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Reconstructing Cohesion through Radio *Salaams Clubs'* 'Imagined Communities' in Kenya

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Abstract: Kenya has undergone experiences of disunity and fragmentation based on identifiable factors such as ethnicity and tribalism. The media has the lead role in ensuring the country remains united if its developmental role is to be achieved under a peaceful environment. This article therefore, examines radio audience as imagines communities and how such communities as *Salaams Clubs* can be utilised as uniting tools in Kenya. The article's argument is derivative and wades through the following key questions 1) what are the features of 'imagined communities' as espoused by Anderson? 2) What are the characteristics of imagined media audience? 3) How is audience imagined and mediated by radio as seen in *Salaams Clubs*? And 4) what could be the value of *Salaams Clubs* in uniting Kenyan audience and cultivating nationhood? Benedict Anderson's concept of nations as 'imagined communities' in appreciating radio audiences anchoring on the *Salaams Clubs* is adopted. The article advances the argument that mediation applies to radio audiences who are, first and foremost, an imagined community, which as argued by many, can never be homogenous. That radio audience forms a multiplicity of dynamic identities. In the process of imagining and mediating, radio like all other mediums brings the audience together for purposes beyond their imagination such as sharing feelings, experiences and belongingness. The article is aimed at contributing to knowledge on the conceptualisation of mass audiences and the internal benefit of such a process to them, which is one of the key issues in the study of mass communication.
Keywords: *Salaams* Clubs, Imagined Communities, Nationhood.

INTRODUCTION

Kenyan radio presenters were invited in a 'Radio Edition' of 'Churchill Live Show'; a local televised standup comedy during one of their editions. The four were Willy M. Tuva of Citizen Radio, Jimmy Gathu of Nation F.M., Kalekye Mumo of Kiss Radio and Njogu wa Njoroge of Kameme F.M. During his interview session with the presenters, the show host, Daniel Ndambuki (aka 'Churchill') asked the audience to put across any question they had for the radio personalities. It was then that a man stood up and asked Njogu wa Njoroge how he usually conceptualises his radio audience. The man said that he had been listening to Njogu for a very long time. He confessed that he had never met him and that he was now so very happy to meet him in person. But he wanted to know how Njogu manages, every morning, to think of his audience and even laugh or cry with them on air. Does he ever bother if anyone is listening and if so how? In a way, the man was indirectly asking Njogu how he manages to conceptualise his listeners. In his response, Njogu said that what he usually does is to 'imagine that you are tuned to the radio at any particular time and the rest falls in its order'. Njogu spoke addressing the man directly, in a way emphasising a practice in radio programming that every broadcaster addresses one single listener at every single moment.

A critical look at the above conversation between Njogu and one of his ardent listeners tells us that radio audiences, and indeed media audiences in general, are in most cases (if not all) a product of imagination on the part of the radio presenter (communicator) and that the conversations that take place between the communicator and the audience do so within that spectrum of imagination. The process of communication in media starts with the assumption that there is someone ready and waiting to listen, to read or watch the media text (be it news, programme, advert etc). This is an indication that media products (or texts) such as news, are not only a construction of reality but a platform on which reality is re-reproduced before it is presented to the audience [1, 2]. It should then follow that this product of a 'construction' is best aimed to an imagined entity; audience. But again, as Mwaura [3] argues, 'all media mediate' so much so that in their fulfillment of their role as a go-between in the

presentation of reality, they should also be seen as mediating their audiences for other purposes.

Examined from the concept of imagining, one can say that media helps advertisers to conceptualise audience existence, just like the broadcaster does. However, the advertiser conceptualises the mass audience as a market through the media. As such, there is a process of conceptualising the audience as a 'mass' or 'body' of individuals that can be targeted for certain reasons. It is only after the conceptualisation of the audience that the process of communicating to it starts. Thus, even if not for economic purposes, a media institution will always imagine its audience and mediate it for certain ends. This brings us to the concept of imagined communities by Anderson [4] in his conceptualisation of the nation.

Anderson's idea dates back to 1983 when he came up with some framework of analysing "nation, nationality and nationalism". He saw all the three concepts as being cultural artifacts whose existence is actually a product of some sort of construction. His definition of the nation as an imagined community was literal in the sense that he conceptualised it as a mass of individuals so big that members will only identify themselves with other members simply by imagining that, in the first place, they exist. Within this context it is important to note that, most of the analysis and conceptualisations of media audiences suggest they are imagined communities in the sense that Anderson thought of the nation as imagined. Just like the nation, mass audiences (radio audiences to be specific) bear the features of an imagined community as laid out by Anderson. Such ideas have been advanced by media scholars, among them, Branston [5] who argues that media institutions play a role in constructing and imagining media audiences. Gripsrud [6] also advances the argument by Anderson on imagined communities, but with reference to media audiences with a view that media institutions provide the opportunities of lived up experiences of national communities.

FEATURES OF IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

The concept of imagined nations as popularised by Benedict Anderson is literal. It is based on the assumption that as members of a nation, individuals do not get to know each other and in fact might never get to know each other in their life time but in their minds there are image(s) of each member of the nation. A nation he says:

[...] is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow- members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion **[7].**

According to Anderson, there are three ways in which this imagination happens. Firstly, nations are imagined as limited to mean that every nation, even the biggest of them all, has boundaries beyond which it cannot extend. Territories have limits. Secondly, the nation is imagined as sovereign to mean that every nation as an independent body has its own fabric of rules that define its identity and guide it. Thirdly, a nation is imagined as a community to mean, within a nation is a network of complex networks among individuals, or what he calls "horizontal comradeship"; ideas that have also been advanced by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin [8] among other scholars, who agree that indeed the idea of nation is associated with shared community or commonality.

What roles then do the media play in creating such communities? Grispin [9] specifically points out that "the media are, locally, regionally and most obviously perhaps on the national plane, creators of imagined communities," and if not so, they can be used as propagators of an ideology that sustains the nation state [10] even if it means conjuring up their existence. By belonging to an audience, one feels a sense of belonging and attachment to people "who we have never actually met, who are very different from us in many ways we do not know and live far away from us" [11]. Media institutions thus *homogenise* people (that is, make them one) while acting as avenues of social contact. The act of belonging to a media audience is thus a ritual which introduces you to friends and acquaintances whose warmth you miss when you are denied access to the media outlet [12, 13].

FEATURES OF MEDIATED COMMUNITIES

Media audiences are best thought of as mediated communities when they are conceptualised as mass blocks of people who are enacted through media institutions. That is, mass audiences, like most media products are brought to life through a process of mediation and their existence is as old as the mass communications industry to say the least. In fact, mass communications were developed with a view of the mass audiences since as it were; they developed as a response to the Industrial Revolution of the 1800's in America which necessitated the need for a mass market [14]. Later on as scholars developed theories for the study of mass communication they still had the audience in mind.

For instance, Harold Lasswell's communication model of 1948 has a component of the audience when it asks "to whom" the message is being directed and even so "with what effects?" Nicholas and Price [15] and McQuail [16] stress this fact when he identifies the audience as the receiver saying they are a

critical component in the communication process. Most scholars have defined mass audiences as 'communities' who share a common identity through the media product they consume. For examples, McQuail [17] identifies the place, the people, and the type of medium, the message content, and the time as five ways of defining a mass audience.

Thus according to him there will be an audience for a local radio as compared to a national radio, an audience that is female as compared to a male audience; audiences for soap operas as compared to that of political talk audience and so on. Kumar [18] argues that media audience is "a collectivity, an aggregate of persons who are readers, listeners, and viewers of different media or their various components." On his side, Burton [19] conceptualises media audience in three ways: (i) "as a disparate collection of individuals who happen to be consuming one text at a time; (ii) a coherent social group with common characteristics outside their consumption; and (iii) a mass group whose identity comes from the very fact of their consumption." Nicholas and Price [20] understand media audiences from two perspectives: either as (i) "a homogenous mass which is passive and easily manipulated" or (i) "a heterogeneous mass with a variety of different groups composed of thinking individuals."

The above definitions of mass audience conceptualise it as a mass of people: a community. What the definitions have not done is to introduce the concept of how these communities are mediated, that is, the process through which the communities are constructed or created by media institutions into the different community groups they later become, which as Schudson [21] as well as Branston and Stafford [22] argue is one of the things that media institutions do in their relationship with the audience. We already mentioned one of the ways in which the audiences get mediated when we said they get a life through a media outlet.

This is to say for instance, a newspapers readership only exists in so as the newspaper exists, and a radio audience only exists only in so as the particular radio programme or show is on air. But a mediated mass media community will always be presented as one group who the specific media outlet will want seen as a compact block partaking the media product at the same time and even with the same effect. This is the key process of the mediation process and within it we note that members of a media audience will always be dispersed and will consume media products at their own convenience, and because of that then the products will always affect them differently.

RADIO AUDIENCE INDUCTIVE CONCEPTUALISATION

Induction is the thinking from particular to general or simply conceptualising a single entity and multiplying the single to apply to the general. Radio mediation happens in three stages: First the radio audience is conceptualised as a single listener, who mutates to a mass audience but who finally mutates back to a single individual who is passed to interested parties. This is how it happens: radio programming is about concentrating on a single listener at one particular time; this is the argument we began with through the example of *Kameme's* Njogu wa Njoroge and the listener who asked him a question during the 'Churchill Live Show'. That single listener has certain features only identical to them and the radio does its programming to fit those features and the listener's interests. So it can be age: 28 years; income: earning net Ksh. 100,000 per months; interest: business; name: Kate. The features can be many.

What happens is that the radio will concentrate in making programmes that only fit Kate. However, the radio does not establish itself as only a medium for Kate. It imagines that there will be several individuals with features of Kate that will listen to it at every particular time. So from an individual Kate, the radio audience is usually mediated, by mutating to a plural of Kate. But in the true tenets of broadcasting, a radio presenter talks to only a single listener at a time. So from the plural Kate the mass audience has to mutate back to a single Kate, since on radio one can only talk to a single Kate at a time. This process happens unconsciously to both the communicator and the audience.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE '*SALAAMS'* CLUBS

Salaams Clubs are shows popularised by Kenya broadcasting corporation radio where members of the public were required to send, through ordinary mails or otherwise, greetings to other fans and relatives. The show consolidated a community of people who would be interacting during the show, even when they do not know each other physically, but have an interest in the matters of the show. Mostly, this was made interesting by dedicating songs through the presenter. This is broadly discussed later in this section.

Examining radio *Salaams Clubs* in Kenya through the lenses of Benedict Anderson we are able to get new insights about media audiences as mass blocks of people who share commonalities that are only made possible by the existence of the mass media, and which can be used for uniting Kenyans. This can be possible given that radio is a blind medium and one which permeates our lives more than any other media [23]. Radio is able to negotiate all the corners of our

existence to be at every place we are at whatever time and it does this by painting mental images on the whole process of communication, but more so about the communicator (broadcaster) and the receiver (audience) [24]. It is because of this that it fits well to be discussed as the channel through which the audience is both an imagined and a mediated community.

As earlier discussed, imagined communities have three main characteristics that media aid in propagating: limitedness, sovereignty and comradeship. So are radio audiences. They are limited in the sense that at every given time, a radio audience can only have a certain composition of people, who listen to it at that particular time. At least you cannot listen to more than one radio station at a time. Even within a particular radio station, you can only listen to one particular programme at a time. You can only fall within that fragmentation: one radio at a time and one programme at a time. So radio audiences, like all media audiences are inelastic. Within the time you are listening, you belong to its audience. Once you tune to another radio station your membership to that audience ceases. Again after 10am a new presenter comes in for a different programme. The morning show programme has its set of listeners different from the mid morning show listeners, hence the inelasticity of the audience.

The aspect of sovereignty applies in the sense that every radio station is established by first of all formulating the rules and guidelines of how it will be governed. It is within this spectrum that it identifies its catch area, and even so its target community (audience). It becomes sovereign in the sense that through such structures it will have a well defined identity with rules of engagement separate from other radios and their audiences. Capital F.M., for instance, is a radio that targets mid income earners and above. It majorly targets what one would call 'Kenyans on Twitter' who are techno-literate and so on, while the Kenya Broadcasting Service (KBC), a public radio, is for all Kenyans, but more so, the low income level Kenyans who are not as literate. Each of these radios serves a well defined community with rules only understood, perhaps covertly or overtly, by its members. As a Comradeship platform, it is on this aspect that the radio is more explicit in showing how the media audience is imagined than any other channel.

There is some friendship that radio listeners usually carve for themselves. They do this while observing the first two aspects of limited membership and sovereignty. This we need to stress is most common in community radio stations and in commercial radio stations that are oriented towards a communist perspective than a capitalist one. That is radio stations that are more concerned by the need to create cohesive forces among their listeners than the need to shape a market for selling to advertisers. An example would be Radio Jambo (communist approach) as compared to Capital F.M (capitalist approach). Listeners in the radios with a communist approach have an idea of the existence of their fellow listeners and this is where the *Salaams Clubs* become relevant in this discussion.

Common from the early 1980's to the 1990's, the Radio *Salaams Clubs* were a platform of comradeship in the country that was maintained through radio programmes in which radio listeners were given an opportunity to greet each other [25]. The fans would buy greetings cards sold by the Voice of Kenya (VoK) and later the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), write the names of the people they wanted greeted and post it then wait patiently to hear their cards read.

This was happening at a time when VoK/KBC was the only broadcaster and thus its monopoly came with its own privileges and challenges in equal measure. Those whose cards were read and whose names were picked by other fans became celebrities, over time. However, that would take ages at times and would require a lot of patience, endurance and persistence. But regardless of this difficulty, the fans had a way of doing their business. It was some kind of a formula that they understood. First of all, there was the rule of picking a unique name so that one would stand away from the rest. For instance, a story is told of one such fans who had a name similar to that of football legend Joe Kadenge, so the fan had to add '*Omwana wa Leah'* to his name so as to stand away from the legend.

The other strategy was the parting shot where there were such salutations as "*KBC Ndio Nusu ya Kuonana*" (KBC is a halfway means of face-face interaction). Whatever it was, there was always a parting shot. These were formulas that helped maintain the comradeship in the real sense of the concept as was seen by Anderson in his conceptualisation of imagined Nations [26]. But even so, the idea of sovereign nations was perpetuated first, in the formation of the smaller units of *Salaams Clubs* (that were regionally) but which belonged to the larger family of the *Salaam Club* whose umbrella was VoK/KBC. In other words, even if you belonged to a smaller *Salaams Clubs*, your existence was inspired by the desire to belong to the larger family.

This way, legendary fans of these *Salaams Clubs* have insinuated, the image of the Kenyan nation was perpetuated. Robi Reuben Robi, one of those who belonged to the *Salaams Clubs* age broadcasters argues that the *Salaams Clubs* played a *Kenyanising* role at that time and that, "The *Salaams* trend of the 80s transcended the current narrow ethnic, sectarian and

generational boundaries erected in certain social media domains. The fans were proud to be Kenyans" [27]. Therefore, what we can get from Robi Reuben is that the clubs helped to create families of national comradeship.

However, since the liberalisation of the airwaves and the loss of the monopoly of KBC, the *Salaams Clubs* have been weakened. They are not as pronounced as they were as before. But they are still there in some radio stations; only that their activities are more technologically driven than before. They are still as sovereign and families of comradeships as they were in the 'golden' days.

Today, in radio programmes where fans are given a chance to connect on air through *Salaams* it is common to hear a new fan introducing themselves and even asking for permission to join the fan club of the particular radio. After their introduction, existing fans quickly pick the new fan's name and start engaging them in their *Salaams* and welcoming them in the family. When a fan loses touch with his on air family, often other fans including the presenters of the particular radio programmes, will start looking for them. In some instances, radio fan clubs have gone to form welfare groups having started as an on-air network group.

CONCLUSION

Radio on air communities, starting with the *Salaams Clubs* of the old days KBC to the current groups can be seen as embodying the aspects of the nation as was conceptualised by Anderson. But underlying this aspect is the fact that the radio audiences undergo the process of mediation for them to exist. Without the media, they are nonexistent. The media play a role in creating and re-creating them to suit their different purposes. They are mediated because the images the radio creates of them might be totally different from the images they are in real life. This way the media and especially the radio play a role in imagining, mediating and consolidating audiences in Kenya. They do so by framing them and presenting them as permanent blocks of persons who are in existence and who are related physically and emotionally. It can be therefore hypothesised, that *Salaams Clubs* could be among the media tools that can be actively used for the purpose of breaking ethnic boundaries that have threatened to divide Kenya.

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