

## WORKSHOP 2:

# Is there any Perspective of Self-Sustenance for the Press in Africa?

From the time of independence until the end of the eighties – with the exception of Senegal, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa – Catholic newspapers in most of the African countries were the only independent voices. It was the time of state media and of state and party monopoly of the media.

During all these decades, as well as during the fight for independence, the Catholic press composed great pages on the history of their respective countries. Some of the editors-in-chief and responsables of these newspapers were the real fighters for independence, and later for the freedom and development of their people : in this regard we could mention l'Effort Camerounais, Moto in Zimbabwe, Lakroa n'i Madagasikara . . .

In 1980 as CAMECO in collaboration with WACC and the Lutheran World Federation published the first volume of the "Christian Communication Directory" many newspapers already existed, some having quite a high circulation (see table Nr. 1).

### **Alongside the Democratic Process of the '90s, a New Print Media Scene**

At the end of the eighties as the wind of democracy swept over the continent, it brought an unexpected mushrooming of new newspapers in most of the countries, as well as a deregulation of the communication laws.

While in many countries so far only a few titles were known (governmental, and sometimes one or two „independent“ voices, mainly produced by the Church), many new and independent newspapers were on the market in a very short time, debating on all issues, in particular on politics.

According to an article written by PANOS Paris „in 1994 in the 12 Francophone and Lusophone West African countries there were 131 newspapers, 103 of which were less than 5 years in existence“!

### **Is the Catholic Press aware of the New Media Scene?**

The Golden Age of the Catholic press in Africa is over. The still existing Catholic press, as well as some new titles which they would like to produce, for instance in Guinea, Burkina Faso, RDC, Angola . . . does not give the impression that they have a new vision, nor that they have realised that Africa has changed or that they have to face a completely different communication landscape. They have competitors, among whom a few are really excellent, and attractive to the (few) readers.

### **A Hard Time for the Print Media in Africa**

The printing press as a whole printing industry (book publishing) must face innumerable difficulties in the present situation of Africa today:

- Low rate of literacy, and a tremendous lack of reading culture
  - Low standard of living of the population, while at the same time the production costs and the selling prices of the newspapers are very high, making them unaffordable for the people : for example, in RD Congo the selling price of a daily newspaper is the equivalent of US\$ 1.00 !
  - Poor means of communication for collecting the information and for organising an efficient and proper distribution; the newspapers and print media in Africa are mainly for the elite and urban population
  - Strong competition from radio and audio-visuals
- However, internal points have to be mentioned too, for instance
- Many newspapers are very poor in terms of content: many are rather (politically) propaganda-oriented, or report more rumours than information
  - Among the journalists, there is a great lack of „general“ culture and of „journalistic“ culture, as well as lack of professionalism (journalistic skills and ethics). It is very common to blame the lack of training – or to say this in a more positive way – to recommend better training and qualifications for journalists and managers.
  - But there are also many well trained and competent journalists in Africa. „But how can we carry out this job, when we have such bad salaries, no social security, no future after retirement . . . and when we have to search for ways to feed the children, to take care of the family . . . “ In this case the journalist is a „mercenary“ instead of a servant of the truth!
  - The relevance of the newspapers also has to be questioned.

### Which is the way to self-sustenance for the press in Africa?

In the eighties we arrived at some proposals to give a certain self-sustenance to the press in Africa: one solution was to develop a joint-venture between the newspapers and a printing press,

Table 1:

<i>Title</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Circulation in 1980</i>	<i>Circulation in 1998</i>	<i>Periodicity</i>
La Croix du Bénin	Benin	7,000	3,500	Weekly
Ndongezi	Burundi	10,000	5,000	Fortnightly
Effort Camerounais	Cameroon	suspended	4,000	Weekly
La Semaine Africaine	Congo-Brazzaville	6,500	1,500	Weekly
The Standard	Ghana	25,000	8,000	Weekly
Lakroa n'i Madagasikara	Madagascar	6,500 15,000 in 1990	5,500	Weekly
Kinyamateka	Rwanda	9,500 14,000 in 1981	15,000	Fortnightly
Afrique Nouvelle	Senegal	9,300	Stopped in 1987	Weekly
Umafrika	South Africa	16,000 in 1980 over 60,000 around 1990	25,000	Weekly
Kiongozi	Tanzania	69,000 up to about 100,000 copies in the past	8,000	Fortnightly
Munno	Uganda	7,000	Stopped in 1988	Daily



to establish a supportive link between them, to create „press groups“.

In the Catholic Church, there were some tentative reactions in this respect:

- in Senegal: „Afrique Nouvelle“ and l’Imprimerie Saint-Paul
- in Cameroon first of all: „L’Effort Camerounais“ and l’Imprimerie Saint Paul, and now: MACACOS in Douala
- in Zimbabwe “Moto” – Mambo Press
- in Rwanda: “Kinyamateka” – Pallotti Presse (created in 1985)
- in Madagascar: “Lakroa” – Saint Paul Fianarantsoa
- in Congo-Brazzaville: “La Semaine Africaine” for whom a new printing press integrated into COMAFRIQUE was created, but the project failed and a new structure was developed. . .

This joint venture pursued two objectives : firstly, it could be expected that by being produced by its own printing press the production costs would be lower, and secondly thanks to commercial jobs, the printing press – as a productive and profit-making enterprise – was supposed to generate some profit which would finance the newspaper. We have to accept that this great hope of the eighties has failed in every respect. The only exception was Pallotti Press in Rwanda which succeeded in allocating an annual subsidy for the newspaper for about 7 years . . . until the genocide in 1994!

Why did this dream fail? Using the experience and expertise of resource people participant in the workshop, Mr. Gerard Tassinari who is at the present time the technical adviser of the Episcopal Conference of Congo in the merging process of the Catholic printing presses in that country as well as Bro. Karl Kälin, the CAMECO technical adviser in the field of printing presses who knows most of the Catholic printing presses in Africa, the workshop tried to analyse and understand the reasons for their failure. From their experience they underline that the idea of combining a newspaper and a printing press as a productive and profit-making branch, is still at least in theory, brilliant and meaningful. In most cases, the problems and the failures are located in the lack of management and human capacities!

However, most probably the quality of the newspapers is also an important factor. Reporting on the results of the in-depth evaluation of the Catholic weekly, “Lakroa N’i Madagasikara” (Madagascar) conducted last year, Prof. Frédéric Antoine from the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) pointed out some important questions: What kind of newspaper do the Churches produce? For whom ? How can newspapers in Africa become relevant and attractive to the people? to the readers? to the buyers? As regards the Church, is it a priority to launch newspapers for urban and educated people or to start „post-literacy“ and „rural“ newspapers produced in the local languages: i.e. „Tekemanayi“ in Kananga, DRC, which had a circulation of more than 25,000 copies a few years ago, and still has a circulation of about 11,000; or „Isika Mianakavy“ in Madagascar (17,000 copies in 1980 and now about 25,000)?

But a newspaper consists not only of a concept and a content. Even the best vision is not sufficient to establish a newspaper on a sound basis: the press is also a business! Where is the African press today, and where is the Church in this respect?

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