



Multi-Lingualism And The Importance Of ECOWAS Parliament In A Global World

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ABSTRACT

Africa needs to form a large market through the usage of a single currency which is driven by political leaders in the four corners of the continent. As a very important institution of state, the legislature is pushing and pursuing for more integration through the institutionalization of laws and regulations that will ensure the success of this integration. It is on this note that this paper is advocating bi-lingualism and multi-lingualism as a tool for bridging the language gap in interaction within the global community among parliamentarians. Hence the need to develop and encourage the ability to communicate in languages across borders amongst parliamentarians will in no small measure ensure the quality of legislation and by extension hastens the integration process within the sub-region. The paper recommends the creation of an enabling environment especially by national governments where the ECOWAS parliament will be allowed to embark on radical reforms that will provide proactive approach to sub-regional challenges.

Keywords: legislature, integration, bi-lingualism, multi-lingualism, ECOWAS parliament.

INTRODUCTION

Since its inception more than forty (40) years ago, much effort has being devoted by the ECOWAS leadership to the promotion of free movement of persons and goods across national boundaries. The sub-region is home to not less than 362 million people spread across 15 countries, occupying about 5.1 million square kilometers with huge economic potential. The integration process has actually been helped by global trend especially the economic integration of European countries and the North America Free Trade Association (NAFTA). One of the institutions established to ensure greater integration of the sub-region in the House of Representatives of the community is known as ECOWAS PARLIAMENT.

The ECOWAS parliament was established under Articles 6 and 13 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty of 1993 with its initial Protocol establishing it being signed in Abuja on August 6, 1994. It is the Assembly of Peoples of the Community serving as a forum for dialogue, consultation and consensus for Representatives of the people of West Africa with the aim of promoting integration. The establishment of the parliament is a drive towards a single government. The dynamics of this parliament shall follow after the manner a legislative house is administered. The peculiar character of the ECOWAS parliament is the multi-lingual nature of the members across national boundaries.

One of the core objectives of this parliament is the promotion of freedoms seen as one of its hallowed endeavors. A free society promotes interaction at different levels and at different strata of humanity at the economic, political, cultural, social, environmental and religious segment of the society.

Since one of the basic elements of a democratic society is the institutionalization of the law making process, it is therefore necessary to admit that language is a veritable tool in carrying out business of the legislature for the sustenance of free society where inferiority in terms of language and economic wellbeing is relegated if not completely obliterated. In fact, sound points of legislation establish social

stability, mutual understanding and homogeneity between and amongst diverse people. In this part of the world, the inability of someone to communicate in English Language is regarded as a serious setback in the acquisition of goodwill and economic favours. This is why the Nigerian 1999 constitution (as amended) did not make the English the exclusive language of doing the business of law making. According to section 55 of the constitution, the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangement has been therefore.

This paper is not so much as discussing the usage of languages in the conduct of legislative business but in appreciating the beauty and finesse of a legislature having such qualities as may permit to enter into dialogue in any language as the situation demands. It should be noted that the concept of multi-lingualism as operationalized in this paper means the situation where the legislative process and legislators are in tune with more than two foreign languages away from the local languages spoken in the country.

Statement of Problem

Studies in issues on multi-lingualism, multi-cultural and racial diversity have attracted scholars of federal political systems and federation and co-federation. This is so, considering the fact that the ECOWAS PARLIAMENT as a legislative body is set up and set out to promise sound point of legislation which shall further bridge the divide within the sub-region. The ECOWAS parliament as a new institution must come to terms with the 'institutional knowledge of members and institutional forms of structures and procedures [which] are transferable through time and across boundaries (Patzelt 2007) from the established parliament of member-states. However, due to the degree and depth in terms of durability, there may be departure from established rules and procedures to give room for adjustment of institutional forms to fit with the tenor, temperature and temperament of a changed and changing environment occasioned by the diversity of culture and knowledge. Within the sub-region, three major languages that the colonialists used and which serves to reduce languages are English, the French and Portuguese. The essence is that the dynamism of interaction especially among legislators is ever widening and it is essential that legislators are in tune with these modes of interaction. Even though Mandarin is the language spoken by over one billion people the world over, it lack the spread that may warrant it dictating the tenor of world events. This is unlike the Spanish and French languages that have over the years acquired the tenacity to dictate the pace of world affairs. Within the ECOWAS sub-region, the French language is the most dominant in terms of spread. In some instances though not substantiated, it has been argued in that in voting for the best African footballer in the continent, the franc-phone countries tend to consider their kith and kin of the French language hue. Only recently, the Lagos state government announced that the Chinese language will receive attention and be taught in schools in the state. This is because of the place language, especially international language occupy in business communication. Though, within the ECOWAS parliament, translation technology is in use, it is not like communicating directly in the language. Just only recently, Jeb Bush, a Republican contender for the office of the president of the United States of America was reaching out to the Spanish community in America communicating in the Spanish language. This paper is therefore aimed at advocating the promotion of multi-lingualism among legislators in a global world dictated by the absence of boundaries due to advent of information and communications technology.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework we shall be using for this work is the democratic theory. According to Terchek and Conte (2001) there is no single theory of democracy only theories yet many of them are different from one another yet they belong to a family and share same family resemblance. One of the variant of the variant of democratic theory which we shall adopt as an explanatory tool in this work is the Lijpharts (1977) consociation democracy which essentially is argument between leaders of each bloc in a divided society to share government, involving 'grand coalition', segmental autonomy, proportionality and minority vote. Lijphart (1994) believes consociationalism is the only workable type of democracy in deeply divided societies. Here, it is believed that the ECOWAS parliament is a grand coalition of blocs and segmental autonomy representing states. Also included is the work of Dryzek (2003) on deliberative democracy where he postulated that deliberative democracy is made for power sharing with attenuated

sovereignty and a more contestatory deliberative politics in the public sphere that is semi-detached from the state. According to him, this is because democracy is essentially, though not exclusively a matter of deliberation. Although, we are aware even as argued by Majefe (2002) that African societies are being fixated on colonialism (including its new form; neo colonialism, emphasis mine) which its umbilical cord is still dripping with blood. Yet there is the belief that democracy in whatever forms so long as it allows for individual freedom and the assertion of peoples' right is good for Africa and that within the confines of ECOWAS PARLIAMENT, it would be more appreciated as this august institution will in more ways result in stronger integration of the sub-region.

Conceptual Clarification

Languages all over the world are vehicles used in communicating intent between parties, and all languages possess certain characteristics such as its symbolic and complex nature. There is no language that is more important than the other. The spread of language of the smallness of a country or community does not reduce the importance of the language as an effective tool of communication. This is the point made by the respected linguist, Edward Saphir when he opines that however technologically or culturally backward a people may be, their language always turns out to be a highly complex and sophisticated weapon of great precision within the range of culture in which it is set. All languages possess the same characteristics. The difference is in its spread and the population that uses such as a mode of communication. In Nigeria, there are over four hundred languages spoken over 170 million people. Of more than 6 billion people inhabiting the earth, over 3 billion communicate with one of the seven major languages of the world; English, Spanish, French, Bengali, Chinese, Arabic and Portuguese. In Nigeria, English Language is widely used in all official transactions including business transactions and inter-marriages between people of different ethnicities. The inability of government to erect a national language has more than ever before elevated the usage of English language as a means of communication and therefore has a wider reach in terms of population usage. Though, the Nigerian constitution places much premium on the usage of indigenous language(s) as may be prescribed by the legislative Houses, this has not limited the vast reality that English language is the most potent tool of communication in Nigeria. In this sense, the ability to speak two or more languages is usually referred to as Bi-lingualism and multi-lingualism as the case may be.

In fact, multi-lingualism can be called linguistic heterogeneity (Izuagba 1998). It also pre-supposes that a multi-linguistic community is also multi-cultural. However, language pluralism in African is mostly identified with the effect of colonialism especially by the partition of 1884 in Berlin when the Europeans powers met. The scramble and partition did not take into consideration the ethno-linguistic boundaries rather the demarcation lines cut across linguistic and ethnic groups (Izuagba 1998). The consequences of this action as viewed by Ahukanna (1990) were:

- i. The forceful unification of ethno-linguistic groups large enough to be separate nations with different indigenous national languages, provided the justification for the imposition was in the interest of the colonial administration;
- ii. Political cum linguistic balkanization for widely spoken indigenous languages of West Africa, prevented a situation where an indigenous West African language would have emerged as a native West African lingua franca. A role which is today performed by English and French.

The Legislative Process in the ECOWAS Parliament

The West African Sub-region is structured in such a way that French Language is the dominant language spoken in more than a third of all countries within the sub-region. By reason of colonialism, the English and the French languages are the most dominant languages that they even led to cultural imperialism whereby indigenous Africans find it an arduous task to communicate in their mother tongue. Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking neighbors and due to their population; she is regarded as the 'Big Brother'. In this regard, Nigeria has been in the fore-front in ensuring that her neighbors had a share of prosperity within the region. Nigeria including the members of the ECOWAS through the ECOMOG helped neighboring countries over the scourge of insurrection and violent protests.

In order to consolidate on the 'Third Wave' of democratic experience, the ECOWAS sub-region established the ECOWAS Parliament to concretize the process toward regional integration akin to the European Parliament in Brussel, Belgium. The integration process has seen to the establishment of the customs union and the currency union. It has also established the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, created in 19991 but the instrument of authority came into effect on 5th November, 1996. Thus, ECOWAS Parliament was one of the far-reaching instrumental structures that would ensure its relevance in a global competitive world. To be a member of the sub-regional parliament, one must first be element into each country's legislature.

Composition of the ECOWAS Parliament

The Supplementary Act in Chapter IV, Article 25 (A, B, C, D, E) specifies the structure of the Parliament which consists of the Political wing while Article 26, establishes its Administrative wing. ECOWAS parliament is composed of 155 seats with each member-state entitled to a guaranteed 5 seats, while the remaining seats are shared on the basis of population. Nigeria as the regional power house has 35 seats. The parliament is competent to consider any matter concerning the community, in particular, issue relating to human rights and organs of the community. The opinion of the parliament shall be sought in the following areas:

- a. Inter-connection of the communication links between members countries so as to make free movements of persons and goods effective;
- b. Inter-connection of telecommunication systems to form an effective community network with the maximum possible number of extension to the rural areas to make them more accessible;
- c. Inter-connection energy network;
- d. Increased co-operation in the area of radio, television and other media links within the community and the rest of the world; development of national systems to form an integrated effective community system with is own programme;
- e. Public health policies for the community;
- f. common educational policy through harmonization of existing system and specialization of existing universities, adjustment of education within the community to international standard;
- g. youths and sports;
- h. scientific and technological research;
- i. community policy and environment;
- j. Treaty review;
- k. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in all their plenitudes; and
- l. Community citizenship and social integration.

From the items above, it is obvious that the ECOWAS parliament is set out to initiate legislations that will smoothen the rough edges against social economic and culture integration.

The ECOWAS parliament presiding leadership is known as the Bureau which comprises the Speaker and four Deputy Speakers as the governing organ of the Parliament. (<https://parl.ecowas.int/structure-parliament/>)

Multi-Lingualism within the Legislative Process

The ECOWAS as a body recognizes the co-equality and importance of three major languages (foreign) in official matters, therefore the ECOWAS parliament as a body permits the conduct of legislative business in the three languages. To this end, the importance of being multi-linguist in communicating points of legislation cannot be over-emphasized. The person who communicates in other languages already establishes and cements understanding hitherto lacking such understanding go a long way into building bridges and ensure unity and unanimity in points of legislation. Since this is the case, the promotion of cultural ties is most needed within the sub-region and the ECOWAS parliament is one of the most veritable venues where the legislators as political leaders can establish socio-cultural linkages across borders through cultural exchange during international carnivals. The usage of the three ECOWAS official languages in legislative business tend to give a semblance of union or confederation thereby

moving toward a single market, thus pushing for the possibility of driving for investment amongst citizens of the sub-region irrespective of foreign partnership.

The conduct of official business in the three official languages will better communicate the peculiarities of the member-states as the Parliament becomes more pro-active through the new supplementary act which seeks to enhance the powers of the legislative body to make conducive legislation for the community.

The multi-linguist speaker (speaker across borders) legislator will ensure that complex and technical point of legislation which ordinarily ought to be mis-understood, mis-represented, mis-interpreted are avoided or out-rightly jettisoned. Since one of the core objectives of the community is the promotion of trade links between citizen of members-states, multi-linguist parliamentarians are in better stead to ensure the generation of legislation which shall promote cross border understanding thereby fostering trade links and reducing distrust considerably. Such distrust is mostly noted amongst traders of both Franco-phone and speaking countries. For instance, concern have been variously expressed in sports circles over the appointment of Franco-phone speaking personalities in the headship of associations and even in the vote to decide the much coveted African Footballer of the Year award. Votes have favored Franco-phone brothers which have been expressed in journalistic circles.

Also, the consciousness and awareness that trade legislation applicable in one member-country is applicable in another within the community more often not has greater multiplier effects as this encourages linkages multi-sectorally. For instances, the comparative advantages inherent in this can be tapped when one considers the African Movie and music industry which has swept the entire world with its local content and has greatly encouraged cross-fertilization and collaboration of ideas between Anglo-phone and Franco- phone speaking actors; directors, producers, make-up artists, sound engineers, etc. this type of collaboration can ensure an entire pull of resources in the fight against piracy and copy right manipulators. The ECOWAS market is well over 250 million in terms of population. With this large market, we may not be searching for market to sell goods and services. The need of the cross border legislators' is of such tremendous importance when viewed from the lens of an increasing global inter-connectivity which has made physical boundaries inconsequential unlike what was obtainable about 30 years ago.

Today, the world is increasingly witnessing the global pull of centrifugal forces which is making centralization of political authority much more important. Global inter-connectivity has shot up the importance of trans-national organization is more than ever before assuming monumental importance. It is in the light of the above this paper is propagating that with new supplementary act which shall integrate the sub-region are made. Presently, the European parliament in Brussels has assumed such importance in the world. All that is needed is to ensure the harmonization of domestic laws with the laws made by ECOWAS parliament.

Challenges before the ECOWAS Parliament

The following are the possible challenges(s) that may be encountered:

1. Member-state nationalistic and ethnic spirit, what the Guardian Editorial of May 20, 2015 refers to as 'micro-nationalism of leadership' of member-state which can be very strong. Since Nigeria is the largest country of the sub-region and with a highest number of legislators, member-countries may not be comfortable and may result in over-protectionism. Though, there may be cross border parliamentarians who may be comfortable with other legislators within the sub-region, this may not trickle down to average citizen of the sub-region who may not be adept at understanding the three major languages.
2. The effect that to a large extent and in the long run results in cultural imperialism where by indigenous language may be emasculated and go into extinction.
3. Due to poor disposal income of the vast majority of the people of the sub-region, the advantages inherent in exchanges in terms of culture, trade linkages, and tourism may not be harnessed.
4. Since the advent of radical Islamic movement, it has become increasingly important to greatly monitor and secure the borders against infiltration of radical Islamic movement and teachings

which is fat gaining momentum the world over. Thus, reducing travel and cross border movement.

5. Also, the inability of the regional parliament to legislate a single currency is hampering the free movement of goods, services and personnel which are the hallmark of regional integration. Such obstacles may not be unconnected with what Heldlund *et al.* (2008) called 'processes of professional socialization'. This is when a representative body is faced with the challenges of skill and values transfer from one generation to another.
6. The lack of a trans-national highway is also another challenge that is hampering communication between and among citizens of sub-region.
7. The recurring problem of the transfer of forms and practices of existing legislative assemblies from one socio-cultural setting to another (Hedlund *et al.* 2008). Patzelt (2007) had defined 'institutional form' of a parliament to consists of its fixed social and legal structures that, on their part, are reproduced in everyday interactions as long as background expectancies, formed during institutional socialization, are mutually not discredited. We cannot gloss over the meddlesomeness and neo-colonial designs of erstwhile colonial masters such as the overwhelming presence of the French in West French in West African Franco-phone countries.

CONCLUSION

The importance of legislation in the development of the ECOWAS sub-region cannot be discountenanced. This is because every move toward development and growth is preceded by sound points of legislation which mirrors the culture and peculiarities of the people. Therefore the recent announcement by the leadership of the ECOWAS parliament that soon as citizens of the community will start electing members of the parliament is a welcome development. Coupled with the supplementary act which seeks to empower the parliament to deal with serious issues of governance and development, it means that the sub-regional government is on the verge of following global trend in regional integration. The issue discussed here which deals with multi-lingual character inherent in the ECOWAS parliament due to the diversity of the community is such that when harnessed can unify the parliament for better understanding and a concrete step toward regional integration. Bi and multi-lingualism across national boundaries can reduce to a large extent the barriers of micro-nationalism of leadership in member-state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- i. An enabling environment should be created for the ECOWAS parliament to embark on radical reforms. The radical reforms mean that sovereign states should reduce their powers by submitting same to the parliament.
- ii. Once language barrier and nationalistic fervor is dis-abused, the parliament will have the will and courage to legislative on serious themes that affect regional co-operation. In spite of the multiplicity language in the European parliament, it has evolved a scheme by which the language is no longer a barrier to communication and representation.
- iii. Thus multi-lingual membership of the parliament should ensure that unnecessary checkpoints within borders of member-sate are reduced. This will to give the parliament the impetus to legislate on the need to have a strong statistical base for the sub-region. All of the above is a pointer to mobilizing for a single government for the sub-region. This was the dream of the founding fathers of ECOWAS such as Dr. Yakubu Gowon and the late Gnassingbe Eyadema.

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