

Cultural Dependency: A Philosophical Insight

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Every independent country always celebrates or marks the day they were free from colonial rule in the form of “independence day celebrations”. The impression was that they were no longer slaves working under a colonial master. A fleeting glance at cultural markets reveals that despite other competing countries like India, China and Mexico, American culture dominates. This dependency on American products for arts, entertainment, dressing, and lifestyle changes in general is the major thrust of this paper. When a people’s way of life is dictated by the life of another, is it not a form of colonialism? The electronic colonialism theory was used to explain that this dominance by one culture is the modern form of colonialism and has far reaching catastrophic consequences for the dependents and needs to be checked to avoid disaster.

Keywords: Electronic Colonialism; Cultural Imperialism; Synchronization

Introduction

As it has been said that no man is an island, so it is that no country no matter how developed is an island. There was and will always be some form of inter dependency among countries. Cultural dependency has been labeled many names like cultural hegemony; media imperialism; cultural synchronization; and cultural imperialism. Whatever each writer chooses to call it and despite slight differences in definition, it generally portrays a scenario where one is consciously or unconsciously dependent on another as its main source of cultural beliefs and practices. In fact, the term often conjures a recurrent image of a master and a dependant resulting in a situation where the dependant thrives on the hand-me-downs from the master.

The electronic colonialism theory acknowledges that foreign produced communication materials negatively influence local values and indigenous media. It also explains the fact that cultural dependency or over dependency will invariably lead to a situation where the dependents unconsciously becomes willing slaves to their “masters”. This theory does not negate the fact that positive trends could emerge from exchange between countries: such positive trend including civilization as it is, formal education and modernization. However, it is mainly concerned with the issue of over dependency leading to abuse and mental enslavement. Using this theory as the anchor point, this paper tries to look at the overall implications of over dependence on foreign media materials? What does the future hold for upcoming generation? Is this really a form of modern colonialism?

The world is now seen as a global village but at whose expense. Is there equal playing ground for the villagers in the so called village? The ‘villagization’ of the world owes its existence to international communication which has been defined by Agba (2002: p. 250) as

the exchange of meanings across national frontiers and between two or more countries. It is brought about by the inter dependency need of man which makes it imperative that the way one man needs to reach out to other men for

meaningful existence, so does a country need to reach out to other countries for better life for its citizens.

This definition implies that international communication is meant to strengthen bonds among countries and maintain a kind of uniformity in pace in terms of developmental strides. In other words, if we share our developmental programmes in terms of soap opera, then there ought to be uniformity in the pace of the message effects on the citizenry.

The recent concern by writers points differently to that effect in that the original and innocent intention behind international communication and relations have been over ridden by the developmental wallowing gap threatening to engulf the developing countries. Through review of related literatures, this paper hopes to analyze this concept of cultural dependency as it is.

Cultural Dependency

What actually is meant by cultural dependency?

It was found out that the term “cultural dependency” have been labeled many names by writers depending on the angle they address the issue from. Some of such names are cultural imperialism; cultural hegemony; cultural synchronization; cultural homogenization; and cultural mainstreaming.

Culture which is the customs, beliefs, art, music, and all other products of human thought made by a particular group of people at a particular time. This culture is what distinguishes one culture from another, or a kind of identification which when exhibited reveals or gives inkling to where you came from. A mode of dressing often leads to such comments like “you dress like an American; or you look like one who is coming from the airport”. Cultural Dependency arises when a country is controlled by another. By way of definition, cultural dependency or imperialism is a

process whereby ownership, structure, distribution, or content of the media in any one country singly or together subject to the external pressure from the media interest of

any country or countries without a proportional reciprocation in influence by the country so affected. Boyd 1971 in Nwosu 1990 cited in Agba (2003:256)

Cultural dependency invariably puts pressure on one society to adopt the culture, values and lifestyle of another. This situation is worsened if there is an existence of any form of inequality among the partners; like the type that exists between developed and developing or under developed countries. There are other cultural products in the market like Mexican and Chinese movies but the beam light often happens to be on American pop culture. Commenting on this was Rauschenberger (2003:5) who wrote that:

Individuals and governments around the globe have expressed concern regarding the influence of American cultural products on both local and national cultures. US cultural imperialism has become a topic of debate in not only scholarly circles, but in economic, legal, and legislative arenas as well.

.....Despite American culture's global hegemony, China's film industry in Hong Kong remains vibrant, India's "Bollywood" films are gaining worldwide audiences, and Korean music, film and fashion recently gained immense popularity throughout Asia markets. Clearly, other cultures are capable of producing world-class cultural commodities as well (2003:20).

This observation followed the heels of such occurrences like the presence of American culture in nearly every facets of life. Whether it's beverages, foods or products, it appears that the world can't quench its thirst for American culture. Every change or improvement has to be tailored to American culture to be considered a change in the right direction. In other words, resemblance to American culture has become the yardstick for measuring development and developmental efforts. In fact, in a country like Nigeria, people are on the verge of losing their local culture as a result of trying to be civilized. Here, civilization is defined and measured as how one is able to conform to the American ways.

Cultural Dependency and the Media

The power of the press in this twenty first century is not contestable. This has led to the well deserved name of "information age" where millions of people scattered all over are reached simultaneously through evolving sophisticated and communication technologies. Media plays a central role in creating and transmitting the dominant culture to the developing society.

Writing on this, Okunna (1999: p. 186) *explains that*

as new communication technologies are developed, their increasing sophistication and power are enfolding the diverse people of the world into a global village. The speed and sophistication with which information now travels round the globe have constituted the media into what has appropriately been described as the 'information superhighway.

I concur with the "information superhighway" but I am concerned about the pedestrians along this highway? How do they compete with the flying and zooming cars on the highway? Are they lost or do they even count as the users of the highway?

This power of the media to reach a mass audience with information for awareness or attitudinal change implies that it has a role to play with regards to cultural dependency. In fact, there is no mention of the term cultural dependency without the media coming into the discussion because they are the media of communication especially the Television and recently, the internet.

Explaining the role of the media in this dilemma was the MacBride Commission in (Okunna, 1999:141) who found out and wrote that

mass communication is a major carrier of culture, and that the mass media are cultural instruments which supply the cultural fare and shape the cultural experience of many millions of people in the modern world.

This concern for the role of media in cultural units also stems from the fact that communication in whatever form is a major carrier of culture and hence, it is important in the production and transmission of culture.

Theory of Electronic Colonialism

Electronic Colonialism Theory (ECT) posits that foreign produced communication negatively influence local values and indigenous media.

This theory according to Roberts, (2010) was "formed to protect cultural diversity and traditional cultures of a culture". It was more like a reaction to the belief that first world nations were on the verge of invading the cultures of developing and underdeveloped countries.

According to Wikipedia, ECT basically tries to analyze what the media does to the mind of the audience. Its power is largely derived from repeated exposure to media contents. ECT "explains how mass media are leading to a new concept of empire. It will not be based on military power or land acquisition but based on controlling the mind. It is a psychological or mental empire" (www.wikipedia.org). This is a new form of colonialism and more fatal because mind management and manipulation is the modern form of enslavement. One can now understand the saying that "a controlled mind makes a willing slave".

The relevance of this theory to this work is vividly captured in the words of Rauschenberger (2003:2) that:

.....the spread of American consumer culture goes beyond popular consumption, raising questions and concerns of US dominance in the cultural sphere, what effects such cultural commodities are having on the values of societies and in turn, on the realm of politics.

This theory gave us a line to grasp the implication of cultural dependency on dependents culture.

Implications of Cultural Dependency

Why the concern about the quantity and nature of information flow into the country? The answer to this question will be found in the implications of this over dependency on foreign media and these implications are explained thus:

Elimination of Culture

Culture has been summarily seen as the totality of the way of life of a people. In other words it is the existence and meta-

physics of their being. It is then of little wonder why each town, nation or country jealously guard their culture which is their pride. In the face of the massive flow of foreign materials and the effects of heavy viewing on the audience, what is the fate of the nation's culture? Realizing that we are on the verge of unconsciously eliminating our culture, scholars and writers are scared. Ansah 1989 in Okunna (1999: p. 143) writes that

...the fear is prevalent that through the use of modern technology and mass communication, some cultures risk losing their identity and becoming submerged by the cultures belonging to those who control modern technology and communication software.

Saying that it is some cultures that is just being subtle. To be specific, it is the cultures of mostly the developing and dependent countries that are endangered. I also want to add that the fear is primarily experienced by the receivers. The senders are not bothered because their giving further strengthens their dominant position in world culture. Our way of eating and dressing have changed that many have forgotten what locally made foods and wears taste and look like. Also contributing is Okunna (1999: p. 143) who commented that:

...in virtually every third world country, mass media audiences consume large quantities of foreign media culture. It is feared that this massive exposure to foreign culture could distort and displace native cultures in developing countries.

She went ahead to assert that the media has a role to play in the threat to own culture by writing that

...because mass communication is such a powerful vehicle for the dissemination of culture, there has always been fears that massive flow of foreign mass media contents into societies other than those in which such contents are produced, will negatively influence local culture (Okunna, 1999:142).

In fact, as it stands, it is not only the developing and under developed countries are experiencing fear as was observed by Rauschenberger that,

"the intrusion of American consumer culture into the everyday lives of the average global citizen has prompted many to charge the US with a new form of colonialism- "cultural imperialism" (2003:2).

The fear has been globalized in that all and sundry are feeling the weight. Clearly, global trade of cultural commodities, dominated by US products, is growing rapidly. And people are not only noticing but also feeling the pinch, voicing concerns that their way of life and traditional culture are being threatened.

Loss of Identity

Who am I? Who are we? This is the type of question that subsequent generations will ask if the rate of cultural dependency on foreign material is not checkmated. This situation will be an aftermath of the elimination of culture. When a country consciously or unconsciously loses its identifying traits, what will they become? If "A" ceases to be "A" or blends into "B", what happens to "A" when it comes to sovereignty and location?

Agba (2002: p. 267) clearly captured the scenario by observing that

African media must understand that dependence elongates subordination and insults a nation's sovereignty, reduces its political interdependence to a mere nominal proclamation.

What this means is that all the time and money spent in Independence Day celebration is a sham because we are being mocked as slaves who celebrate freedom while still mentally bound in slavery. The claim of being free from the colonial masters is just a way of showing our level of ignorance.

Elimination of Epistemologies

An example of elimination of epistemology is replacing African languages with European ones. Recently, I went to officiate children's mass in my locality and made an interesting observation; I asked a child his name in vernacular and he could not answer before his mother explained to me that he does not understand vernacular. What a shame that a boy cannot understand a simple question in his mother tongue. When that child grows up with the ideology that vernacular is inferior, what do you think he will teach his children considering the fact that you cannot give what you do not have? It will be a question of how long before that native tongue become obsolete or attains that status of an alien language. When an owner becomes an alien in his/her domain, what next?

Cultural Domination

All this implications are somehow interlinked to another.

"Whether through their importation of western media culture or through the barrage of western television culture which flows into their countries through Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) over which they have no control, developing countries are at the receiving end as alien cultures which are alienating their peoples from their own countries" (Okunna, 1999:145).

There are uncountable numbers of Satellites TV and an equally number of foreign station that flood our TV screen. Uyo in Agba 1999 cited in Okunna (2002:264) opines that

"our screen have been surrendered, more or less to foreign programmes that have little or no redeeming values as far as our culture is concerned".

Can you even begin to imagine the number of cable TV stations on our television with far brighter and fuzzy free pictures than local stations? The number is updated at regular intervals to increase their number and quality level thereby ensuring their unrivaled relevance in cultural markets.

Cultural Synchronization

When a person's culture is eliminated resulting in loss of original identity, there is a need for a new one. To fill this vacuum for a new identity and culture, the people thereby become synchronous with the culture that led to the elimination of the original. How do I mean? What is cultural synchronization?

Giving a definition, researchers like Kamara and Howell in Okunna (1999:145) explains that cultural synchronization

means that the receiving cultures of the developing countries “take on the shape of or become synchronous with the outside (European-American) cultures.

This invariably leads to non appreciability of own culture and a resultant loss of sameness. This is to the detriment of the society as revealed by Okoye 1993 in (Okunna, 1999: p. 146) that

“heavy viewing of foreign culture could overwhelm Nigerian culture resulting in their alienation from their local surroundings”.

He warns that this alienation will be at the detriment of national development because the preservation of a person’s culture is essential to their development.

Unrealistic Representation

International communication according to the definition by Agba (2002:250) is

the exchange of meanings across national frontiers and between two or more countries. It is brought about by the inter dependency need of man, a situation which makes it imperative that the way one man needs to reach out to other men for meaningful existence, so does a country need to reach out to other countries for better life for its citizens.

In the introductory part, this paper asked if there is an equal playing ground for the exchange and the answer is in the negative. Research revealed that there is a quantitative and qualitative imbalance in the exchange process.

In the words of Agba (2002:255) “communication in these areas is used as a tool of the continued exploitation and subjugation of the African continent”. There is an imbalance to the extent that this situation, often has been cited as the bedrock of many a woe of the black race.

He went ahead to explain quantitative and qualitative imbalance thus:

Quantitative imbalance concerns the amount of news flow in both directions (developed and developing). He argued that most news and information flow from the developed to the under developed world, while news and information crawl up from the latter to the former. Agba (2002:257).

In other words, there is no basis of comparison between the amount of information between or among the players. The ratio of the news exported to other countries is quite insignificant as against the quantity that imported into the receiving country.

Qualitative imbalance is a concern about the quality of news that is carried about the developing countries. Agba (2002:258) asserts that

“most of the unfavorable reports are based on wars, pestilence, strifes, and all kinds of crises, diseases, hunger, disasters, famines, coups, political instability, economic downturn, and every other thing that wears a black outfit.”

Going by this explanation, it is now obvious that the developing areas are misrepresented and under represented by the

developed countries. This is a clear case of “world outside and pictures in our heads”. The pictures about the developing countries in the heads of the developed countries are all negative and to a large extent, untrue. Summarily, the little quantity of information about developing nations is mostly in the negative which further tilts the balance against the developing nations.

Recommendations/Conclusion

Decades ago, the concern was how the media could aid in developmental efforts; how and what can be done to close or bridge the gap between developing and under-developed nations. The answer was international communication. As it has been said that no man is an island, so it is that no nation or country is an island. If the lesser developed countries depend on the big shots for media contents, the big shots like US depend on them for oil and other natural resources. The major concern now is how far the original goal has been achieved.

The question is if international communication has done more harm than good. Well, in the course of this research, the harm was and is on the side of the developing nations. In their quest to live up the all American dream, their root, their identity; their culture, are all on the verge of being eroded and replaced by the donor countries. This situation is even worsened by the fact that most of the foreign stations on our television are free-to-air while local stations are only open to subscribers or hackers. The fact that the developed countries are also technologically advanced does not help the cause of the third world nations.

Be that as it may, seeing where international communication have gotten the dependents, this paper advocates that the exchange should be between countries on the same footing so that both will carry each other along. In other words, developing countries should be inter-dependent on other developing countries to have an equal pace without one invading another. Previous research called it the South-south cooperation which has been described as a strategy for inter dependency among countries of the south with the aim of reducing their economic dependence on the north.

Also, this paper recommends further research to ascertain the problems (if it exists) experienced by the developed countries in the course of their inter dependency with the developing and under developed nations to have a balanced assessment. On a final note, it is time for both senders and receivers to wake up and smell the coffee; it is time for self assessment in order to correct the mistakes of today for a better and healthier tomorrow.

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