PROLOGUE

THE NAIROBI SEMINAR

This brief Prologue is to introduce a collection of papers given at a seminar held in Nairobi, Kenya, from 3 to 7 August 2004, on the topic 'Media and the Construction of Identity in Africa'. A wide view of the seminar is given by its Chairman, Professor Valentin Y. Mudimbe, in his Epilogue at the end of the book. Here we attempt to summarize some of the arguments put forward by the participants at the seminar itself and later put into writing by them (all have been slightly edited for presentation in book format).

The seminar was the most recent of a long series of meetings held in Africa by the International African Institute, London, and was funded by the Ford Foundation, Office of Eastern Africa. The Institute was founded in London in 1926, as a research and publishing organization independent of governmental, missionary, or commercial control. Its main aim has been to disseminate knowledge about an ever-changing Africa whose people have all too often been regarded in Europe and America as culturally, intellectually, and morally inferior; a view linked to colonialism, to the modern political, financial, and commercial dependence of most African countries on the West, and to sheer ignorance. The Institute has for three-quarters of a century combatted that view and has demonstrated the formerly unrecognized qualities and importance of African civilizations to the rest of the world. An important part of its programme has been to organize seminars at various universities in Africa and to publish the papers presented at them. The long-term aim has been to advance knowledge, that comes from within Africa, of African societies, their cultures, their languages, and the many problems that face them, and to bring together African and non-African scholars so as to construct a common understanding of these problems and to emphasize the commonality of Africans and non-Africans in the world.

This particular seminar was also planned to reflect postcolonial changes in academic scholarship and specialization. With an ever-increasing number of African scholars themselves working in various parts of Africa, it included more participants from the local region – in this case, eastern Africa – than had been usual in the past. Former seminars had included local observers, but they had been marginal. We decided to transform them into participants, and to include people working outside universities – in publishing, radio, government and other occupations. Finally, we opened the seminar to the public rather than to a solely academic audience. Several hundred local observers attended the formal panels, participated in discussions, and came to the informal meetings of the seminar held not in a local university but in a hotel where all could come. The proceedings were also reported in the local press and by radio and television stations. This seminar was a deliberate and pioneering effort to link 'academics', 'practitioners', and 'the public'.

THE 'NEW' AFRICA AND IDENTITY

Most previous International African Institute seminars had been on often rather limited and 'academic' subjects; here the emphasis was on a wider and more obviously contemporary and political topic. 'Media and the Construction of Identity' reflected both the growing importance of the process rather clumsily known as 'globalization', and also the widespread local concern in, hope for, and, often, fear of the so-called 'media' in a time of often rapid and unexpected construction of new social and cultural identities throughout Africa. These days there is nowhere in Africa whose local people are not affected by the 'media' in one form or another.

Discussions, books, and conferences on the media have become popular during the last few years, almost all concerned with the place of the media in American and European societies, but with little attention given to Africa. There have been discussions on the provision and promotion of the internet and computers in Africa, but few have considered the crucial role of African cultures and enterprises in this venture. Africa is seen primarily as a target for Northern technology and commerce but rarely as a continent largely lacking in the material means required for their use. There is a major focus on elites and their interests, but little concern with the mass of the people and their problems, most of which are linked to poverty. This reflects a bias in most 'development projects', which, whatever their ostensible purpose to help the underprivileged, in practice are usually controlled by powerful and wealthy urban elites. Few development strategies have been informed by the immediate needs of people in rural areas, or work through the various cultures of a region to address those needs. Development paradigms designed in the West are inappropriately transplanted to an Africa of which national

and international understanding is typically woefully inadequate, and the same may be said of the media.

Today the various media bring about both the formation of new social systems and identities, the maintenance or reshaping of existing ones, and frequently the destruction of believed 'traditional' ones. Those outside Africa who initiate and control most media assume that their African recipients are essentially similar to those of Europe and America. In addition, their approach takes the elites – and the urban elites at that – as the norm, and ignores the nature of the majority of the varied and ever-changing social groups and networks in both urban and rural Africa. It is not merely a problem of the relationship between an intrusive global culture and a passively receiving local one. Many forms of media in eastern Africa have local origins, but their importance is rarely recognized. Many are based upon 'traditional' forms of cultural expression that are no longer purely local but are adaptations of wider African themes. Examples include commentaries of the Bible and the Qu'ran, traditional and new forms of literature, music, art, clothing, even foods. Therefore the seminar's emphasis was on the natures and needs of African societies and their cultures and on local societies' responses to media influences and saturation, rather than on media technologies.

Most of the companies that produce and control the media invent their own versions of both global and local cultures. They produce new worlds of experience and imagination, especially in representations of religious alienation and military violence. Whatever the overt aims of those who control the media, those who receive its communications use them for their own various purposes, political, social, religious, which are often opposed to and not even comprehended by the controllers. There are usually two levels of communication in media messages, and all messages from originators' to recipients' media have responses by the latter, some overt and others concealed. Most of the chapters that follow discuss these structures of messages of the various media that affect local African societies.

Many of the media, such as television, are usually considered as worldwide in their culture and impact, yet television is visible to only a small minority of those living in Africa. The internet reaches only a minute proportion of African urban dwellers and virtually none outside the elite of the larger cities. Radio reaches the majority, newspapers and films reach a fair part of the total population, and religious works also affect the majority. However, newspapers, radio, and television are today also initiated within Africa itself, frequently for very small, local audiences. The situation is far more complicated than has often been assumed, and the seminar participants were all involved in one way or another with this complexity.

The media, whether global or local, represent ways of living and provide models of how one might appropriately relate with others, as well as how

recognition, status, honour, and prestige are given or withheld. Newspapers and magazines may, for example, ridicule or ignore certain sectors of society and promote – or occasionally attack – the ideas of the powerful economic or social classes. Information packaging may be skewed in order to pursue certain goals, and certain truths may be withheld. The media play an important role in the processes of entrenching public consent because media texts can construct definitions which are then presented as 'reality'. These constructions are guided mainly by the politically powerful as well as by commercial media owners. A consequence of this process is the emergence of alternative media which are distinct from the mainstream. As an example, media liberalization in Africa has led to the growth of privately owned FM stations, especially in the urban areas. FM radio stations are faster paced than the government stations, and more often than not target youth as well as the middle class. They play hip-hop music, composed locally or internationally, and they pay particular attention to sports. Because they play popular international music and are financially assisted by private advertisers, they link the youth of Africa with the youth of other nations and contribute to the growth of global youth identity and culture. In contrast, community radio stations, such as Bush Radio in South Africa, target rural populations or those in poor settlements. Their content, including news, music, advertisements and discussion programmes, is predominantly local and informational.

A major medium for the perpetuation of moral values is, of course, religion. Religious organizations have continued to expand their media outlets from the Bible and the Qu'ran to street preaching, outdoor rallies, video production, radio and television broadcasts, and religious magazines and newspapers with limited circulation. Different religions in Africa have distinct symbols and markers ranging from dress codes to greeting rituals.

In brief, the participants considered the impact of the media on everyday African social, cultural, political and religious life, and the identities both of those who control and also those who are directly and indirectly affected by them. The seminar was not on popular culture *per se* in modern African societies, but essentially on the impact of world capitalism upon African societies at the local level and the latter's responses. The media in this era of globalization may seek to challenge cultures and reframe identities: how does this happen and what is the impact of this configuration? The participants discussed the fluidity of identity formation and how local communities renegotiate their identities in the face of changing circumstances; and they examined how the media can accentuate or deny loyalty to ethnic identities and the implication of such accentuation and denial.

The Epilogue, by the Chairman of the International African Institute, Professor V.Y. Mudimbe, presents an original and deep analysis of what took place at the seminar. The author, a distinguished philosopher, is renowned

for his many writings. Especially relevant to the seminar, of course, is his work on the images and the inventions of 'Africa', a concept too often taken for granted without any very clear understanding of what it has meant at different times and to different people. The author discusses the consequences of the activities of the media as experienced in Africa, and suggests the shallowness of the common view of the media bringing 'globalization', even 'civilization', from the 'North' to the 'South', essentially a continuing form of the invention of 'Africa', and an historical process of great complexity. It is a conflict between the global and the local that is not invariably won by the global interests – local interests always fight back.

THE MESSAGES: CONSTRUCTION AND CREATIVITY

At first glance the following chapters may appear too wide-ranging, even too disparate, to form a consistent body of discussion. More consideration shows that they present diverse ways of dealing with the problems of achieving identities based not on the periods of colonialism and immediate post-colonialism but on an unclearly defined 'Africa', of which various meanings have been invented by both non-Africans and Africans. The chapters that follow the Introduction are grouped into three sections. The first section includes chapters on 'the media, community, and identity'. They discuss the history of the media in Africa and the problems of defining new communities and their identities as affected by the media. The media can be used for social change, but in a world that is undergoing intense polarization, they can be used to alienate communities and deny them opportunities for their voices to be heard. The immediate problems discussed in these first chapters include the effects of colonial institutions and the establishment of forms of government over citizens whose wishes may be different from those of their rulers; the nature of social groups and institutions which have endured through colonialism and globalization; and the means of communication – the 'media' – necessary to be controlled by ordinary people rather than by outside commercial and other interests if new national and local groups and identities are to be linked to still persistent 'traditional' cultures. These chapters attempt to define or redefine the meanings of processes such as 'nationalism', 'tribalism' and 'tribalization', territorial, political and cultural boundaries, commercialization, and all the other aspects of 'identity'.

The other two sections are on the media themselves, the first on the global media and the second on the less familiar local media, not only as responses to the former but with histories and cultural meanings in their own right that show their complexity and vibrancy. We may conveniently distinguish global and local media, a distinction both between the nature and content of media and also between their originators and recipients, although the categories are hardly exact. First we may discern the global

media: books, newspapers, world-made films, radio, television. Then we may discern local media at any given point in history: local literature, poetry, music, clothing, naming, local news reporting, advertisements, cartoons, bus painting, and so on.

The basic questions discussed by the authors of these chapters are 'what do the media do in Africa?' and 'how do they work?'. The answers are found by presenting ethnographic examples of a wide range of media, some literally coming from outside Africa, and others emerging from within it. During the seminar itself, the two means of communication were considered as leading to certain consequences, 'creativity' leading to 'construction'.

By 'creativity' we refer both to local responses to the global media and to the invention and control of media by local people. What is meant by the word 'construction'? Can identity be 'constructed' at all, and if so by whom? How deliberate or conscious a process is it? Can it be constructed by outsiders – the controllers of the media – or only by local people who receive, and pay for, the media initiated and controlled by others? The participants of the seminar generally assumed the meaning of 'identity' to be the sense of belonging to almost any kind of social group that has some form of self-identification: an ethnic, language or cultural group, a nation, member of a continent or local area, a category of people with a common cultural, political or religious aim. All are defined by their members and by outsiders. These outsiders were, at one time, the colonial rulers; today they are usually the controllers of a national government. Identity is shown to be a consequence of many factors and is continually shifting and under constant negotiation. Many writers on the effects of the Western-controlled media, as part of the process of globalization, maintain that the process of identity formation involves, even necessitates, the standardization or homogenization of all cultures and societies wherever they are. Many of the participants expressed doubts that this is necessary or even possible, and presented arguments for ongoing cultural diversity and divergence.

Yet all participants explicitly or implicitly argued that 'construction of identity' means making or retaining the sense of cohesion of the members of a moral community, whether a bounded group or merely a category of some kind. Such a community or category must have common interest and morality, and must be able to control conflict and disharmony. It seems impossible to do so altogether, but one seemingly universal way of doing so is to find culturally accepted means of expressing conflict and disagreement that obviate openly expressed violence and that do in fact form ties between latent enemies, the so-called 'peace in the feud'. One such way is, of course, the performance of ritual directed towards a deity or ancestor, as worship in a congregation, monastery or convent, or worship of a new deity held by a particular sect. Another way is to avoid open hostility by use of certain forms of communication in which words or other messages are understood by all

involved but are expected not to lead to violence; examples include Swahili songs and the use of cloth and personal names in southern Ghana.

These and other examples described refer to the avoidance of personal violence in societies which are both literate and where literary competence is given high praise and is held as an essential quality of citizenship, usually based on 'correctness' of ancestry, of rank, and of 'good manners'. They are of communities and categories with an agreed-upon single history (even if mythical) and morality: they are already 'constructed' or are in the process of being so. They are aware of change and of threats from outside, and of the fact that some of their members welcome change or 'development' and others do not. 'Change' here was once called 'colonialization'; today it is called 'globalization'. In the former case those against it were called 'tribal', in the latter we prefer to speak of 'local'. The participants largely analyzed the nature, purpose and reception of the various media found in Africa in these terms.

A point made by many of the contributors is that of the dissolution of mainly formal 'Western' boundaries of behaviour, language, art, music and comedy, and their creative mingling to compose new forms and cultural ambivalences and ambiguities. Boundaries are broken, and newness and freshness are introduced. Nothing remains the same after it comes into contact with another. Although it is often held that globalization is culturally and socially an overwhelmingly uniform process, this Euro- and America-centric view is neither correct nor illuminating. It is today occasionally fashionable to dismiss the social and cultural variety of African civilizations as old-fashioned, linked to 'ethnographical exoticism' and the like. This viewpoint is held by those who, even now, find it difficult to see 'Africa' in terms other than of colonialization and decolonialization and who fail to see the strength of intra-African variation. It comes out very clearly from these chapters that to study 'globalization' we still need to study the local: if media help to construct identities, these are very local ones with an immense range of detail. The people of any region may have to accept 'Western' media, but they nonetheless are able to change its many modes and forms to suit themselves (often to the annoyance of the media controllers), and they also use their own 'traditional' media to carry 'global' messages. To participate in globalization, in 'modernity', by linkage to the 'media', may include divergence from a 'world uniformity'. Indeed, as Mudimbe suggests, divergence is not only possible or probable – it may well be inevitable.

To understand better the significance of the distinction between 'global' and 'local', the participants discussed the aims of those who control them and the responses of those who receive them. The former do not only transmit their own wishes and viewpoints but aim to manipulate the thoughts and behaviour of the recipients; the latter may refuse to be manipulated and

themselves become originators and transmitters of their own wishes and viewpoints and argue back. Media are both conduits and barriers. We may perhaps define the conduits as those controlled by those who also break and so abolish boundaries, and the barriers as those who make and mark boundaries. In the latter case, the messages are the weapons of the weak that are often unforeseen by the powerful. The seminar participants asked, often by implication only, what are the wishes of those who are, at first sight, judged to be weak. They also asked why and how do these people use the media as weapons? There are other possible weapons, such as the ballot box and ultimately rebellion. The use of the media in this way has occurred less often, although they are often – in the end perhaps, usually – the more successful choice.

All these matters were discussed not only by those who gave papers but also by members of the audience, who played a crucial (and perhaps rather unexpected) role. Among the most widely mentioned by both the formal participants and the audience were the reasons why journalists, as well as other writers, portray Africa as a hungry, ailing, and poor continent prone to internal conflicts and wars; that the links between modern African societies and those of the diaspora and of other links outside Africa, such as to most Muslim countries, are rarely discussed; that within Africa, more information is needed on the roles of governments and commercial interests, including degrees of censorship and the roles of the proprietors of media of all kinds; that there are important problems to do with local creativity in the media representations of African cultural behaviours, of language policies and practices, of music and art, of public means of cultural expression in advertising, in public transport, in cartoons, in forms of humour and obscenity, and in representations of gender and sexuality. In general, questions were raised about the aims and control of the media, their roles in processes of globalization, in local and international commerce, in problems of health, education, party politics, in the expenses needed to establish and practise the media by small local groups in the constantly changing political systems of the day, where some sections of national populations, especially women, the rural and the poor, are scarcely represented.

Finally, the seminar reflected the growing concern of international foundations and of the International African Institute to place the centre of African studies and scholarship within Africa. Three bodies were concerned in its planning and execution: the International Council of the Institute, in London; the Ford Foundation, through its representatives in Nairobi; and in Nairobi a private company, Twaweza Communications, established by one of the organizers, Dr Kimani Njogu, formerly a member of the Kenyan university community. This sharing of responsibility was new and successful. We owe thanks to Professor Tade Aina, the representative of the Ford

Note
John Middleton passed away on 27 February 2009 at Yale-New Haven Hospital just as this volume was going to press. He maintained a vigorous research and publishing life until his death, playing a full and active editorial role in the preparation of this book for publication into what turned out to be the final stages of his life. The volume brings together work from the IAI's programme of international seminars, of which he was a key advocate. It represents his last major project on Africa and his final intellectual and institutional contribution to the work of the IAI. It is a valedictory to us all.