Communication Development in Africa and its Impact on Cultural Synchronization of Africa and its People.

by Cecil A. Blake.*

Abstract

This paper examines the problems and prospects of the development and application of communication infrastructures and products in order to achieve cultural synchronization. It discusses the subject from the perspectives of an emerging discipline, and against the background of ethnic and cultural conflicts in various regions of the world. It gives specific examples of the uses and applications of new communication and information technologies elsewhere in the world, and points out the tasks confronting African governments and the private sector.

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Le développement de la communication en Afrique et son impact sur la synchronisation culturelle de l'Afrique et des Africains.

Résumé

Cet article étudie les problemes et les perspectives du développement et de l'application des infrastructures et des produits de la communication pour la synchronisation culturelle. L'auteur aborde le sujet comme une discipline nouvelle et le situe dans le contexte des conflits culturels et ethniques qui existent dans divers endroits du monde. Il donne des exemples spécifiques d'utilisations et d'applications des nouvelles techniques de la communication et de l'information dans d'autres parties du monde et énonce les défis que doivent relever les gouvernements et le secteurs privé en Afrique.

Introduction

The subject we referred to as 'communication' twenty-five years ago has undergone radical changes in meaning and connotation, not to mention its emergence as a fully fledged discipline. Then communication meant, for many in Africa, transportation and did not connote human interactive processes (Blake 1979). Ten years ago, communication had come to be known in most African educational settings as a subject concerned with media. The human — rhetorical, group, and intercultural — processes did not feature prominently as part of the discipline. In the past several years, however, communication, with its multifaceted foci has become fairly well known in the continent with several major universities offering degree or diploma courses in the field.

Yet, one has to be cognizant of the fact that out of the recent meaning of communication has grown an entirely new discipline under the general technological nomenclature of 'the new technologies.' These technologies range from informatics, telematics and biotechnology to new materials. Those of us who studied communication arts in the 1970s have increasingly found ourselves obsolete when it comes to innovations and rapid advances in the area of the new communication and information technologies. Without retraining and wilful efforts to stay abreast with developments, many scholars find themselves lost in a field they once thought they mastered but which has been transformed into an amalgam of pet and quaint areas, with 'whiz kids' and young millionaires using a vocabulary or thesauri that sound alien or at least unfamiliar.

A difficult aspect of the scenario described above is that Africa seems not to be part of this rapid transformation process or is at least far behind in it. African participation in the communications field, in my view, defies the topic I address, i.e. 'Communication Development ...' in the sense that the continent has so far avoided the revolution in new information technologies to-date. Since I hold this view, but yet fascinated by the other half of the topic — 'Cultural Synchronization' — I believe we could engage in some form of a discourse.

This paper, it is worthwhile to remember, is being written at a time when global unrest, manifested in cultural and ethnic conflicts that threaten the viability of several countries in all regions of the world, dominate the world news. The conflicts in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union have led to the popularization of names of places such as Kosovo and Nagano Karabach. These were places that did not gain the attention of the international media prior to the outbursts of the recent past. The outbursts are increasingly threatening the authority of the state over the various cultures and nationalities 'amalgamated' under one umbrella called the nation. The outbursts represent a crisis in the solidification of disparate entities into

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one national entity. In short, cultural and ethnic assertiveness create doubts as to what the concept 'nation' represents.

This becomes all the more significant because the upheavals in the socialist states are embarrassing countries that prided themselves of immunity from ethnocentric and 'nationalistic' tendencies mainly as a result of the successful setting up of a socialist/communist state comprising several ethnic/national communities. Socialist/communist ideology had hitherto been portrayed as a system that forestalls ethnocentric tendencies that directly threaten the integrity of the nation. It is, therefore, crucial to recognize, at least, that even societies that developed instruments to harness cultural differences and convert potential conflicts to pillars of strength, are faced with a serious crisis of diversity and unity in multi-ethnic states. If at all one could have ventured the utterance of 'cultural synchronization' in the recent past, it should have alluded to the socialist states that have, up to this point, managed coexistence of difference cultural, albeit national, entities in one national structure.

The problems of ethnic and cultural conflicts threatening the 'nation' are not unique to socialist states. Sri Lanka, a 'semi-socialist' state has a peculiar situation in which intra-ethnic conflicts have resulted in the setting up of a 'parallel government' by Sinhalese extremists opposed to the terms of agreement between the majority Sinhalese-elected government and the minority Tamils who have been fighting over minority rights over the past several years.

The United Kingdom, with a Conservative government far removed from socialist tendencies, is in the middle of an intra-ethnic and inter-state crisis whereby Irish people in Northern Ireland are divided along religious lines and are systematically killing each other with their British rulers at times becoming victims of the wrath of the Irish Catholics represented by the Irish Republican Army. Then there are the ethnic conflicts in Iraq, and run-away religious wars in Lebanon which threaten the very existence of the state.

What all this means is that the concept of cultural syncronism is an elusive one in today's world. Furthermore, the media could be seen as instruments that exacerbate the problems through sensational reporting rather than serving as instruments to promote synchrony. Lack of effective communication between the various groups in conflict also plays a significant role in fostering divisions.

Cultural synchronization, therefore, is a concept that should be at the core of analysis, particularly as it pertains to communication and its role society. The point at issue is: To what extent is cultural synchronization feasible in African societies that are basically multi-ethnic with many language codes and rituals which preserve norms, histories, philosophies

and basic rules for human conduct? How could synchrony emerge if deep attachments to such cultural factors could not be disengaged, or at least modified, to accommodate different histories, philosophies, etc? Notwithstanding the work by Anta-Diop (1962) on the cultural unity of Black Africa, modern political entities in Africa have emerged in the forms of states that are governed either by one dominant ethnic group or coalitions of strong ethnic groups with less powerful groups largely in subordinate positions. One could perhaps discuss synchrony not as a 'meshing' or an attempt to standardize cultural norms, but rather as a process of maintaining peaceful multi-cultural coexistence, or cultural pluralism. If that is the case, then we may be able to approach the subject from various perspectives, with communication development as the mechanism by which coexistence or cultural harmony could be achieved. In order to promote coexistence, the effective use of communication tools — both software and hardware — are required and should be part and parcel of the development process.

Communication Development

As indicated earlier, Africa seems to have avoided the revolution in new information and communication technologies. This is not to say, however, that there are no manifestations of the results of this on-going revolution, or that Africa could not join in mid-way. As it stands, practically every citizen in the major urban centres in Africa is familiar with some of the components of the revolutionary advances in communication technologies — video casettes and compact discs dealing mainly with entertainment. The extent to which the articulate in society use these components to enhance their knowledge is highly questionable. The average secondary school or university does not use computers to aid instruction or learning. Computers and telecommunications infrastructures are not developed enough to benefit from telematics. Government structures concerned with data generation, storage, retrieval and dissemination do not have, as yet, substantial hardware and software to use these technologies to improve upon their methods of accumulating data required for decision-making processes or for basic dissemination.

If that is the case, then we cannot argue that these technologies could be put to use for disseminating cultural data to various sectors of the populations in urban areas in efforts to 'synchronize' culture at the national level. As is commonly known, the majority of African populations still remain in rural settings which, so far, have yet to be introduced to some of the 'components' mentioned earlier.

Yet, one could argue that the very existence of some of the 'components' creates obstacles for attempts at cultural synchrony. The software used by

owners of equipment such as video cassettes are not produced locally. They carry content that might lead to problems of cultural identity, resulting in an overall weakness of the cultural fabrics of whatever has been nurtured as a national culture.

The reasons for stating that cultural weakness could result are basic: (a) *Powerlessness.* Outside of coercive measures, it is difficult to monitor content being watched in the privacy of an individual's home. It is not desirable to repress the free flow of information even at the entertainment level, and this causes severe problems for some countries. Powerlessness could also be understood within the context of poverty. Many African countries cannot afford what it takes to generate and package software for entertainment that would compete with foreign programmes. Besides, these countries are simply not strong enough within the global media environment. They are receivers of messages that could harm the national fabric and yet they cannot generate significant counterveiling messages.

(b) *Dominant derogatory messages.* Repeated messages that tend to denigrate the objective conditions within which viewers in Africa live and exalt conditions of life, especially in the West, could lead to low self perception and esteem among African viewers. Such a situation makes it difficult, not only for the viewers, but also for those in society who attempt to develop messages aimed at reinforcing national cultural values. In extreme cases, repeated derogatory messages coupled with excessive violence result in delinquency among high risk adolescents and young adults.

(c) The new communication technologies, such as video cassettes in particular exacerbate what Herbert Schiller (1976) has referred to as cultural domination.

How then could one make a case for communication development and cultural synchronization among the peoples of Africa? This question should be discussed with several assumptions:

(1) Culture is not stagnant particularly in a world dominated by sophisticated systems; (2) Practically all societies undergo cultural changes through contacts with other cultures; (3) The flow of culture-oriented messages is mainly North-South and not vice-versa which, therefore, creates an imbalance in the process of refining or making adjustments to cultural development; (4) Human communication processes — rhetorical, group, interpersonal, etc., — within a given culture could be aggregated and articulated pedagogically so as to ensure at least an understanding of the basic differences and similarities among different ethnic groups; (5) Cultural heterogeneity is not undesirable.

The Case for Cultural Synchronization in Africa

In order to deal with the questions and assumptions raised above, an examination of the Japanese experience would serve as a starting point. To many observers outside Japan, the country and its people are commonly referred to as a 'miracle' in our time. Japan has successfully transformed from a severely defeated nation just a little over forty years ago to a nation that dominates the world economy today, and at the frontiers of science and technology, particularly in the field of information technologies.

In achieving this feat, it has also protected its culture from dissolution, notwithstanding the heavy exposure to Western influences dating back to the Meiji restoration of 1868 and much more so during and immediately after the occupation by the United States (Nagai and Urrutia 1985). Throughout its ordeal in rebuilding itself after World War II, Japan tried hard not to be left behind. Twenty-five years ago Japanese products were ridiculed in Africa. Today, without Japan's products, particularly information/communication commodities, one is not regarded as sophisticated. Yet, the globalization of Japanese know-how has not caused any serious dent in the cohesiveness of the cultural fabric of its society. Some, like the former Prime Minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, attributed homogeneity among the key factors underlying Japanese success. The influence of Confucian philosophy is also cited as a positive one. Moreover, Japanese people speak one language; religious differences are nonexistent. The island nation is congested and its people have to exercise patience with each other to live in crowded conditions, particularly in major urban centres. But all these alone do not suffice as reasons for the apparent harmony that exists among the Japanese.

Japanese underwent several aspects of the assumptions mentioned earlier. They were exposed to a dominant world media system controlled by the West for a number of years. As Youichi Ito (1987) observes, 'It is apparent that Japan imported many foreign mass media products when the Japanese sense of cultural identity was weak and foreign media products steadily disappeared from the Japanese market as the sense of identity became stronger.' Ito argues that the crisis of a weak cultural identity existed in Japan in the 1960s and part of the 1970s as a result of the mainly 'weak competitiveness of the Japanese mass media products.' The flow of media products was from the West to Japan. The country was a consumer of cultural media content that it did not produce. What it produced probably did not fancy the imagination of the Japanese audience perhaps due to the weakness of identity with its own society, Ito argues.

It is interesting to note, however, that the Meiji restoration did not bring about the weakness of cultural identity that was manifested one hundred years after its initiation. The explanation might be the absence in the

nineteenth century of a mass media structure and content that portrayed powerful visual images hitherto unknown in the past. Contacts with Western culture, however, as a result of the Meiji restoration in 1868 might have set long-term dispositions to succumb to dominant culture-oriented messages resulting in the weakness discernible in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The Japanese case is interesting in several aspects, particularly with regard to the position adopted by Ito who argues that 'it is obvious that the Japanese in the 1980s have a stronger sense of cultural identity than in the 1960s.' He claims that reduced importation of mass media products and enhanced production by Japanese of their media products account for the strengthening of Japanese cultural identity. Not only is the production of Japanese media content greatly improved, the country now 'exports twice as many television programmes as it imports. Ito points out that the percentage of imported TV programmes (on Japanese television) is the second lowest in the world after the United States.

What does all this say about communication development and cultural synchronization? First, one cannot use the term 'synchronization' in the sense the title of this paper connotes. But one could argue that the development of communication capabilities and mass media products could impact significantly on the strength of cultural identity with one's nation or state.

If African states could capture the essence of the various communication processes in their respective cultural milieu and were able to convert observations to concrete media products, that would, perhaps, be a start in the overall process of capturing the various processes in the existing cultural groups in any given country in the continent. With the development of media vehicles, such processes could be portrayed in various forms for convivial and pedagogical purposes. Repeated projections of such images could conceivably assist in forging a national cultural image that could be readily recognized as 'national symbols' even if not fully accepted by all.

It is precisely because possibilities of using the new information/communication technologies in this manner mentioned above exist that one should heed the statement by Koji Kobayashi (1983) that the 'widespread introduction of C & C (Communication and Computer) systems will bring video images from all parts of the world directly into our living rooms by satellite or through fibre optic submarine cable systems.' Such an event would, for Kobayashi, 'help expand the areas held in common among nations and promote mutual understanding among the majority of mankind, dissolving the antagonism between nations, races, and religious groups.'

This is perhaps the strongest argument for communication development and cultural synchronization in Africa. Kobayashi's sources from which

the images emanate are located in the world system. For Africa, the sources would be the various cultural enclaves. If the continent could develop the necessary technical capabilities, then Africans may be able to choose freely among a menu of images those that closely approximate to their indigenous cultural orientations and, possibly, establish links through such discoveries. As it stands now, no such options exist even at the domestic levels in several African states.[1]

Even if technical capacities do not exist at the national levels, the private sector could be marshalled to invest in this field so as to stimulate development and diversity in the various industries that fall under the new communication and information technologies. With competitive industries leading in this area, the possibility of keeping up with advances in innovations in the field would be much greater than having the development of the industry solely in the hands of the public sector.

The uses and applications of the new communication and information technologies as far as cultural synchronization is concerned could be put to the benefit, not only of the present generations, but also for posterity. Images portrayed via video have a strong impact and do not require 'reading' in order to communicate. Posterity could relate to the previous generations in action form rather than in a passive manner as represented by reading materials. The point here is not that reading materials are being denigrated, but rather that the new technologies would serve as a strong complement to such materials. In essence, the generation that develops the capacity to apply and effectively use the new technologies by packaging peculiar cultural media content would be satisfying its obligations to preserve the essential elements of culture for generations yet unborn. This could be seen as intergenerational equity in the realm of cultural resources. Present failures to achieve cultural synchronization could conceivably serve as motivational factors for future generations to try and achieve the goals that their forebears could not reach. But this could be done only to the extent that the data is properly stored and retrievable.

Mechanisms Required for Synchronization

As the argument for synchronization advances, one could perhaps look at another attempt that is not directly comparable to the idea but related somehow to the intent — bringing about coexistence of different cultural traditions to serve as a form of national culture. One major country that has tried hard to achieve what could be called cultural homogeneity out of cultural heterogeneity is the United States. Bearing in mind the assumption that cultural heterogeneity is not undesirable, one could perhaps understand why the 'melting pot' concept in the United States is yet to be achieved. Notwithstanding the peculiar history of the United States — the

physical destruction of an entire race (the American Indians) and the enslavement of people considered to be chattel, its constitution and other national warrants proclaim and laud the value of equality. The contradiction between the constitution and the reality is not at issue here. What is crucial are the attempts made to accommodate, in one society, the various cultural and racial groups.

One mechanism the Americans tried was to achieve the 'melting pot' concept through an educational system that would inculcate the required values in the young, starting at the secondary school level. In short, the strategy was to use education to promote 'oneness', or in our case, synchrony. Education has been variously defined, and Newmark and Asante (1976) define it as the 'midwife of cultural learning'. But as pointed out by Bernier and Davis (1973), the educational institutions simply 'program students for cultural homogeneity, either by attempting to destroy the minority cultures entirely as in most Indian schools ... or by paying lip service to a mythical melting pot'. In essence, what obtains is an attempt to impose the value system of the dominant social classes as representative of a national culture. The American case is the strongest for a society that wishes to achieve synchronization but has managed only to maintain cultural pluralism which in itself is significant but not necessarily egalitarian. I must hasten to add that I may be wrong in describing the American situation as an attempt at synchronization.

Stemming from this, the educational system could be used to promote cultural synchronization. The problem, however, is the content within the national curriculum on the one hand, and the continental (African) curricula on the other. Given the varying degrees of complexity of the development imperatives confronting African states, how feasible is it to attempt at even standardizing curricula content on culture? There are several countries still locked in the battle of tribalism (an ugly word!) and require internal synchronization. How far then could we go with continental synchrony? These questions are obviously rhetorical and should remain so until we can provide reliable data on 'experiments' to achieve synchrony, or to even manage peaceful co-existence against the background of cultural pluralism.

The overriding importance of developing communication and information capabilities cannot be overstated. Directly related to advances in the new technologies are the wide range of possibilities in applying and using these technologies for pedagogical purposes. African governments and the private sector would have to take a hard look at the global context and determine where the continent stands within the context of the revolution going on in the field of new information and communication technologies. Priorities for investing resources with a long-term goal of achieving social cohesion required for peaceful development would have

to be determined. Having access to the technologies *per se* is not what is required. A deliberate effort at packaging messages that would be competitive with external software is the key to success. Numerous entry points into the cultural domains of various ethnic groups would have to be identified.

Among the entry points could be entertainment and educational kits prepared specifically for cultural instruction. Furthermore, African states with basic computer facilities could experiment on linking institutions that could develop courses structured around what Anta-Diop refers to as the cultural unity of Black Africa.

Summary

This paper has attempted to address a difficult topic in the sense that the objective — synchronization of culture and communication development — is not easy to define, let alone analyse. Because of this, extended examples have been cited to bring the objective within the context of current exercises in multi-ethnic states on the one hand, and within the context of a monocultural state like Japan on the other.

The tasks called for in this topic are phenomenal but potentially achievable. African states are cognizant of the important role of cultural harmonization, both at the national and continental levels. The various continental and regional bodies — the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Economic Commity of West African States (ECOWAS) — have several articles that express the desirability of having such harmony. It is up to the leadership in society, both public and private, to carry out the mandates.

Note

1. Nigeria television has, for a while, programmed national telecasts featuring indigenous themes. The extent to which this method has achieved cultural harmony among its various ethnic groups is unknown to the author.

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