The Digital divide and Sociocultural Change in Africa

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A globalized world has made it increasingly possible for individuals and societies to be connected through technology. In Africa, the internet is rapidly changing the lives of growing numbers of people, significantly impacting their worldviews and redefining important socio-cultural models. Yet, many others simultaneously continue to remain excluded as part of the phenomenon of a so-called *digital divide.*

The tremendous changes brought about by Covid-19 shed light on these inequalities even more. During the lockdown, digital technology allowed many people worldwide to continue work, education and communication uninterrupted, while millions of others were unable to connect to the internet, finding themselves isolated. Approximately seven million university students across Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, remained without access to education for several months.

There are also demographic gaps: people in higher income brackets, better levels of education and youth were more likely to have smartphone and internet access. Many older adults, on the other hand, know how to use mobile phones only for communication and safety and are slower in mastering and adopting technology.

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the internet in everyday life, discourse on the *digital divide* in Africa highlights both the unequal societal distribution of access to technology and the need for greater skills and training. Urgent exploration of these "new" social inequalities is needed in order to ensure they do not further increase and perpetuate existing poverty.

Another aspect in need of consideration regards the societal transformations taking place today. These transformations are not only in the social realm, but involve cultural, technological, political, economic and environmental spheres as well[1]. A 2017 Pew Research Center study argues that digital communication in Africa today is at a crossroad. On the one hand, rich, long-standing community traditions are changing and immeasurably valuable customs are being lost. On the other, most sub-Saharan Africans with media and

internet access speak of experiencing positive effects in relation to education, politics, economics and personal relationships.

Africa is also experiencing remarkable change in the way deeply rooted, traditional cultural practices are now being lived out, including "celebrations of life", like births and funerals, and even "rites of passage" such as weddings and initiation ceremonies.

As an example, in May 2020, during total lockdown, I participated virtually -- from the balcony of my home in Lomé, capital of the small West African country of Togo -- in a funeral taking place in Nigeria. Together with more than 500 people from various continents, we "accompanied" the small group in Nigeria – where health measures limited participation to 25 people – from the house of the deceased person to the church and later to the cemetery for burial.

This is seemingly nothing new in today's world where such experiences are common. But in the African context, funerals are very articulated celebrations that last a few days. They also include moments of night vigil with family members, friends and acquaintances coming together from all over the country.

In Africa, life is "celebrated". "Mourning" the dead is accompanied by the community. From personal experience, I can testify to the psychological importance of such an atmosphere of closeness and the comfort brought by these ceremonies. With each passing day, the sharing of meals and rituals with dozens of people entering and leaving the house, comes a gentle urging to accept the immutable truth of death, serving to help internalize the reality of death and find the strength to move forward.

Thus, one major challenge for families in this period is "not being able to mourn the dead as we usually do". For this reason, expressions of anxiety are not surprising in this post-Covid period. Will we still remember how to "celebrate" funerals by huddling around those who have lost a loved one?

A similar thing occurs with regard to another common practice in Sub-Saharan societies: the traditional wedding and *bride price* ceremony. This ceremony serves to validate marriages, strengthen new family ties and legitimize children born in marriage. Events can be very elaborate, having up to a dozen stages which require weeks of preparation.

Against this backdrop, one can better understand why the recent words of Zimbabwe journalist, Philemon Jambaya, as reported by the Associated Press, went viral. In an interview, he spoke of negotiating the *price* of his future bride and wife with her family through the messaging app, WhatsApp. This was then followed by a small, brief traditional wedding recorded on smartphones which 'family elders did not resist'. "I never imagined marrying in that way, but I couldn't wait", Jambaya said, ". . . [W]e are also living in abnormal times."[2]

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[1]   B.O. Linnér - V. Wibeck, *Sustainability Transformations: Agents and Drivers across Societies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2019).

[2]   https://apnews.com/article/pandemics-kampala-weddings-coronavirus-pandemic-africa-4222502dae4c64c553d2dcd14eafc6d2