financial and moral capacity, the programming and news contents. Nobody cares about viability of the stations as the broadcasting landscape gets filled beyond saturation level. Licences are issued as rewards for political activism or because of personal contacts and influence. The result is that some people have many licences in their pockets to sell. There are more stations than the market can support. The licences are based on rigid limits of mast height, transmitter power etc that do not recognize varying population distribution, varying economic abilities etc. An opaque process allows the Nigerian factor to flourish very well.

The present broadcasting ownership includes a broad spectrum of the good, the bad and the ugly. Many Nigerians would like to see a reform of this process to ensure that right things are done, right people gets the licences in the right locations.

Let us go to how the whole story all started. After all this is a lecture about reminiscences of WNTV. But then you cannot talk of WNTV, without a brief excursion into the early days of Radio in Nigeria. After all, many of the staff that were first recruited by WNTV came from Radio.

Radio broadcasting was introduced into Nigeria in 1933 when the Nigerian Rediffusion Service relayed and transmitted to Nigerian audiences,

programmes of the overseas service of the BBC, London mainly music and news, for a few hours a day. Nigeria Broadcast Service came into being on April 1, 1951, as part of Department of Telecommunications when Michael Olumide made the opening broadcast from Tugwell House on the Marina in Lagos. The broadcasting prodigy Christopher Emden used to single-handedly translate the news in English into the three major Nigerian languages of Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba which he read one after the other. The expatriate directors in charge of affairs were led by the Director-General Tom Chalmers. The others were Major J. Allen, Norman England, and Mr. Briggs clearly, it was from the BBC that Nigeria inherited its sound Broadcasting through Radio Distribution Services. The Government invited a company, Broadcast Relay Services (Overseas) from London to establish in Nigeria wired transmission services (with a local partnership). It was granted a license to operate for 15 years in Western Nigeria and Lagos.

A subsidiary was eventually formed and registered as Rediffusion (Nigeria) Ltd. The Government of Nigeria ratified the agreement on July 1, 1952. This was what gave birth to Rediffusion boxes erected in almost every home, particularly in Ibadan and for which you paid a rental fee of 5 shillings per month at the initial stage. These Rediffusion boxes were relaying the programme of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service.

The first set of Nigerian managers and directors included Malam Donli, Olumide Osakwe, Mr. G. Okoh, Mr. Olufowote, Engineer DMT Oke, Canon Yinka Olumide, Mr. Joe Atuona and Omoleye Fasina who was the Secretary to the Corporation.

Radio Nigeria operated from three short-wave stations in Kaduna, Enugu and Ibadan. In addition there were provincial studio centres in towns like Sokoto, Zaria, Jos, Ilorin, Ijebu-Ode, Abeokuta, Warri, Onitsha, Calaba, Owerri, Benin, among others. Today there are FM Stations in almost all the

states. Radio Nigeria is the call signal the corporate name was, later the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in 1956 and since 1978 the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria FRCN. The first three Nigerian Directors Generals were Venerable Erasmus Victor Badejo, Dr. Christopher Kolade and Engineer Bishop George Bako.

From 1951, Nigeria ran a regional structure of Western, Eastern and Northern Regions. The Regions were the Federating Units which were effective counter-balance to the centre. The Western Regional government was led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was Premier in the Eastern Region while Sir Ahmadu Bello was Premier of Northern Region. These 3 Premiers ran Governments that were positively pro-people. There was competition among the Regions for rapid economic growth and development. Many Nigerians regard this period as the Golden Era of Nigeria. In this race for excellence, Chief Obafemi Awolowo was the first runner. Obafemi Awolowo was known for his phenomenal contributions to the development of Nigeria. All these strange, new, and unusual contributions have now become the lasting legacy and pride of his family and all Nigerians till today. One of them is The Premier Hotel-Ibadan. It is a brainchild of Chief Obafemi Awolowo.

Sixty years ago this year, Television was introduced to Nigeria, indeed Africa on Saturday night October 31, 1959, audiovisual signals beamed forth from the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV) located at Agodi, Ibadan. The Western Region Government led by the Premier Chief Obafemi Awolowo with Chief Anthony Enahoro as his Minister of Information established the very first Television Station in Nigeria and Africa.

Another phenomenal creation was the Western Region Lottery. Other phenomenal innovations of Chief Awolowo which are enduring and which are being copied in various forms today are:

- ❖ Free Education
- ❖ Free Medical Care
- ❖ Establishment of the Cocoa Marketing Board
- ❖ The building of monumental Structures like The Cocoa House, Western House in Lagos, Liberty Stadium
- ❖ Bodija Housing Estate.
- ❖ The codification of the Local Government Law which brought about the Establishment of District and Divisional Councils.
- ❖ Public Cinema outfit for the enlightenment of rural communities.
- ❖ Establishment of Farm Settlements
- ❖ Establishment of First Pilgrim Welfare Board for Muslims in Nigeria
- ❖ Enacting the First Minimum Wage Law in Nigeria.

What was it that brought about the establishment of television in Western Nigeria? What was the situation that triggered off the urgent need for a regional broadcasting outfit? The story is now very well known that a motion for self-government for Nigeria moved by Chief Enahoro was opposed by the NPC from the North. The Action Group declared the Macpherson constitution unworkable. They resigned their membership of the house en-mass and walked out. Governor General Macpherson made a broadcast on the NBS condemning the Action Group. The following day, Chief Awolowo phoned the Director of the NBS that the world want to make a broadcast to correct the aspersions cast on the Action Group, but the NBS refused. Chief Awolowo was denied a right of reply. It became obvious that broadcasting must no longer be on the Federal Exclusive List. In the subsequent constitutional Conference, Chief Awolowo successfully led the campaign for the movement of broadcasting to the concurrent list. It has been so since then, except for the brief period between 1977-1979 when the NTA Decree of 1977 made television an exclusive Federal list, having-taken

over all TV Stations, The 1979 Constitution reverted the situation which and allowed the States to establish their own TV Station.

It was Chief Anthony Enahoro as the West Regional Minister for Information, Home and Midwest Affairs who went on an overseas visit and came into contact with television. On return home he submitted a report which Chief Obafemi Awolowo as Premier accepted and set the machinery in motion for a blue print. The blue-print made provision for setting up a corporation which, with a foreign technical partner, was to establish a company to operate television and radio services for the government and people of Western Nigeria. Government went into partnership with Overseas Rediffusion later known as Rediffusion International for the purpose and the Western Nigerian Government Broadcasting Corporation WNGBC formed the Western Nigeria Radiovision Services Ltd, with the foreign partners.

By the middle of 1959, the building of Television House to accommodate the offices and studio complex at Agodi had started. Advertisements had also been put out for the recruitment of staff from within and outside Nigeria. Among the first set of staff recruited were Anike Agbaje-Williams, John Edyang and Kunle Olasope as the announcers/presenters and Segun Olusola as producer. The pioneer, African technical, or semi-technical, and professional sectors of WNTV included Adebayo Faleti, Dipo Bibilari, who was a Cameraman, Mr. Sam Adegbite, also a Cameraman, and Mr. Teju Oyeleye, an Engineer/Telecine Operator. Mr. Bayo Sanda joined the Film Department early in 1960 having worked with the then Barclays bank (now Union Bank).

Africans were thought to be slow in learning, and because television was relatively new in the world in 1959, even in Europe, and complicated medium the foreign partners thought Africans would never understand its operations. And if they would eventually, they thought, it would take at least

ten years (for the fast learners) or fifteen years (for the slow ones) to learn the language and acquire the technique of television. So they signed an agreement with the Government to hand-over fully to Nigerians after 15 years. When I say they, this means the Company called Overseas Redoffusion, the overseas partners who joined the Western Nigerian Government to establish television. But the Nigerians learnt fast-Editors, Cameramen, Announcers, Producers, Floor Managers, vision Mixers and the lot. Within one month they were conversant with all aspects of film make-up, and the running of a film projector.

In 1959, there were many white faces around. At the head of them all was Mr. Arthur Mathers-an Australian and the first Chief Executive of the first television station in Africa. Mr. Headley Chambers was the station manager and perhaps the next most powerful officer after Mr. Mathers.

Mr. Steve Rhodes became the first African Station Manager when Mr. Chambers left. While Mr. Chambers was in post, one Mr. Archer had been the Lagos Office Manager, as the officer in charge of Commercials and resident in Lagos was then called. When eventually Mr. Archer left, Mr. Steve Rhodes became the Lagos Office Manager.

Mr. Banjo Solaru, later an Advertising Executive, was an Executive producer. Mrs. Agbaje-Williams also became an Executive Producer and was boss to Mr. Ayo Ogunlade (the former Federal Minister for Information) who later became the Controller of Programmes – the highest position in the Programmes Division at that time, under whom Mrs. Agbaje-Williams later worked.

And to talk of the programmes! They were 99% foreign. The films were mainly Cowboys and Old Westerns. Hopalong Cassidy, I Spy, Highway Patrol, Tugboat Annie, Laurel and Hardy, The Goldenberg, The Count of Monte Christo and Robin Hood were some of the films. There were no Yoruba

Programmes at all and there were no local plays. The first Yoruba Programme on Television was introduced in 1962, weekly newsreel called IROHIN ATELEJO.

The first major Nigerian play on Television was My Father's Burden written by Wole Soyinka and in which the late Pa Orland Martins played the leading role in 1960. When local Television plays became occasional, the main actors were Mr. Femi Johnson-the late insurance Magnate, Chief Ayo Ogunlade, Mr. Yinka Lijadu, and Miss Yetunde Esan (later Mrs. Omisade of blessed memory).

With the birth of WNTV – WNBS, Radiovision stations were springing up in leaps and bounds! WNTV was founded in 1959, WNBS was founded in 1960. ENTV-BS Television came into being in 1960. BCNN (the Broadcasting Corporation of Northern Nigeria) was established in 1962. By 1960, there were already 5000 television sets in Nigeria. Radio Rediffusion boxes were installed in almost every home at a token fee. In the early 1960's local programme on WNTV, Ibadan was almost 20% of the total weekly programmes; and this was made up of News, Current Affairs discussions, occasional drama and dances, and children's programmes.

One of the earliest and foremost practitioners of television arts, Mr. Segun Olusola made a deliberate and passionate plea for increased local drama on our television screens. At a symposium at the Kings College, Lagos, on Friday the 10th of July, 1964, Mr. Olusola said, "The knowledge of the city dwellers is not tempered and matured by the wisdom and experience of the village elder. We owe it a duty to ourselves and the next generation to bridge this gap. And we have the means to accomplish it. We have a medium yet unsurpassed in its effectiveness in transmitted information and knowledge, a medium that is not barred by language difficulties".

“Mr. Olusola was not just pleading. He was already part of the decision-making process in Television broadcasting. The authorities made deliberate efforts to improve the standard and increase the number of local programmes on radio and television. Commercial as WNBS was, it was already taking on translations of the news in Edo, Hausa and Yoruba”.

Later Ibo was added. A quarter-hour news-reel in Yoruba (titled Iroyin Atelejo) was introduced on WNTV. After that a half-hour Yoruba magazine (AIYE-LU) followed. By this, the percentage of local programme was increasing in the regular schedules of radio and television.

Added to conscious efforts to increase local programmes which would reflect Nigerian culture on radio and television was the introduction of talent hunts and programme festivals. A talent hunt co-sponsored by the German Airlines (Lufthansa) in Nigeria and WNTV-WNBS, in 1968, resulted in the discovery of Fred Coker and Moses Olaiya Adejumo (alias Baba Sala). The first Television week, a festival which later became an annual affair, was held in 1969, it brought out many budding folk-drama groups. The cultural revival, promotion and perpetuation through radio and television had taken various forms. The first form to note is through LANGUAGE. Through news translations, words which looked extinct and had long been forgotten were recalled or adapted for the use in the bid to find apt local equivalents for foreign expressions. In this way, the renewed use of such disused words as Aare (for President), itage (for stage) and Agunbaniro (for a member of the Youth Corps) which are now famous in our news translations were resuscitated. In this way Christopher Emden (that multi-linguist of a broadcaster) was also able to bring back to life the word “Mogaji” for duke – e.g. Magaji Ilu Edinboro (for the duke of Edingbrugh), Iwo Oorun (West) and Ila Oorun (East).

Television contributions had also been felt in drama. Folk drama then called "Entertainment" which never existed beyond the playgrounds of schools on the eve of Christmas holiday breaks (except perhaps in Lagos) or the walls of a church on festival days, became revived. Akin Ogungbe was the first folk-dramatist on Nigerian Television. But after one play, he vanished and Druo Ladipo, a more agile and evergetic dramatist, came in and dominated the scene with his historical plays and re-enactment of Yoruba myths for nearly two years! Later, Ogunmola joined, and then after a very long time, Oyin Adejobi. Then came a proliferation of several theatre groups of which there are now hundreds of them in the Yoruba speaking states.

Other contributions of Television (WNTV) was the revival of Yoruba Poetry and the promotion of Yoruba social music – Juju, highlife, Apala. Overnight, Yoruba poetry surged into fame and was reabsorbed into our way of life. At marriage, funeral ceremonies and all other forms of social engagements, a poet must be there. It became a mark of prestige, a mark of prestige, a mark of being part of the new civilization. New stars were born Lanrewaju Adepoju, Tubosun Oladapo, Kayode Aremu, and many more. The bringing to radio and television screens of tradition songs and dances resulted in the reappraisal of our popular songs. New values were brought into them, and new stars were created and promoted. WNTV – WNBS helped more than individual ingenuity and talent, in the making of Batile Alake, Haruna Isola, Yusuf Olatunji, Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey and the late I/K. Dairo.

WNTV had an organisation upheaval in 1962. There was a crisis in the Action Group – the ruling party leading a major split. This split and subsequent crisis led to the collapse of AG Government and the emergence of NNDP Government – a government that was not popular with the people. That Government needed WNTV – WNBS as a propaganda tool. That led to a

clash with the Technical Partners – a clash that led to the collapse of the partnership and the withdrawal of foreign partners in 1962. From then, WNTV – WNBS became an appendage of Ministry of Information and a megaphone of the party in power. There was a celebrated incident where the political MD read the press statement from the party as TV Stations News. There was the classic case of 1965 West Regional Elections when the Station broadcast fake results released by the Electoral Agency, which were at variance with the reality on the ground. There was political intimidation and harassment of staff. Some officers were sacked because they smiled / jubilated when the news about the ruling of the Privy Council against the incumbent Government filtered in. No query. No response. Only dismissals on the basis of unproven allegations. Those were the dark years. The audience, the Advertisers and the Advertising Agency because of politicization of its programmes abandoned WNTV.

Then came the coup of January 1966 ushering in the First Military Government. With the termination of the political mess in Western Region, the first professional General Manager was appointed in Jan. 1966. With the appointment of the GM came a thorough professional effort at creating a new image of WNTV, and building a good relationship with the audience.

The new Management restructured the Corporation into six departments – Engineering programmes, News and Current Affairs, Finance Marketing and Administration. The new management shifted emphasis from “to entertain” to “inform and educate” – more in line with the vision of Awolowo, who really wanted to use WNTV to assist the free education programme. Greater emphasis was placed on news and public enlightenment programmes. This policy shift led to an intellectualization process involving mass training of officers to at least Diploma level, mass recruitment of young creative graduates, and increasing per cent of local content to 80% by 1976-77.

The restructuring led to the preparation of scheme of service, staff regulations, station's code of conduct and practice. It led to the introduction of MBO, PPBS, Attitude Surveys and various forms of scientific management principles. It led to the execution of Phase II development plan that led to creation of Asileke, Idominasi and Iju/Oba-Ile transmitting stations, and Jobele, Ejigbo and Efon, Alaye link stations. This extension took WNTV to most parts of the Western states. Don't forget that WNTV had always covered Lagos through Abafon Transmitter. The transmitters and mast/antenna in Agodi, Ibadan had been replaced earlier.

The greatest achievement of the professional management was making WNTV free, independent, and impartial again. The new management cut the umbilical cord tying WNTV to Ministry of Information. They fought for and secured freedom from political manipulation. It began creating a heritage of freedom nurtured by courage, boldness and professionalism. Under Teju Oyeleye WNTV resisted successfully the decision of the Ironsi Military Government to appoint a Military Prefect for the Station. Under Vincent Maduka, WNTV handled matters so professionally that WNTV did not get consumed by the internal politics within the Military when Major K.K. Gagara came calling during the abortive February 1976 coup. Under Yemi Farounbi, then known as NTV Ibadan successfully resisted the directives of the Obasanjo Military Government that the Station's news be vetted by the Military Governor. Even when WNTV was taken over by Muritala – Obasanjo Regime, along with others to form NTA, under Vincent Maduka WNTV fought against the decision. Supported by the Western State Governor, David Jemibewon, and Kwara State Governor George Innih, WNTV wrote many memos on the unreasonableness of the decision in a Federation and the technical inability of aerostart technology upon which the creation of NTA was based to deliver six national channels. WNTV and Maduka were proved right, the aerostart failed. Not one of the balloons flew. The 1979

Constitution decreed by same Obasanjo Regime made Television a concurrent subject restoring the right to own TV stations to the States. Even with this policy, somersault, nobody paid compensation for acquiring WNTV and the others. Nobody apologized for the policy error, and the complete failure of aerostat technology.

Even when WNTV could not abort the acquisition, it still advised on how best to operate NTA with 2 channels. The first channel was suggested to be like BBC – centrally produced but nationally receivable. The second channel to be like then UK's ITV – decentralized and regionalized. The Government rejected this and stuck to an NTA that would deliver six nationally receivable channels. After much pressure, Headquarter of NTA Zone Awas moved from Lagos to Ibadan and was to originate one of the six channels. In the decision of the Supreme Military Council in 1976, Ibadan's role in history has been wiped out. Ibadan was not to be a Zonal Headquarter. Thanks to Vincent Maduka who fought for WNTV 's Ibadan to be one a Zonal Headquarter. The subsequent station, NTV Ibadan was prohibited from using "First in Africa". Thanks to Yemi Farounbi's management that fought against the decision and secured a reversal.

It is a matter of national pride that television in Africa started in Nigeria. It is true that 60 years ago, Nigeria was the only African country that had television. The opening of the Station was a national celebration with Sir James Robertson, Nigeria's Governor-General present. Nigeria might have lost leadership role to South Africa's DSTV, it is an historical fact that television in Africa started in Ibadan, Nigeria. It will always remain a fact of history.

Let me end with another suggestion. I started with a suggestion on the need to renew the broadcast licensing process. I suggest that given the new digital technology, the six original Zonals headquarters including Ibadan

should be converted to regional TV Stations broadcasting regionally through terrestrial signals. This will not obliterate the so-many small NTA stations, it will only introduce six regional stations, that under original plans would have been broadcast national channels.

In celebrating, 60 years of TV in Africa we the Alumni of 1st African TV Station are not only recounting what has been by publishing a book of reminiscences of about 70 persons who have worked there. We are also publishing an history book on that First in Africa TV station. There will also be a TV documentary. There also will be a Hall of Fame and Museum. But we want also share in moulding the future. There will be a colloquium on the theme "60 years of TV in Africa. Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow". The proceedings will be published as an academic book. There may be a 4th book using WNTV as a case study of the problems, challenges, and growth of TV in Africa. The Alumni plans to establish a Training Centre for short professional courses along the lines of Thomson Foundation TV College in Glasgow. You are welcome to join us to celebrate Nigeria as the home of Africa's TV network.

In writing this paper, I relied on writings of Adebayo Faleti, Kunle Olasope, Vincent Maduka among others because I was not there 60 years ago. I came into the scene only 50 years ago.

I thank the organisers for this opportunity.

God bless you all.

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