

THE CHURCH AND THE NEW BROADCASTING PLURALISM IN AFRICA

MOUTHPIECE OR VOICE OF THE PEOPLE?

by Michel Philippart

Changes in the national media scene are perceptible.

Broadcasting pluralism could be developed into a cacophony.

First objective being to make money

On my arrival in Ouagadougou - as all visitors arriving for the first time in Burkina Faso - I was primarily impressed to see so many motorcycles and bicycles: a well-ordered confusion in which the few cars around could hardly find their way!

A second surprise awaits the visitor entering the Cathedral compound: the impressive and large pylon of Radio Maria, the Catholic Radio station of the Archdiocese of Ouagadougou. Even visually, the changes in the national media scene are perceptible!

Created in December 1993, Radio Maria is one of the 5 private FM radio stations on the air in Ouagadougou. Burkina Faso is definitely a laboratory of the broadcasting pluralism in Africa: actually 20 private FM radio stations exist in the country, among them the ten independent local stations of the commercial network "Horizon FM". And further ventures are in preparation.

Risk of Drift

For Burkina - and consequently for the whole of the African continent - we can assess that radio competition will be hard; the survival of the fittest may definitely become the ruling concept. Certainly, the new freedom of expression and of the media in Africa has to be welcomed, and needs still to be reinforced. But there are evident risks: competition could turn into an unhealthy rivalry; the broadcasting pluralism could be developed into a cacophony in which the most powerful station - which often means the most commercial - will win the battle but may hardly pay attention to the needs of the people. While listening to some of the newly independent radios in Burkina or in Senegal, the unavoidable impression catches you that they sound like disk-jockeys, with their first objective being to make money through advertisements and calendars of social and private events. It is not without justification that the commercial network radio "Horizon FM" is named by many people "Radio Pagaille", meaning "Radio Mess"!

The freedom of expression is a fundamental and imprescriptible right. But can this legitimize the production and operation of any kind of radio or programme?

Should anyone become a broadcaster without guidelines and even control? In many cases, the new independent radio stations in Africa have only minimum equipment, mostly just one studio: this forces into heavy "live" broadcasting, hence creating a sense of drift and uncontrolled verbal skids for the speakers or reporters who have no experience, training or professional points of reference. The recent past has shown a worse consequence of such type of "radio-makers": Any rumor can become "hot news" with terrible results... as it was in Rwanda and even in Senegal...

Any type of radio journalism does not contribute or promote human dignity! Is each new radio station a saint because it is "independent and private"? Is the State-controlled radio bad and oppressive by



nature? As experienced during the recent AMARC Conference in Dakar ⁽¹⁾, the recommendations “community”, “associative”, “independent” or “private” used in labelling radio stations could refer to various and very different realities, hence could easily cause confusion and misunderstandings. In this respect the distinction and relation between public, communitarian and commercial radios should be discussed carefully and in-depth.

Africa: A Continent dedicated to Radio

Since 1992, we have repeated that Africa will be the continent of radio⁽²⁾. The deregulation of the State radio monopoly and in the creation of many private (commercial and community) radio stations, especially in Western Francophone Africa, as in Burkina Faso and Mali, verifies this statement. CAMECO is also involved in this process, and has assisted in directing the sudden increase of projects towards Church-related stations.

There seems to be no doubt that in Africa, radio is the most important and most appropriate means of communication, and the role played by radio in the Rwandese affair confirms:

“Radio is co-natural to the African oral culture and can be considered as a new way to develop the cultural value”.

“Radio is accessible to everyone: especially in a continent with the highest illiteracy rate and with so many local languages, where the majority of the population lives in rural areas, where the roads, telephone and telecommunications systems are unreliable, making access to newspapers, books and television difficult, radio can reach even the remotest areas”.

“Radio is affected by the present political wind blowing over the whole of Africa: in many countries we assist to end the monopoly of the State-owned Broadcasting Corporations, to legalise media reforms affirming in the Constitution the freedom of the press and of expression, opening broadcasting to private/commercial entrepreneurs”.

“Radio has a central role to play in the process of development and democratization in the continent, at least as contributing to a pluralist and participatory society”.⁽³⁾

In 1993, active radio stations run by the Catholic Church could be counted on one hand. Already one year later the number increased considerably, not talking about the numerous stations in preparation. Now in almost every country of the continent, Bishops, dioceses or Catholic institutions are making efforts to launch a radio station.

The Church shouldn't miss the Wave

In many African countries, the law now allows freedom of expression, uncensored press and radio journalism. For the Church, and for CAMECO as a service to the local Churches, the challenge is great. We shouldn't miss the wave. The Catholic Church of Africa cannot exclude itself from the broadcasting development.

Since the recognition of this situation calling for action, difficulties appeared and questions are raised: how can the Church be present in the radio business? How to use radio, and for which purposes? Do we have to start new Church and Catholic radio stations? Or collaborate with other groups, with other Christian and religious denominations? Is “a proper use of radio” to broadcast prayers and preaching or how can a “Catholic programme” be balanced by educational, social, political, health, agricultural... topics in order to become also a service to the “civil society”? There is not one single answer or one unique model which could be implemented everywhere. Each situation, each project is specific, and has to be considered in its individual context.

Which distinction and relation between public, communitarian and commercial radios?

Radio is co-natural to the African oral culture

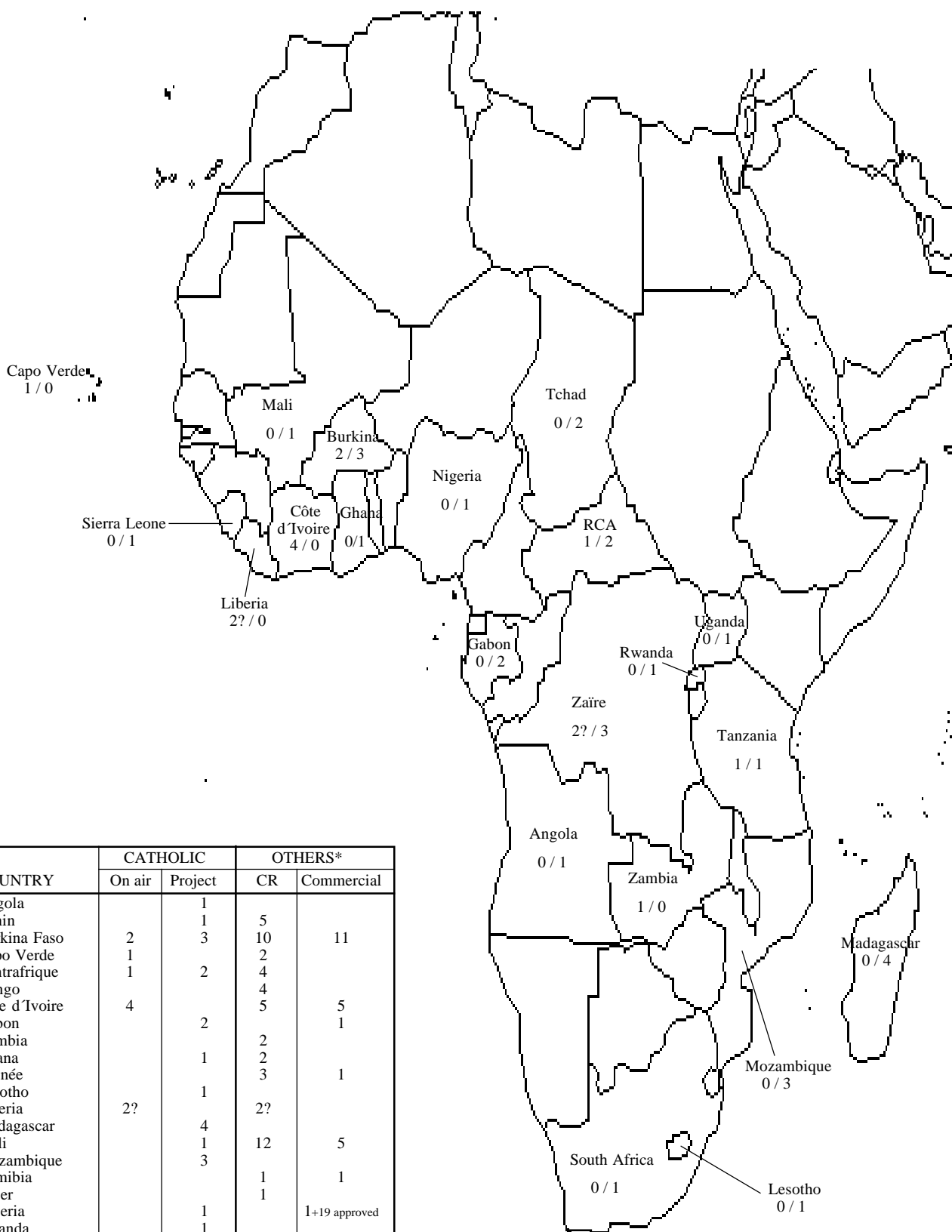
Each project is specific and has to be considered in its individual context

⁽¹⁾ AMARC 6, the Sixth World Conference of Community Radio Broadcasters, “Waves for Freedom”, Dakar, January 23-29, 1995.

⁽²⁾ See CAMECO “Information Bulletin”, issues 2 and 3/1992

⁽³⁾ Excerpt from STEM VAN AFRIKA/ CAMECO policy paper on “Community Radio in Africa”.

Catholic radio stations in Africa: on-air* and in preparation*



COUNTRY	CATHOLIC		OTHERS*	
	On air	Project	CR	Commercial
Angola		1		
Benin		1	5	
Burkina Faso	2	3	10	11
Capo Verde	1		2	
Centrafrique	1	2	4	
Congo			4	
Côte d'Ivoire	4		5	5
Gabon		2		1
Gambia			2	
Ghana		1	2	
Guinée			3	1
Lesotho		1		
Liberia	2?		2?	
Madagascar		4		
Mali		1	12	5
Mozambique		3		
Namibia			1	1
Niger			1	
Nigeria		1		1+19 approved
Rwanda		1		
Sénégal			1	1
Sierra Leone		1	1	1
South Africa		1	(189)	3
Swaziland			1	1
Tanzania	1	1	2	
Tchad		2		
Togo			4	1
Uganda		1		2
Zaïre	2?	3	4	
Zambia	1		2	1

* **On the map**, the first figure refers to the Catholic radio stations on air and the second to the Catholic radio stations in preparation or in project, according to CAMECO's and OCIC Missionary Service's information available on 13.03.95. **In the table**, by "others" we mean on one hand the community radio (CR) stations which include community, associative and rural local radio stations and on the other side the commercial radio stations; here our information is from many various sources, among them PANOS Institute (Paris-Dakar) and ACCT (Paris).