
ETHNIC MEDIA PRACTICE AMONG THE BLACK (WEST AFRICAN) MUSLIMS IN LONDON

BY OLAWALE HASSAN

If I should compare the West African Black Muslim ethnic media practitioners' experience to a bird singing melodiously in a covered cage, would this not seem too harsh an imagery to paint? If however I tell you that the target audience is also in the same cage as the bird; this would probably be a relief knowing that it is not all an effort in futility. As ethnic media is produced by and for an ethnic group or community, it is the connecting ring in the formation of a social, political and economic chain meant to pull the community up the ladder of relevance. As the storage of the people's identity, ethnic media is the expression of their particular and shared experiences, a voice to their thoughts and a preparation for their future.

Rather than adopting an academic approach, this essay shall lean heavily on the personal experiences of Nigerian-British ethnic media practitioners and owners, investors, or independent content providers in the UK, who were interviewed for this purpose to give credence to the observations made and possible conclusions reached at the end of this report.

The fact that ethnic media operate in the fringe is not just understandable, it is expected due to the nature and structure of ethnic media operation. Therefore, it cannot compete favourably with the mainstream media. Be it in print journalism, electronic (social media inclusive) or the entertainment industries, ethnic media practitioners are less recognised in comparison with how mainstream media personalities are promoted, accepted and celebrated. In my view, the experience of the Nigerian ethnic media practitioners suggests that the hurdle is doubled as 'persons of colour' and becomes tripled because they cover the Muslim experience. Do recall the image of that beautiful bird singing melodiously in the covered cage.

It is surprising that though there is no apparent recognition of ethnic media professionals or platforms, there are flashes of achievement, points of prospect, paths to prosperity and a fulfilling future for ethnic media practice among the Black Muslims of West African / Nigerian descent in London.

The 2011 Census indicates that more than 6 million individuals identify as belonging to Black, Asian or other ethnic groups. This shows the significant size of the ethnic population and invariably the important role ethnic media practitioners are playing in British society. A study by the Independent Press Association attests to the growing demand and significance of ethnic media in Britain. "The UK's ethnic populations are continuing to flourish and expand. Across all generations, there is still a fundamental appetite to consume and embrace media that recognises their unique cultural differences and dials into their personal, cultural perspectives (IPA, 2012).

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EXPERIENCES OF NIGERIAN ETHNIC MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

The following are ethnic media professionals' experiences to narrate the story of the singing bird in the covered cage.

Abdul Kareem Olusola Adetoro-Ipaye is a Muslim ethnic media owner in London, originally trained as a graphic designer who picked up interest in television production, web development and specialised in multimedia. Whilst working with many mosques, Islamic centres and organisations as the Project Lead for the World Assembly of Muslim Youths (WAMY) during the 2012 London Olympics, he encountered many Muslims covering the games for media outlets but noted that none of them were from Black or African Caribbean backgrounds. This made him feel that the Black Muslim experience at the 2012 Olympics was neither captured nor represented.

Abdul Kareem became determined to establish a media outfit that would fill the communication gaps between the Nigerian Muslim community and the general public as well as increase the profile of Black Muslim community activists. He added that although his media outfit has been online since 2012, he registered Salam Television and Magazine Limited, in late 2017, as one of the first, if not the first Nigerian Muslim-owned online ethnic media in the United Kingdom. It is an online television station that he considers as his contribution to the development of community institutions, especially with focus on Muslim experience. He narrates it was neither easy to find any bank loans for the business nor to motivate members of the community to invest in the idea. He had to go ahead with his personal savings.

In terms of patronage, some members of the Nigerian Muslim community believe that services related to the religion must always be free, except for few individuals and organisations, who after seeing the quality of services the station offers were able to pay some minimal charges. My community finds it easier to spend on social events despite our being obviously religious.

Abdul Kareem believes that the Covid-19 pandemic presented a boost for ethnic media practice in the community. Because most of the Islamic organisations and mosques have to connect remotely with their members online presence became more popular than ever. He noted that this change would lead to abundant broadcast materials in the near future, with attendant effects of improved quality and a boost in the number of individuals working in the growing Black Muslim ethnic media industry. He wished there were more collaborative efforts between Black ethnic media practitioners and Asian Muslims who are next in number and influence after the mainstream media practitioners in the United Kingdom.

"Anobi Jones" is a well-known name on Naija FM 101.1 London, a popular community radio station especially among the Yoruba-speaking ethnic groups. His real name is Abdul Razak Ayinde Abioye. As a broadcast media practitioner with over fifteen years experience in presentation and production on ethnic television and radio stations such as Passion TV, Faith TV, Oodua TV and Naija FM, he explains that as a strong believer in community service who sees the family as the core of the community, he became concerned with the rising number of family breakdown cases within the Black community, which according to him is negatively impacting on the general Black community.

I felt the need to lend a voice in the media but it was religion that prompted my full involvement in the media. At the wake of the London terror twin-attacks of June 29-30, 2007, I found the one-sided talks about Islam and Muslims on community media as destructive of our delicate unity and sought an avenue to bring people together for amicable discussions of our differences. That was what led to 'Faith United on Radio', a popular programme that featured community leaders and broadcast of Jumah prayers for the first time in our community. The latter content did not go well with some Muslim scholars and the attempt to identify agreeable leadership among the groups made me see the internal strife in the Nigerian Muslim community.



He resorted to playing the recordings of Sheikh Muhyideen Ajani Bello, a notable Nigerian Muslim preacher's sermons. It was a decision that cleared him from partisanship.

Anobi Jones enjoys being on air as a hobby but is not oblivious of the business part of it. He learnt the business the hard way when he invested in the promotion and sponsorship of artistes who "got wiser" than him when it came to finance. "I was still seeing the business at the planting season, but my artistes saw harvest time, I lost some capital but gained experience." He was quick to add that however, this is not the general practice in the Nigerian community, we are good people."

My relationship with the general Black business community has been cordial and mutually benefitting especially during Ramadan when I get my programmes fully sponsored. This post-Covid experience has created a platform for more educated and young Muslim scholars to emerge, I see more talent emerging and hope it would widen the reach of Black Muslim leadership that would appeal to wider audience.

Sister Nafeesa Ayeola's childhood dream is to become a presenter on television, hence her choice to make a career of broadcasting in London did not come as a surprise to many people around her. However, the cost of having an independent slot on television made her settle for radio broadcasting. Her weekly programme 'Sunnah And Self-Esteem' which comes on air 18:00 - 19:30 Hrs every Friday on Naija FM London, combines (Islamic) religious and social issues in order to have general appeal and possibly attract sponsorship which seems a challenge.



The African Muslim community seems to underestimate the power of the media, else I don't know how to explain why getting some of the Muslim scholars to speak on the programme becomes an uphill task. I have experienced several last minute disappointments in the studio when guests fail to turn up; thank God for plan B contents which save such days. Advertising is poor among our people. I've heard people say 'God will bless my business even if I don't advertise.' I wonder if that is not missing the point even according to the teachings of Islam regarding the need to put in our best efforts before handing over to God in prayer. It is intriguing however that the same set of people find it easier to spend in the promotion of their cultural identity. No doubt,

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we are very hard-working and a people who are keenly interested in education, but our use of the ethnic media needs improvement. It is interesting that we are very active on social media for social purposes.

Commenting on what else is needed to be done in order to place the Black Nigerian Muslim community in London at an enviable position, she identifies an urgent need to build strong networks and platforms where ideas and best practices are shared, with a view to penetrate beyond the community’s immediate market. Sister Nafeesa Ayeola concluded, “until we establish strong business and social networks amongst ourselves, the chances of us growing our community is very slim.”

I asked her if it is not a hopeless situation for ethnic media practice, her response was that, “The future is very bright, and that’s why I am still practising.”

Maroof Akintunde Adeoye is a recognised name in the Nigerian Muslim community leadership as Amir³⁹ of the Council of Nigerian Muslim Organisations (CNMO) and the President of a non-political social club - Ibadanland Development Association, United Kingdom. He is a management consultant, an accountant, chartered marketer and an author who pursued the dream of establishing a more cosmopolitan radio station for the Black community in 1998, unlike the existing stations which he sees more as “Yoruba ethnic, sectional and unregistered or pirate stations.” As a professional, he is not willing to take shortcuts. Reacting to my question about why did he venture into the media, Adeoye explains:



You need media to showcase who you are as an individual or a community; a media to have a voice, to clear ambiguity and misrepresentation of your ideals, you need media to put yourself out there in the full glare of those who might share your values, invest in your dreams and for your would-be service-users to see you. I was thinking big for a full-blown, general-interest, commercial station located in South East London but when the cost came to my table, it was daunting. The community saw it as a good project that would be grossly under-utilised, and that was it. I revisited the project in 2016, this time, with minimal cost and focused on digital broadcasting. The options are still open for me to work with a team on having the designed community station.

³⁹ Leader

Adeoye identifies not being strategic as the biggest challenge of the Black Muslim community in London. “We are generally reactionary, and hardly reach out to the non-Black Muslim communities who are more established than we are in this part of the world.” He expressed fear that the Nigerian Muslim community may lose the youth who are just forming their identity at a place they are growing up to see as their ‘home.’ We must create communal spaces and a good image the younger ones would be proud to identify with. Adeoye concluded that, “despite the prevalent challenges, the Nigerian Muslim youth got what it takes to be celebrated globally. The Asian Muslim community in the United Kingdom has done well in this respect, we cannot afford to be left behind.”

The success or otherwise of ethnic media practice depends highly on how it addresses the target audience’s yearnings, speaks their language, solves their problems, sells their products and adapts to the immediate environment where it operates. The ethnic media practitioner may not make great success in competing with the mainstream media, rather, it should take hold of and maximise the unreached demography of the population that constitutes the ethnic target audience. It must recreate the nostalgic feelings of home away from home in the older audience. Specifically, the Black Muslim ethnic media practitioner of Nigerian descent in the UK must build on the existing trust and unity in the community, and invest in the identity of the younger audience without overlooking the need to collaborate with other Muslim communities in order to exploit the strength in the Muslim diversity. Hopefully, these steps would keep the expressed ray of hope alive.

It is not in vain that these beautiful canaries and robins in the covered cage sing, how fulfilling it is to know that those for whom the sonorous songs are sung are forever attracted to the unending tunes from these familiar crooners.



OLAWALE HASSAN

Olawale Hassan is a creative writer and a broadcast journalist who voluntarily retired from the service of Lagos State Government as a Manager Programmes (Radio Lagos/ Ekofm) after his further studies and eventually relocating to live permanently in the UK. He carved a niche for himself as a versatile media content producer with a series of award-winning productions.