

A KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE URTNA CHILDREN'S TELEVISION PROGRAMME PRODUCTION WORKSHOP, NAIROBI, APRIL 7, 1999.

By Kithaka wa Mberia

Ladies and Gentlemen:

You are gathered here as communicators with the intention of holding discussions and carrying out exercises in the making of television programmes. You are motivated by a desire to learn better ways of using television as a tool for communicating with children. You want to communicate more efficiently with them.

Efficient communication has to take into account three main variables, namely: the target audience, the content to be communicated and the medium of communication. Without prior consideration of these variables, communication efforts can be frustrating both to the communicator as well as the audience.

The programmes that will emerge from the skills acquired in this workshop will be consumed primarily by children in Africa. Therefore, you broadly know your target audience. However, you need to clearly demarcate the boundaries of the group. Whom, exactly, do you have in mind? What are the lower and upper age limits for your target audience? You need to have answers to these questions.

The word "medium" is an ambiguous one. In the context of communication, it can refer to either a tool, a form of technology or a speech system. For this workshop, you are already decided that your form of technology will be television. So, the issue of the technology to be used is not open for discussion. You can, however, debate the issue of language or languages to be used in your programmes.

To throw some light on this area, I would like to bring to your attention two issues that have a bearing on language. The first is the relationship between language and children's learning. The second is the link between language and worldview; a phenomenon otherwise called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

Psychologists have shown that in the early formal learning, children perform better when they learn in their first language. Some of the programmes you will make will be educational in character. You need to decide whether you want to take seriously the psychologists' view on the relationship between early learning and language. If you do take it seriously, it will be prudent to consider making children's programmes in African indigenous languages. Needless to say, if you decide to make your programmes in African indigenous languages, you will be charting a new path. For sure, the route will not be easy to follow. The other alternative is to make your programmes in European languages. This is an easier route in the sense that it has been trodden over and over again. But as they say in Kitharaka "Kaba njira indaja ikinyia", that is, "it is better the long route that gets you to your destination". You have to choose between the comfort of taking the already trodden route or the challenges of "the long route that gets you to you destination".

Let us turn to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The hypothesis claims that our worldview is shaped by the language we use. There are two versions of the hypothesis. The first one, referred to as the strong version, contends that a person's world-view is wholly shaped by their language. In the second version, referred to as the weak version, claims that, whereas a person's world-view is shaped by the language they speaks, such influence is

only partial. In other words, according to the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, our world-view is shaped partly by the language we speak and partly by other variables.

Whereas it is evident that the language we speak influences our world-view, it is no longer tenable to hold that the world-view is wholly shaped by language. Today, linguists do not support the strong version of the hypothesis. However, they subscribe to the weak version.

Now, let us go back to the children's television programmes. How do you want your programmes to influence the African child? Do you want the child to see the world through the eyes of the West? Or, do you want to assist him/her to grow up as confident, self-respecting person whose world-view is homegrown? If you do not mind the subtle indoctrination of African children that will make them see reality through the eyes of the West, you can make your television programmes in languages such as English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian. However, if your desire is to assist African children to acquire a homegrown world-view, the best media for your programmes are the African indigenous languages.

Let me caution that the issue of language can be very emotive. Your language choice should be such that it does not excite political suspicion or other ill-feelings. Moreover, it should not be such that it occasions rejection of your programmes. In spite of the above observations, there is not a single formula in choosing language. What works for Kenya may be inappropriate for Nigeria. What is applicable in Benin may be disastrous in Mozambique. Each situation, each country, needs to be assessed differently according to the prevailing political reality and ethnic equation.

Should you decide to use an African indigenous language for your programmes, the problem of choosing one language will not be that big for some of you. Some of the African countries have only one predominant indigenous language. Somali is predominant in Somalia, Swati in Swaziland, Kiswahili in Kenya and Tanzania, Sotho in Lesotho, Chichewa in Malawi and Tswana in Botswana. These languages are appropriate candidates for children's television programmes in the respective countries. Moreover, in some regions of Africa, strong indigenous lingua francas have emerged over the years. Such is the case with Kiswahili in East Africa and Hausa in West Africa. These lingua francas are well-positioned for television programmes in the respective regions.

What about the issue of the programmes' content? Let begin on this issue by stating that children should be allowed to enjoy their childhood. They need good entertainment. Give it to them. Let me add that parents wish to see discipline in their children. They also want them to have proper orientation in life. They want their them to grow to be confident, hard-working and responsible persons. As you make the programmes, see to it that the content of your work contribute to, rather than militate against, the interests of the children and the legitimate wishes of their parents.

Africa is a continent ravaged by economic deprivation, political mismanagement and social upheavals. Your programmes will be of great value to our societies if they can prepare today's children to tackle Africa's problems when they become adults. To assist children in this regard, your programmes need to impart values and ideals that will make them good political and economic managers. They need to acquire from your programmes the right attitudes including the willingness to give selfless service to society.

In the last forty years, Africa has gone through much agony. It has witnessed civil wars in countries such as Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, Sudan, Liberia and Somalia. It has seen numerous coups d'état. Several cross-border wars have taken place on the continent. Wars have been fought, for example, between Kenya and Somalia, Somalia and Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda and Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The continent has produced several dictators. These include M. Nguema, J.B. Bokassa, I. Amin, K. Banda and J. Mobutu. Under their rule, the populations of their respective countries suffered severe repression and serious human rights abuses.

In the economic sphere, the last forty years in Africa have basically gone to waste. There has not been any meaningful growth in real terms. Indeed, some African countries are poorer today than they were in the seventies. To a large extent, the political and economic woes in Africa can be explained in terms of bad governance including economic mismanagement, endemic corruption, nepotism, tribalism, and political, ethnic and religious intolerance.

You can contribute in changing Africa for the better in the political arena. You can do this by making children's television programmes that teach them the value of good governance and selfless service to society. Such programmes could, for instance, teach the children the importance of democratic institutions, culture of tolerance, accountable and transparent leadership and respect for human rights. These political values are glaringly lacking in today's Africa.

Another area where our societies are in dire need of assistance is in science and its application. In an article appearing in the *Daily Nation* of March 11, 1999, citing the biannual *UNESCO World Science Report of 1998*, we learn that:

Africa remains the most scientifically backward region in the world having been relegated to the sidelines of global science and technology – [it] is little more than a bystander in most international science issues – [it] watches as breath-taking leaps are made in the fast-moving information technology and communication industry.

The same article goes on to observe that:

A 1992 survey in Africa counted a total of 200,000 scientists and engineers who represent only 0.36 per cent of the world's scientists. Africa is responsible for only 0.8 per cent of the total world scientific publications. Its share of patents is "close to zero" and has yet to produce a Nobel laureate for any scientific discipline.

Need I say more? The time to plant the seed of science is now. You have the fertile ground in which to plant it. Get the seed and plant it. As a Kiswahili proverb puts it "udongo uwahi uli maji", that is, "mould the soil while it's still wet". For you, this is not merely an opportunity, it is a duty, a responsibility, a moral obligation.

Your programmes can also contribute positively in the area of environment and environmental conservation. You can make programmes that heighten children's consciousness on the value of environment. Africa has abundant water resources. It has precious wetlands. It has beautiful and rich coastlines and national waters. It has an amazing biodiversity. By making programmes that make explicit the advantages of a healthy environment and a sound environment management, our children will grow up to become environment-friendly adults. This is the opportune time to show that environment impacts directly on people's economic, political and social well-being. This is the right time to mould children's minds so that in their adulthood they lovingly embrace the notion of sustainable development founded on a healthy environment.

Gender prejudices are an impediment to our development efforts. These prejudices manifest themselves in the discrimination against girls and women, sexual harassment, unflattering statements and demeaning proverbs, sayings and narratives and, in general, marginalization of women in society.

Our languages are replete with innuendo that the female sex is inferior to its male counter-part. There are numerous expressions that portray girls and women as intellectually inadequate, lazy, maliciously cunning, untrustworthy, undependable and, sometimes, evil.

In our villages, boys get preferential treatment in matters of education. In our schools, there are bottlenecks that bog down the girl-child. In the workplace, sometimes women meet mistreatment and injustice. In the issuing of bank loans and in giving other financial services, financial institutions do not take women seriously, mistrust them or have regulations that militate against their interests. These are just a few of the areas where prejudices against girls and women lead to commission and omission detrimental to females. Paradoxically, this discriminatory behaviour against the female sex is also detrimental to the males as well as to society at large.

Acquisition of appropriate gender perspectives will be a welcome asset not only for the betterment of girls and women but also for the well-being of the entire society. Since children's minds are very impressionable, your television programmes can play an important role in bringing forth the desired results.

Our lifestyle affects our well-being. Our behaviour has a bearing on our health. Failure to wash hands after some activities or before eating food can introduce harmful germs into our bodies. Eating unwholesome food or drinking unclean water can lead to the poisoning of the body or to contracting illnesses such as anthrax, typhoid, dysentery, cholera or amoebic diseases. Furthermore, irresponsible sex is the main gateway to contracting sexually transmitted disease including HIV/AIDS.

Shaping of children's lifestyles away from irresponsible behaviour can lead to healthier children now and healthier adults in the future. The net effect will be healthier societies. In turn, not only would such a situation lessen the burden on public spending on healthcare, but also enable people to contribute more meaningfully in economic endeavours. For these reasons, consider "Good lifestyle for better health" as a candidate for your television programmes.

Should culture be an area of concern in children's television? The answer is, "Yes!". There was a time when culture was seen as something peripheral to development concerns. This misconception is no more. At the launch of the World Decade for Cultural Development in 1998, culture was reaffirmed as an important component in human development. Unfortunately, today's African is a person with a battered cultural identity. The battery started with the arrival in Africa of external religions. Then came colonialism. The process is still continuing, almost unabated, although in more subtle forms. Almost on a routine basis, there is innuendo that African culture is inferior compared to its Western counterpart. Among other places, this innuendo lurks in books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television programmes and in films.

This battery of the African psyche has created in the African a low self-esteem and a lack of confidence. In some cases, it has led to a ridiculous aping of things Western.

Such is not the personality to come up with imaginative and innovative ways of solving problems in a hostile world. Such is not the personality to lead Africa from its beggar-of-alms status to a confident, innovative and self-sustaining continent. The enlightened African, through efficient communication, has a duty to contribute to the undoing of the damage effected on the African mind. He/she has the responsibility of resuscitating the African into a wholesome being able to confidently direct the course of his destiny. Is there a better place to launch this noble task than at the cradle? I do not think so.

To make persuasive children's television programmes, it is not enough to merely choose a good theme. You need to equip yourselves with relevant and adequate information; you need to acquaint yourselves with children's idiom; as well as to have a working knowledge of child psychology. Furthermore, it will be wise to occasionally assess the level of the children's comprehension and the impact of your programmes on them. These dimensions to your activities call for an integration of a research component into your operations.

Carrying out research, making good programmes and marketing and distributing them will undoubtedly present financial and logistical challenges. To come to terms with these challenges, you will need to pull together your talents, skills, experience, energy, goodwill and other human and material resources. In short, you will need to collaborate among yourselves.

Ladies and gentlemen, as communicators dealing with children, you can build or destroy them. If you build them, which I am sure is your intention; you will have contributed a lot in making the Africa of the 21st century a better continent than the Africa of the 20th century. If that comes to pass, you will have rendered a great service to the continent.

Thank you.

Prof. Kithaka wa Mberia, PhD, has taught linguistics, Kiswahili and communication in University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya, since 1982. Besides being an academic, he is a poet and a playwright. He has travelled extensive for academic conferences, art festivals. Moreover, besides University of Nairobi, he has taught in universities, namely, Virginia State University (United States of America), University of Warsaw (Poland) and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies) South Korea. He has published numerous papers and chapters in refereed journals and academic books respectively. His published creative works include: *Mchezo wa Karata* (1997), *Natala* (1997), *Kifo Kisimani* (2001), *Bara Jingine* (2001), *Maua Kwenye Jua la Asubuhi* (2004), *Redio na Mwezi* (2005), *Msimu wa Tisa* (2007) and *Rangi ya Anga* (2014) and *Doa* (2018). Many of his creative works have been translating and published in English. They are *Death at the Well* (2011), *Natala* (2011), *Flowers in the Morning Sun* (2011), *Another Continent* (2011) and *A Game of Cards* (2011).