The use of Information and Communication Technologies for Promoting and Sustaining National Integration in Africa

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Abstract: The major argument advanced in this paper is that African governments should make use of information and communication technologies within their governing structures in seeking ways and means of promoting national social cohesion. We present a heuristic by developing a model – e-Cultural Synchronization -- for national integration in African nations, with a central focus on the synchronization of indigenous cultures as fulcrum. The rationale is grounded in the need for African states to pay more attention to the cultural fabric of their respective societies in efforts to reduce cultural tensions by demonstrating that there are indeed many aspects of African culture that are not antithetical, for instance, to democratic governance or other governing prescriptions that have been tried by some African leaders. The model utilizes the application of information and communication technologies as means of achieving cultural synchronization for stable governance. National integration continues to be a major challenge for several African states. Internecine warfare, pervasive poverty, weak infrastructure in several sectors poses problems for smooth governance. Conflicts at the level witnessed during elections in Kenya and the Ivory Coast have resulted in charges of crimes against humanity (approximating ethnic cleansing) by African heads of State. A former head of state of Ivory Coast – President Laurent Gbagbo, is presently facing charges of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court at The Hague, Netherlands. Even though the majority of African states achieved independence since the late 1950s and during the 1960s there are still problems in fashioning and sustaining nationally integrated nation states resulting in conflicts. Countries such as Zimbabwe and South Africa pose different problems for national integration after independence. Their problems centre mainly on race and economics. Insurgencies are taking place in countries such as the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Mali, Uganda, Zaire, Somalia and Rwanda to name a few. The emergence of major non-state actors such Al Shabab, Boko Haram, and Al Qaeda in the Maghreb continue to challenge the "State." The major sources for the preceding are religion and politics. Among other sources of conflict exacerbating the challenges for national integration are disputes over natural resources, socio-economic disparities and ethnicity. Several attempts made at national integration have centered on ideological choices, with a focus on democratic governance, with very little emphasis on indigenous cultural synchronization as a means of promoting national cohesion.

Keywords: e-cultural synchronization, national integration, ICT, conflict resolution, cultural synchronization

1. Introduction

In order to get a handle on the argument supporting the inclusion of cultural synchronization as a significant element among the constituent elements at play for the successful use and application of it in e-governance platforms, we present a discussion and analysis on the following: (a) establishing the context for a case for cultural synchronization as a component in e-governance platforms in African nations; (b) the national integration problematic in African nations within the context of the role of cultural synchronization, as an integral part of efforts at achieving national integration; (c) a conceptual analysis of e-governance, and (d) fashioning an e-cultural synchronization model as a constituent element within e-government platforms in Africa, with the aim of promoting social cohesion, as well as serving as a tool among others, for conflict resolution required for national integration efforts by African nations.

Protracted ethnic and religious conflicts in several African nations such as the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Uganda, Central African Republic and Rwanda, to name a few have resulted in wanton deaths of millions of Africans. In addition to the loss of lives, infrastructural damages, and pillaging of rural communities have led to the displacement of untold numbers of Africans. Refugee camps for displaced Africans escaping internecine wars in their respective countries serve as breeding grounds for dislocated ethnic groups who organize themselves to wage war against their detractors. A glaring example is the protracted war between the Government of Rwanda and Hutu rebels who escaped to the Democratic Republic of Congo and have been involved in armed excursions into Rwanda. The situation in Rwanda is striking not just because of the horrible genocide of 1996, but mainly because the nation is not as culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse as, for example, the Federal Republic of Nigeria where Boko Haram has caused mayhem and extending the war front into Cameroon and Niger. The two major ethnic groups in Rwanda, for example, use the same language, unlike a country like Nigeria with over two hundred languages and dialects.

Central to an understanding of the concept of cultural synchronization is the need to find ways and means of aggregating, codifying, synchronizing and disseminating information on similarities as well as differences in cultural beliefs and practices of warring factions, as well as the public at large by use of information and communication technologies (ICT). There appears to be a major knowledge deficit, or simply a refusal to appreciate similar aspects of cultural and other belief systems that should bond rather than serve as factors of disintegration, and differences that represent exigencies which require peaceful resolution (Bitzer, 1968).

2. Cultural synchronization construct

Blake (1988) proposed that African nations should use the new information and communication technologies for "cultural synchronization of Africa and its people" (p.17). Cultural synchronization is defined as a process of aggregating and codifying information on similarities that exist among co-cultural groups in diverse African nations by using information and communication technologies, with the objective of bringing to the attention of the public, that co-cultural groups may share more in common than they realize, hence serving as a means of promoting social cohesion. The focus on similarities does not preclude as well data on differences that require peaceful resolution.

The argument was advanced "against the background of ethnic and cultural conflicts in various regions of the world" (p. 17). Furthermore, "as a continent, Africa is struggling to get a handle on the complex role and position of culture in efforts to forge ahead with its various development projects" (p.3, 1989). He argued that "research on software development in particular has resulted in the possibility of miniaturizing knowledge without the loss of content and substance….Miniaturized knowledge is rapidly disseminated by computer and related technologies with a wider scope than the traditional methods, with the possibility of reaching more people simultaneously" (p. 2). The use of ICT to capture essential elements, namely, those aspects of culture comprising customs, beliefs, stereotypes, values, prejudices, worldview, etc., would augment access to such content. It would involve, however, the following steps for ascertaining access: robust research endeavors; formulation and processing, followed by packaging of research data, storage and distribution of content. The distribution would be in the form of e-cultural synchronization as a component of the overall e-governance platforms of African nations.

We start with the above because attempts at developing a cultural synchronization component in e-governance platforms in Africa should take into consideration the significance of miniaturizing knowledge about similarities and differences in many aspects of cultural beliefs and practices among co-cultural groups in nations that are ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse. It should be done in a manner that would assist in retaining the essential bits of knowledge about shared cultural beliefs and practices, worldview, values, etc., among co-cultural groups so as to come up with manageable and operational content within the platform. The possibility of citizens accessing information on synchronized cultures augurs well for a more informed citizenry on issues regarding mutually shared beliefs, customs, tradition, mores etc, as well as differences that require peaceful resolution. As discussed later, there are certain limitations that would have to be addressed regarding issues of access to e-governance platforms in African nations by ordinary citizens. Meanwhile, recent advances in ICT have helped to create a "new culture" (for Africa) for information generation, aggregation, codification, storage, dissemination and retrieval, and beneficial for cultural synchronization.

Cultural synchronization is an imperative when a critical examination is made of the overall African scene with division getting more and more entrenched. For instance, democracy is spreading rapidly in the continent, evidenced by the emergence and growth of a multi-party system. An inherent factor, however, in such an ideological choice is a heavy baggage that accompanies democracy as the ideological choice particularly for diverse African nations. That baggage is division along ethnic lines – characterized by the strong adversarial nature of democracy. Division goes even beyond ethnic demarcations. It triggers xenophobic tensions on issues of citizenship of contenders for national offices in some African countries as were the cases in Zambia and the Ivory Coast (Whitaker, 2005; Oduro, 2009).

3. National integration

National integration has long been an important focus of attention by scholars, policy makers and the United Nations system (APPER, 1986) for postcolonial African governments. At the onset of decolonization in most of the African countries, there was a heated debate and concern among social scientists about the need for national integration in African societies with diverse populations (Binder, 1964; Coleman & Rosberg, 1966; Zolberg, 1967;

Davis and Kalu-Nwiwu, 2001). This concern has been also been re-emphasized by Bandyopadhyay & Green (2009) Onifade & Imhonopi, (2013), advocates of national integration as a policy to promote state building in a continent beleaguered by socio- political instability. The socio-political matrix in most of the African States is characterized by inter and intra-ethnic conflicts, and religious tensions. There are also contending views on efforts at national integration initiatives in Nigeria, for example, a very diverse nation (Enegwea and Umoden 1993; Ihonvbere et.al.; 2003; Alapiki, 2000; 2005; Attah, 2013).

Some aspects of national integration historiography demonstrate an approach to African national integration that privileges what could be referred to as a "de-ethnicized" national unity, at the expense of celebrating cultural diversity. The Federal Republic of Nigeria, for example, is made of about 250 ethnic groups (Enegwea &Umoden, 1993). The plurality of groups, the arguments goes, many times throw up centrifugal forces that tend to tear countries apart. This reality imposes the need to integrate the distinct ethnic groups to become a monolithic whole that shares a common identity and destiny. Essentially therefore, national integration is a process that attempts to erode the presence of micro-nationalities in place of a spirit of nationhood (Alapiki, 2000). This is achieved through the breakdown of ethnic barriers, the elimination of primordial ethnic loyalties, and the development of a sense of common identity. A functionalist approach, suggests, however that distinct ethnic groups operate as a system that requires each unit for the good of all. Thus, the different ethnic groups are the interrelated and interdependent sub-units that must function in unity (Anele, 1999).

For purposes of addressing the cultural synchronization construct as a key process among others in working towards the achievement of national integration in African nations with diverse populations, we define national integration as a process of working towards the achievement of a stable national entity, with an increased knowledge and understanding among co-cultural groups, with similar and shared beliefs, values, customs, traditions, worldview, etc., that form a nexus around which national identity, consciousness and interests are fashioned and grounded. Cultural synchronization as a process of facilitating national integration recognizes as well, differences manifested in unshared values, beliefs, traditions, customs and worldviews among co-cultural groups, but focuses on, and elevates similar and shared elements, while learning more about differences and how to solve them peacefully, in order for co-cultural groups to work on the basis of peaceful co-existence. Sectoral and other factors that would form the rubrics of national development plans in this regard are warranted in part, on a culturally synchronized national vision. E-Cultural synchronization provides one ICT-based mechanism through which such learning could be obtained within the wider context of e-Government.

It must be emphasized at this juncture that in the absence of a credible, trustworthy and respected national leadership structure committed to the development and enhancement of the quality of life of all citizens, national integration efforts would continue to be futile irrespective of processes such as cultural synchronization in e-Government platforms of African nations.

4. Information and communication technologies within the context of e-governance for African states

There are various definitions of e-government. Olowu (2004) defines e-governance as "all the information and communication technology platforms and applications in use in the public sector of the use of the internet for delivering government information and services to citizens". e-Government is referred to as the process of transformation of the relationships between government, its stakeholders - citizens, businesses and employees – using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to improve efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, accountability, responsibility and service delivery of public governments (Kraemer & King, 2003).

Studies have shown that e-government has numerous benefits to offer to citizens, businesses and governments which include improved service delivery, increased democratization, reduced corruption, and an increase in national business, and competitiveness (Pudjiantoand Hangjung, 2009; Srivastava and Teo, 2006; Moynihan, 2004).Hafkin (2009) describes e-Government implementation in Africa as comprising of various approaches, ranging from the technologically and internally oriented (introducing ICTs into all aspects of government activity), the more external Internet government service delivery, the customer-centered and development oriented approach advocated by the United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN), to harnessing the power of technology to transform public administration through the use of ICTs.

The general approach to e-Government is through the Internet deployed through Wide Area Networks or mobile computing. E-government can be delivered using both Internet Protocol (IP) devices such as PCs, and PDA and non-Internet Protocol (IP) devices such as telephone, fax, PDA, SMS, MMS, GPRS, RFID, biometric identification and smart identity cards as well as community radio (Hafkin, 2009).

E-government services can be classified into four categories: (1) a secure government intranet for more efficient interaction among governmental agencies; (2) Web-based service delivery; (3) e-Commerce for more efficient government transaction activities; and (4) digital democracy for more transparent accountability of government (Moon, 2002). These are further described as Government-to-Citizen (G2C), Government-to-Business (G2B), Government-to-Employee (G2E), and Government-to-Government (G2G) (Graafland-Essers and Ettedgui, 2003; Carrizales, 2008;Ayo, 2009).

Stemming from the above, cultural synchronization as an added component in the e-government platform of African nations would be useful for all functions with the objectives of: forging and achieving national identity, consciousness and integration(G2C); ascertaining fairness in employment practices and employee welfare in both the public and private sectors (G2B); designing public affairs and public relations strategies and tactics for government information dissemination (G2E), and finally, enhancing the quality of communication and other forms of interaction among federal, state, local and rural administrations.

4.1 e-Government models

There are various models that have been developed to describe the stages of e-government. These models have some stages in common but also have some differences as well. Among such models are: the World Bank's three stage model, the Gartner's four stage model, Layne and Lee's four-stage model, United Nations' five stage model and the Jayashree and Marthandan Model (Jayashree and Marthandan, 2010; Layne and Lee, 2001; UNASPA, 2001; Baum and Di Maio, 2000). The United Nationsmodel is the most popular and used in various e-government (Haveez, 2004; Hafeez & Sher, 2006; Unies, 2008). The stages in the model are:

Stage 1 - Emerging presence: Here, a government makes its online presence with a web page which might include an official website, and links to ministries or departments. Information is majorly inactive and there is little or no interaction with citizens.
Stage 2 - Enhanced presence: More information is provided by government on public policy and governance and makes them easily accessible to citizens. Links are made to recorded information such as newsletters, documents, reports, laws etc.
Stage 3 - Interactive presence: Governments provide online services like downloadable forms for applications and an interactive portal with services to ease its use by citizens is being put in place.
Stage 4 - Transactional presence: Here, there is now two-way contact between 'citizen and government'. It includes options for paying taxes, applying for ID cards or passports and other functions similar to G2C interactions.
Stage 5 - Networked (or fully integrated) presence: This is the most sophisticated level of e-government implementation. It integrates all e-government service dimensions G2G, G2C and G2B. At this stage, government through technology becomes proactive in connecting with and answering to citizens' needs.

4.2 e-Cultural Synchronization (e-CS) model

There are four stages in the development of an e-CS model. They are:

(1). Robust research on disparate cultural universes in diverse African nations, requiring an interpretive methodology.
(2). Organization and formulation of data derived from step one above.
(3). Processing of disparate data
(4). Formatting for e-Government platforms
(5). Launching for G2C; G2B; G2E and G2G dissemination

The first stage mentioned above requires collaboration with cultural anthropologists, sociologists, historians, scholars/experts in religious studies, intercultural communication, and rhetorical communication, all with research competence in African societies. The pertinent methodology for such an endeavor is interpretive. The research results would yield data on disparate values, religious and secular beliefs, traditions, customs,

worldview, rites, philosophies, histories, warrants used to justify actions, and other socio-psychological variables. The firststage of the research process, therefore, requires a high degree of open-mindedness, in the sense that value judgments on the part of the researchers on beliefs, customs rites etc., of co-cultural groups should be avoided, because such judgments could have a negative impact --in terms of biases and potential misrepresentations -- on the organization and formulation of data.

In the stage two, the same team of researchers would be involved in the organization and formulation of data emanating from research endeavors. It is at this stage that discrete categories are identified and formulated resulting in a breakdown and organization of similarities and differences among disparate ethnic, linguistic and religious groups in the given nations. Overlaps in similarities and differences among the diverse population are identified and systematized for synchronization, with particular emphasis on overlaps in similarities.

Stages three and four involving processing of disparate data, and formatting for e-governance platforms respectively, are handled mainly by ICT experts. These experts would have access to researchers involved in stages one and two for clarification if necessary, and to authenticate the integrity of the data being processed electronically for formatting consistent with e-Government platforms. The process of authenticating generated data is required to ascertain that there is no evidence of falsification, before the data are synthesized and formatted for uploading on the e-government platform. Synchronization is not restricted to similarities as mentioned earlier. Overlaps in differences should be aggregated as well, and organized to show them as stumbling blocks towards the achievement of a national identity, and representing exigencies that should be gradually resolved in a peaceful manner.

The final stage is the launching of e-CS on the e-government platform. A well-written guide and explanation of the function and purpose of e-CS would need to be prepared, to inform citizens, businesses, government officials and staff at alllevels of governance about the richness evident in the synchronized content showcasing similarities around which a national cultural heritage is seen and celebrated, as a means of forging a collective national consciousness and identity. Educational institutions at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels would benefit from the use of e-CS data. It must be pointed out however, that e-CS is not a substitute for textbooks, scholarly reference works in the forms of peer-reviewed published articles or books. It provides an added and specialized source of information on similarities and differences among co-cultural groups with a focus on values, beliefs, customs, traditions, worldview, etc.

Stemming from the above, there must be as well, security considerations in the management of e-CS. Hackers could possibly access it with a potential to distort content to an extent that e-CS could contain false and inflammatory content about diverse co-cultural groups triggering conflict. There should be no effort spared to ensure full protection.

5. Limitations

There are limitations that require attention. For instance, the level of literacy in Africa remains high, not to mention literacy in the use of ICT applications such as e-CS and e-governance as a whole. In addition to the above, for e-governance to function effectively and efficiently, some fundamental aspects of national, regional, state, and local infrastructure have to be in place: energy; telecommunications and related technologies, committed political leadership, given the history of the recent past in several African nations beguiled by corruption, graft, nepotism that create lack of trust in governments. If the source of e-governance is not trusted, access and use of e-governance platforms would be negligible or useful only to elite groups in society that can afford what is takes to make use of ICT. Furthermore, deep-seated prejudices among diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups are not going to be easily eradicated by the E-CS in the short run. Human and fiscal resources to carry out all the activities in the five stages mentioned above are resource intensive.

6. Conclusion

The prevailing environment in African countries with diverse conditions remains tenuous in political and socio-economic terms, as well as several aspects of belief systems, cultural practices, and worldview. The strain on national integration efforts are evident in countries that are combating insurgencies such as the Federal Republic Nigeria, Mali, Morocco, Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Kenya. Libya represents presently , the worst example of states that once enjoyed a significant degree of national integration, but now experiencing total disarray and the collapse of the country.

National integration is multifaceted in terms of the challenges for stability and the fashioning of a national consciousness and identity, and mechanisms necessary to deal with the challenges. e-CS is not advanced in this work as the panacea for solving the problems involved with achieving national integration in African nations, particularly in those with diverse populations. It is argued here that e-CS is a key element in national integration mechanisms and primarily fashioned to provide information on e-Government platforms about co-cultural entities in diverse African nations. The information provided would focus on similarities and differences in the constituent elements of co-cultural groups, through the use of ICT and e-government platforms. The information contained in e-CS could help to let co-cultural groups recognize, appreciate and act on the information which shows that there is lot of "us" in "them," even with differences. The administration in power in any given diverse state in Africa would need to show willingness to invest in e-governance platforms as a first step, and then to enrich the platform with the type and quality of information on several sectors such as e-Commerce and the proposed e-CS. The potential benefit derived from co-cultural groups finding out that there is a lot of "us" in "them" in a positive way would outweigh, indeed, the costs.

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