

CHAPTER 3

SOME CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.1. Introduction

Owing to the scarcity of studies that have been done in this area, the researcher managed to find only three studies during his literature search that share certain similarities regarding issues or aspects that the present study is trying to address. Consideration was also given to whether these studies would provide new insights and benefits to the present study, either by the way of enabling the reader to see the study in a better light, or by providing the kind of information that would lend further support to the direction taken in the present study. Finally, it was also considered important that these studies should set the scene for what the reader could expect in the rest of the study.

3.2. Programme Content and Language

The first study to be reviewed was done by Ndolo (1988). It used a triangulated research methodology involving the historical-critical approach and the analysis of existing records.

The main goal of the study was to examine the role of broadcasting and the language problems of national integration in Nigeria. Ndolo (1988) saw the lack of a national radio station that broadcast in a common language to all Nigerians as a stumbling block to nation building. There are two important aspects of Ndolo's (1988) study that deserve special attention in the present study. The first revolves round the use of English as the broadcasting language on Nigeria's national radio service, which he found to be unacceptable. According to Ndolo (1988), the main problem with English as the broadcasting language of communication across ethnic boundaries in Nigeria was that it benefited only the educated few, who constituted less than twenty per cent of the Nigerian population. As one of the solutions to this problem, Ndolo (1988) advocated the replacement of English as the broadcasting language on Nigeria's national radio station in favour of Nigerian Pidgin, a widespread language of communication in Nigerian society.

The second important aspect of Ndolo's (1988) study is what he refers to as 'uniformly structured messages', because he believed that they had an important part to play in nation

building. In this regard, Ndolo (1988) shared Eleazu's (1977) view that the potential utility of the mass media is measured by the extent to which they enhance the integration of the social unit. Ndolo (1988) believed that this could be achieved to the extent that the content of the media is packaged and delivered in a standard form. The assumption here is that widespread national uniformity of attitudes and patterns of behaviour would be the result.

Ndolo (1988) identified programmes such as education, music, sport, news and current affairs, and religion as ideal for broadcasting on Nigeria's national radio station. He saw these programmes as extremely important in the case of Nigeria for the part that they would play in increasing national consciousness, battling against ethnicity, and promoting national integration. Ndolo (1988) assumed that these programmes would appeal to the cross-section of Nigerian society.

However, it is not surprising that Ndolo (1988) recommended the broadcasting of such programmes to the entire society, given the popularity that they enjoy the world over. These types of programme are in fact at the core of programming in most radio stations in many parts of the world. The reason for this is that most listeners can relate to the content offered by these programmes. It could also be that the needs satisfied by these programmes are the ones that mean the most in the lives of most listeners.

The high level of interest these programmes enjoy among many listeners makes them ideally suited to the promotion of national consciousness. Nevertheless, it is important to note that however noble the goal of using radio for national development, the first and most important task of any radio station is to attract the greatest possible number of listeners. The challenge is even greater for those stations that want to attract a multiethnic and multicultural audience, as is the case with SAfm in South Africa.

Since it is inconceivable that any radio station could help to promote nation building in a country the size of Nigeria, which has more than 100 million people, if it were to reach or attract only a small number of listeners, a new approach to broadcasting would be necessary to build up a large, ethnically diverse listenership base for the station. It would,

then, be in the process of building this kind of audience and nation building could take place simultaneously through the kinds of programme that the station offered.

Whereas both studies emphasise the importance of programmes that would appeal simultaneously to different cultural or ethnic groups, the main differences between Ndolo's (1988) research and this study is that the present research does not overlook the part that other important factors could play in rendering SAfm ineffective in attracting the desired audience.

While one cannot underestimate the part that both uniformly structured messages or programmes and the broadcasting language of widest communication could play in national development, it is doubtful that these two factors alone would be sufficient to guarantee national integration. Liu (1971, cited by Allen, 1977) has argued for example that mass media are a necessary but not a sufficient cause of macrosystemic integration, but that they are a tool. Liu wrote:

'National integration is dependent upon the existence of an emergent social infrastructure of modern transportation, a national language, and widespread literacy, and that these elements must precede or accompany national integration' (p. 241).

In support of this view, Liu (1971, cited by Allen, 1977) notes that mass media in England and America developed only after all these elements were present. He added that mass media development occurred only after the social infrastructure had laid the foundation of social integration. 'The media, according to Liu, did not create national integration, but rather reinforced it and advanced it further' (Allen, 1977, p. 241). The secondary role that has been given to nation building in the present study appears justified in the light of the convincing argument that has been put forward by Liu (1971, cited by Allen, 1977).

Perhaps one of the most important contributions that Ndolo's (1988) study has made to the present study is that it serves to highlight the crucial part that a common broadcasting language acceptable to all can play in attracting a multicultural audience, as is the case with SAfm. Secondly, Ndolo's (1988) study lends further support to the present study regarding the importance of broadcasting programmes on SAfm that could cut across

ethnic or racial lines.

3.3 Cultural Background

The next study to be discussed is important because of the cultural dimension that it offers, which is critical in the present study.

No doubt, the role of culture in cross-cultural communications has important implications for a radio station such as SAfm as far as the broadcast messages and styles of presentation are concerned. Unlike radio presenters who broadcast for a radio station that serves a monocultural audience of which they are part, radio presenters who broadcast to a multicultural audience need to be acutely aware of the part that culture plays in their work.

Culture is defined as a shared way of life (Williams 1981, cited by Starck and Villanueva, 1993). According to Du Preez (1997), culture embodies the knowledge, values, norms, beliefs, language, perceptions and continual adaptation to the environment in which a group of people find themselves. The matter of continual adaptation can be closely associated with the experience and background acquired from one's cultural environment. All the aspects of culture mentioned here are important because they exert a powerful influence on the way we see and deal with our social environment.

One of the studies that best exemplifies the part that culture can play in cross-cultural communication is the one that Starck et al (1993) conducted in the area of news reporting by foreign correspondents. To set the scene for their study, they began by making a distinction between the terms intracultural and intercultural. The former suggests cultural elements within a given cultural group; the latter suggests crossing from one culture to another, and can also be equated with cross-culture. However, for the purposes of the present study, and particularly the multicultural and multiracial audience that SAfm is supposed to serve, the terms multicultural and multiracial will feature prominently in this study.

Starck et al's (1993) definition of a foreign correspondent is that of a media representative or staff member who reports and interprets the actions and events of different societies for

another audience not native to the country. As important gatekeepers in the flow of information on international news, foreign correspondents shape our ideas of other cultures and societies. In view of the important task that foreign correspondents have to perform, Starck et al (1993) ask the following pertinent questions: What qualifications do they have? How culturally prepared are they? What is their concept of culture? To what extent are they aware of the influence of culture in their work? How do they counteract cultural bias, preconceptions and stereotyping?

Starck et al (1993) used the concept of cultural framing as a theoretical framework for examining the work of a foreign correspondent. Since framing by definition involves persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation; of selection, emphasis, and exclusion that can be evoked in any (social) situation (Gitlin, 1980), Starck et al (1993) have been able to demonstrate the influence that their own culture or frame of reference has on the way foreign correspondents do their work. They categorise the kind of information that interferes with balanced and objective reporting of events that take place in a foreign country into four cultural frames: cultural background, cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness and cultural constraints. Starck et al (1993) did not regard these cultural frames as mutually exclusive.

Cultural background refers to the knowledge a person has of another's culture, especially the history and way of life of the person or the group of which he or she is part. It has to do more with understanding the social and cultural background of others. This entails having knowledge of the environment in which they grew up and of cultural factors, including (social) norms, behaviour and values they take as theirs.

Curiosity, and particularly the constant need or desire to learn and know more about other cultures, should drive any media person whose work involves informing, educating, and entertaining people of different cultures. Perhaps one of the best ways to learn more about another culture is to be involved personally in that culture. Du Preez (1997) has made an interesting observation on this point, in which she lays blame at the door of South Africa's history:

'It can be said that the neighbourhoods of cities of

South Africa resemble the scattered islands of an archipelago. In the city of Pretoria we have, for instance, the islands of Mamelodi, Meyerspark, Atteridgeville, Waterkloof, Laudium, Eesterust and Danville. Many people living in Waterkloof have paid more visits to Europe or New York than to Atteridgeville or Mamelodi. Township tours are very popular among foreign visitors. But one hardly finds a white South African on these tours' (p.1).

Given the gloomy scene that has been painted in the above statement, and assuming that this is still the case even today, it is important for different media organisations to make a concerted effort to expose their employees to the various cultures in South Africa. Personal involvement and willingness to learn more about other cultures would undoubtedly help any media organisation that serves a multicultural audience to gain better insight into, and understanding of, the audience they serve.

Prior experience in dealing with people from other cultures is also important, in the sense that it can sensitise a person to the new cultural elements that may be expected in a different cultural environment.

3.4 Cultural Sensitivity

In order for media to succeed and to serve a multicultural audience adequately, be it print or broadcasting media, it is vital that every media representative should strive to see things in the context of the cultural environment in which they occur. This is what constitutes cultural sensitivity.

Cultural sensitivity has to do mainly with a person's willingness to learn about other cultures in a way that goes beyond formal training and education, in order to be better able to deal with people from those cultures.

According to Starck et al (1993), cultural sensitivity refers to familiarity with the historical and cultural context of another society, and implies not only awareness but also respect, if not empathy, for others' ways of life. As far as intercultural communication is concerned, cultural sensitivity that is accompanied by a positive attitude to people from a different

culture is most important. All the knowledge in the world will not ensure successful cultural communication if there are negative feelings towards people from different cultures. On the other hand, if one has an open mind and is positively disposed to create a good relationship and behave sensitively towards others, the lack of knowledge of the other can be overcome and the cultural interaction can succeed (Du Preez, 1997).

Again, Starck et al's (1993) work on foreign correspondents underscores the significance of sensitivity when dealing with people from other cultures. They cite one of the foreign correspondents who reported that her news organisation endeavoured to avoid offensive language:

'Arguments often arose over the use of the phrase "illegal aliens". Latin Americans did not regard such people as "illegal". Thus, if at all possible, she would use the term "undocumented migrants" to avoid a less pejorative label' (Starck et al, 1993, p.20).

Another correspondent, who was primarily concerned with press coverage of the Vietnam war said that he was expelled from the country because he had written about the US's involvement in building new tiger cages for political prisoners.

'The difference, of course, was that the first case (of using tiger cages) showed the Vietnamese mistreating Vietnamese. The second case (in which the US was found to be paying and providing for tiger cages) showed Americans mistreating Vietnamese. The first fits into American conceptions of American racist conceptions' (cited by Starck et al, 1993, p.20).

According to Starck et al (1993), it was more difficult for the public to accept the US's part in building the tiger cages because respected Americans were implicated, and the notion challenged the public's own frame of reference.

Although the above examples may sound far-fetched, especially for a country such as South Africa, negative stereotypes and prejudices that defined much of South African life in the past are among the many things media personnel have to overcome in their own lives in order to be successful in their jobs.

3.5 Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness has much to do with being conscious of the part that culture plays in multicultural communication, and the practical steps that professional communicators must take in order to minimise the influence of their own culture on their work. This would ensure, if at all possible, that stereotypes are not perpetuated.

Though certain stereotypes could, for the most part, be representative of a certain percentage of the population, the truth is that they should not be generalised for the entire group or population. Negative stereotypes that evoke negative feelings or attitudes towards others who are perceived to be different should be avoided at all costs by those who work in a mass media environment. Another related point is the ease with which a person from one culture can offend someone from another culture is more pronounced in a multicultural environment. Starck et al (1993, p.22) cited the example of a National Geographic photographer taking pictures of Muslims in Mauritania without asking for permission, and explained that this was equivalent to having 'their souls stolen into a camera'.

Starck et al (1993) also contend that in many obvious ways the views held by different societies are similar, but political circumstances and world views surrounding the individuals may be completely different. It is, therefore, imperative for any media organisation that provides a service to a multicultural audience to try to communicate with its audience in a way that helps bridge the gap between people of different cultures caused by a lack of understanding. Flexibility, that is the ease with which professional communicators mix with people of different cultures, would help them gain a better understanding of the people they deal with in their own work. More important, any media professional who has learned to be flexible with people from different cultures is more likely to develop an ability to listen to people without a pre-set agenda, or to be guided by predisposition. It is also essential to allow people to speak on their own terms so as to avoid bias, misrepresentation and stereotypes.

‘You therefore come up with something much more interesting and not so much imprisoned in your own kinds of cultural bias, which we all have, coming from

wherever it is we are coming from' (Starck et al 1993, p. 23).

The media institutions that are most likely to succeed in any multiracial or multicultural society are those that show cultural sensitivity towards the people they serve.

3.6 Cultural Constraints

Cultural constraints refer to obstacles that stand in the way of successful communication in a multicultural environment. Since no one is likely to escape completely the influence of culture in the way they see or deal with the social environment, it is advisable that fairness rather than objectivity should take precedence in their attempts to understand their social environment. One of the respondents who participated in Starck et al's (1993) study said that she preferred fairness to objectivity.

'It's a lot better to accept the kind of cultural and intellectual constraints that you come into a situation from, and try to be as fair as you can. I think that's (the word, fair) a better word than objective because objective makes it sound as though you have a sort of magic neutrality which you know nobody does in any situation' (cited by Starck et al, 1993, p. 24).

Another respondent preferred fairness to objectivity.

'What I would strive for in my writing is not objectivity, but fairness. I would like to present all of the points of view that I encounter in a way that reflects what they think. And I think that's a little different. I think there's a kind of fake objectivity that doesn't really advance understanding' (cited by Starck et al, 1993, p. 24).

Cultural constraints are also caused by a lack of background information on another culture. This is easily overcome by mixing with people of different cultures. However, it must be pointed out that mixing or coming into contact with people of other cultures does not always result in better understanding between people. This kind of mixing could in fact, reinforce existing attitudes and stereotypes regarding another's cultural group. For example, Sears et al (1985) contend that people tend to behave in a stereotypical way when they know the group membership of another. Apparently, the best way to deal with

issues, or anything else from a cross-cultural angle is to be flexible and to meet a variety of people. However, to be on the safe side it is important to work on the assumption that the audience knows nothing about the events or issues in hand. It is important then, that any form of communication message delivered in a multicultural environment should be seen or dealt with in the context in which it occurs.

To know and have an understanding of different cultures not only helps one to deal with people from those cultures, but enables one to hear both the words and the overtones. Perhaps the most important of all, the best way to counteract cultural bias, is to constantly examine assumptions, especially those that people may not realise they hold (Stark et al, 1993).

3.7 Multicultural Television

The last study to be reviewed in this chapter was done by Smolicz et al (1984).

Smolicz et al's (1984) research into *Multicultural Television for all Australians* presents both striking similarities to certain aspects that the present study is trying to address, and a different line of reasoning that accords with their stated objectives that is a radical departure from the present study. The main objective of their study was to determine, in retrospect, whether the multilingual and multicultural TV station had succeeded in achieving the goals that were set for it by the Australian Government. This television station was multicultural in the sense that it was designed to broadcast programmes that appealed to the different cultural or ethnic groups in Australia. In order to contextualize the discussion that will follow, brief background information on Smolicz et al's (1984) study is in order.

The multicultural television station in Australia came into being in order to serve the growing number of people from over 100 different countries who had come to settle in Australia since 1947. There are a number of reasons for the establishment of this kind of television in Australia. Firstly, the Australian government believed that this kind of television station would assist Australian residents from many ethnic groups in maintaining their languages and developing their cultures, in passing them on their

descendants; that it would contribute to a greater sense of self-esteem and confidence.

Secondly, it was intended to promote tolerance and mutual understanding between the members of Australian society, and an appreciation of the diverse, multicultural nature of Australian society, as well as its history and traditions. Thirdly, for non-English-speaking residents of Australia it would offer programmes in community languages, and at the same time encourage and facilitate the learning of English and other languages. Lastly, it was to provide information and advice on the rights and obligations of Australian residents and on other matters that would help non-English-speaking migrants to settle.

There are several points of similarity between the present study and Smolicz et al's (1984) that are worth mentioning. The first has to do with the realisation by those who were in charge of affairs at the new television channel of the significance of changing the name of the new service from 'ethnic' to 'multicultural-multilingual'. This was in no way insignificant, as it demonstrated the desire for the service to appeal to every section of the viewing public, including the majority group. This is similar to what happened in the case of SAfm during the relaunch of the station in 1995.

The second point of similarity between SAfm and the new multicultural television station is that both broadcasting services were established in order to respond to the new broadcasting challenges that were facing the countries concerned. As has been pointed out, the establishment of SAfm was in direct response to the urgent need for an English radio station that would be accessible to all South Africans. In the case of Australia, the multicultural TV station was established in order to serve the ethnic minorities of Australia who were not catered for by the mainstream television channel, the Australian Broadcasting Commission or ABC. In addition to the main responsibilities that each of the two stations was expected to fulfil, each also had an additional part to play in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding between the different cultural groups. However, the same could be said of Ndolo's (1988) study.

The third and last point raises a similar concern that has been expressed elsewhere in the present study. This has to do with the failure of people in organisations to adapt to new

situations or new ways of doing things. In stating the reasons for the failure of the efforts to incorporate the multicultural television channel into the existing framework of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Smolicz et al (1984, p.38) wrote:

‘There could have been a variety of reasons to fear the merger, or rather the swallowing up of the infant multicultural service by the old established corporation which for so long had failed to take account of the increasingly multicultural nature of Australian society and which continued to purvey the largely undiluted Anglo-Saxon fare. One would also have reservations about the flexibility of the predominantly Anglo-Saxon staff that was steeped in a monolingual and monocultural tradition to respond adequately to the new requirements. Under such conditions the multicultural component would most likely be dissipated as part of the tendency on the part of the dominant Anglo group to allow the activation of only those forms of ethnicity which constituted no challenge to its cultural monopoly in Australian society’.

In closing this section of this chapter, the important thing to note about Smolicz et al’s (1984) study is that it remains a television study, not a radio study. Unlike radio, which relies solely on sound, TV is audio-visual, which makes it more attractive to many people. The idea of targeting a multicultural-multilingual television audience in a single channel did indeed make this kind of television station a ‘service unique in the world’ (Malcolm Fraser, 1981, cited by Smolicz et al, 1984, p. 47) at that time.

However, though the study applauds the success that this kind of television has been able to achieve in terms of the stated objectives, the small number of viewers from the ethnic minorities and from the mainstream society is something that would be a cause for concern to any broadcasting medium that seeks both to attract and to increase a multicultural audience.

3.8. Common Feature

The most significant common feature that is central to all three studies reviewed appears to be the emphasis on those factors that facilitate cross-cultural communication. These are: (1) common broadcasting language; (2) programmes that appeal to most of the listeners,

either because they can relate to them, or because they fulfil the most important needs in their lives; (3) knowledge and understanding of other cultures, and (4) the ability to be receptive and to adapt to new situations or roles as a broadcaster. In line with the objectives of the present study, this researcher is of the opinion that these factors are crucial to the success of communication in a multiethnic and multicultural environment, and of SAfm in particular.