Assessing the Functions of African Cultural Values in Journalism Practice: A Case for Ethical Journalism in Africa

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Abstract

This study investigated the functional role of African cultural values in the practice of ethical journalism in Nigeria, using Ananmbra State as a case study. The objectives centred on determining the functions and use of African cultural values in ensuring ethical journalism practice in Nigeria. The survey of 162 journalists working with different media and information organizations in Anambra State used questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions to obtain data. Findings revealed that the journalists studied perceived African cultural values as having a useful role in the practice of journalism in Nigeria. This role covers a broad range of issues which centre on encouraging: ethical practice, dedication to duty, hard work, and development-inclined journalism. It was recommended that the training and re-training of journalists to equip them with knowledge of African cultural values and inculcate in them the orientation of resorting to the values in their day-to-day journalistic activities is imperative.

Key words: African cultural values, ethical challenges, ethical journalism, functions, journalism practice, perception.

1. Introduction/Background

It has been observed that the practice of journalism in Nigeria, modeled largely along Western ideologies (Mu'azu, 1999), is fraught with ethical challenges at an alarming rate (Assay, 2009; Sowunmi, Raufu, Oketaokin, Salako & Usifoh, 2010; Adeyemi & Okorie, 2010; Nwabueze, 2010). Some of the challenges include among others: ethnic distrust, religious intolerance, political tension (Anifowose, 1982; Dare, 2001; Kur, 2003); promotion of prejudicial stereotypes about some groups and individuals; making generalizations not supported by concrete facts and figures; dissemination of rumours; using inflammatory, misleading and sensational language; shallow and episodic reporting (Pate, 2011), and bribery (Sowunmi et al, 2010; Nwabueze, 2010; Adeyemi & Okorie, 2010). Others are invasion of privacy, adversary journalism, gossip or cocktail journalism, puff journalism, pre-emptive journalism, speculative journalism, junkets, deliberate falsehood, bias, and pocket book journalism (Umechukwu, 2007). While we cannot say with certainty that Western ideologies introduced the above mentioned challenges to journalism practice in Africa, the ideologies have contributed to the challenges (Mu'azu, 1999; Mfumbusa, 2008; Adeyemi & Okorie, 2010; Asante, 2011) and have done nothing or very little in addressing the challenges (Bourgault, 1995; Ainslie, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 2005).

Unethical journalism practices in Africa generally arise from the thinking that there is "one-best way of being and doing to which Africans must aspire and be converted in the name of modernity and civilization" (Nyamnjoh, 2005, p. 3). This tends to suggest that the Western ideology in the name of civilization and modernity, at the expense of an African value system, which is today accepted as a universal journalistic norm, has not fully assisted journalism practice in Africa. The argument by Nyamnjoh (2005) is that Africans had a unique journalism practice before the arrival of colonialism on the continent. Colonialism came and eroded this African journalism. But since pre-colonial African journalism produced better effects than the modern African journalism (Hachten, 1971; Bourgault, 1995; Ainslie, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 2005), it is imperative for Africans to reconsider the useful tenets of the pre-colonial African journalism and carry them along with some functional and effective tenets of modern journalism. The tenets of pre-colonial African journalism were largely drawn from the African cultural value system. In other words, for journalism in Africa to serve its purpose in contemporary African societies, it needs a synthesis of the best of both Western and African ideas. This is the contention of some scholars who have suggested the grave need to integrate African cultural values to the practice of journalism for any meaningful result (Bourgault, 1995; Faniran, 2003; Asante, 2011; Musa, 2011). A sense of African cultural values in the practice of journalism would equip and empower the journalists to observe more faithfully the ethics of the profession, some of which share similarities with African cultural values like accuracy and fairness, independence, integrity, honesty, objectivity, etc. The idea of integrating traditional or indigenous forms of communication with modern mass media, which has been suggested severally (Wilson, 1988, 1991, 1997; Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1998) is within the premise of bringing African cultural values to bear in the practice of journalism.

This is so because indigenous communication relies largely and finds its strength on cultural values of a society (Alumuku, 2006). The idea of community media, which is gradually gaining ground in Africa, is predicated on the notion of horizontal communication, which in turn rests on the cultural values of the community. This point is well captured by Kur (2011, pp. 340-341):

> Community broadcasting also possesses the characteristic features of being traditional in the true sense of the world, so as to have strong indigenous linkages; producing messages with local flavor; avoiding all forms of colonial influences; utilizing appropriate indigenous materials and resources; and depicting the people's actual reality, their ideas, wisdom, tradition, arts and culture.

The import of the foregoing is that the role of an African value system in African journalism practice cannot be over-emphasized. The absence of African values in journalism practice portends danger to the practice as aptly noted by Mfumbusa (2008, pp. 141-142): "A number of views account for the dismal state of media performance in Africa. One school of thought sees the abandonment of African traditional norms and values as source of functional and credibility problems affecting the media… hence, a return to the African ethical roots is touted as a solution to media performance problem." Thus, the question goes: do journalists in Nigeria take into cognizance the value of African culture in their practice of journalism? Finding answers to this question is the thrust of this study.

What do we really mean by African cultural values? African cultural values are those norms or mores that are largely unique to Africans and define the African identity (Gyekye, 1996). The core elements of African cultural values centre on gerontocracy, social solidarity or communalism, egalitarianism (Orhewere, 2007), religion, ties to natural laws, and moral order (Okolocha, Nwanunobi, & Igbo, 1999). More specifically, an African cultural value system is characterized by the following features identified by Onwubiko (1995) and Adani (2004): (1) sense of sacredness of life; (2) sense of hospitality; (3) sense of good human relations; (4) sense of the sacred and religion; (5) sense of time; (6) sense of respect for authority and the elders; (7) sense of community life; (8) sense of truth, uprightness, justice and equity; and (9) sense of personal worth and preservation of family name and image.

These African cultural values stand to reinforce journalism ethical conduct. In other words, when journalists in Africa bring those values to bear in their practice of journalism, they stand a chance to better observe the ethics of the profession and perform the task of journalism more creditably. This study is set to investigate the extent to which journalists in Nigeria employ African cultural values in their practice of journalism.

2. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to ascertain the role of African cultural values in the practice of journalism in Nigeria. The specific objectives were:

1. To examine Nigerian journalists' perception of the functions of African cultural values in journalism practice.
2. To ascertain whether the journalists make use of African cultural values in journalism practice.
3. To determine whether the adoption of African cultural values in the practice of journalism could address ethical challenges in the practice.

3. Theoretical Framework

The *African journalism theory* constitutes the theoretical framework of this study. This theory has roots in the works of early Pan-African scholars (Ong, 1982; Ansah, 1988; Kasoma, 1996; Kamwangamalu, 1999). These scholars contend that the integration of African cultural values to the practice of journalism will enrich the practice and give more value to society. Drawing from the observations of the above Pan-African scholars and prevalent journalism practices in Africa, Nyamnjoh (2005, p.1) articulated the *African journalism theory*. He expressed the need for this theory in the following words:

> The precepts of journalism that apply currently in Africa are largely at variance with dominant ideas of personhood and agency (and by extension society, culture and democracy) shared by communities across the continent, as it assumes that there is a One-Best-Way of being and doing in which Africa's must aspire and be converted in the name of modernity and civilization. This divorce is at the heart of some of the professional and ethical dilemmas that haunt journalism in and on Africa, a journalism whose tendency is to debase and caricature African humanity, creativity and realities. It is a constraint that renders African journalism a journalism of bandwagonism, where mimicry is the order of the day, as emphasis is less on thinking than on doing, less on leading than on being led.

With this justification, Nyamnjoh goes on to articulate the theory with the basic assumption that for journalism to be relevant to Africa and Africans, it has to depend on the values inherent in African culture. Nyamnjoh

identifies these African values that can enrich African journalism to include: communalism as opposed to individualism, oral tradition, valued African humanity and creativity, patriotism to home village and its culture, and cultural identities. Expanding on these values, Shaw (2009) notes, as it relates to African oral tradition, that oral tradition form of communication presupposes the construction of reality in a social context. In traditional African societies, bards, griots (story tellers) and village historians constructed and presented realities in their stories, at the same time informing, educating, entertaining and satirizing. Similarly, Nyamnjoh draws the attention of African journalism to the suggestion of Chinua Achebe on the use of language. Achebe says that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. African proverbs carry a lot of messages about the African value system. These messages make a huge impact on the listener. With regards communalism, Kamwangamalu (1999) writes about the African world view of *ubuntu*, which is an ancient South African idea that a person is a person through other people, as aptly captured by Kirwen (2011, p. 341): " I am human because I belong, I participate, I share." Similarly, Shaw (2009) stresses group orientation, continuity, harmony and balance (communalism) as strong social values associated with traditional African societies. Another characteristic of the *African journalism theor*y resides within the notions of "civil society" and "public sphere." These notions, as observed by Shaw (2009), were a strong part of African journalism during the colonial era. These notions meant well for African journalism and can continue to emphasize a strong kind of community life unique to Africa. This is opposed to the Western liberal model of journalism which emphasizes individualism (Nyamnjoh, 2005).

The *African Journalism theory* does not dismiss everything about Western journalism as bad and inimical to the development of Africa (Shaw, 2009). It appreciates and upholds the good in Western journalism, especially with regards to respecting African humanity and creativity. Hence, Nyamnjoh (2005, p.3), in his articulation of the *African journalism theory*, identifies a meeting point between Western and African models of journalism in the following words: "The way forward is in recognizing the creative ways in which Africans merge their traditions with exogenous influences to create realities that are not reducible to either but enriched by both."

The import of the foregoing ideas about *African journalism theory* is that it is possible to employ African cultural values in the practice of journalism. This would put journalism in a better position to facilitate the aspirations and developmental quests of the African continent. This study is an attempt to investigate the extent to which African cultural values are used in journalism practice in Africa.

4. Research Method

This study adopted survey research method, using questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as instruments of data collection. The population of study comprised all journalists working in Anambra State, Nigeria. Data obtained from NUJ Secretariat, Anambra State Chapter, indicate that the total population of registered journalists in Anambra State as at January 2013 is 289. A sample of 162 journalists was drawn for the questionnaire aspect of the study, based on Krejcie and Morgan table of sample size determination (cited in Keyton, 2001). The proportionate stratified random sampling was used to draw up the sample of 162 journalists from all the media/information houses in the study area as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Population figures of media/information houses in the study area with their corresponding proportional sample sizes

Media/Information Houses	ABS	NLN	NOA	FMI	ASMI	LCM	NTA	FM	CC	Total
Population	53	49	20	20	32	24	15	12	64	289
Sample	30	27	11	11	18	14	8	7	36	162

Source: NUJ Secretariat, Anambra State Chapter, January 2013.

ABS = Anambra Broadcasting Service, NLN = National Light Newspaper, NOA = National Orientation Agency, FMI = Federal Ministry of Information, ASMI = Anambra State Ministry of Information, LCM = Living Christ Mission, NTA = Nigerian Television Authority, FM = Radio Nigeria Purity FM, CC = Correspondent Chapel.

The resultant sample in each stratum was reached through simple random sampling technique, using a table of random numbers. For the FGDs, nine FGDs were conducted, one each in nine of the media/information houses. Each FGD had between six and ten participants. Participation in the FGD was determined on the basis of interest. The test-retest method was used to measure the stability of the questionnaire instrument. In doing this, the instrument was administered on 20 randomly selected journalists in Awka, the capital city of Anambra State, on two counts. To reduce the effect of test-retest shortcomings, an interval of five weeks, as suggested by Wimmer and Dominick (2000), was observed between the two tests. Reliability of the test-retest was determined using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient, which yielded a co-efficient of .80. Journalists used in the pilot study did not take part in the main study.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Demographic Characteristics of Samples

Out of the 162 copies of questionnaire administered, 156 were returned and found usable, yielding 96.3 percent response rate. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were males and 42 were females. Thirty-eight percent were married, 49.6 percent were still single, 4.9 percent were widowed, and 7.5 percent were either divorced or separated. The respondents cut across varying age categories, with those within the category of 40 – 44 years being the highest by 30.4 percent. This was followed by those within 35 – 39 years (25.7%), 30 – 34 years (17.7%), 45 – 59 years (13.1%), 25 – 29 years (11.2%), 50 years and above (4%), and 20 – 24 years (1.1%). In terms of education, more than half of the respondents had a first degree or its equivalent (52.2%), slightly above one-quarter had National Diploma (ND) certificate or its equivalent (25.3%), 15 percent had a second degree, and only 1.3 percent did not go beyond secondary level education. For duration of practice, the highest number of respondents (32%) put in 5 – 9 years in the journalism practice. This was followed by 27.6 percent respondents who had put in 10 – 15 years; 19 percent, 1 – 4 years; 12.7 percent, 15 – 19 years; and 8.7 percent, 20 years and above. Demographic characteristics in respect of the FGDs sample were not remarkably different from those of the questionnaire sample.

5.2. Perception of Functions of African Cultural Values in journalism Practice

Table 2: Respondents' perception of the functions of African cultural values in journalism practice

Functions	Frequency	Percentage
To enhance objectivity.	36	15.2
To enhance honesty.	29	12.2
To enhance hard work.	35	14.8
To enhance discipline.	47	19.8
To enhance loyalty to professional ethics.	40	16.9
To enhance development-oriented practice.	28	11.8
To enhance positive cooperation among journalists.	22	9.3
Total	**237**	**100**

Source: Authors' survey, 2013.

All respondents to the questionnaire said African cultural values have functional roles in the practice of journalism in Nigeria. The respondents identified the roles as presented in Table 2 to include enhancing: discipline (19.8%), loyalty to professional ethics (16.9%), objectivity (15.2%), hard work (14.8%), honesty (12.2%), development-oriented practice (11.8%), and positive co-operation among journalists (9.3%). Data from the FGDs supported the above questionnaire data, and went further to identify the enhancement of aesthetics and style as other functional roles. For the enhancement of aesthetics, a 44-year old male editor with *National Light* newspaper remarked: "The unique use of language in Africa loaded with familiar proverbs, idioms, and satire, if employed in journalistic writing and presentation, would give the desired beauty to African journalism." Similarly, a 37- year old female reporter with Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS) said: "Everywhere in the world, Africa's use of language is appreciated as seen in the works of Chinua Achebe and other African literary writers. If this kind of African literary language is brought into journalistic writing, it will give a lot of beauty to the writing." For style, a large number of discussants, especially those with the print media, said language devices in African literature have the tendency of promoting both personal and organizational styles in African journalistic writing.

The foregoing findings agree with the views of Kasoma (1996), Nyamnjoh (2005), and Ashante (2011) that African cultural values have a place in effective journalism practice. Ashante (2011), for example, holds that the spirit of African communalism, if brought to journalism practice, would address a number of moral challenges and instill a spirit of hard work and dedication. Similarly, Kasoma (1996) believes that African communalism, which emphasizes unity in diversity, has a strong tendency of building bridges across ethnic, religious, regional, social, economic, and political divides among journalists in Africa. This, according to Kasoma, is healthy for desirable journalism in Africa.

5.3. Use of African Cultural Values in Journalism Practice

Of the 156 respondents who reacted to the questionnaire, 48.1 percent agreed that they actually make use of African cultural values in journalism practice, 30.8 percent said they don't, and 21.1 percent were undecided. This suggests that a larger number of the journalists studied (51.9%) don't employ African cultural values in journalism practice. The 48.1 percent (n=75) respondents who said they actually used African cultural values in journalism practice explained more as presented in Table 3:

Table 3: Respondents' use of African cultural values in journalism practice

Use of African Cultural Values	Frequency	Percentage
Respect for constituted authority in news sourcing.	32	10.1
Use of African language and expressions.	54	17.0
Truthfulness in writing and presentation.	49	15.5
Objectivity, fairness and balance.	40	12.6
Communal approach to issues.	37	11.7
Good human relations with sources.	41	12.9
Giving priority to human interest issues.	64	20.2
Total	**317**	**100**

Source: Authors' survey, 2013.

Data in Table 3 reveals that insights from African cultural values assisted the journalists studied to: give priority to human interest issues (20.2%); write using African language and expressions (proverbs, myths, anecdotes, idioms, riddles, etc) (17%); be truthful (15.5%); use good human relations approaches in dealing with sources (12.9%); be objective, fair and balanced in reporting the news (12.6%); imbibe a communal approach (11.7%); and show respect for authority in sourcing for news (10.1%). The FGDs data agreed with the questionnaire data on this count. A 46-year old male reporter with Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Awka narrated his experience:

> During the political impasse in Anambra occasioned by the kidnap of Governor Chris Ngige, I was confronted with material gifts and threats on my life to report the incidence contrary to the truth as I saw and was told. Specifically, I was offered huge sums of money to portray the master-minder of the kidnap – Chris Uba – in a good light, and the victim – Governor Ngige – in a bad light. The ideas of honesty and fairness, which I have come to acquire through my **Indigbo** cultural heritage, stimulated me to shun the material gifts and threats to my life and report the event objectively and honestly as it occurred.

Some other discussants gave similar accounts that showed how insights from an African cultural value system assisted them to make decisions that improved their journalistic performance in the areas of objectivity, balance, fairness, honesty and good taste. Other discussants emphasized how the use of African cultural values assisted them achieve human interest reporting. A 33-year old female reporter with Radio Nigeria Purity FM gave an account of how she came to the idea of reporting the plight of destitute persons in Onitsha town:

> There are many destitute persons in Onitsha, especially along Upper Iweka Road, begging for alms on a daily basis. This pitiable situation is the case in a country of abundance where some have more than enough; yet others don't have at all to the extent of begging on the streets. The plight of these vulnerable set of human beings pricked my conscience, and I remembered that as Africans, we are meant to be our brother's keeper. Thus, I started reporting this category of people to inform the world of their plight and solicit assistance for them. Through my reports, some of these destitute persons have received some forms of assistance.

The account of this reporter explains not only human interest, but the sacredness of life, generosity, compassion, love, hospitality, and a spirit of communal assistance, which are part of the philosophical foundations of an African value system (Igboin, 2011; Okpilike, 2012).

The use of African language is another value the discussants said has given colour to Nigeria's journalism practice. A 48-year old male reporter with NTA Awka spoke about the success story of NTA network programme *Newsline* under the pioneer producer and presenter, Frank Olize. *Newsline,* as produced and presented by Olize, according to this reporter, was highly entertaining, educative and informative. It attracted high viewer patronage. The producer and presenter, Frank Olize, was mainly responsible for the success of the programme largely due to his use of African language with its power of expression, proverbs, idioms, and riddles and jokes loaded with a lot of moral and social, economic and political lessons. In a similar vein, a 54-year old correspondent of *ThisDay* newspaper in Awka spoke about the eloquence with African language by the late Ernest Okonkwo, who was a sports commentator with Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). He said:

> Ernest Okonkwo would describe episodes in a soccer match using typical African language, tone, mood, and setting to the extent that some listeners preferred to listen to Okonkwo's radio commentary than watch the soccer match. Some audience members used to watch soccer matches on television and listen to Okonkwo's radio commentary of the match

simultaneously.

5.4. African Cultural Values and Journalism Ethical Challenges

Table 4: Whether African cultural values could address ethical challenges in African journalism

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	81	51.9
No	47	30.1
Not Sure	28	17.9
Total	**156**	**99.9**

Source: Authors' survey, 2013.

As shown in Table 4, 51.9 percent respondents to the questionnaire agreed that the use of African cultural values could assist address ethical challenges in journalism practice. Only 30.1 percent respondents did not agree, and 17.9 percent respondents were undecided. How exactly could African cultural values assist address ethical challenges in journalism practice? Answers to this question are given by data from the FGDs. Most discussants across the nine FGDs maintained that adherence to the African value of honesty could largely address the numerous ethical challenges of African journalism. A 30-year old male Information Officer with Anambra State Ministry of Information said: "Honesty is an African value that Africans learn right from childhood, and if employed in journalism, it will address many vices." Another Information Officer with the National Orientation Agency (NOA), a 42-year old female said: "I was taught by my parents and grandparents the virtue of honesty. I have always tried to abide by this teaching, and the result is that I often perform my job with a high sense of morality and discipline. This gives me tremendous happiness and explains my success on the job." Similarly, a 29-year old male journalist with Living Christ Mission (LCM) said:

> African cultural values are all about the good of the entire society and not just the domain of individual selfish motives or interests. When our journalists begin to think and act for the good of the entire society, and not for their selfish motives, issues of unethical behaviour and mentality in the profession would be a thing of the past. Also, if all journalists, in the African communal spirit, rise with one voice to condemn unethical practices in the profession, a lot of progress would have been made in standard practice.

Many other discussants expressed similar views, suggesting that African cultural values have the tendency of addressing ethical challenges in the practice of journalism in Africa. This finding is in agreement with Kasoma (1996), Nyamnjoh (2005), and Asante (2011) that African journalists could learn from community and society in African values to bring about morality in journalism. African journalists, according to the trio, need to develop a sense of right and wrong, as it is the case in traditional African society, to be able to feel guilty in moments of ethical challenge, and summon the courage to correct colleagues who deviate from the professional norm.

On the whole, the findings of this study have supported a case for *African journalism theory*, used as theoretical framework in this study. Findings in this study that journalists in Nigeria perceive African cultural values as having useful functions in the practice of journalism on the continent, especially in addressing ethical challenges, suggest that the adoption of *African journalism theory*, as advanced by Ong (1982), Ansah (1988), Kasoma (1996), Kamwangamalu (1999), Nyamnjoh (2005), Shaw (2009), and Kirwen (2011) among other pan-African journalism scholars, would assist greatly in improving journalism practice on the continent. The adoption of *African journalism theory* on the continent is, therefore, not only desirable but ripe.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the perception and adoption of African cultural values in the practice of journalism in Nigeria. The study, a survey of journalists in Anambra State, Nigeria, used questionnaire and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to obtain data. Findings revealed that the journalists studied perceived that African cultural values have critical functions to discharge for the attainment of a more desirable and meaningful journalistic practice in Africa as a whole. These functions centre on enhancing ethical practice, hard work, and development-inclined practice. It was also found that the use of African cultural values in journalism practice is unsatisfactorily low. The conclusion reached, on the basis of the findings, therefore, is that to improve journalism practice in Africa and make it more meaningful to the continent, it is pertinent to tap from the cherished African cultural value system. To do this, it is recommended that stakeholders in journalism profession should ensure that journalists are not only adequately knowledgeable on African cultural values, but believe in the values, stick to them, and actually use them in their day-to-day journalistic activities. In so doing, it is imperative that the values are consciously incorporated in journalism training curriculum in Africa. Similarly, already practicing journalists should be subjected to re-training opportunities that would assist them acquire those values. But above all, the

entire people of the African continent need a re-orientation about African cultural values. Rather than see these values as "uncivilized," "primitive," "out-dated," "anti-social," "unsophisticated," and "crude," Africans should realize the usefulness of these values in encouraging discipline, uprightness, dedication to duty, hard work, decency, honour, worthiness, morality, respectability, and responsibility.

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