

**ADVANCING AFRICA'S SOCIAL INTEGRATION THROUGH
EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES****Williams, Jonathan Peter**

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Abstract

Africa is rich in diverse cultural traditions and practices that serve as platforms for social interaction, communal entertainment, and the reinforcement of shared values. These cultural activities have significant potential for promoting social cohesion and mobilizing communities. While regional integration efforts on the continent have traditionally focused on economic and political strategies—such as trade liberalization, common markets, and treaties like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)—these approaches have not fully achieved the desired outcomes. This study argues that education, as a conduit for cultural awareness and appreciation, can serve as a catalyst for unity by leveraging Africa's cultural heritage to strengthen social bonds and promote cooperation among member states. By integrating cultural education into formal and informal learning systems, African nations can foster a sense of shared identity, mutual respect, and continental solidarity. The study highlights the role of education in harnessing cultural activities as instruments for social integration and proposes that cultural literacy can complement economic and political strategies to achieve a more cohesive and united Africa.

Keywords: African Unity, Cultural Integration, Social Cohesion, Education, Continental Solidarity

Introduction.

Nations in Africa are associated with their peculiar traditions and cultural orientations, and so are the uses of cultural activities in African societies many and varied. Essentially, cultural activities can be used for social interactions, group entertainment, life celebrations, furtherance of common interests, etc. As such, part of the fundamental values of the African culture lies with its potentials for social mobilization and cohesion.

Integration and co-operation are usually representatives of comradeship, friendship or allies, and are equally part of the ways to foster bond, interactions, and unity among peoples of different societies. Some societies, through acceptable value systems, flexible traditions and lifestyles, fascinating festivities and other forms of cultural expressions have secured the admiration, confidence and partnership of other societies.

In Africa, the strategies for integration and co-operation have mostly been associated with orthodox economic and socio-political schemes. Trade liberation schemes, common markets, regional banks and political/economic treaties have accounted for the popular strategies for integration. To limit the chronicles, in 2018, 44 out of the 55 member states of the AU signed agreement on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), as part of the agenda towards the acceleration of regional economic integration. Thus far, these strategies have not yielded maximal results, thereby leaving the exploration of cultural opportunities as an alternative option in the search for regional integration.

There is no gainsaying that colonialism and neo-colonial doctrines extensively eclipsed some vital elements of African culture, and by extension stifled the cultural ties that ought to enhance unity in the continent. For so long, Africans have unfortunately conducted themselves more as cultural agents to the Europeans to the detriment of learning, social change and cohesion in Africa (Bolarin & Pemedede, 2014). The quest for the recovery of Pan-African cultures and for the exploration of same in fostering bilateral and multilateral integration and co-operation in the continent has therefore resonated in different fora, just as researches into the use of education as a tool for regional integration have been intensified.

However, much as there is the increasing desire for cultural integration in Africa, there are also many challenges in the actualization to this desire. These challenges are as a result of barriers created by differences in geography, political ideologies economic interests and even educational policies/interests. However, in all of these areas of differences, education still stands out as a constant and reliable pivot for the nurturing and promotion of those elements of African cultures that would easily facilitate integration in the continent.

Concept of Culture and Education in Regional Integration.

The end of World War II witnessed much resurgence in efforts towards the fostering of regional co-operations and integration. The Europe Union (EU), which has the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversities as one of its goals, is a classical example of a renowned forum with conspicuous agenda for regional integration. Though essentially established as an economic forum, the EU still provided the room for cultural networking within the borders of member countries.

Similarly, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) is also a regional body in search of cultural integration in South America. There are other regional bodies in Asia and America that are committed to advancing sub-regional and regional integration through cultural contrivances.

Regional integrations are more of the interconnected actions within the sub-regional, regional, inter-continental and international circles. Mabe (2012) acknowledges that the bigger gamut of foreign relations is typified in interactions amongst cultural systems. The relationship that exists between cultural systems and foreign relations provides that, in order to understand the foreign policy of any nation, one must be very well abreast with the culture of that nation.

The inter-connection of culture and foreign relations is also predicated on the idea that cultural imperatives are inseparable from international social behaviours. Thus, Mabe (2012) asserts that:

There have been case studies of the people who live in bi-cultural social world. These individuals who migrate and settle permanently in different culture areas function as cultural intermediaries, bringing with them their original nationalist allegiances. They influence the attitudes of their adopted countries to issues that concern the country or areas from where they originally migrated (p. 328)

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Cultural resources such as literature, language, arts, history, music, dance, drama, fashion, festivals, food, games, etc, are known for their international values and influences through the cultural exchanges that happen amongst nations (Ogbenika ,2020). The gradual spread of these resources around the regions of the world results into cultural integration, collaboration or partnership. To adumbrate Omeruah (2005), the celebration of the Olympic Games is a product of a consistent teaching and spread of the Greek cultural heritage in form of sporting activities. Today, the Olympic Games have evolved into a single event that integrates other diverse cultures of most other nations under a very friendly, safe, entertaining and enterprising atmosphere.

Again, the concept of culture in diplomacy has been in existence for decades. Thus, definitions of cultural diplomacy tend to refer to the use of cultural products or heritage (educational and cultural) exchanges by the state to support national objectives abroad. Cultural diplomacy is different from conventional diplomacy in the sense that it is a wider range of activities that significantly boost a healthy political and economic understanding relating to nations. The utility of culture for diplomacy broadly revolves around the dissemination of cultural practices for the promotion of collective interest amid the committee of nations (Scott-Smith, 2016)

Furthermore, there are very many examples that culture and education are pertinent to the cultural equations in a fast globalizing society. According to Morgenthau & Thompson (2012, p. 544), “what has been said of education and culture as such holds true of education and cultural activities aiming at the interchange of the products of different national cultures”. Morgenthau & Thompson (2012) in furtherance to identifying the efficacy or otherwise of cultural approach to unity, examined how the interplay of education and culture in the mandate of UNESCO has impacted cross-national communities. In fact, the establishment and activities of UNESCO is a testament that culture and education provide the rightful atmosphere that ensure co-operation in the midst of nations.

Culture is not static, neither is it a destiny. Culture comes in contact with other cultures, and spreads through migration, cross-national marriages, business, education, etc. Fundamentally, culture is transmitted through education. Education creates a situation in which the culture it transmits is commonly shared by persons and nations of different origins. Education therefore integrates cultural activities and values of nations, leading to the tolerance and affirmation of certain cultural identities by different nationalities and groups. Predictably, education can be actively deployed to effect changes in negative cultures around the world through superlative mental orientations (Olaniyan, 2009; Palmer & Perkins, 2015).

The concept of culture and education remotely plays a major role in cross-national relations, as it has become necessary for nations to be knowledgeable and tolerant of the cultural activities of each other in their formal and informal diplomatic relations. It is therefore not surprising that culture and education can become of immense inspiration in the conversation and aspiration for a rewarding integration and co-operation between African nations.

The foregoing buttresses the conventional concept and nexus between integration, culture and the significant role education could play towards the actualization cultural integration. Unfortunately, however, Obanya,(2002,p.24) has observed “the failure of African nations to forge cooperation through education, in spite of numerous pan-African conferences of the 1980-1990 decades and the existence of a platform known as the OAU Decade for Education in Africa”. This noticeable failure is only an allusion on the need for the search of those empathic, eclectic and plausible educational templates that can catalyze integration in Africa.

Reminisces of Education for African Cultural Integration.

The role of education for cultural renaissance, and as part of the necessary tools for the survival of Africa in fast globalizing world is quite historical. Studies have demonstrated that the intellectual campaigns of African nationalists and socio-cultural crusaders (with their afrocentric philosophies) such as Marcus Garvey (Pan-Africanism), Kwame Nkrumah (African Unity), Nnamdi Azikiwe (Renaissance) Leopold Senghor (Negritude), Julius Nyerere (A United States of Africa), etc, are largely hinged on their reflections of the cultural life and values inherent in the indigenous systems of education across the African continent (Okpoh, 2007). As a matter of fact, their educational orientations did not only turn them into cultural nationalists, it also provided them with the initial political compass towards the aspiration and co-ordination for a liberated and united Africa.

The first ever post-colonial activity to integrate African culture was initiated with the hosting of the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in 1966. It was followed by the Festival of Pan-African Culture in Algeria in 1969. In 1977, FESTAC (Second Festival of Black Arts and Culture) was held in Lagos. It was a loud festival of arts, music, dance, literature and culture which assembled artists from all over Africa and its diaspora. The event was used to develop a strategy of cultural empowerment in Africa. Organizers of FESTAC were determined to use the epochal occasion to keep black culture from being eclipsed by other cultures and stop the disdain on African cultural heritages by those who insist on using western education to brand Africa only in the context of a primitive society. Today, FESTAC is reminiscent of one of the major talking points in the global reconstruction of the history and image of the African oneness Africa (Omilusi & Olorunfem, 2021).

Interestingly, in The Revised Treaty of the ECOWAS, Annex VII-2 Cotonou 1993, Article 62, member states agreed to encourage and promote, by any way practicable, all manner of cultural exchanges. However, the Treaty barely reflected on the pedagogy of cultural industries for the origination of the learning, enhancement and dissemination of a West African language as part of the deliberate measures to foster integration in the West African sub-region. Nonetheless, the Treaty approved for member states to promote knowledge in cultural tourism, free trade of cultural items and formal sensitization on the need for free commercial movements of artists from the subregion. Essentially though, the framework of the Treaty was to theoretically ensure that a knowledge-based-culture is largely considered in the overall integration plan of West Africa (Omilusi & Olorunfem, 2021). Furthermore, it is the values of culture for integration that led to First Pan-African Cultural

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Congress, organized by the African Union in Addis Ababa in 13th November 2006 (M'Bow, 2007). This occasion produced the historic Charter for African Cultural Renaissance, which was though inspired by a previous Charter signed by African Heads of States in Mauritius in 1976. The Charter for African Cultural Renaissance reaffirmed that Africa was founded on its history, and that the affirmation of cultural diversity and unity are of common concern to all Africans. Article 3 of the Charter stated that part of the Objectives of the Charter is: to encourage cultural co-operations amongst Member States with the view to strengthening of African unity. The Charter is equally and firmly convinced that, to bring about cultural rebirth in Africa, it is educationally imperative to, inter alia:

1. edify educational systems by the reconstruction and teaching the History of Africa.
2. strengthen the role of endogenous systems of knowledge
3. incorporate the use of African languages in education curriculum, and
4. deepen the ties in the education between African States and African Diaspora worldwide. (Charter For African Cultural Renaissance, 2006)

The Emphatic Templates.

Going by contents of the aforementioned ECOWAS Treaty and AU Charter, the imperatives of education for cultural cohesion were merely ambiguous and indistinct. There were no further critical insights on how to explore those requisite educational necessities for the maximal realization of the much anticipated cohesion for Africa states. In the light of this, these emphatic and actionable educational templates are herein surveyed:

1. Revitalize Cultural Transmission.

Fundamentally, education is the transmission of culture from one generation to another. Education and culture are both critical in interrelationship. Culture is learned. Understanding culture types helps in the appreciation of various cultural perceptions. However, that culture is shared and integrative means that no single education system can bring about the shaping and spreading of culture. According to Ololube (2012, p112), the extent of the integration of culture vary from one school system to another. To this effect, schools in Africa would have to systematically revitalize and expand the templates of African Traditional Education to enhance cultural transmission and mobility in Africa (Obanya, 2002).

Culture is taught as an instrument for transversal activity which highlights all other areas of sociopolitical activity in Africa, including the cultural backgrounds that easily influence policy interventions and programmes by African governments. More so, such teachings are structured to transmit practical application to the very many pan-African and international conventions to which governments in Africa have been party to. Studies and publications on culture have been apt in mirroring culture as a major catalyst for the reconstruction and reintegration of Africa societies, by emphasizing those cultural traits that unite Africans, and by deemphasizing the agelong cultural distortions mounted by the agents of colonialism, with their protracted adverse consequences

in African relations (Obanya, 2005). To the end, Universities with Faculties or Departments of Cultural Studies can only intensify and expand the mission of providing research and teaching in the expressive cultures of Africa and Africans around the world, particularly with academic programmes carefully designed to promote local and intercontinental awareness of African cultural realities in an interdisciplinary matrix.

2. Reinivigation in Cultural History.

Africa is mostly conceived as a geographical entity rather than a continent of common historical heritage. According Alagoa (2006), the continent is not particularly defined by race or any category of socio-cultural history, and so the diversity of its historical experiences has not been thoroughly explored. This gap has therefore thrown up the need for proper historical orientation that would foster cohesion within the continent.

Reinvigorated studies of African history would be considered effectual for providing unity in Africa. As a matter of fact, historical studies of the Sudanese empires show how the empires made themselves pacesetters in African integration. They laid the foundations of regional trade through the culture of occupation, negotiation and absorption. As such, studies of the empires offer a practical case study for West Africa to have the confidence that unfettered integration is feasible despite geographical encumbrances (Diagne, 2017).

In the submissions of Akombo et al (2015, p.5) “history also serves as a unifying factor”. The knowledge and understanding of the historical antecedents of the diverse African people provide insights on how they have evolved and eventually fused together by common cultural heritage before the scramble for and partition of Africa by imperial interests. Reflections on such historical bonding only soften the ground for further initiatives on integration. Indeed, the knowledge of African institutions and their histories has “helped to loosen ethnic ties and increasingly provided a bond of union in the larger states” (Ajayi, 1988, p.79)

3. New Drive in African Languages

An indisputable strong trait of culture is language. African languages have constituted quite a lot of challenges to socio-political synergies in the continent. Suffice it to say that, the languages of the former colonialists, mostly represented in English, French and Portuguese have no doubt impacted positively in bringing, to some reasonable extent, the African populace together. Nevertheless, scholars argue that that these ex-colonial languages strictly favour language unification for the African elites to the detriment of the mass illiterate population. In other words, these colonial languages are only accessible to the intelligentsia, whereas the unlettered cannot have access to the same languages due to lack of access to basic universal education. Again, the language myth, which equates good cultural practices with mastery of international languages such as English, French and Portuguese deny Africa the spread of African languages (Alliyu & Salami,2015). The ex-colonial languages have invariably dwarfed the African linguistic heritage, given their preponderance use over and above all other indigenous African dialects and languages. Ajayi (2001) observes that many of the African languages are either endangered or lost to globalization. Consequently, Afrocentric scholars have reechoed the need for deliberate educational policy drive

on the reinforcement of native languages around Africa, not only for their survival of those languages but as a way to spread and bring down the language barriers that exists amongst the litany of ethnic groups in Africa. In addition, there is also the demand for African linguists and language institutions to plan for a territorial language (chthonolect) or regional language (choralect) for the ease of national or regional integration. Much as this has been occupying the attention of educational language planners for many decades, with the tremendous expected results, Alliyu & Salami (2015) have out rightly canvassed for intentional link of language, culture, and the people via a common educational curriculum and philosophy if the possibility of a pan-African monolithic language is to be achieved in the near future. Such philosophy is hinged on the exploration, development and use of; intercultural thinking, intercultural language materials, intercultural communication, intercultural collaboration and multi-culturalism in the forging of integration.

4. Intensify Education Exchanges

As with many other forms of functional cultural diplomacy, Africa is still lacking in regional educational exchange programmes. Many Africans are rather leaving the continent in droves to Europe, America and Asia in pursuit of foreign education. The intensification of intra-African education exchanges has the potentials to change the negative narratives of Africa as a Dark Continent. Besides, the alumni of the exchange programme are in better position to be worthy African cultural ambassadors, and would in a long-run help advance conservations and dialogues in the viewpoints and interests of Africa (Wekesa, 2018, Arugu, 2014). Intra-African academic mobility therefore becomes another reasonable platform for furthering internationalization in the continent. In this whole scheme of intellectual exchanges and mobility, Mazrui (1978, p.355) identifies “the African intellectual as an international link” in the fusion of African thoughts, and one “whose interests cut across national boundaries whilst ensuring that “modern art in Africa is becoming sufficiently widespread”, thereby making him a major player in the “internationalization of Africa in new way”.

Conclusion

The dialectics on culture and integration in the African continent is central to educational inputs, dynamics and relevance. Sub-regional and regional organizations like ECOWAS and the AU have duly acknowledged this but without much insight for the operationalization. The utilities of educational activities and templates have shown that education is a veritable instrument in harnessing cultural potentials for the benefit of integration in Africa. The initiatives for integration can be further promoted via the mix of formal transmission of culture, reinvigoration of historical studies, drive for the spread of African languages and development of schemes for exchange programmes in Africa educational institutions.

Suggestions.

Part of the dreams and visions of African nationalists is to see that Africa is firmly united, particularly in the face of rising intercontinental and global competitiveness. Africa can largely be united only where her varied and shared

cultural heritages are further enhanced by the educational practices that easily facilitate regional integration. Therefore, African governments and their Heads-of-States, sub-regional and regional blocs, diplomatic agencies and other socio-political institutions should move beyond Treaties, Charters, Protocols, Agreements, etc, and endeavour to encourage and sustain the visions of the nationalists by emphatically leveraging on the channels of education for cultural integration.

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