ALSYSTECH
Journal of Education Technology

e-ISSN : 2988-442X
p-ISSN : 2988-4403

Index : Dimensions, Scilit, Crossref, Garuda, Semantic, Google Scholar, Base, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/alsystech.v3i1.4314

Decolonization of Communication Products and Education in Africa: A Revisit to Cultural Imperialism

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Nov 18, 2024	Dec 4, 2024	Dec 14, 2024	Dec 19, 2024

Abstract

This paper examines the ongoing impact of cultural imperialism on Africa's intellectual and communication landscape, particularly in the realms of media and education. It highlights the issue of Africa's dependence on foreign media products, which often undermine indigenous cultural values and knowledge systems. While some scholars argue that cultural imperialism is obsolete, reframing it as cultural synchronization or pluralism, the paper challenges this view by questioning the viability of globalization dominated by Western ideologies and technology. The study explores historical and contemporary examples of cultural imperialism, assessing the dominance of Western media and its effects on local communication practices. It also proposes strategies for decolonizing media and education to foster cultural diversity, autonomy, and better representation of African perspectives.

Keywords: Decolonization, African, Culture, Media, Education, Cultural Imperialism

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Introduction

Africa's underdevelopment has been extensively attributed to the pervasive influence of Western media and the systemic impositions rooted in colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, and the contemporary neo-liberal order driven by globalization. These forces have perpetuated a cycle of economic dependency and cultural domination that have undermined Africa's autonomy in shaping its development narratives.

The imposition of hyper-trade liberalism as characterized by the prioritization of free-market principles and the reduction of trade barriers has deepened Africa's integration into the global economy on unequal terms, often favoring Western powers and multinational corporations. In the realm of communication, this phenomenon is not just economic but also ideological. Western media, acting as cultural emissaries, have played a critical role in framing Africa's image, often perpetuating stereotypes and narratives that undermine the continent's potential.

As a result, the debate continues on how Africa can reclaim its agency in the globalized world, not only by restructuring its economic engagements but also by fostering media and education systems that authentically represent African identities, values, and aspirations. Rodney (2018), in his work 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa' argued that the question of who and what is responsible for Africa's underdevelopment can be addressed on two levels. Firstly, he attributes the primary responsibility to the imperialist system, which significantly hindered Africa's economic progress by depleting its wealth and obstructing the rapid development of its resources. Secondly, he highlights the role of individuals who acted either as agents or unwitting accomplices of this exploitative system. According to Rodney, Western European capitalists were the driving force behind the extension of their exploitation from within Europe to encompass the entire African continent.

In recent times, capitalists from the United States have significantly benefited from the exploitation and underdevelopment of Africa. These deplorable circumstances have been further exacerbated by the scientific and technological advancements of Western Europe, the United States, and other industrialized nations, which are used to maintain their dominance over developing regions. This phenomenon forms the foundation of cultural imperialism; a troubling reality where the industrialized world's

scientific and technological edge perpetuates inequality, marginalizes indigenous cultures, and reinforces global dependency. As such, using the technological superiority to skillfully facilitated the erosion of African cultures and replacing them with foreign value systems (Okafor, 2014).

The concept of Cultural imperialism has been applied to explain phenomenon in several fields. Most post-colonial nations in Africa have grappled with the complex legacy of cultural imperialism, particularly in the realm of communication and education. The Cultural Imperialism Theory, originally proposed by scholars such as Herbert Schiller and Edward Said, provides a framework for understanding how Western media and communication systems have exerted dominance and influence over non-Western societies, shaping perceptions, value system, and identities in the process.

Historically, Baran (2004, p. 521) pointed out that the rising fear that "western cultural values, especially those of the United States, would overshadow and displace those of other countries" brought about the idea of cultural imperialism which was considered by these countries as a new form of colonialism. Rauschenberger (2003) had traced this powerful nature and influence of western culture on the developing nations to technological and economic might. He observed that western culture permeates the world because it has the military and economic power to do so.

It is an established fact that communication products play a crucial role in giving a new dimension to the possibility for interchange of ideas and information between people in this modern era. Its contents affect the people's socio-economic life, politics, cultures, national systems and international relationships in different levels. Joula (2007) observed that the free flow of western cultures via communication, traditional and modern media programmes has unarguably undermined and adversely affected the indigenous culture, traditions and religious heritage of the so called developing countries. These cultural products are considered to have had great impact upon the feelings, thoughts and cultural values of a people.

Theunissen (2017) thereby advocated for a process that would allow the indigenous peoples to engage in a truly endogenous development in which the elements of their ways of life, that are most important and central to their sustainability are preserved and developed through their own effort and media agencies. This resonates the position of Ali (2023) that decolonizing African and its education requires a

profound acknowledgment of the continent's rich cultural heritage. This process involves embracing the diverse tapestry of African languages, traditions, and knowledge systems that have shaped communities for generations. By integrating indigenous concepts and perspectives into the curriculum, educational institutions can foster a sense of pride, identity, and belonging among students. Such an approach not only enriches the learning experience but also promotes inclusivity and provides a more holistic understanding of Africa's historical and cultural contributions.

This paper therefore seeks to revisit the issue of Cultural Imperialism in the context of Africa's communication landscape and education, focusing specifically on the decolonization of communication products and curriculum, with the aim of examining the historical and contemporary manifestations of cultural imperialism in Africa.

Culture and Cultural Imperialism Defined

Culture is a broad and multifaceted concept that encompasses various aspects of life, including religion, food, clothing, language, marriage customs, music, and the arts. It represents the characteristics and knowledge shared by a particular group of people, shaping their way of life and providing a sense of identity. It is deeply rooted in tradition, values, and social practices, and can vary significantly across regions and societies. Ranging from the way people dress to the music they listen to, culture influences how individuals express themselves and interact with one another in the society. Hence, it is an essential part of human existence, guiding behavior, communication, and societal norms (Pappas & McKelvie, 2022).

Oko-Epelle and Damilola (2020) asserted that culture encompasses the entire spectrum of unique spiritual, intellectual, and emotional attributes that define a society, shaping its worldview and ideas about life. It influences how we perceive the world and holds the power to foster the attitude shifts necessary for achieving peace and sustainable development, which are essential for the future of life on earth.

Cultural imperialism on the other hand, is the possible "invasion of an indigenous people's culture by powerful foreign countries through mass media" (Baran, 2004, p. 521). The theory of cultural imperialism emerged from critical communication scholarship and is primarily used to explain the increasig global dominance of U.S. culture, driven by its commercial media system.

According to Boyd-Barrett (2018), the centre of many definitions of cultural imperialism is the notion that the culture of a dominant civilization, country, or institution exerts significant, unreciprocated influence over a less powerful entity, often to the point of cultural domination. The concept encompasses the study of all interactions between "cultural" phenomena and "imperialism." These interactions include (1) cultural changes imposed on weaker entities, (2) changes arising in both stronger and weaker entities through processes of contact, contestation, and resistance, (3) the adoption of social practices from the weaker entity by the stronger, and (4) the emergence of hybrid cultures that blend characteristics of both stronger and weaker entities.

A Brief History of Cultural Imperialism Theory

Historically, the term cultural imperialism originated from 1960s neo-Marxist discussions within cultural, media, and postcolonial studies, which analyzed the wave of "independence" that followed World War II as numerous nations emerged from colonial rule. It drew inspiration from the writings of nationalist revolutionaries, revolutionary theorists, and their supporters during the 1950s and 1960s. Although its roots lie in that era, the concept has broad relevance throughout human history. In the West, Herbert Schiller is recognized as the leading theorist of cultural imperialism. During the 1970s, the idea gained further traction and was endorsed by UNESCO and the Non-Aligned Movement (Boyd-Barrett, 2018).

This critical communication theory gained prominence during the post-World War II era, particularly in the context of the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were vying for global influence. Both superpowers sought to persuade and compel other nations to adopt their respective political and socioeconomic systems capitalism and democracy in the case of the U.S., and communism under the Soviet Union (García & Birkinbine, 2018).

These theories suggesting and describing cultural imperialism which emerged in the 1960s had gained prominence by the 1970s. Propelling the establishment of international organizations, such as UNESCO, designed to research and monitor global information flows. Despite the wide attention and audience cultural imperialist theory has gained, it has been hindered by the lack of clear definitions. As such, agreeing on a

single definition of culture and other key terms in this area of research has proved difficult. Thus, various definitions for cultural imperialism evolved (Rauschenberger, 2003).

The classical work of Schiller (1976) is seen as the pioneer study which attempted to define as well as set the first standard for the term "cultural imperialism". He defined this concept as the way in which major multinational corporations, including the media, of developed

countries dominate developing countries. And while Schiller mainly focuses on the communications aspect of cultural imperialism, the theory has also been applied to explain phenomenon in other fields such as international relations, education, sciences, history, literature,and sports.

Though, this Herbert Schiller's theory of cultural imperialism has been largely discredited in communication studies by liberal thinking scholars, others still hold tenaciously to the continuous relevance of the theory. Schiller's cultural account of U.S. imperialism is considered unsatisfactory for explaining emerging markets and rapid developments in global culture industries (Zhang, 2016). However, the theory succeeded in providing a major conceptual thrust behind the movement for a New World Information and Communication Order regarding the flow of information between nations of the world. This, the theory does by proposing that a society should be brought into the modern world system when ever its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping its social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system (Gudova, 2018).

The debate on cultural imperialism hits it zenith in 1980 during the release of MacBride Report endorsed by United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation(UNESCO). This report was necessary at the time due to increased call for globalisation of the mass media. Developing countries had lamented the control of international news coverage bythe west especially the United States. Western dominance of the media content was attributed to low competition and lack of sufficient resources on the part of the third world countries to create their own quality fare. The report however, advocated for the establishment of a New World Information Order (NWIO) where individual countries could be allowed to have control over media content as it

affects them (Baran, 2004). Pitiably, after over four decades after these issues were raised by the MacBride Commission, they remain largely unresolved (Ngwu, 2017).

Cultural Imperialism Revisited

Cultural imperialism here is the systematic spread of one culture's influence over others, often through physical and economic domination, accompanied by assumptions of cultural superiority (ethnocentrism) (University of Jyväskylä, n.d.). This cultural imperialism as captured in Adum, Kenechukwu, and Abuah (2015) is perpetuated by the West dominating the media systems of developing nations through technology, production values, ideologies, and ownership which has led to the erosion and adulteration of traditional cultural values in these nations as they aspire to adopt Western norms.

Industrial development has facilitated this cultural imposition, promoting the narrative that progress equates to adopting Western ideals. For example, the Ivory Coast once purchased a satellite dish to broadcast extensive French programming, embracing French culture as a superior identity (Martins & Nakayama, 2005).

Theories explaining the spread of Western culture generally fall into two paradigms: the "dependency" and "free-market" paradigms. The dependency paradigm, often linked to Neo-Marxist theories, sees Western cultural domination as a tool for capitalist exploitation, fostering cultural alienation, synchronization, and dominance. Scholars like Schiller, Smythe, and Hamelink contend that Western media creates false needs and consciousness in developing nations. In contrast, the free-market paradigm argues that global consumers voluntarily engage with U.S. cultural products, viewing them as cooperative participants in the cultural exchange. Proponents like De Sola Pool and Boyd attribute U.S. dominance in cultural trade to advanced technology, competitive production, and economic factors, suggesting minimal imposition on consumers (Rauschenberger, 2003).

Cultural imperialism has also shaped global news flow, perpetuated by Western media and international news agencies, which dictate Africa's development agenda (Okafor, 2014). For instance, Lwahas (2014) criticized programs like *Big Brother Africa* for promoting Western ideologies while neglecting pressing African issues like unemployment and youth restiveness. Media technology plays a significant role in cultural imperialism. Hence, Adum, *et al.* (2015) identify it as a critical medium for influencing developing nations. However, Ekeanyanwu (2008) counters that technology's impact depends on its application, not its

inherent nature. Similarly, Barker (2004) highlights the emergence of cultural hybridity rather than homogenization, suggesting globalization fosters diverse cultural exchanges.

Cultural Imperialism and Education in Africa

The history of education in Africa is deeply intertwined with the dynamics of cultural imperialism. According to Nwauwa (2020), the arrival of Europeans in West Africa during the 15th century, prior to formal conquest, marked the beginning of Western education on the continent. Missionaries were at the forefront, using education as a tool for evangelism. As European colonial powers established control, they appropriated education to consolidate their rule, using it to shape societies according to colonial objectives. By the mid-19th century, Western education had given rise to a new educated elite, particularly among "liberated slaves" in Sierra Leone.

Western education in Africa was fraught with contradictions. It produced an educated class that was, on one hand, alienated from indigenous cultures and often collaborated with European colonizers, thereby reinforcing colonialism. On the other hand, this same elite, educated both locally and abroad, became the vanguard of nationalist movements, ultimately contributing to the decolonization of Africa. Institutions of higher learning, including the three new universities established in West Africa after World War II, became arenas of intellectual debate, reigniting discussions on the adaptation and Africanization of education (Nwauwa, 2020).

From the 19th century onward, colonial education was a contested issue, forming a cornerstone of the European "civilizing mission." Questions abounded both within colonial administrations and in European metropoles. Debates centered on the purpose and scope of "native education": What should be its goals? Who should receive it, and how should it be tailored to the perceived capabilities of the local population? Concerns also arose regarding the political, economic, and cultural ramifications of such education, including its potential unintended consequences. Despite the formal end of colonial rule, the legacy of colonial education which sought to impose Western cultural dominance persisted (Matasci et al., 2021).

Cultural Imperialism and Struggle for Decolonization of Africa's Media and Education

The influence of mass media on global lifestyles is undeniable, serving as a potent tool for shaping perceptions, behaviors, and cultural norms. Western powers have skillfully utilized this influence to impose their cultures and values on developing nations, particularly in Africa. Ekeanyanwu (2015, p. 25) describes this phenomenon as media imperialism, where African societies become overly reliant on imported media content and frameworks that prioritize foreign lifestyles, morals, and values, often at the expense of indigenous traditions and practices.

Wane, Kempf, and Simmons (2011) argue that European colonialism disrupted countless cultural and epistemological landscapes across the globe. In Africa, it displaced local knowledge systems and educational practices, replacing them with Euro-American frameworks that promoted universalized values through language, technology, and communication systems. These tools of control alienated Africans from their cultural roots and reinforced the domination of Western ideologies.

Western media models and structures further marginalized Africa's indigenous communication practices by relegating local narratives and cultural expressions to the periphery. Stereotypes perpetuated by Western media reinforced colonial hierarchies and painted Africa in a negative light. These portrayals dissociated African societies from their roots, replacing communal traditions and solidarity with artificially created media demands, which evolved with every new publicity campaign (Petras, 1994; Tucker, 2016). Consequently, cultural imperialism facilitated the erosion of African identity and perpetuated dependency on external validation.

Despite gaining political independence, African nations remain burdened by the residual effects of cultural imperialism. The dominance of Western media outlets spanning through print, radio, television, and digital platforms continues to entrench Western cultural hegemony. This pervasive presence fosters cultural homogenization, distorts indigenous narratives, and erodes local identities. Martin (2015) highlights the disproportionate and negative representation of the Global South by Western media, reinforcing colonial binaries that juxtapose the orderliness of the Global North against the chaos and dependency of the Global South.

In response, scholars, activists, and policymakers advocate for the decolonization of African communication and education systems as a means of reclaiming cultural sovereignty. Decolonization involves dismantling oppressive structures and fostering environments where marginalized voices can produce and disseminate their own narratives. This requires rejecting cultural dumping the practice of imposing foreign cultural products and promoting local content that authentically reflects African experiences, values, and histories.

According to Ali (2023), empowering future generations necessitates a significant transformation in the mindset of policymakers and practitioners in education. This transformation involves dismantling barriers and challenging entrenched power structures to create spaces where voices from all backgrounds are heard and valued. Accepting diversity and ensuring representation in decision-making processes are vital to fostering an inclusive and equitable environment. However, the journey to decolonization is fraught with challenges. Stakeholders who benefit from the status quo often resist change, pushing back against transformative efforts to maintain dominance. The process, therefore, requires striking a delicate balance between preserving deeply rooted traditions and cultures within educational structures and embracing progressive reforms. Such a balance is essential to create more inclusive and empowering environments for African students, equipping them to thrive in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

Decolonization, in this context, is not merely about rejecting external impositions but also about reimagining African education and media systems to reflect the continent's unique identity, values, and aspirations. This transformation involves confronting deeply entrenched biases, empowering local narratives, and fostering a sense of pride and ownership among Africans over their cultural and intellectual heritage.

Adebisi (2016) maintained that to evaluate and assess the implementation of the right to education in Africa requires an understanding of the diverse contexts and complexities shaping the discourse. Hence, Oko-Epelle and Damilola (2020) proposed that an effective strategy to counter the dominance of global media lies in the selective acceptance and promotion of local content to meet audience needs. To safeguard and ensure the future of Nigeria's cultural heritage, it is essential to consistently promote it through various media platforms. This is in tandem with the position of UNESCO

(2023) advocating for the adoption of reformed approaches aimed at decolonizing the teaching and learning of Africa's history within educational systems.

Conclusion

Culture is inherently dynamic and evolves through interactions with other cultures. However, at the global parlance, such exchanges often become imbalanced, leading to one culture's dominance over another. In Africa for instance, the lingering effects of colonialism and cultural imperialism are most evident in the media and education sectors, which remain deeply entrenched in Western ideals. Despite achieving political independence, many African nations are still economically, educationally, and technologically dependent on Western systems. This dependency perpetuates cultural subjugation and undermines local identities.

The media, a powerful tool of influence, continues to prioritize Western content, values, and lifestyles, marginalizing indigenous traditions and shaping societal beliefs. Similarly, education systems in many African countries still reflect colonial structures, emphasizing Western paradigms over indigenous knowledge and practices. This has created a generation disconnected from their cultural roots and overly reliant on Western frameworks for development. Globalization, with its Western-dominated narratives, exacerbates these issues by accelerating the erosion of local cultures. The unchecked promotion of Western lifestyles has further entrenched cultural imperialism, eroding the diversity and richness of African traditions.

Addressing this deplorable state requires a deliberate and sustained effort to decolonize media and education in Africa. Media policies should prioritize the production and dissemination of local content that reflects African values, histories, and aspirations. Educational curricula must be restructured to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and perspectives, fostering a sense of pride and ownership. African nations can challenge cultural imperialism, preserve their unique identities, and chart a development path rooted in their heritage and realities.

Recommendations

To counter the pervasive influence of cultural imperialism, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Governments in developing countries should establish legal frameworks to regulate the volume of foreign media content accessible to their citizens. These policies should aim at protecting and promoting indigenous media and cultural productions, thereby fostering local creativity and innovation.
ii. Significant investment in local media industries is necessary to empower indigenous producers to create culturally relevant content that resonates with domestic and international audiences.
iii. Educational systems should reflect African values by incorporating curricula that celebrate indigenous cultures, languages, and histories, promoting cultural pride and awareness among younger generations.
iv. Efforts should be made to improve the packaging and export of local cultural contents to Western and other international markets, showcasing the richness of African heritage and fostering global appreciation for indigenous traditions.
v. Governments should partner with cultural institutions, NGOs, and media houses to ensure the preservation and advancement of indigenous cultures in the face of globalization.
vi. African nations can leverage on modern technology to develop platforms that amplify local voices and enable the production and distribution of indigenous content.

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