

Evolution of Indigenous Language Press in Nigeria: Historical Overview of Yoruba Language Newspapers (1859–1990)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the emergence and significant roles of Yoruba language newspapers and their publishers in pre- and post-independence Nigeria. Historical methods, utilising primary documents from archives and libraries and secondary source testimonies, were employed. The research was anchored on Democratic Participant, Social Responsibility, and Libertarian Media Theories. Findings reveal that over a dozen individually published Yoruba language newspapers (1859-1990) were deeply committed to local political, economic, cultural, and religious issues. Their commitment to localism, portrayal of Nigerian nationalists, and anti-colonial political reportage ensured their popularity among the Yoruba populace. The study concludes that indigenous languages are optimal for media communication with local populaces. It recommends that media communicate in indigenous languages to foster positive economic and political development in local and urban communities, ensure local news access, fulfil information delivery obligations, enable public opinion formation and democratic participation, thereby sustaining the traditions of indigenous language newspaper pioneers.

Methodology Historical methods utilising primary documents from archives and libraries, and secondary source testimonies	Key Period Analysis of Yoruba language newspapers (1859-1990) in Nigeria	Main Finding Over a dozen newspapers deeply committed to local politics, culture, and anti-colonial nationalism
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Keywords: Indigenous language newspapers, localism, communities, Yoruba populace, colonialism/nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

19th-century Nigeria's local language newspaper development was influenced by religion and local politics. Early newspapers were closely linked to Christian missionaries who introduced Christianity (Akinseloyin, 2020; Onyenankeya, 2021). Pre- and post-independence nationalist politics further spurred the proliferation of Yoruba language newspapers (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020).

Arrival of Christian Missionaries

Christian missionaries arrived in mid-19th century Nigeria (Akinseloyin, 2020). Major missions—CMS, Methodist, Presbyterian (Scottish), ECWA, Adventist, and Roman Catholic—began evangelical work by the 1840s, with other Christian sects following. Their initial aim to spread Christianity ultimately led to the establishment of churches, schools, and Western civilisation in Nigerian society (Onyenankeya, 2021).

01	02	03
Missionary Arrival (1840s)	First Yoruba Newspaper (1859)	Nationalist Movement (1900s-1960)
Multiple Christian missions established evangelical operations, introducing Western education and printing technology (Akinseloyin, 2020).	Rev. Henry Townsend established "Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba" as the first indigenous language newspaper (Ogbiten, 2010).	The indigenous language press played crucial roles in anti-colonial politics and independence movements (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020).

Through their evangelical projects, missionaries promoted English and indigenous language literacy via formal education (Onyenankeya, 2021). During their religious campaigns, the earliest missionaries established printing presses as early as 1846 and 1854, followed by indigenous language newspapers (Ogbiten, 2010). Though intended for Christian propagation, these newspapers ventured into political journalism, local economic issues, and advocated for the abolition of slavery, functioning as a discursive parliament and fostering nationalist agitation (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020).

Rev. Henry Townsend of the CMS mission, Abeokuta, South-West Nigeria, founded the first Yoruba language newspaper on 3rd December 1859 (Ogbiten, 2010). Titled "Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba," it printed four pages of religious and local community news in Yoruba. An English language version was later added, making it a bilingual newspaper. "Iwe Irohin..." was Nigeria's first printed and circulated informative communication medium (Ogbiten, 2010).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Nigerian historians and academics have studied indigenous language publications, but Yoruba newspapers receive limited specific attention. The 1859 Yoruba newspaper pioneered Nigerian journalism, necessitating specific historiographical research into the indigenous Yoruba language press. Existing histories of the Nigerian press—spanning book chapters, newspapers, and journal articles—inadequately elaborate on indigenous language newspaper issues. Though scholars like Coker (1968), Omu (1978), Akinfeleye (1985), Duyile (1987, 2019), Ogunsina (1992), and Oduntan (2005) document press histories, none adequately highlight the indigenous language press's importance, societal role, or commitment to domestic and local issues. This gap requires addressing.

Research Gap <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited specific attention to Yoruba language newspapers• Inadequate elaboration of indigenous language press issues• Missing analysis of domestic and local commitments	Historical Significance <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1859 Yoruba newspaper pioneered journalism in Nigeria• Need for specific historiographical research• Importance in Nigerian society understudied
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This study aims to provide new knowledge by empirically examining the emergence and roles of local Yoruba language newspapers in religion, local and colonial politics, and their benefits to Nigerians.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1. Examine Yoruba language newspapers published in Nigeria from 1859 through the 1990s.
2. Identify their proprietors/founders and the reasons for their establishment.
3. Determine their role in Nigerian social, religious, and political affairs.
4. Ascertain their role in anti-colonial agitations for Nigeria's independence and support for nationalists during the 'war' of independence.
5. Identify their editorial policies and trends in promoting public literacy and welfare (economic, social, and political).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What was the genesis of Yoruba language newspaper publication in Nigeria?
2. What role did the first Yoruba language newspaper play during its existence?
3. Who spearheaded and published the various Yoruba language newspapers?
4. What were their objectives and philosophies regarding newspaper operation?
5. What roles were assigned to these newspapers, and how did they benefit society?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Libertarian Media Theory, Democratic Participant Media Theory, and Social Responsibility Theory. Libertarian Media Theory posits that publications should be free from prior censorship, with no restrictions on legally collected information or its dissemination across national frontiers.

Social Responsibility Theory asserts media should fulfil societal obligations by adopting professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, balance, and objectivity. Democratic Participant Media Theory advocates dismantling government bureaucratic media control systems for easier public access. It promotes media pluralism to prevent monopoly by the wealthy and powerful, fostering decentralisation, localism, and multiplicity through small-scale operations like community newspapers or radio. This enables small groups, individuals, or communities to own and operate media tailored to local information needs.

Libertarian Media Theory

Publications should be free from prior censorship, with no restrictions on legally collected information.

Social Responsibility Theory

Media should fulfil obligations to society through professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, and balance.

Democratic Participant Media Theory

Advocates media decentralisation, localism, and community-owned small-scale newspapers serving local information needs.

Asemah (2011) observes that such a media system enables public expression of views, fostering active participation in democratic governance.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed Library/Documentary Research. Data were collected from the National Library, examining published Yoruba-language newspapers, related documents, and biographies of erstwhile and contemporary indigenous Yoruba-language newspaper publishers. The National Archives' reserve unit also offered insights into various local-language newspapers.

Research Design Library/Documentary Research examining published Yoruba-language newspapers and related documents.	Data Sources National Library archives, publisher biographies, and National Archives' reserve unit materials.	Approach Historical analysis of primary and secondary sources from the 1859-1990 period.
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LITERATURE REVIEW – AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

Indigenous-language journalism in Nigeria began in the 19th century, coinciding with intensive Christian missionary expeditions in West Africa. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) spearheaded Nigeria's first indigenous-language newspaper, "Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba Ati Yoruba". Its founder, Reverend Henry Townsend (see Figure 1), was an early British missionary sent by the C.M.S. UK mission. His objective was to establish a Christian mission in Abeokuta, an ancient Yoruba community, converting the populace and developing social infrastructure, churches, and schools to promote literacy and civilisation in the native Egba Kingdom.



Figure 1: Illustration of early newspaper printing in colonial Nigeria

Following encouraging evangelical success since 1846, Townsend established a printing press in 1854 to print religious literature, promote Christian evangelism, and advance religious and formal education (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020). By 1859, recognising the community's adequate literacy in native and English languages, he launched his Yoruba newspaper, "*Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba Ati Yoruba*" (meaning "The Newspaper for the Egba and Yoruba people") (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020).

His biographer, George Townsend, in "*Memoirs of Rev. Henry Townsend*", noted the newspaper's multi-dimensional objectives, primarily to disseminate religious information to the Egba community. Headland, in "*Brief Sketches of C.M.S. Missionary 1836-1878*", corroborated these aims, stating Townsend utilised his newspaper for various purposes, including converting natives to Christianity and for the political education of the Abeokuta community, especially its elites.



Printing Press Established

Rev. Townsend established a printing press in 1854 for religious literature and newspaper production (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020).



First Yoruba Newspaper

"*Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba Ati Yoruba*" launched 3 December 1859 as a pioneering indigenous publication (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020).



Multiple Objectives

Aimed at religious information dissemination, political education, literacy development, and community engagement.

Committed to fostering the "habit of seeking information by reading," Townsend **utilised** the "Iwe Irohin" to advance knowledge and literacy (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020). As Akinfeleye (1985, p. 28) observed, "Townsend spread his Christian ministry by mass communication over Badagry, Lagos, and most parts of Egbaland." Alabi (2003) noted that "Iwe Irohin" primarily featured religious and social news, including church officials' movements for ordinations, baptisms, and confirmations, and announcements of deaths and births, thereby informing church workers and the community (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020).

Citing Coker (1968), Alabi (2003) highlighted "Iwe Irohin's" crucial role during a period of mutual hostility and communication difficulties that created uncertain conditions and endangered lives and property. Archived editions reveal its coverage of general interest, non-religious news (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020), including the slave trade, church affairs, Egba and colonial administrative politics, and legitimate commerce. Analysis shows its editorial direction consistently emphasised religious, social, economic, and local political news (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020).

An English language edition commenced a few years after the newspaper gained significant readership across the Egba kingdom, Lagos, Badagry, and other Yoruba towns. Townsend simultaneously published two "Iwe Irohin" editions: the Yoruba language edition on the twentieth of each month, and the English language edition on the fourth, both sold at the same cover price. Duyile (1987) records that "Iwe Irohin" also featured local advertisements from mercantile entrepreneurs and government agencies, alongside church notices.

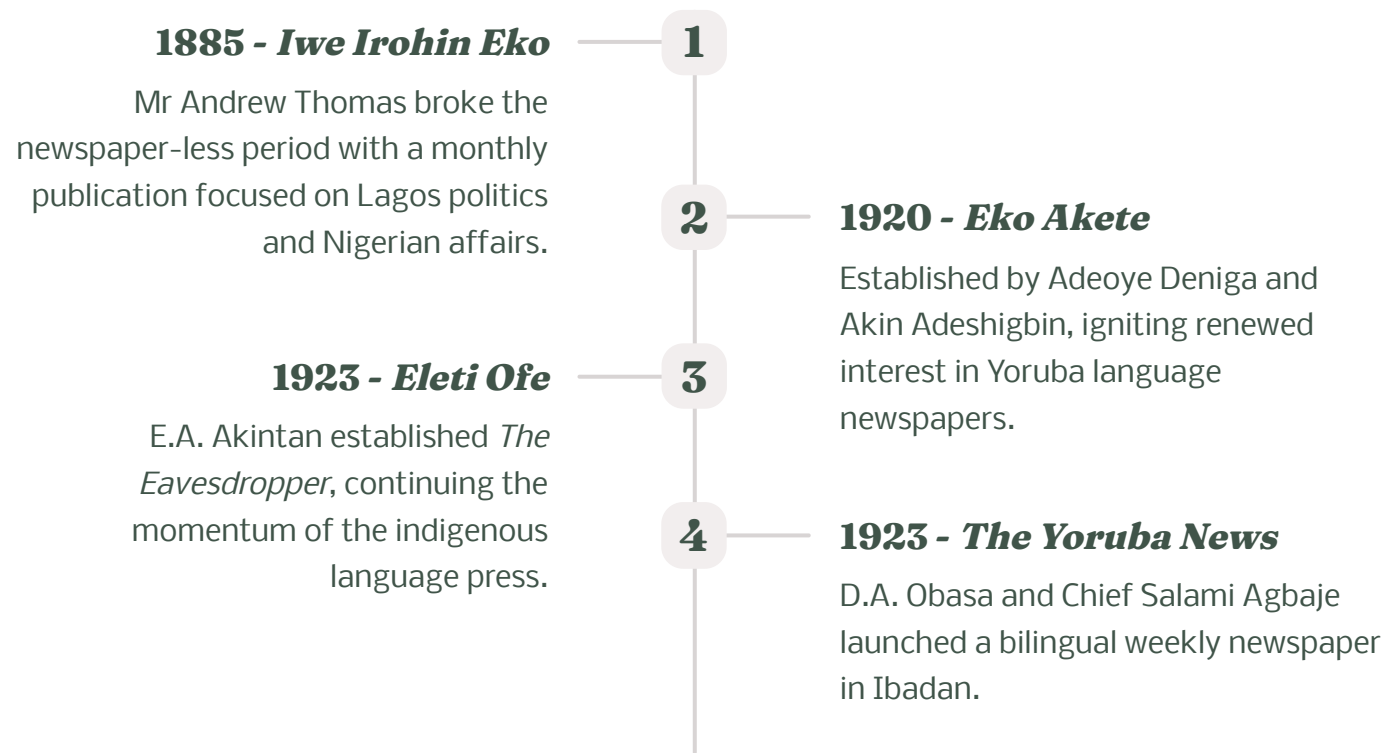
Rev. Townsend's Yoruba language editions were more numerous and popular, enjoying wider readership before publication ceased in 1867 (Ogbonda & Anim, 2020). The collapse of "Iwe Irohin" stemmed from the "Ifole uprising," a conflict involving violent protests against European settlers in Abeokuta, who were accused of interfering in the community's economic and social affairs. Though not a religious conflict—Christianity having been accepted—Townsend's printing press suffered massive destruction during the "Ifole" riots, abruptly ending the first Yoruba language newspaper's publication in 1867.

The First Newspaperless Period (1868-1885)

Between 1868 and 1885, a lull in 19th-century newspaper enterprise ensued, with no one attempting to emulate Rev. Townsend. The colonial government faced no media opposition while strengthening its hold on Nigeria and the Lagos Colony. However, in December 1885, Nigerian Mr. Andrew Thomas followed Townsend's initiative, launching a monthly publication, "Iwe Irohin Eko" (The Newspaper for Lagos Metropolis). While dedicated to Lagos politics and Nigerian affairs, its pages were dominated by issues specific to Lagos. Andrew Thomas's investment broke the long silence in newspapering following the abrupt collapse of "Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba Ati Yoruba" in 1867.

The Anglican Mission (C.M.S.) launched its short-lived monthly newspaper, *Iwe Eko*, covering Christian life and Lagos business news. In 1910, the C.M.S. again published *Nigbati Owo Ba Dile*, a Yoruba translation of *In Leisure Hours*, originally printed in England and circulated across C.M.S. Christendom in Europe and Africa.

Vernacular (Yoruba) newspapers rapidly emerged from 1920. The first, *Eko Akete*, founded by Mr. Adeoye Deniga and famous Lagos printer Mr. Akin Adeshigbin, inspired many subsequent newspapers. *Eletí Ofe* (*Eavesdropper*) was founded in Lagos in 1923 by distinguished Yoruba elite Mr. E.A. Akintan (Duyile, 2019).



In May 1923, *The Yoruba News*, a bilingual weekly newspaper, was launched in Ibadan by D.A. Obasa and Chief Salami Agbaje (Salawu, 2003, p. 93). The 1920s saw many indigenous Yoruba newspapers published to satisfy socio-political needs (Ogunsina, 1992). *Eko Akete*, founded by Adeoye Deniga in 1922, was among the longest-lasting, largely fulfilling its mission of fostering newly awakened nationalism among Nigerians (Folarin & Mohammed, 1996, p. 103) by critically assessing colonial Governors of Lagos on taxation and water rates imposed on Lagosians.

Indigenous Yoruba newspapers fostered nationalism and opposed colonial rule, as noted by Alabi (2003, in Akinfeleye and Okoye, Eds.) (Duyile, 2019; Folarin & Mohammed, 1996; Salawu, 2003). In 1925, amidst intense anti-colonial activities by nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Mbonu Ojike, and Obafemi Awolowo, Mr. Awoliyi, an outspoken Lagos personality, established "*Eko Igbein*," another Yoruba newspaper, in Lagos. That same year, Herbert Macaulay also launched Nigeria's first daily newspaper, the English-language "*Lagos Daily Mail*," which unsettled British colonial leaders (Duyile, 2019).

Two years later, Isaac B. Thomas launched "*Akede Eko*," a Yoruba newspaper on Lagos Island. Dubbed the "Lagos Town Crier" by colonialists, it quickly gained wide readership among Yoruba indigenes across regions. Adopting a patriotic stance, "*Akede Eko*" regularly published anti-colonial editorials and commentaries (Alabi, 2003; Duyile, 2019; Salawu, 2003). Thomas had previously earned a national reputation writing a popular column for the famed "*Eletì Ofe*" (1923), and was a close confidant of its publisher and editor, Mr. Akintan, also known as "Mr. Eaves Dropper."

Alabi (2003) observed that "*Akede Eko*" was regarded as the most popular vernacular newspaper of its time, citing Duyile (1987) on its quick acceptance as an authoritative medium upon launch. According to Duyile (2019), "*Akede Eko*" was deeply involved in agenda-setting for Lagos society. Quoting a May 2, 1929, editorial, Alabi (2003) reiterated the paper's claim: "There is no doubt that this paper is the most popular bilingual journal in Nigeria. It is read throughout all the provinces and its circulation is increasing every week. It is no cynical aspiration that Akede Eko is beyond recommendation."

Just as Townsend's "*Iwe Irohin*" served Abeokuta (1850s-1860s), "*Akede Eko*" was vital to all Yoruba provinces from 1927-1930s. Its vociferous engagement in local politics, Yoruba literature, and culture, with highly influential editorials and feature commentaries, shaped Lagos society (Duyile, 2019; Folarin & Mohammed, 1996; Ogunsina, 1992; Salawu, 2003). Another Yoruba language newspaper, "*Osumare Egba*," published in Abeokuta on November 21, 1925, by the Nigerian Blessed Press, localised its content by dedicating all pages to news and issues relating to the Egba kingdom.

CONSTRAINTS OF COLONIAL PRESS LAWS

The outspokenness of many indigenous and English-language publications—such as *West African Pilot* (1937), *Lagos Daily News* (1925), *Daily Times* (1926), *Daily Service*, and *African Messenger* (1921)—increasingly troubled the British colonial government. Colonial governors often deemed this content "criminal libel," yet publishers defied all warnings. Consequently, the government updated press laws, introducing repressive sections to gag journalists from publishing anti-government reports and commentaries.

Press freedom restrictions began with the 1903 Newspaper Ordinance, followed by the 1917 Newspaper Ordinance. Duyile (2019) notes the 1917 Newspaper Ordinance Act, a stronger amendment to the 1903 law, and subsequent Newspaper Acts specifically addressed newspaper publication, distribution, registration, and agents. The Ordinance stipulated that printers and publishers must supply personal and publication details, with newspaper printers' addresses included in every edition's imprint column.

According to Duyile (2019), all Nigerian newspaper publishers and editors of that period, backed by militant nationalist groups and the three ex-officio Lagos Legislative Council members—comprising Sapara Williams, C. J. George, and Obadiah Johnson—unsuccessfully fought these colonial administration laws. British administrators insisted the laws protected society from falsehoods. Daramola (2003, p. 161), in "Press Freedom: The Legal Bases and Constraints," summarised the press law thus: "In any case from 1859 to 1960 when Nigeria attained her independence, the press had always battled for press freedom. It had to perform its duties as the watchdog of society by defying government and laws in its quest for freedom."

CONTEMPORARY YORUBA LANGUAGE PRESS

The vigour of Yoruba language newspaper publication, strong in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, dwindled after independence, leading to a lull from the 1930s (Alabi, 2003, p. 26). Initially, individual press investors showed little interest in publishing Yoruba newspapers. However, Yoruba language newspapers reappeared years after independence, with publishers emerging in the 1940s and 1950s. Akinseloyin (2020), for example, highlights the evolution and modern impact of contemporary Yoruba language newspapers like *The Yoruba News* and *Alaroye*. Despite their re-emergence, indigenous language newspapers, including Yoruba ones, face ongoing challenges, especially from digital media (Onyenankaya, 2021).

Nigerian statesman Obafemi Awolowo established the English language *Nigerian Tribune* in 1947, two years after his Yoruba language journal *Irohin Yoruba* began in 1945. While *Nigerian Tribune* expressed his political opinions, *Irohin Yoruba* articulated public opinion, primarily on anti-colonial politics. Salawu (2003, p. 94) notes *Irohin Yoruba* had a political undertone, aiming to reach Awolowo's political admirers and Action Group Party supporters, especially Yoruba speakers across Nigeria. This newspaper wielded significant political influence among the Yoruba populace, selling over 150,000 copies in Ibadan City alone. Between 1955-1959, *Irohin Yoruba* boasted over half a million readers in Nigeria's Western region, with 300,000 readers in the Lagos metropolis, an Awolowo stronghold.

Gbohunghohun (The Echo)

Gbohunghohun, another Yoruba publication, belonged to Sketch Publishing Company Ltd, publishers of *Daily Sketch*—an English language newspaper funded by the Western Region's governments (Oyo, Ondo, Ekiti, Osun, and Ogun). It served as a political organ, publicising state government activities. Concord Press of Nigeria, owned by billionaire politician M.K.O Abiola, established *Isokan* (Unity), a Yoruba language weekly first appearing on Lagos streets on 15 July 1980. Abiola, like Azikiwe and Awolowo, leveraged his media empire for political ends, using *Isokan* and his other newspapers for his presidential campaigns. He won the election, but the military government led by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida annulled the results.

YORUBA LANGUAGE NEWS MAGAZINES

The Yoruba language newspaper "Alaroye" first appeared in 1990, published by Lagos-based World Information Agents; it also has an online version. Rated among the best in interpretive journalism by a media rating organisation (Akinseloyin, 2020), this 16-page tabloid magazine often prioritises political occurrences with heavy banner headlines (Ajewole-Orimogunje et al., 2021). Its clearly spelt out editorial policy contrasts with previous Yoruba publications that often followed publishers' dictates rather than publicising their own. Alaroye's editorial direction portrays Yoruba opinions and voices on all public issues (Ajewole-Orimogunje et al., 2021) (see Figure 2). It boldly declares in Yoruba: "Iwe Iroyin ti n soju Omo Yoruba nibi gbogbo" (A newspaper that portrays Yoruba views worldwide). Printed in colour, it sells for two hundred naira per copy.



Figure 2: Contemporary Yoruba newspaper design exemplified by Alaroye magazine

In January 2022, "Alaroye" published a lead story predicting a troubling political crisis within Nigeria's ruling All Peoples Congress (APC), which materialised in April and May 2022, igniting major political disagreement over the party's presidential candidate. The magazine is noted for its popular troubleshooting speculative news, sometimes setting the agenda for the political class on governance issues. While other Yoruba language newspapers flourish in South West Nigeria (outside this study's scope), "Yoruba Challenge," a monthly religious publication by ECWA or Sudan Interior Mission, merits mention as a word-for-word translation of its English version, "The Challenge Magazine," published since the early 1950s.

Alaroye Features

- 16 pages of news stories and features
- Heavy banner headlines
- Clear editorial policy
- Online version available

Editorial Direction

"Iwe Iroyin ti n soju Omo Yoruba nibi gbogbo" - A newspaper that portrays Yoruba views worldwide

Distinctive Features

- Interpretive journalism excellence
- Political agenda-setting stories
- Noteworthy speculative reporting

DATA ANALYSIS

Between 1859 and 1990, over 12 Yoruba language newspapers were published by individual proprietors, whose investments were primarily driven by interests in national and local politics. These newspapers deliberately conveyed anti-colonial political criticisms, promoting local interests, cultural development, and economic development. All Yoruba language publications were thus agenda-laden in their editorials, feature articles, and anti-colonial sentiments.

12+

Newspapers Published

More than 12 Yoruba language newspapers between 1859-1990

131

Years Covered

Period from 1859 to 1990 analysed in the study

100%

Political Agenda

All publications featured agenda-laden editorials and anti-colonial sentiments

SUMMARY

This study focused on the evolution and historical analysis of Nigeria's indigenous language press between 1859 and 1990. It applied historical methods, examining past newspapers from the 19th and 20th centuries available in national library archives. Data were found in national libraries and archives, with biographies of Yoruba language newspaper publishers also proving helpful. The study was guided by three mass communication theories: Democratic Participant Media Theory, Social Responsibility Theory, and Libertarian Media Theory.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Yoruba language newspaper proprietors/investors had premeditated political and local development reasons for their publications, fulfilling social obligations by providing environmental information (Onyenakeya, 2021). Publishers and editors actively engaged in politics, educating the populace on political issues, especially colonial administration policies and Nigeria's governance (Akinseloyin, 2020). Most local language newspaper content was gravely anti-colonial.

Newspapers mobilised people for nationalism and set agendas for collective action against unfavourable government policies. All indigenous language newspapers unanimously supported nationalist agitations for political freedom, reforms, and Nigerian independence. Nearly all Yoruba newspapers, primarily published in Lagos, shared a unanimous anti-colonial government editorial policy.

Publisher Motivations

- Premeditated political purposes
- Local environmental development
- Social obligations to communities
- Political education of populace

Content Characteristics

- Gravely anti-colonial content
- Nationalist mobilisation
- Agenda-setting functions
- Unanimous anti-government stance

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study highlights that newspaper proprietors with ideas for community improvement and beneficial public messages should invest in local language publications. For sustainable democracy in Nigeria, the government and private business sectors should encourage establishing local language publications. To ensure easy access to information and the sustenance of indigenous cultures, local language newspapers are preferable, especially in rural areas where English literacy is rare and most Nigerians reside. Their participation in democratic governance is crucial for nation-building. Finally, existing organisations should follow the Townsend, Awolowo, and Abiola models of establishing local language newspapers along similar policies.

01

Localise Publications

Localise indigenous language newspapers, especially in rural areas with limited English literacy.

02

Government Support

Government and private sectors should encourage local language publications for sustainable democracy.

03

Cultural Preservation

Encourage local language newspapers to sustain and transfer indigenous cultures.

04

Follow Proven Models

Existing organisations should adopt the Townsend, Awolowo, and Abiola models for local language newspaper publishing.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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