

African Immigrant Community Broadcast Media

Ann Nosiri Olumba

The following article has been compiled from edited excerpts of a research report written by community scholar Ann Olumba on African media hosts in the Washington, D.C., area as part of the African Immigrant Folklife Study. Other excerpts have been published in an article in the journal Cultural Survival.

Although nationally syndicated programs such as National Public Radio's "Afro-Pop" are well known across the country, Washington, D.C., radio stations often feature local shows that blend traditional and popular African music, showcase local African music groups, and inform about Africa-related activities around town. These programs play an important role in building community consciousness, introducing African music to Americans, and keeping music traditions vital for immigrants.

Many African immigrants hold to aspects of their cultures tenaciously and hold them in esteem, regardless of the many difficulties they face in doing so. To many of them, culture is central, something to be practiced and maintained. Undermining immigrants' self-esteem and reverence for their traditions are the widely held, ignorant, negative stereotypes of Africans and their cultures. African traditional customs have been destroyed in many ways, but none has had more far-reaching impact than mass communication: television, film, radio, newspapers, and periodicals have all been used to denigrate Africans and their traditions.

But although the mass media can have a negative effect on an immigrant group's traditional culture, they can also be a means through which cultural traditions are celebrated and a larger public's respect for them increased. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the importance of mass media as an instrument of social and cultural uplift, so that such media can be further mobilized to propagate African traditions and cultures in the United States. Although African radio programs in the Washington, D.C., area are plagued by lack of funds, limited transmitting power, and often short duration (ranging in length from thirty minutes to three hours per week), African immigrants in the media use their resources in the struggle to

change negative assumptions about Africans and their traditions.

"The African Connection" on WDCU-FM and "African Perspectives" and "African Rhythms and Extensions" on WPFW-FM operate in the greater Washington metropolitan area. These weekly programs share common goals: to project and promote African cultural traditions in a positive way, to help maintain and strengthen links between African immigrants and their homelands, and to provide a forum where African immigrants can express themselves and discuss issues concerning Africa.

"THE AFRICAN CONNECTION"

Mr. Ibrahim Kanja Bah is the host of "The African Connection" — broadcast on WDCU, 90.1 FM Saturday afternoon from 12 noon to 3 p.m. — a music program and call-in show that features music from Africa and the Caribbean. The program's goal is to educate the American public about African and Caribbean culture and at the same time to entertain them. As education, the program projects African culture in a more positive way than the negative assumptions and conclusions about Africans and their cultures so widespread in the media. The program concentrates mainly on up-to-date music — both modern and traditional in style — from different countries of Africa. Some of the kinds of African music played on this program are: *kora* music, *juju*, *fiji*, *highlife*, and *soukous*. In addition, the program plays Caribbean music such as calypso, reggae, and *zouk*. African immigrants have benefited from this program. Some who had little or no idea about the many different varieties of African music have come to understand more about its diversity in the African world.

Mr. Ibrahim Kanja Bah, who was born in Sierra Leone, has been hosting "The African Connection" for several years. He had no background in radio broadcasting when he started hosting the program. "The African Connection" provides a way for people to begin to understand that Africa is dynamic, alive, and well," he said, "aside from the Africa that they hear about in the news."

"AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES"

"African Perspectives," a public affairs program focusing on Africa, is produced and hosted by Ms. Cece Modupé Fadopé. The program's goal is to shift public focus from existing negative stereotypes and assumptions about Africa to how ordinary people meet the challenges of

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accomplishing social and economic development on the continent. The listening audience is a cross-spectrum of Africans, African Americans, African Caribbeans, Africans from South America, and others interested in African issues.

Through "African Perspectives," African immigrants convey who they are in their own voices. Concerned with the immigrants' welfare, the program has on many occasions invited experts to give suggestions and valuable advice on problem areas facing their communities. Immigration and naturalization law, for example, is one area the program has focused on; the position of women in the community is another. "African Perspectives" also focuses on cultural contributions made by African immigrants to American social life. Musical artists and sculptors from Sudan have come and shared their talents and experiences with listeners.

The program also serves as a link between African immigrants and their homelands, disseminating information of events as they happen in Africa, reported by Africans and with African perspectives. It receives very favorable reactions from its listeners and facilitates their opportunity for participation. It provides one way for African immigrants to share their political views and serves as a medium through which community events can be brought to their attention. "African Perspectives" receives appreciation from African immigrant communities, but its development process needs more grassroots financial support. The program has been on the air weekly for four years, on Fridays from 11:30 a.m. to midday.

Ms. Fadopé is a journalist and activist, born in Nigeria. She has hosted "African Perspectives" for three years. A graduate of the University of Maryland, she has taken numerous courses in communication over the years. She is very interested in using communication strategies to build and empower grassroots organizations. The idea for "African Perspectives," she said, "just came naturally to me. It is something useful that I want to do, and I have put a lot of time and energy in cultivating the skills that are needed.... I would like to make 'African Perspectives' part of a larger media communication strategy to build the image of Africa as it [really] is. Not have the major attention be on what the military governments do. Africa is its people. It's more than the government, it's more than the heads of states, and it's more than the crises that happen."



"AFRICAN RHYTHMS AND EXTENSIONS"

"African Rhythms and Extensions" is hosted by Dr. Kofi Kissi Dompere and is broadcast on WPFW, 89.3 FM Sundays from 10 p.m. to 12 midnight. The program started more than ten years ago as "African Roots." The agenda of "African Rhythms and Extensions" is to promote African music in the United States and to share the African creative essence in rhythms; to promote awareness by African immigrant and non-African communities of the relationship between Black musical forms and of their roots in African musical forms; and to use music to bring people together in peace and understanding. The program is structured under three rubrics. "Meta Polyrythms" presents different traditional musical forms. A news section brings communities into contact with what is happening in the continent of Africa. And the "African Megamix in Polyrythms" presents modern African musical forms and their relationships to other Black musical forms. The objectives of "African Rhythms and Extensions" are to sell African music and to present African culture in its finest form. Musical performances are selected to show relationships and continuities among African musical forms and to demonstrate that on one level the musical languages are the same. Like "The African Connection," this program also projects an idea of African unity by educating Africans to other African musical styles they have never heard.

Dr. Kofi Kissi Dompere is a professor in the Department of Economics at Howard University. His country of

Cece Modupé Fadopé interviews a human rights attorney on her weekly radio program, "African Perspectives," heard on WPFW-FM in Washington, D.C.

Photo by Harold Dorwin

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origin is Ghana. He previously hosted a program called "World Rhythms" for four years, although he had no formal training in radio broadcasting. He acquired his knowledge about African musical forms and their cultural implications through reading. He has hosted the program for more than ten years, financing it himself and hosting it without pay. Dr. Dompere remarked, "I hope that people will understand through the 'African Rhythms and Extensions' program that Africa has a lot to offer in terms of civilization, and it would be useful to pay a little good attention. I hope that 'African Rhythms' would become not only an instrument of enjoyment but also an instrument of instruction."

While all of the radio hosts interviewed use different approaches, all are working toward a common goal, which is promoting and positively projecting African traditions and cultures. There is a real need for the establishment of an African radio station that would be under the management and directorship of African immigrants. Such a station would empower the African immigrants, giving them the freedom to select and present more cultural programs which address their needs and interests. In addition, they would be able to schedule and allocate enough time for each program, including cultural programs for young people and seniors. With their own radio stations under community management, the African immigrants would have the opportunity to express themselves more and share their feelings and opinions with regard to their cultures and traditions.

Ann Nosiri Olumba is a community scholar and research consultant who has studied the role of the media in her native Nigeria as well as in metropolitan Washington, D.C., where she currently resides.

African & Caribbean Radio and Television Shows in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area

"African Connections"

WDCU, 90.1 FM

Saturday, 12 noon - 3 p.m.

Ibrahim Kanja Bah, host

"African Rhythms and Extensions"

WPFW, 89.3 FM

Sunday, 10 p.m. - midnight

Dr. Kofi Kissi Dompere, host

"2000 Black"

WPFW, 89.3 FM

Monday, midnight - 3 a.m.

Bafoo, host

"Konbittakey"

WPFW, 89.3 FM

Saturday, 10 p.m. - midnight

Yvesdayiti, host

"Aend Ethiopia"

WUST, 1120 AM

Sunday, 3 - 5 p.m.

"African Perspectives"

WPFW, 89.3 FM

Friday, 11:30 a.m. - noon

Cece Madupé Fadopé, hostess

"Yet Hibret"

WUST, 1120 AM

Saturday, 2 - 3 p.m.

Ethiopian Evangelical Church

WUST, 1120 AM

Saturday, 3 - 3:30 p.m.

Senegambia Program

WUST, 1120 AM

Saturday, 3:30 - 4 p.m.

"Netsanet"

WUST, 1120 AM

Sunday, 1 - 2 p.m.

"Evening Exchange"

WHMM-TV, Channel 32

Thursday, 1 - 2 p.m.

Kojo Nnamdi, host

"Africa Plus"

Check local cable listings.