

Kudos to the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and its enterprising Director-General, Eddie Iroh, for the grand celebration of 50 years of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). Historically, public radio services began before 1951, in 1935, when a wired broadcasting station was opened in Lagos. Other such stations were at the interval until in 1948, the department of post and telegraphs and the public relations department operated stations in Lagos Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ibadan, Kano, Jos, Zaria, Kaduna, Enugu, Calabar and Port-Harcourt.

But the war in 1935-1946 made people aware, like never before, of the good uses to which radio could be put. The undoubted progress of Nigeria towards political self-realization led the government to decide to introduce a proper broadcasting system in place of the separate, uncoordinated wired broadcasting stations.

In 1949, therefore, at the request of all the West African governments, the BBC and Crown Agents for the colonies surveyed the scene in the four countries and issued a comprehensive report. Nigeria alone adopted the recommendations, and as result, in 1951, the Nigerian broadcasting service was created. It then integrated the wired broadcasting stations, or, as they are commonly called, radio distribution service stations. This included the 71/2-kilowatt R. C. A. transmitter housed in a caravan near Lagos. It originally ran services in the Normandy invasion of 1944 when it was used by the BBC to send back nightly programmes for war reports. It transmitted to the North.

The first director of NBC was Tom Chalmers, an engineer, who in 1953 assessed NBC: "The present NBS programmer schedule of news, talks, music both grave and gay, outside broadcasts and religious services (both Christian and Moslem) is one that no broadcasting organization need be ashamed of: and it is only the beginning. We believe firmly that the NBS can do more than any other agency to bring enlightenment and entertainment to the 30 million people in Nigeria. That is the reason for the choice of title: the Nigerian Broadcasting Service. It is for the service of Nigeria that the 250 men and women of the NBS are dedicated." The importance of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service/Corporation in the 1950s went beyond the development of electronic media. Its staff and programmes were the vanguard of the cultural and intellectual flowering of the decolonizing Nigeria. The music department under Nigeria's greatest world-class composer, Fela Sowande, collected, recorded and preserved the traditional music of many communities. Assuming subsequent managements have maintained this collection properly, the FRCN should possess the richest musical archives in West Africa. Other great Nigerian musicians, who also began their careers with NBS/NBC, were Ayo Bankole, Wole Bucknor, Olaola Omideyi.

The drama department started by Yemi Lijade first produced electronic media plays by Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, and Aig Imoukhuede and discovered the scriptwriting and acting talents of Ralph Opara, Peter Chigbo, Bob Nwangoro, notably in the famous programme, Alao the Master Driver, which may be regarded as Nigeria's first successful soap opera (before the term was invent-

## Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



# Federal Radio: The Next Fifty Years

ed). As Lijadu recalls: "one of the most unifying aspects of Nigeria was something that went all over the country, the *bolekaja*, - we could follow it reflecting the creative aspirations, habits etc. of the people: - this was indeed the best vehicle (excuse the pun) to cover all of that. We were able to unite the entire country in one massive audience. It became a focal point for dispassion." (Sunday Vanguard Dec. 19, 1999. Conversation of Yemi Lijada with Bisi Lawrence)

The news department was set as a BBC standard which has never been equaled since, such as Abba Zoru,

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Michael Olumide, Sam Nwaneri, Emmanuel Omatsola Sam Akpaobot, Eno Etuk (Irukwu),

Stella Udofia (Bassey), Bisi Lawrence, Sam Iyamu, Ishola Folorunsho, Kunle Alakija and Emmanuel Enidin (Nigeria language). Many of the above went on to become broadcasting administrators.

The religious department, headed by Archdeacon Michael Olamide, gave equal attention to Islam, covered by Alhaji Etamode while Christianity was covered by the then Reverend Father Pedro Martins. Some of the brilliant talks by Monsignor Martins, who turned 90 this year, have been collected and edited in a book which will be presented on the 9th of August— *The 50th Anniversary of Monsignor's Ordination*.

The NBC itself acted as a publisher: some of its excellent talks given by eminent authorities were published by the NBC. Just one example: The then Dr S.O. Biobaku gave a series of talks on famous personalities in

Nigerian history which was published in 1960 as "Eminent Nigerians of the nineteenth century."

The NBS/NBC had mobile recording units in each region; for instance, in 1952, it recorded 150 complete programmes from sources outside the studio, including the most isolated areas.

The FRCN of 2001 can profit from a re-examination of the achievements of its predecessors. A case in point: the excellent use of mobile recording studios for grassroots interaction with listeners outside the transmission centers. Moreover, this aligns with the contemporary global orientation towards community radio, that is, greater emphasis on regional/local sources which initiate programmes.

Another lesson: FRCN could reach out to and even discover the young Soyinkas, Sowandes, Oparas, Aig Imoukhuedes etc. so that the FRCN can not only project but cultivate and enrich Nigerians. At the same time, the FRCN, broadcasting in Nigeria since 1935, has been advocating social change, safer health practices and mass literacy.

For in 2001, as in 1935, there remain millions of Nigerians who live without electricity: millions who see newspapers but who cannot afford to buy any newspapers. Millions more who cannot read newspapers— the only medium which is available to these people is the battery-operated radio, which does not cost more than a week's salary, is cheap to maintain and requires no skills to interpret the music and words provided therein. Radio is a very powerful medium that impacts deeply on the listeners. One radio can be enjoyed comfortably by household, kindred, village meetings, lorry and busload of passengers.

Finally, the FRCN should have retail to sell cassette tapes and compact discs of its music and drama. Programmes and publication of his talks and lectures. In the UK, the BBC has a chain of shops.

Since the 1950s, the main threat to radio's popularity and effectiveness has been television; however, in the last few years, public and commercial radio services all over the whole have staged a come-back.

In the western world, radio has transformed itself into a lucrative playground for a new breed of a media mogul.

New FM radio stations are auctioned to the highest bidder. Radio stations from networks are syndicated over half the country to secure networks and semblance and advertisers. Radio presenters are earning salaries that belittle their TV counterparts. Radio assets are worth millions of dollars. Radio which was mocked and derided when the TV arrived has turned out to be the Cinderella of the media. As long as the federal godfather provides adequate support, FRCN can look forward to a 'charmed' future.

The 'magic' of radio is well captured by this poem by the famous English poet W. H. Auden.

In an upper room at midnight, see us gathered on behalf of love according to the gospel of the radio-phonograph.