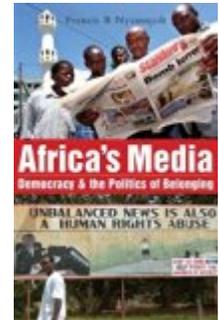**Francis Nyamnjoh.** *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging.* London and New York: Zed Books, 2005. 308 pp. $36.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-84277-583-7.

Reviewed by Sean Jacobs

This book has two aims: it is at once a detailed study of the Cameroonian media during struggles for democratization in that country since the early 1990s, and an attempt at writing a general theory of African media in the context of globalization and the post-Cold War period.

By all accounts Francis Nyamnjoh is well qualified to pursue such an ambitious project. He is well versed in media and communications debates on the continent, having completed his Ph.D. (awarded in 1990) in the sociology of communication at the University of Leicester for a study of the evolution of broadcasting in Cameroon. Following an initial career teaching in Cameroon, he worked as a professor of sociology at the University of Botswana between 1999 and 2001. There he published, among other things, on the widespread xenophobia in Botswana's media and its politics. That led to his current job as head of publications for the continent-wide Council for the Development of Research in Africa (CODESRIA) based in Dakar. From his Senegalese base, Nyamnjoh oversees the publication of the CODESRIA journal, *Africa Media Review*. This

book, *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, doubles as an attempt to present all his past research in one place. As a result, for those familiar with his work, there is not much that is new.

A basic assumption of the book is that media reflect and also shape African societies; the latter are marked by "continuities, interconnections, convivialities and creative marriages of differences" (p. 20). Liberal ideas of democracy have to compete with popular ideas of democracy informed by notions of African personhood and agency for the attention of the media. "If the media are sensitive to these apparent contradictions, as they are expected to be, their content should reflect ongoing efforts to negotiate conviviality between competing traditions, influences and expectations" (p. 20). At the same time, how well the media play their role as mediators depends on "the indicators of democracy used, and also how sensitive to the predicaments of ordinary Africans those indicators are" (p. 20).

The book consists of nine chapters. Six of these deal with media and democratization in

Cameroon. The first two chapters are taken up by the continental focus. These amount to a survey of the main characteristics of the African media landscape, including broadcasting, print media and Internet connectivity, despite the latter still being marginal in debates and impact on democracy and media in Africa. Nyamnjoh puts forward two basic theses: the first is that liberal democracy, and by extension a media system organized around the principles of the free market, deepens--instead of mitigates--the democratic deficit in Africa. The second theme is that liberal democracy's greatest challenge is the "politics of belonging." Nyamnjoh returns to these themes throughout the book.

For Nyamnjoh the political rhetoric about liberal democracy (originating in the West and diffused throughout the world) denies the possibility of inequality, inaccessibility and marginalization, and fails to take into account African realities. As he colorfully puts it early on in the book: "Implementing liberal democracy in Africa has been like trying to force onto the body of a full-figured person, rich in all cultural indicators of health with which Africans are familiar, a dress made to fit the slim, de-fleshed Hollywood consumer model of a Barbie-doll entertainment icon" (p. 25).

As a result, Nyamnjoh insists on taking seriously the disproportionate distribution of communications infrastructure and technology. He remains critical of much of the reform undertaken to correct information inequality. Nyamnjoh is very skeptical of civil society, declaring it on balance an obstacle to freedom of expression and media diversity. While he documents the many restrictions to prevent journalists from doing their job, he does not hesitate to blame journalists for their own predicament, accusing them of hiding frivolous journalism--and being manipulated by powerbrokers--behind professional codes.

He traces the current media configuration in many countries back to colonialism, arguing that nationalist rulers, instead of abolishing colonial public spheres, consolidated or extended them. As a result, diversity of media does not necessarily translate into diversity of perspectives. Poor, ordinary Africans are therefore left out. For example, though the end of apartheid in South Africa has led to some degree of black ownership and partnership in the media, this has not necessarily made the mainstream newspapers more representative of South Africa. Nyamnjoh quotes a study which shows that South Africa's print media has little relevance to the majority of its population and that the presence of more black journalists and news executives has not resulted in more or better coverage of black people's reality in that country.

More than state repression or market factures, one of the greatest challenges to post-independence media is the "politics of belonging." This is Nyamnjoh's second thesis. Nyamnjoh argues that voting along ethnic and regional lines suggests "that Africans might be more comfortable with a democracy in tune with their social background and their predicaments under the global economy" (p. 114). "Belonging" stands against the idea of individuals as citizens, emphasizing instead that Africans relate to democracy often as communities who "for various political, economic and cultural reasons, may be forced or may willingly offer to be 'subjects' or to straddle the world of liberties and subjections" (p. 17). As he points out, Africans continue to emphasize relationships and solidarity over the illusion of autonomy. The consequences of this, as he later illustrates, can only be negative for the media since ethnic and communal ties stifle critical debate.

This second thesis, with its troubling implications, is not however fully developed. Nyamnjoh's discussion is soon taken over by his particular focus on Cameroon during the period often dubbed "Africa's second liberation struggle"; that of the democratization movements of the 1990s that sprang up all over the continent in the wake of the Cold War's end.

For Nyamnjoh, Cameroon is a stand-in for the African continent ("Africa in miniature" is his phrase). Cameroon is the only country in Africa with a dual colonial heritage of French and English "cultures of democracy and media traditions, drawing from both in different ways to edify its postcolonial structures and practices" (p. 19). Specifically, the decade of democratization of the 1990s evidenced tensions between the Anglophone and Francophone communities in the country, and marked an overwhelming reluctance by the Francophone-dominated state to concede to Anglophone "values" of democracy and freedom. Cameroon also represents the continent's diversity in major indigenous populations, religions and cultural traditions, and, according to Nyamnjoh, is an excellent laboratory to study ethnicity and the politics of belonging.

Nyamnjoh is scathing in his analysis of how Cameroon's official media (state broadcasting institutions, the state print media and publishing corporations) fall short in fulfilling its democratic mandate of information and deliberation. That same media held a monopoly until 2000, serving as the propaganda of the ruling party and the country's president, Paul Biya, who has ruled Cameroon since 1982. The President treats the state television service CRTV as his personal property, manipulates state print media and shuts private media out of discussions of political power. As a result, private media become frivolous and the site for ethnically-based contests between national and local politicians. In this regard, Nyamnjoh reserves his harshest criticism for Francophone media in Cameroon, even though it also has faced bannings and much restriction. This is largely because of its unprofessional and unethical conduct in actively participating in the partisan skirmishes between and among government elites as well as between government and opposition (usually to the benefit of the government).

Nyamnjoh sees more potential in political cartoons as well as in a form of rumor as alternative media. According to Nyamnjoh, far from giving up, ordinary Africans have adopted various strategies, including publishing, in the face of increasing repression, going underground or using "alternative means of communication" such as the grapevine, political rumor, humor, parody, irony and derision. These are known variously around the continent as "Radio Trattoir" in Francophone Africa, "Radio Boca a Boca" in Lusophone Africa, and "Radio One Battery," "Bush Telegraph," "Pavement/Sidewalk Radio" or "Radio Mall" in Anglophone Africa. Those informal information sources are increasingly employed by poorer citizens frustrated with the mainstream (both state and private media) in Cameroon.

The book suffers from a number of problems related to its theoretical and empirical reach. The quarrel with liberal democracy is not a new insight (although Nyamnjoh's linking it with media systems is) and "belonging" is never really defined. Similarly, the most interesting part of the book for this reviewer, concerning rumor and cartoons, is contained in a very short chapter. Finally, it is not sure how much one can generalize from the specific case of Cameroon. However, studies of African media and its relation to debates about democracy and democratization are few and far between. Nyamnjoh's ambitious work on the continent should therefore be welcomed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica

Citation: Sean Jacobs. Review of Nyamnjoh, Francis. *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging.* H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. June, 2006.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11845