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TUNING IN TO PAVEMENT RADIO

STEPHEN ELLIS

THIS ARTICLE is an attempt to describe and define a phenomenon known all over Africa, for which there is no really satisfactory term in English but which is summed up in the French term *radio trottoir*, literally 'pavement radio'. The article contends that *radio trottoir* is a phenomenon worthy of observation and study by scholars, and that it is best understood in the context of the oral traditions and respect for oral culture which modern Africa has inherited from its past.

Perhaps the closest English translation of the term *radio trottoir* is 'bush telegraph', but this is unsatisfactory in that it is an old-fashioned metaphor: the telegraph was superseded decades ago, whereas the radio has for some 30 years been Africa's favourite modern news medium. Moreover, the bush is no longer a place where gossip is really hot, if ever it was. That distinction lies nowadays rather with the urban pavement, bar, market, living-room or taxi-park. That is where Africa's political pulse beats most strongly. So, rather than use an outmoded English metaphor to render the sense of *radio trottoir*, we may refer instead to 'pavement radio'. It may be defined as the popular and unofficial discussion of current affairs in Africa, particularly in towns.

Although pavement radio is a controversial medium, often mistrusted, feared or despised by politicians, journalists and academics, there is no doubt of its pervasive existence. Any inhabitant of Africa, familiar with the fact that the most important political news is often gleaned not from official news media but from conversations with friends and acquaintances, will recognize this. As befits its nature, pavement radio is more often talked about than written about. However, it is occasionally described in serious studies of African affairs,¹ and is treated with dry humour, for example, in a political novel written by a former prime minister of Congo.² It is often referred to (albeit indirectly, for reasons which will become evident) in newspapers published by African governments or subject to their control.

Unlike the press, television or radio, pavement radio is not controlled by any identifiable individual, institution or group of people. Of course,

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1. The best academic treatment is David Bettison, 'Rumour under Conditions of Charismatic Leadership and Racial Political Tension', *African Social Research*, 6 (1968), 413-62. I am grateful to Richard Hodder-Williams for this reference. See also Touré Keita, 'Radio trottoir', *Index on Censorship*, (1986), No. 5, p. 27; Ekambo Duasange Ndundu, 'Radio trottoir: ses lois tendancielles', *Analyses sociales*, (laboratoire d'analyses sociales de Kinshasa), 3, No. 4 (July-Aug 1986), pp. 56-61. Articles in *Politique Africaine* have also touched on the subject.

2. Henri Lopès, *Le pleurer-rire* (Paris).

individuals may, and do, seek to influence what is transmitted on the air-waves of pavement radio. But it is essentially anonymous and even democratic in that a story cannot be transmitted orally over any considerable distance or for any substantial period unless it is judged to be of interest by a significant number of people.

Pavement radio has certain favourite topics of discussion. It thrives on scandal in the sense of malicious news, and rarely has anything good to say about any prominent person or politician. Transmitters of pavement radio, that is to say ordinary people in Africa meeting in the course of their daily round, delight in casting doubt on the good name of a politician, ascribing improper or dishonest actions. One government minister will be said to have completed a corrupt transaction. Names will be named and sums of money quoted. Explanations will be advanced towards the behaviour of the political elite.

Clearly pavement radio is related to a phenomenon known in all societies at all times and generally called by pejorative names such as 'rumour' or 'gossip'. And it is true that pavement radio includes generous helpings of rumour and gossip. However, an examination of the social role and pedigree of pavement radio in Africa reveals it to be qualitatively different from either rumour or gossip and to have a quite different social and political function from its counterpart in Europe or other societies which have become essentially literate, not just in terms of the numbers of people who can read and write, but in the cultural significance attached to the written word.

The fact that pavement radio in Africa operates within an essentially oral culture causes it to have special features of both structure and content. An African audience gives far more weight to the spoken word than a European one, which generally believes little, and certainly little concerning national politics, that is not written or broadcast on radio or television. Moreover pavement radio is characteristically animated by certain social groups or in certain situations which listeners instinctively recognize as giving increased authority to rumour. The most believable purveyors of information are likely to be those whose jobs give them some access either to top-level gossip, such as government drivers, servants and hairdressers, or people with wide social or geographical contacts, such as market-sellers and long-distance lorry drivers. In Mali, for example, discussion and information on current affairs is especially conveyed in what are called in Malian French *grins*, regular social meetings of friends for relaxation and discussion.³

Music and dance remain important for conveying political messages, as they always have been. In a study of popular songs and poetry in colonial Mozambique, Leroy Vail and Landeg White concluded that poetry was seen as a proper form for statements about power, and that even in a generally repressive climate criticism was permissible in the form of songs. The

3. Personal communication by Tiébilé Dramé.

form made the content lawful.⁴ If this insight is also true of Zaïre, it throws an interesting light on the tough position taken by the government of Zaïre, whose Censorship Commission of Music, established in 1967, has to pass all songs before they can be performed in public.⁵

So not all rumours have equal weight. In part, their credibility depends on who recounts them and in what context. Over time pavement radio selects the most credible rumours and repeats them, helping to form popular consciousness.

Some examples of pavement radio broadcasts

African pavement radio is also different from mere rumour, at least sometimes, in its choice of subject, often discussing matters of public interest or importance which have been the subject of no official announcement. To some extent, of course, this is a result of censorship. A person who hears an item of news orally transmitted—or, for those who prefer, who hears a rumour—may find that the broadcast and printed news media are silent on a subject which is being widely discussed among the populace at large, or at least that these same news media offer an inadequate explanation. Popular rumour, for instance, might offer information on a demonstration which has gone unmentioned in the national press, or it might offer information about the causes of the demonstration or of casualties sustained which are at odds with facts and figures announced by the national media of press and broadcasting. Thus an important riot in Madagascar's capital, Antananarivo, is said to have left over 50 people dead in December 1984.⁶ It was a riot charged with political implications since many of the dead belonged to a youth organization used as a security force by the ruling party. Following the riot, the government dismissed several leading army and police officials. Yet the events went unmentioned in the government-owned media and received only a belated mention in a Catholic Church newspaper,⁷ although thousands of Antananarivo's citizens had witnessed the killings. The riots provided a topic for discussion on pavement radio for weeks.

It seems then that pavement radio's listeners and broadcasters—the two can hardly be distinguished—feel that their medium can retail information of public interest. Politicians and news managers may disagree, but the African public reserves the right to decide what is interesting and important. This can make pavement radio highly subversive.

Some subjects discussed on pavement radio may not be of obvious interest for high politics but relate to tradition and myth, underlining the extent to which pavement radio is a contemporary form of the oral traditions and oral histories which have been the subject of analysis by modern historians.

4. Leroy Vail and Landeg White, 'Forms of Resistance: songs and perceptions of power in colonial Mozambique', *American Historical Review*, 88, (1983), pp. 887–8.

5. Article 19, *Freedom of Information and Expression in Zaïre* (London, 1987), pp. 28–9.

6. *La lettre de l'Océan Indien*, 15 December 1984.

7. *Lakroa*, 23 December 1984.

Thus pavement radio sometimes transmits stories about witchcraft and other phenomena which, to a Western observer, can seem irrational or bizarre. These repay closer study in the light of the imagery of popular culture which retains a foundation in African religion, folklore, and oral history.

A specific example of this may be taken from Madagascar again. In Antananarivo, a rumour arose in late 1981 that a number of male corpses had been discovered which had been castrated. The genitals were said to have been used for ritual purposes. The stories were widely believed, the wicked deed being attributed to North Korean military or civilian aid workers in the island, who were generally unpopular.

This bizarre rumour has an interesting pedigree. The theme of a group of foreigners seeking to acquire human organs for mysterious purposes is well-known in Madagascar, and has been recorded by anthropologists. Usually the organ thus used is said to be the human heart, or sometimes the liver. One anthropologist, having encountered the belief that all Europeans are heart-thieves, interpreted it as a cultural metaphor. European culture, perceived as a corrosive influence on traditional Malagasy culture, could steal a person's heart in the sense of turning affections away from the culture of the ancestors and towards an imported European ideology.⁸ This may be satisfactory as an academic explanation or decoding. The fact remains that many Malagasy sincerely believe in heart-thief stories and are terrified by them. Moreover the belief is old. The first known reference to it dates from the late 19th century, while very similar reports date from as early as 1824, when British missionaries reported that people feared them as kidnappers. They explained it as a result of the slave trade, when foreigners had taken people away never to return.⁹ So an unbelievable story heard on pavement radio may turn out to have a deep meaning and a long history, in this case relating to the way in which many Malagasy consider foreigners and the intrusion of foreign culture.

Such weird stories are not unique to Madagascar. In early 1982, popular opinion in Accra attributed a series of murders in the Volta region of Ghana to the action of government officials, said to be motivated by the desire to harness powerful magic.¹⁰ One source records a spate of rumours in Malawi in the 1960s alleging that corpses had been drained of their blood, which was to be sold to South Africa. This too is an old myth, said to have its origin or functional explanation in the flow of manpower from Malawi to work in the South African mines.¹¹

8. M. E. F. Bloch, *Placing the Dead* (London and New York, 1971), pp. 31-2.

9. G. Berg, *Historical Traditions and the Foundations of Monarchy in Imerina* (Univ. of California, Berkeley, Ph.D., 1975), p. 16.

10. Association of Recognized Professional Bodies, Accra, *News Bulletin* Vol. II, no. 2, 28 July 1982.

11. David Williams, *Malawi, the Politics of Despair* (New York 1978), pp. 252-3; G. Shepperson and T. Price, *Independent African* (Edinburgh U.P., 1958), pp. 9-10.

In all these cases orally transmitted rumours are superficially absurd but may be seen to be of political and cultural significance. Their meaning is implanted in local images and metaphors. They are not necessarily archaic in the sense of being marginal to the modern political process. For example, David Lan's remarkable study of Zimbabwe's liberation war, which admittedly relates to a rural environment, shows how supernatural beliefs rooted in tradition can be crucial to modern political developments.¹² Urban rumours too are often based on traditional symbolism.

Rumour, news, myth and politics

Nobody more than African politicians appreciates the fact that pavement radio is widely listened to and believed. In Cameroon, which has a strict official control of information, one coup attempt reported by pavement radio in 1979, almost certainly with some accuracy, appears to have gone unmentioned in any written or broadcast bulletin. Another coup attempt in April 1984 certainly did not go unreported, but provides a clear example of how pavement radio presents a problem to the political authorities. Official accounts of the April 1984 coup attempt were so inadequate, particularly in regard to the precise origins and aftermath of the bloody fighting in Yaounde, that *radio trottoir* recorded a spate of rumours about the causes of the coup attempt, the number of casualties, and the ensuing hunt for those implicated. The rumours became so widespread and worrying to the government that President Paul Biya felt obliged to mention the subject in a speech broadcast on national radio on 20 September 1984 which is worth quoting:¹³

As for the truth, many of you confuse it with rumours. But rumour is not the truth. Truth comes from above; rumour comes from below. Rumour is created in unknown places, then spread by thoughtless and often malicious people, people who want to give themselves a spurious importance. Cameroonians, pay no heed to the rumours which are spreading through the country.

President Biya's remarks constitute a remarkably frank appraisal of the political significance of pavement radio by a most authoritative source. That which is not officially sanctioned, President Biya told his listeners, is not true. But information reported from above in Africa, that is from official sources, and which therefore purports to be authoritative, is often insufficiently detached or detailed to satisfy the public. In Ghana, an official survey in 1983 found that citizens were more inclined on principle to believe rumour than official news.¹⁴

12. David Lan, *Guns and Rain* (London, James Currey 1985).

13. Quoted in Filio Bamose, 'Cameroun: de la rumeur publique', *Afrique-Asie* No. 332, p. 32.

14. Private communication.

The inadequacy of official news is partly because it is in short supply. According to a United Nations survey, Africa and its offshore islands had 220 daily newspapers in 1964, of which 169 were in black Africa. One estimate was that the 1964 total had fallen to some 156 daily papers by 1977. Of these, Arab Africa accounted for 35 dailies, white Rhodesia and South Africa for 24, Mauritius and Madagascar for 30, and the remaining 36 states had only 67 daily newspapers. Many of those papers were subject to some degree of censorship. The number of readers was some 5 million. There was one newspaper for every 1,000 sub-Saharan Africans. In the same year, 1977, there were only 11 television sets for every 1,000 Africans.¹⁵

Without doubt, the most important modern news medium in Africa is the radio. Since the invention of the transistor in 1948, and its subsequent introduction to Africa, the ownership of personal radios has increased at impressive speed. By 1977 sub-Saharan Africa was reckoned to contain 630 radio transmitters and 20 million receivers, or 62 radios for every 1,000 people. More recent statistics for East Africa indicate that the total is now much higher. By 1987 Kenya alone, for example, had an estimated 3 million radio sets.¹⁶

Even so, people do not derive all their news from the radio. The available audience research appears to suggest that many people in Africa listen to the radio primarily for music and general interest programmes. For a variety of reasons, they are less influenced by current affairs or news bulletins.¹⁷ Possibly, the same could be true of listeners the world over.

Even when an African has a radio, and is seeking political news, he or she is unlikely to find fully satisfactory accounts from local radio stations which, as with newspapers, are controlled by governments and which broadcast news which the African public appears to find anodyne. Radio-owners can, and do, listen in large numbers to international radio stations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio France Internationale, Deutsche Welle, or Afrique No. 1, which are often said to carry more hard-hitting news that appears, to judge from audience response, to rouse strong feelings of hostility or approval in various African quarters. In 1982 Radio France Internationale was reckoned to have some 12 million listeners in Africa, and the other international stations probably have comparable or higher numbers.¹⁸

Information compiled outside a given country, especially when it is edited and broadcast by a radio station financed by a former colonial power, inevitably acquires a certain slant, as African information ministers and some intellectuals are not slow to point out. Moreover foreign correspondents based in Africa can have difficulty acquiring and filing stories. So, like any

15. International Press Institute, *A Rural Press for Africa* (London 1979), p. 4.

16. BBC World Service, press release, no date.

17. Graham Mytton, *Mass Communication in Africa* (London 1983), pp. 20-1.

18. *Africa Confidential*, Vol. 23 No. 12 (9 June 1982), p. 8.

news media, international radio stations are liable to transmit only a partial or distorted version of the complex truth. They may make errors of judgement or fact. News producers or editors may even be prevailed upon to transmit information which has been tailored for political purposes.

These remarks on the state of modern mass communication in Africa help explain the reaction of the imaginary African who hears an intriguing rumour from a friend and who is unable to check its truth by other means even if he wishes to do so. Part of the explanation for the importance of rumour in African political life, therefore, lies in the absence of persuasive written or broadcast news. Like the *samizdat* of pre-*glasnost* Eastern Europe, rumour is of great political sensitivity as a consequence.

Governments the world over, of course, manage news as a means of political control. In this respect African governments are no different from those of other continents. However African governments, with exceptions such as Nigeria and Mauritius, exert an official control over the media which is stricter than in many other parts of the world.

This is a sensitive matter to discuss, since it has been the subject of some partisan and sometimes racist comment. African governments and intellectuals have sometimes argued that to call for press freedom is itself an example of Europe imposing its cultural values. They contend that free speech outside a circumscribed political sphere is not an African tradition. It is relevant that this argument, though not devoid of truth, is often cynically used to justify tyranny. But foreign liberals, if they go to the other extreme in championing unrestricted freedom of speech, may be guilty of ignoring some of the subtlety and sophistication of African political culture, or of underestimating the importance for Africa of maintaining political stability.

For present purposes, this argument is intended only to emphasize the fact that it is widely acknowledged that the broadcast media occupy a sensitive political space, and that the role of oral media in this regard has been less often noted.

The repression and manipulation of oral news

The political significance of this conceptual space may be gauged by the attempts made to control it.¹⁹ Several African governments are said to employ rumour-mongers whose task is to place pro-government material in the public domain. Incidentally, my source for this is *radio trottoir*. On firmer ground, many African governments have been known to arrest people

19. For a general discussion of how government rhetoric is received, and often subverted by the use of humour, in popular discourse, see C. Dubuch, 'Langage du Pouvoir: pouvoir du langage', *Politique Africaine*, 20 (December 1985), pp. 44-53.

suspected of peddling rumours critical of the government, and indeed this is often regarded as a serious offence.²⁰

The practice of arresting rumour-mongers on the grounds of subversion has an impressive pedigree. At least one old African law-code designated rumour-mongering as a capital offence.²¹ This raises the question of how, in pre-literate Africa, governments distinguished between legitimate oral communication and unlawful rumour. The answer would appear to be: in much the same way as modern Africans distinguish between worthless rumour and important oral information, that is by reference to what is said, by whom and in what context.

All African politicians are acutely aware of the power of rumour. Their predecessors have known for centuries that this can be rendered harmless, or even useful, by carefully channelling its expression. There is a West African tradition that dissident opinions could be spoken into a gourd, where the dissident could vent his feelings without inspiring subversion.²² A modern variant, whereby the sting is taken out of popular rumour, is that used by the government of Gabon under the name *Makaya*. This is taken to be the name of an imaginary common man, described as a government driver, someone who is not part of the elite but who overhears some of its secrets. *Makaya* is, in fact, the archetypal originator of rumours and exponent of pavement radio. The daily column published in the Gabonese daily newspaper *L'Union* is signed by the imaginary *Makaya*, in fact the pen-name of a senior journalist said to work in the presidency. The column is highly critical of individual ministers, and will often reproduce rumours which are currently circulating on the streets of Libreville. It is the only genuinely popular item in a turgid newspaper. It is notable however that the column never criticises President Omar Bongo, whom it refers to as '*Le Makaya d'honneur*', implying that he, alone of all the elite, is in touch with the feelings of the man or woman in the street.²³ President Bongo uses very skillfully the populist technique of attacking the government of which he is the head, criticising its corruption, incompetence et cetera. Thus he succeeds at a stroke both in reducing the power of popular rumour and in keeping government ministers in a semi-permanent fear of denunciation by the press. In June 1986 President Bongo took the *Makaya* technique still further when he unexpectedly entered a television studio for the broadcast of a programme in which government ministers are questioned by an audience. The

20. Amnesty International, *Annual Report 1988* (London, 1988). Cf. N. Mwambungu, Member of Parliament for Karonga North constituency in Malawi: 'A whisper which would lead to the breakdown of the Malawi government will be treated as treason', quoted in Williams, *Malawi*, p. 229.

21. François Callet (trans. G. S. Chapus and E. Ratsimba), *Histoire des Rois* (revised ed., Antananarivo, 1974-8), Vol. III, pp. 93-4.

22. Joseph Ki-Zerbo, 'Africa—silent continent?' *Index on Censorship*, No. 2 (1986), pp. 16-18.

23. Jean-Pierre Challard, 'Signé Makaya!', *Africa International* (December 1985), pp. 33-6.

President proceeded to humiliate the unfortunate Minister of Social Security by asking him about his salary, his secretary's salary and the functioning of his department. Probably few Gabonese are fooled by these antics. They are aware that nothing happens in Gabon without the implicit or explicit approval of the President. Nonetheless Makaya, and his selective transmission of rumours from *radio trottoir*, is a useful political device.

Pavement radio and oral history

If popular opinion, including urban popular opinion, needs political news, it also needs history in some shape or form. Twenty-five years ago, when Western academics began to study African history in significant numbers, it was fashionable to suggest that oral histories were dying out, and that they were known only to a dying generation of old people who had access to the pre-colonial heritage. Oral history had been replaced by documentary history, just as princes and big men had been replaced by political parties. But the passage of time has demonstrated that popular oral discourse on politics, often in a highly individual form which draws on African images, continues to thrive in Africa's towns.

Pavement radio in other words should be seen in the light of oral tradition and treated as a descendant of the more formal oral histories and genealogies associated with ruling dynasties and national rituals. Just as those older oral histories enshrined national constitutions, with king-makers, priests or others able to pronounce upon the legitimacy of royal claims and actions, so does pavement radio, the modern equivalent, represent a populist restraint on government. This perhaps explains why pavement radio so often reports malicious stories about politicians. It is for the same reason that, in less modern communities, gossip and indeed witchcraft allegations often have an egalitarian effect, punishing individuals who threaten to become too much more powerful than their neighbours.²⁴ In the same way pavement radio cuts down to size politicians who are often perilously unconstrained by paper constitutions which they do not respect. For the poor and the powerless, pavement radio is a means of self-defence. At the same time, it should be noted, *radio trottoir* often expresses admiration for the enterprise and acquisitiveness of the very politicians whom it lambasts for their corruption. This paradox is also found in village politics.²⁵ It seems to express deeply-held attitudes towards power and wealth wherever it is encountered.

If it is true that pavement radio contains a traditional element of limiting the power of politicians and magnates, then it is likely that modern oral tradition probably contains, or itself represents, a means of remembering history. Little academic work appears to have been done on how the vibrant popular oral culture of modern times assimilates current events into

24. Peter Geschiere, *Village Communities and the State* (London, 1982), pp. 45-54.

25. Geschiere, *Village Communities*, pp. 45-54.

history. The most scientific work available on the subject, done by teams of researchers recording rumours in Malawi in 1959, suggests that pavement radio plays an important role in cementing popular belief in certain ideas and in propagating an enduring view of important political events.²⁶ There are also some interesting clues as to how this may happen. Roger Koumabila-Abougoué has recorded how a popular cult in eastern Gabon in the 1950s grew up around a fetish named after General de Gaulle.²⁷ A popular interpretation of elite politics, in this case the career of General de Gaulle, was transformed into a politically important anti-colonial movement in religious form. It is said that the late president Kwame Nkrumah is remembered in parts of northern Ghana as a mythical creature who married a water-spirit.²⁸ This is not only a tradition of a type quite commonly used to account for the origin of new dynasties, but may also relate to the fact that Nkrumah married an Egyptian woman, hence someone from outside the usual frame of reference in northern Ghana. It would be interesting to know how this modern remembrance relates to those stories about Nkrumah which were current in the area thirty years ago.

These last examples from Gabon and Ghana are not of recent date and come from rural areas. But they do hint at the extent to which popular oral culture, which uses pavement radio for its communication, can retain a memory of a political fact and situate it within a mythological framework in an astonishingly short time. Already, to take a more recent example, we hear that the townspeople of Conakry in Guinea do not believe that Ahmed Sekou Touré really died in 1984, but that he left power and is still living elsewhere.

All this suggests that pavement radio transmits more than just idle gossip. Even the most sensational allegations are at least revealing of popular opinion. They must be, to be repeated and considered believable. As anthropologists and politicians have always known, and as historians seem now to accept, these opinions are related in Africa to religious forms and to other quasi-mystical forms of consciousness. C. M. Toulabor's study of the government of Gnassingbé Eyadéma in Togo, for example, is an illuminating and highly original blend of documentary study and information gleaned from *radio trottoir*.²⁹ What makes it a work of valuable scholarship is the manner in which this is put into the context of local religious cults and the legitimation of power through religion. This is a model of how *radio trottoir* can be used intelligently by scholars. Oral history is not dead. It is alive and living in Africa.

26. Bettison, 'Rumour under conditions of charismatic leadership'.

27. Roger Koumabila-Abougoué, "'N'gole", un fétiche anti-colonialiste de l'après-guerre (1945-1955)', *La Semaine Africaine*, 10-16 January 1985, pp. 15-16.

28. M. Anafu, 'The CPP and the chiefs', *West Africa*, 10 December 1984, pp. 2518-20.

29. Comi Toulabor, *Le Togo sous Eyadéma* (Paris, 1986).