

Re-examining Civil Society in Emerging Sub Sahara African Democracies: The State, the Media, and the Public in Ghana.

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Introduction

African media and civil society scholars have described Sub Saharan Africa as a weak civil society. They also questioned the role African media has played in promoting civil society on the continent (Ronning 1999; Osaghae, 1994; Sachikonye, 1995b). The media, as public service institutions, have traditionally performed a political propagandist and developmental role and served the interest of competing elites (Karikari, 1993; Ansah, 1985a). However, since the mid 1990s, democratic and liberal reforms that swept the Sub Saharan African continent have resulted in the introduction and growth of independent media, particularly private radio, and ended decades of state media monopoly. Consequently, the role of the media, particularly independently owned radio broadcast services, has been changing (Heath 1999; Blankson, 2000).

The contemporary role of African media in promoting civil society on the continent has been unclear. This is because the conceptualization of civil society to the African context has itself been problematic. The application of the concept to Africa reflected its origin in Western societies that are extremely different from those in Africa, thereby, sparking the debate over whether the concept can be applied to Africa (Berger, 2002, p.23). In addition, the application of the civil society concept to Africa's democratization process seldom focused on how it related to the continent's media (Berger, 2002; Ronning, 1999). African media and civil society scholars only examined media-government relations (Osaghae, 1994; Ronning, 1999). Berger (2002, p.22), for example, notes that much research on African media from the 1960s to the early 1990s focused on development concerns. It was only in the mid 1990s, when struggles on the streets put democracy on the political agenda, that the concept of civil society and media's role on the African continent began to register significantly in scholarly writings (see Makumbe, 1998; Ndegwe, 1996; Osaghae, 1994).

Even so, many of the African civil society and media scholars have described African societies as lacking viable civil society elements (Ronning, 1999; Osaghae, 1994). Others have singled out the African media as a weak civil society element (Sachikonye, 1995b). However, Berger (2002) points out that the exciting conceptualization of civil society for Africa is problematic and in need of a more nuanced articulation.

This article looks beyond the boundaries of the conceptualization debate and the state-media relationships that have occupied African civil society and media writings for decades. Using examples of the changing character of civil society institutions in Ghana, after the country's democratic and liberal reforms, this article draws attention to evolving civil society elements in contemporary Sub Saharan Africa. It calls on African media and civil society scholars to re-examine the interdependent relationship developing between the state, the media, the public, and other emerging civil society institutions.

Two emerging characteristics associated with the democratic reforms are significant to the development of civil society in Sub Saharan Africa. The first is the emergence of an independent media system, especially radio broadcasting, which is redefining media's role in contemporary African societies. A more vibrant and critical independent media has emerged in newly democratic Africa nations and is fostering the dissemination and free exchange of information leading to social, political and economic reforms. The independent media is also promoting the development of socio-economic interests that mitigate traditional political polarities that will ultimately strengthen civil society.

A new African public has also emerged from the 1990s reforms; one that is being transformed from a

passive to an “aroused” public. For the first time in decades, the public is participating in civil discourse and has begun to show a keen interest in civil and state matters. It is developing into a key element of civil society in Sub Saharan Africa.

The development of independent media and an aroused public in African societies are important emerging components of civil society that call into question past description of African civil society as weak. They also draw attention to the need for media and civil society scholars to re-examine emerging civil society institutions in contemporary Sub Saharan Africa.

Past Conceptualization of Civil Society and Media’s Role in Africa

Since the mid 1990s, after political and economic liberalization began sweeping the African continent, the concept of civil society has been at the center of debates among African media and civil society scholars. The debate centered mainly on two issues: on the conceptualization and applicability of the concept of civil society to African context; and on the role of African media in building civil society. Scholars have taken different views about African media’s relations to civil society. Moyo (1993), for example, considers state and civil society as belonging to one public realm. Traber (1995) locates the media in civil society, which in turn, he says, needs access to public sphere or needs to create its own. Mansson (1999), on the other hand, sees an interaction between civil society and the independent press as forming a public sphere. He even treats the private press as if it were something quite different from civil society (or at least different from the rest of civil society). Ronning (1995) takes a more conventional and logical position of seeing private media as part of civil society. But Sachikonye (1995b) critiques the African media in general and argues that social movements (in civil society) should establish their own media to ensure a more favorable image of civil society.

However, Orvis (2001) provides a more realistic conceptualization of civil society that is more applicable to the African context. He defines civil society “as a public sphere of formal or informal collective activity autonomous from, but recognizing the legitimate existence of the state and family” (p.19). This definition allows us to consider traditional or ethnic organizations, self-help and cooperative groups, patronage networks, and traditional authorities as viable elements of civil society (Hutchful, 1996, p.68). It also allows us to consider a wide array of political activities, collective social activities and norms (Ekeh, 1992), and rural institutions (Hutchful, 1996) as parts of civil society. Orvis defends this view of civil society by asserting that collective activity guided by the norms of moral ethnicity, and taking the form of ethnic or patronage organizations, is as much a part of African civil society as are trade unions, professional associations, or churches. The broader conceptualization of civil society provides an analytical utility that encompasses aspects of both Western traditions and contemporary African associational life. It allows us to ask important questions about contemporary African civil society, especially regarding elements more rooted in and representative of African societies, but less internally democratic and less likely to support liberal democracy.

Besides the conceptualization issues, the question of whether Sub Sahara African nations can be considered civil societies have occupied the attention of many scholars. Two opposing views have emerged. Pessimists have expressed skepticism about civil society in Africa and point to the continent’s many failures of democracy as a hindrance to the development of civil society. They argue, “if used at all the concept [civil society] should be used in a very restricted sense relating to the emergence of a consensus on norms defining a civil sphere” (Callaghy, 1994, p.235). Optimists, on the other hand, have proclaimed the dawn of a new democratic era in Africa based on the resurgence of civil society. They argue that “we [scholars] must excise norms from the definition of civil society in order to allow us to examine a variety of norms that might inform civil society... Rather than rendering the concept of civil society useless, ethnic, regional, religious, class, gender, and other conflicts are important areas that play a central role in understanding contemporary civil society in Africa” (Orvis, 2001, p.20). Unfortunately, scholars have conceptualized civil society in the traditional Western sense thus setting expectations contextually incompatible with the realization of African civil society.

In the Western sense, civil society is conceptualized as the “realm of organized social life that is autonomous from the state, voluntary, self-generating and supporting and bound by a legal order or set of

shared rules" (Diamond, 1994, p. 5). Such a conceptualization reveals several tenets. First, that civil society concerns are public, not private. Second, civil society relates to the state, without being a part of it, through pressure to redress policy and expose government corruption. Third, civil society is marked by pluralism and diversity reflected by independent mass media and cultural institutions. Fourth, civil society is market-oriented and rejects central economic planning. Fifth, civil society holds that different groups represent different constituencies, and that no one can claim to represent the whole of society. Sixth, civil society plays several democratic functions, such as curbing state power, developing pro-democratic attitudes, creating alternatives to political parties, and strengthening independent media. And finally, civil society fosters the dissemination and exchange of information leading to social change and economic reform as well as the development of socio-economic interests that mitigate traditional political polarities (Diamond, 1994, p.6-7).

By using a Western conceptual framework, many African media and civil society scholars have characterized both the African media and civil society as weak. For instance, Ronning (1994, p.4) concludes that "it is characteristic of weak African states that media are directly linked to the state apparatus and used to promote personality cults. The reality is that a weak state continues to be a preponderant entity in much of Africa - especially, in relation to an even weaker civil society." According to Fatton (1995, p.75), the lack of appropriate norms in African societies has created a civil society that is a "disorganized plurality of mutually exclusive projects that are not necessarily democratic." In Berman's (1977) view, the lack of a trans-ethnic public arena grounded in universal society norms, and civic trust governing both political and economic transition, partly explains Africa's weak civil society situation. While Lonsdale (1994) points out the problem political tribalism and power battles among African elites have posed to the development of civil society in Africa, Markovitz, (1998) sees the lack of resources and Africa's economic crisis as creating weak civil society organizations that are dependent on the state and foreign donors. Finally, Orvis (2001) points to Africa's rural character as a factor in the lack of a civil society on the continent. He argues that because associations such as trade unions, professional bodies, and independent media are relatively new, disorganized and poor, they have few roots in rural societies in Africa where the bulk of the population resides.

To many of the scholars, the so-called crises on the continent have contributed to a widespread suspicion of state structures, which were invariably seen as corrupt, inefficient, dictatorial, and unable to provide any form of development. These factors also produced a struggle between the state and civil society organizations, such as non-governmental organizations, social movements and activists that often took the form of attempts by the state to overpower and bring them under its control. These were often achieved and defended under the pretext of nation building, national security and interest, and accusations of mismanagement. To critics of African media and civil society, these conditions were collectively responsible for the disintegration of Sub Saharan African states and civil society. However, Berger (2002) points out that the application of the concept of civil society to the Africa context has several conceptual limitations.

Nuances in the Conceptualization of African Civil Society

The conceptualization of civil society to the African context has raised many questions (see Berger, 2002; Sachikonye, 1995b; Thornton, 1999). Both Sachikonye and Berger present some of the conceptual nuances in scholarly writings on the characterization of African civil society and on the role of the African media in civil society. Sachikonye (1995b) claims that the concept has been "used in a liberal sense where civil society is seen as a sphere of struggle with mass organizations and the absence of an adequate analysis of the state" (p. 1). In this view, the state is inherently bureaucratic and undemocratic. Berger (2002, p.25-27) also points out that scholars have treated the state and civil society as two distinct concepts, thereby failing to recognize the interdependence between them and other components of African civil society. Scholars have also viewed civic groups, especially the media, as oppositional forces to the powers of the state. As a result, they have set unrealistic expectations on civil society institutions in Africa. They have also dismissed or ignored civil society as an alternative power center in African societies. Ronning (1994, p.3) posits that scholars have created a view of civil society as 'good' and the state as 'bad,' whereby the state is seen as a problem whose power must be shrunk through privatization and deregulation. In terms of African media, this took the form of opening up access to the

airwaves for private broadcasters. Civil society, on the other hand, is seen as part of the solution.

Civil society scholars have ignored to examine how African media relates to other components of civil society. Instead, they have singled out media–government relations and focused on how civil society components relate jointly or separately to the state, rather than to each other (Berger 2002, p.28). Thus, civil society has been pitted against the state and journalism oriented towards government and government-media relations (Kupe, 1999). Such a view has put Africa’s media in a watchdog role where it is expected to curb the powers of the state. Unfortunately, the inability of the media to perform this watchdog role has led to characterizations of the media as a weak civil society institution. In addition, assigning a watchdog role to African media is troublesome because it assumes that the media is an institution free to focus on whom it likes or prefers and without any interests beyond those of journalism. Berger (2002) rightly observes “while it is often recognized that other civil society groups have interests and agendas, there is also frequently an assumption that the media could or should somehow escape this fate” (p.29). It is, therefore, important that media and civil society scholars examine emerging relationships between the media and the rest of civil society elements, not just the media-state relationship.

Finally, civil society scholars have failed to acknowledge the importance of Africa’s rural institutions such as chieftaincy, community of elders, and self-help organizations, as viable components of civil society (see Ansah, 1991; Kupe, 1995). These are significant oversights, as the role of culture and community in the construction and maintenance of African civil life, especially in rural areas, is an important area of inquiry. Such a dearth in research allows stereotypical assumptions about civil society in general and the rural situation in particular—e.g. the absence of mass media creates a weak relationship between the media and civil society on the continent--to continue. For example, Ansah (1991) claims that civil society mass media (private and community) is scarce in Africa, leading to arguments that the urban independent press can in consequence play only a limited role in democratization and civil society initiatives. Similarly, Kupe (1995, p.397) asserts that the media has always been peripheral to the lives of most people in Africa. These views set a barrier and eligibility standards to civil society and fail to acknowledge that the media as civil agency of mass communication, particularly community radio, do have ripples across the whole African society, and not only in the urban centers. In view of these, the argument that the African media has no direct impact on the lives of the rural masses “underplays the extent to which there is a message multiplier effect whereby even rural dwellers obtain mediated access to the urban-based media, particularly through rural radio and other informal networks” (Berger 2002, p.28).

The characterization of Africa as a weak civil society may have been true in the past. However, significant social and political developments, following the 1990s liberal and democratic reforms in African nations, raise questions about whether this characterization accurately reflects emerging democracies in Africa. The developments also draw scholarly attention to the need to re-examine emerging civil society institutions and their role in strengthening contemporary African civil society. Using Ghana’s experiences, though Ghana is not unique in these developments, two of such developments are discussed: the changing role of the media, particularly independent media, and the opportunities it offers for building a stronger civil society; and the emergence of an ‘aroused’ public who, for the first time in Ghana, is showing a keen interest in civil society issues and actively participating in civic discourse.

Changing Role of the African Media – Independent Media in Ghana

One of the most critical civil society institutions is a media that allows for communication between groups, builds relationship between social groups, and supports the development of organizations articulating public needs and opinions (Taylor, 2000). For decades, critics of Ghana’s media questioned whether the state media that existed prior to 1995 played any significant role in building civil society (Ansah, 1991 and 1994; Karikari, 1994; Koomson, 1995). They point to the tight control and censorship of the mass media by authoritarian and undemocratic governments, the use of the media for government propaganda, and the political and economic crises that plagued the nation for decades to justify their criticism. However, the intensification of democratic and liberal reforms in the mid 1990s have resulted in the establishment of multi-party democracy, the privatization of the airwaves, and the emergence of independent mass media operations, especially in regional and community FM radio broadcasting. Since 1995, over two hundred

independently owned radio and television stations have been broadcasting alongside the state media, thereby significantly changing the media environment in the country (Blankson, 2000; Tandoh 1995).

The traditional propagandist and developmental role played by the state media, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), was transformed after the introduction of private media 1995. Early in their operations, the independent media, particularly radio, assumed the center stage in the democratic and civil society building process. For the first time in Ghana, it began to provide the needed avenue for free speech, freedom of expression and public participation in civil discourse. This has allowed for the free expression of divergent or dissenting views on civic and political matters without fear of government repercussion. It has also made possible the exchange of information between various elements of civil society and for public participation in the social, economic, cultural and political development of the nation. For instance, social activists, private individuals and public officials, including former President Jerry Rawlings, have appeared on newly created interactive audience discussion programs in radio to respond to public concerns and questions on diverse issues – the first of their kind in Ghana. The same programs are also open to other civil society groups including student and worker's unions, professional associations, rural cooperatives, churches, activists, and women groups who use the platform to exchange ideas and communicate with their audiences and/or to relate with each other in a civil manner. Although the majority of such interactions have been heated exchanges between the guest speakers and the public participants, the experiences clearly mark the development of a new relationship between the media, the public, and the state; a relationship critical in the development of a civil society.

The independent Ghanaian media has positioned itself at the center of the emerging Ghanaian civil society and is developing into an alternative power center to the state. In exercising this power, it is encouraging and empowering other civil society groups to shed off the 'culture of silence' that has characterized them from decades of state control and suppression of press freedom and free speech. The media is assisting and strengthening other civil society groups to develop interdependent relationships among themselves and with the state. In addition, it is not only demanding for democratic changes (as civil society scholars have expected); it is also demanding for social and structural changes within the society and other non-state civil society institutions. In particular, the privately owned radio stations have not been afraid to play this civic role.

In the process of exercising their newly found freedom, the independent media operations, especially radio stations, are performing two important civil society functions: disclosing the society's shortcomings and abuses (not just that of the state), and strengthening the democratic process and civil society. They are serving as advocates for the new democratic dispensation by scrutinizing public servants, the state, private organizations, and other civil institutions. They are also gaining the ability to reach various segments of the populace with information and to create links between like-minded civil society groups. These functions have made the Ghanaian independent media a committed media and a viable civil society institution, one that is positioned in the center of the democracy and civil society building process. The independent media, particularly radio, have proven to be the best tools to assist civil society organizations in Ghana speak to and listen to the populace. In view of these developments, one can only conclude that given the right environment, the media in Sub Saharan Africa can play a major role in the democratic and civil society process. Through its ability to allow for information and social exchanges, it can also encourage the development of interdependent relationships between components of civil society. Finally, it can, and has already proven to be a central element in the development of an active public; one that has begun to show keen interest in civic matters and to participate in the society's governance and social life.

Emergence of an 'Aroused' Ghanaian Public

One of the central tenets of a civil society is an active public that participates in civil discourse through the media and also has an interdependent relationship with the state and other civil society groups (Ronning, 1995). Yet, African civil society scholars have failed to examine the role of the African public in civil society initiatives, especially since the 1990s democratic and liberal reforms and the consequent institutional and societal changes. One of the important developments associated with the reforms is the transformation of the Ghanaian public; from passive to what Hallahan (2000, p. 505) describes as an

“aroused public.” Prior to the introduction of independent media in Ghana in 1995, the Ghanaian public generally had lost interest in participating in state affairs and in the state print and broadcast media (Ansah, 1993). A 1985 study by Obeng-Quaidoo reported that Ghanaians spent on the average only two and half hours per day listening to the state radio, GBC Radio. The lack of participation in state governance and in the media were results of decades of political instability, public disappointments with governments, and decades of state control of the media and free speech (Ansah, 1994).

However, the liberal reforms and the growth in private media opened up avenues for the public to freely express their views on all matters of civil and social interest. The openness in government and a freer and more vocal press are allowing the public to express diverse views on civic issues. Consequently, the ‘culture of silence’ that characterized the Ghanaian public prior to 1995, is gradually being broken. An aroused public has emerged and begun to play a significant role in the society. For instance, since 1998 there have been stirrings of public opposition and protest against government policies and at the perceived incompetence of the government and civil institutions. Public resentments have also been expressed openly against non-state organizations for their malpractices and social irresponsibility. The majority of public discussions in the media do not center on political issues. They focus rather on social responsibility and accountability of both state and civil society matters such as family issues, women and children issues, health issues, and the role of cultural institutions in the Ghanaian society.

It is evident in Ghana that the public is no longer content with being a passive element on which governments act; it is insisting on being an integral part of the development agenda and a true civil society element. For the first time in Ghana, the public is able to participate freely and openly in civil and state matters and is heavily involved in the democratic dispensations. It is able to criticize the state and other civil society institutions by expressing their views on scandals and abuses of an economic, political and private character. The public is able also to personalize social and political issues. Consequently, there continues to be a growth in public interest and participation in civic discourse and ultimately a redefinition of civil society in Ghana.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary developments associated with the 1990s reforms in many Sub Saharan African countries are transforming civil institutions and their role in the society. As demonstrated by Ghana’s experiences (although Ghana is not unique), the character and role of the media as a civil society institution is changing from being a state control propaganda tool to a more open and independent media. The implication of this change in character is that the traditional role of the African media in their societies is being redefined in ways that are critical to the development of a true civil society in the region. The independent media has emerged at the center of the democratic process and ultimately developed the potential to strengthen civil society institutions on the continent.

Similarly, the emergence of a relatively more active public is having significant implications on both the state and other emerging civil society elements. These two developments are critical components of civil society that cannot be ignored in the search for civil society tenets in Africa. Unfortunately, scholars have ignored to examine their significance in civil society debates on Africa. This article calls on African media and civil society scholars to examine emerging civil society elements in emerging democratic Sub Sahara African societies. Of particular interest are the role of emerging independent media and the changing character of the African public in the democratic and civil society initiatives. This re-examination is important because developments associated with the 1990s reforms in some Sub Saharan African countries continue to contribute to the building of a civil society stronger than what scholars have previously ascribed to the continent. One cannot assume that the continent as a whole is characterized by media freedom and broadcast diversity and democratic changes. In many countries, political and legal systems continue to provide provisions for curbing the freedom of the press and civil society organizations (Jamieson, 1999). But this should not be an excuse for scholars not to examine emerging civil society institutions on the continent and the interrelationships developing between these civil institutions and the state.

Ghana’s experiences lend support to the argument that civil society elements can emerge in Sub

Saharan Africa given the right environment. Civil society institutions are not static but respond to social, economic and political changes on the continent, and are tied to local communities and cultural life. Therefore, there is certainly a need for scholars to look beyond the past conceptualization debate over what constituted African civil society and examine contemporary institutional changes that are strengthening African civil society and the interrelationships developing between the state, the media, and other civil society elements in Sub Saharan Africa. Scholars should also examine the changing character of the African public, its evolving role in the society, and its relationship with the state, the media and other civil society institutions. It is only when these institutional developments and changes are examined that a clear and contemporary understanding of the nature of African civil society can be gained.

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Selected Publications and Papers

"Public Relations in Emerging Democracies: The Case of Ghana." Upcoming book chapter (expected to be published in December 2002).

"Language and Cultural Sensitivity in Broadcasting Reforms in Emerging Democracies: Ghana" Submitted for publication in the *Journal of Radio Studies*, 2002.

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