

# #Palaver Platforms

## An Ubuntu Initiative for National Unity and Social Media

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### Abstract

Social media platforms are not politically neutral tools. For that reason this chapter studies the polarizing influence of social media on national unity in Africa. From the social constructivist perspective it examines the conflictual interactions via social media between social movements, state and tech giants. Their polarization prompts a reflection on the validity of the non-dominating concepts of the African-rooted Ubuntu philosophy. The Ubuntu concept of consensus is presented as an addition to the perspectives of the Beijing consensus, Washington consensus and Bandung consensus. The author argues that Ubuntu philosophical orientations reclaim via social media the communal dimensions of serving cohesion within the domains of economy, technology, politics and culture. In the end, the author argues for Palaver Platforms as the alternative dialogue for social media promoting social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Ubuntu Philosophy; Palaver Platform; Social Media; State and Tech Giants; Social Movements; Seriti

### 1. Introduction

John Stuart Mill (1859) assumed that in the political arena of a free society, opinions clash until a consensus is hammered out about what the best proposal is. Using social media in the political debate demonstrates that this idea has reached its sell-by date. Social media are defined here as ‘interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss and modify user-generated content’ (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media platforms are not politically neutral

tools (Wasserman, 2011); they benefit from polarisation instead of consensus. Social media are instruments for political expression (Dwyer & Moloney, 2019), but, like all forms of hegemony (political, economic, technological, and cultural), social media serves especially those actors already in power, such as states and tech giants, to cement their dominant position. The term *tech giants* refers to dominant, privately owned technology companies which, in addition, have a close connection with their homelands. Examples of such alliances are Google/Apple/Facebook and the USA; Tencent/Huawei and China; Samsung and South Korea; Safaricom/M-Pesa and Kenya; Kaspersky and Russia. The presentation of social media can be compared metaphorically to the double-faced head of Janus. One side presents the face of the state and market, whilst the other side shows the connection of social media with social movements.

African states (including the military and secret intelligence services) and tech giants establish their dominance through the power of shutdown and/or surveillance (Kavanagh, 2017). This means that social media, as a representation of hegemony, hands power to those who control it. Social media then serves as an oppressing technology, a mechanism for strengthening existing state structures, discourses and policies. But in its duplicity, social media also supports social movements, with the ability to mobilise the masses in their demand for systemic change. In its form of *hashtag politics* (Davis, 2013) social media can be marked as a liberating technology (Diamond, 2010), a channel for the marginalised to speak out and challenge societies' order. From this backdrop the social movement of *hashtag activists*, mostly students, of *#EverythingMustFall* were calling in 2015 for a renaissance in South African academia, society, economics and politics. Social movements can be understood as groups of repressed and marginalised people raising their voices in the face of powerful political forces within society. In Africa, social media empowers social movements to mobilise students, professionals, trade unionists, unemployed youth, etc.

The polarization, via social media, between state and tech giants versus social movements in Africa prompts us to reflect on the validity of Ubuntu, philosophical non-dominating concepts of unity and consensus in this digital domain. Now that the political debate is polarizing exponentially online, it is important to research the effect social media exerts on the unity within African states. From this background my chapter addresses the question: what is the relevance of Ubuntu philosophy for national unity through social media?

## 2. Conceptual Framework

Technology experts will associate Ubuntu with Linux's clunkingly mechanistic operating system. Philosophers however know this African way of thinking through its vitalistic adagio: *a person is a person through other people*. From a philosophical reflection on the contemporary context of social media, a vision evolves for Palaver Platforms as the alternative dialogue for social media and internet. Inspired by the series of Bandung Commemorate Conferences, the text will pursue references for social media between Ubuntu philosophy and Beijing, Washington and Bandung Consensus. The rationale is the Ubuntu argument for a holistic human faced perspective (Du Toit, 2005a), which merges dichotomies such as the individual and community, the state and social movements, leaders and followers, and technology and humanity. Notions which, from an Ubuntu holistic viewpoint, are complementary.

The perspectives for this paper will derive from philosophy, technology and political sciences. There is in this paper no support for the opinion to separate out Ubuntu philosophy from politics in order to assure a pure philosophy free from ideology (Matolino, 2019). The core of politics is the notion of justice and fairness, and philosophical Ubuntu principles on community, justice, consensus and conflict contribute to the political debate between citizens. And, furthermore, it is good to realise that even if philosophies (or politics) are exercised in pure, perfect ways we, in our imperfection, cannot experience and accept it. We will never experience philosophies in a pure and perfect way, simply because we are human...

Next to these considerations, the structure of this paper is influenced by the social constructivist principals such as that a nation doesn't exist in the absence of human society (Foucault, 1970). The messages from actors (state, tech giants and hashtag activists) on social media express and constitute social practice. In accordance with their performative character, social media significantly influence the shape, volume and content of language which is the key instrument for interactions between people. Social media discourses use emoticons to replace words, tweets are limited to a maximum 280 characters which leaves little room for nuance and, as we can see, hashtags ring out as clear as a bell. The *hashtags* of the South African social movements reveal their ambitions clearly: #FeesMustFall, #Racism-MustFall, #ColonialismMustFall, #SexismMustFall, #PatriarchyMustFall, #CapitalismMustFall and, ultimately, #EverythingMustFall.

Via social media, tech giants and states are mining personal data; a technological process with the singular interest of categorizing and calibrating algorithms. The proprietorships and their presentation of news on media has always

been important. However, particularly at a time in which theories (such as Actor-network Theory, or ANT) look upon humanity and technology as equal actors, it has become increasingly significant to make an analysis of the technological discourse on programming language, the technical processes that power platforms, their data mining and the ways in which people are categorized and pigeonholed.

In turn, the activists behind the protest hashtags have a more ideological component. They aim to transform the African academic, social, economic and political system. They are in conflict with the hegemony of state and tech giants and the dominant ideology within academia, society, economics and politics. Therefore, the study of the relevance of Ubuntu philosophy for national unity on social media needs to focus on the ideology of power and the process of social change (Ellul, 1964).

### 3. The Ideology of Power

The analysis of the ideology of power will be executed per section as follows:

- 3.1 *Technology and Hegemony* summarises the visions of science philosopher Bruno Latour, which address the role of technology as an actor in the process of social and political change. There is additional focus on social media as an actor for creating power by how it is used, by whom and in what context.
- 3.2 As social media moves between global and local contexts, section 3.2 *Africa's neo-liberal context* uses the visions of both sympathisers and sceptics to consider the effects of economic globalisation on Africa (via the domains of technology, politics and culture).
- 3.3 *The Beijing, Washington and Bandung Consensus* section will introduce non-African interpretations of consensus.

#### 3.1 Technology and Hegemony

Our continuation of life on this planet will depend on the manner in which people use and think about technology on a global scale. A major barrier is the lack of good governance (Leonhard, 2016). The effects of technology on humans prompt us to reflect on its concepts from a multi-philosophical framework. This necessarily implies a major change in the approach to prevailing philosophical orientations on technology. In other words, the Western-oriented interpretive framework needs to abandon its assumptions of universalism and allow space to other philosophical perspectives if we are to understand and realise a reflection of technology

that deconstructs the trend towards new forms of Western hegemony. The way technology, including social media, is investigated from the perspective of Ubuntu philosophy, outlines the possibilities to live in a technological world without losing the human values needed for social cohesion and national unity.

The dominating theories in an approach to technology are firmly rooted in the West. The human spirit is often considered as the software of the mind (Hofstede, 2011). Philosophy of science purports that political leaders, thinkers and users are responsible for the technology they choose and its impact on society. Leading philosopher of science Bruno Latour (2005) views the relationships and the interactions between people and technology as an actor network (ANT); networks of human and technological actors influence each other within society. These actors participate as equals in a dynamic collaboration and are only awarded meaning by relating and interacting with each other. By being equal, the actors transcend dichotomies such as: man–technology, subject–object, society–the individual, culture–nature, vitalism–mechanism, etc. The actors' positions *can* vary in power within the relations and actions, but as the actors participate in the actor network, all actors are essentially equal. This 'equality thinking' necessarily implies a major change in the approach of humanity and technology.

Latour's philosophy of science's approach to technology is linked to social-constructivism, which sees social reality as the outcome of a conflict between actors endeavoring to impart meaning to reality. At a societal level, technology is not a neutral actor, as it is embedded in social and moral networks. As a fully-fledged part of society, technology is an actor which stimulates power. A value-free and power-free use of technology is an illusion. Like all forms of hegemony (political, economic, corporate, religious, cultural), technology is used particularly by those actors already in power (states, multi-nationals, religious institutions) to cement their power position.

Technology is both an actor and a factor in the process of social and political change. If there is a crisis situation within a society, both individuals and groups develop plans to maintain or reach the position of power. Technology plays a key role in the strategies for creating and/or maintaining power. The implementation of a successful strategy benefits from embarking on a new way of taking action, such as the use of social media by both the state and tech giants and social movements.

Frantz Fanon had already warned in the twentieth century of the negative and destructive influence of communication technology. Fanon (1967, p. 92) recognized early the manipulative strategy in which media, in this case radio, served the colonial state interests by affecting people's lives, communities and discourses in societies. More than fifty years on from Fanon, a new state power is crystallizing

due to the growing influence of technology and neo-liberalism, namely the merger of states and tech giants. Neo-liberalism represents the global trend towards an increase in the influence of commercial companies on society, at the expense of labour unions and social movements, through privatization of state-owned enterprises. The union of states and tech giants threatens the privacy and personal data of social media users. Through social media, both state and the market tighten their grip on society. African states use surveillance technologies via social media to observe and monitor political opposition, activists, etc. (Kavanagh, 2017). The tech giants benefit commercially from society's growing polarization and help expand this by prominently displaying extreme messages, meanwhile marginalizing the more moderate messaging in the process. Via the Internet of Things, Africans are surrounded, monitored and controlled by devices from tech giants, mostly non-African, that interact with them, with each other, and with third parties including both state and corporate entities (Korff, 2019, p. 129).

Terms such as digital colonialism, data colonialism and techno-colonialism (Madianou, 2019) describe how this combining of digital developments and tech giants revives and recalibrates colonial capitalist relationships of dependency. African states depend on Asian and Western technology companies in exchange for citizens' data and access to African markets (Kavanagh, 2017). At the same time government leaders have their fingers on the buttons which allow them to switch social media (and by doing so social cohesion) on or off. These state interventions are demonstrated by the sixteen-month ban of social media in Chad, or taxing the use of social media in Uganda. For their part, tech giants such as Facebook and Google harvest personal data to be mined as the raw material that keeps the social media boiler commercially stoked. This is surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) *pur sang*: the process of mining mass personal data like a resource by companies, with the explicit aim of influencing consumers' behaviour and mindsets for commercial or political ends. An example of the latter was Cambridge Analytica's trawling of Facebook accounts for election campaigns.

African social movements confront this dominance of state and tech giants (Prempeh, 2006). Throughout African history, social movements have been dedicated to values such as community welfare and solidarity, and have excluded colonial and neoliberal doctrines. What typifies the current social movements is the way they work in urban Africa via social media. Social media is a game-changer in view of political practices aimed at creating and maintaining power. It brings social change. Political activists reinforce their position by enhancing their visibility and mobilizing support in the political arena via the technology of social media. Social media is, in this domain, defined as interactive platforms through

which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss and modify political content (Kietzmann et al., 2011). A generation of young Africans (Smith, 2019) in particular are utilizing social media to construct political fellowship, with the aim of increasing solidarity and to establish social movements.

Notwithstanding the oppression of social movements, social media nevertheless offers technological benefits for the relation between state and citizens. For instance, in response to complaints from citizens regarding public services expressed on social media platforms, the Kenyan government intervened with useful actions to meet the citizens' demands (Lodge, 2013). Social media can also improve the communications between voters and their political representatives, create new conduits for political participation and provide new mechanisms of responsibility (Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2019).

One may conclude that the prospective impact of social media on national unity is likewise met with scepticism and fear, due to the risk of it being used by the state to control citizens. Whilst simultaneously playing a key role in the social movements of activists, social media serves the state (including army and secret service) in controlling and manipulating people in their role as citizens and the market in controlling and manipulating people in their role as customers. At this point in time, social media possesses the capacity to connect people. However we should not neglect to touch on the inherent risks of social media offering tools for a neo-liberal hegemony by state and market.

### 3.2 Africa's Neo-Liberal Context

The African continent is home to a huge diversity of cultures and the contexts of nations vary widely. However, Africa can be considered one entity with respect to the omnipresence of neo-liberalism and globalization, which prompts us to reflect on how Africans' lives are influenced by states and tech giants. Underpinning the free market is an economic globalization supported by technology, politics and culture (Heins, 1999). Within the domains of economy, technology, politics and culture, the visions of sympathizers and sceptics about the role of social media diverge.

#### Economy

In view of the economy, sympathizers express a shifting discourse about Africa, in which successes are evident and possibilities recognized. Leading consulting firms (McKinsey, 2016; Ernst & Young, 2017) propose Africa as the second fastest growing region of the world, with a transformation to knowledge-based economies powered by technology. Sceptics welcome this news, but although African

states do regionally integrate via economic communities (Ecowas, Eccas, AEC, etc.), mining for the components used in the production of mediums for social media, such as computers, smartphones, etc., is still the largest contributor to an economic growth which benefits only the few. Despite a slightly increasing middle class, the majority of the population still lives in poverty. Therefore a significant number of African adults, 33% according to a 2018 Gallup World Poll, prefer to migrate permanently. The frustrations with misgovernment, corruption and unemployment are a threat for national unity and the main drivers for the desire to leave. A divided population of remainers and leavers-to-be also affects social cohesion.

## Technology

In the field of technology, sympathizers point to the rise of social media in Africa. Social media reduces the entry barriers for firms onto the global market. Neo-liberal sympathizers welcome the innovative icon of African technology: Safaricom's M-Pesa (M stands for mobile and Pesa means money in Swahili). First established in 2007, this Kenyan bank is now the most successful mobile payment system in the world and operates in Africa, Asia and Europe. Mobile phones are also seen as the new talking drums (De Bruijn et al., 2009), helping people to connect across the continent and with Africans of the diaspora. However, sceptics would argue that access to the global market for African companies is proactively hindered by Western trade blocks, despite social media. In addition, there is a real gap between users and non-users of such facilities as the internet, e-banking, etc. The internet was used by 43% of Africans in 2021 ([www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)). The infrastructure for further digital development is weak. States also routinely block social media use, which interrupts both local and global integration. Data from the journalism website Quartz states that in the past four years half of African countries have experienced social media blockades. Internet blockages have a negative economic impact. Businesses operating through e-commerce have lost thousands of hours, leading to the loss of billions of dollars. In 2019 alone, internet and social media shutdowns are estimated to have cost the continent more than two billion euros (Ngila, 2022).

## Politics

Social media supports social movements from Algiers to Cape Town (Smith, 2019), a development benefiting both democratic change and a new political dynamic. People use social media as a political channel. Listen for instance to the speeches of Plo Lumumba on YouTube, in which he pleads for a so-called *sanitization of Africa's politics*. Sceptics point to anti-democratic state control via social media,

which is increasing beyond accountability. Human rights are challenged as states use surveillance technologies to monitor and spy on political opponents. Social media is presented as a liberating technology; however, it can also just as easily serve as a tool of oppression in a bid to bolster existing power positions rather than challenge them.

## Culture

Regarding culture, sympathizers often speak about ‘the African century’. Social media offers *Afropolitans*, African citizens of the world, a global platform for the successful promotion of African movies, fashion, music, dance and literature. Meanwhile, the sceptics point out that *Afropolitans* are made up of only a tiny fraction of young artists and tend to monopolize all the attention. Africa’s image in the world is determined more by conflict and poverty than by culture.

From the visions presented on social media by both sceptics and sympathizers we can conclude that the lives of Africans (just like that of Asians, Europeans, etc.) move between two opposing forces: global and local integration. There is a gravitational pull towards the direction of the universal free market, whilst simultaneously there is the draw of a return to an African context of particularism. A worldwide liberal unity can be observed emerging in the fields of economy, technology, politics and culture. At the same time, however, renewed group formations have emerged in these same fields, in which African local orientation is key to identity. These forces cause tension.

The tension between global and local integration directly influences how African states are governed. Most African states have a dual system of governance, with the traditional ways of governance and decision-making exercised in parallel to Western-style democracy. This twin track approach raises tensions between the roles of democratic governments. The one, serving as a reliable business partner in a capitalist world system based on Western orientations, versus the other, serving as a good steward for African national unities based on African orientations (Lauer, 2007, p. 300).

For further insight on the global neo-liberal case in relation to Africa, I will focus on the 2019 World Economic Forum in Cape Town and the concepts of the Beijing, Washington and Bandung Consensus which, like the Cold War did at the time, affect political processes.

### 3.3 The Beijing, Washington and Bandung Consensus

During the 2019 Cape Town gathering, African political leaders discussed their continent's future in general and the prospects for younger citizens in particular. The African heads of state all confirmed that much needs to be done to improve, especially, the economic position and prospects of Africa's uniquely young population. The continent has 200 million young people aged between 15 and 24.

In their quest to create jobs, African leaders are also receiving a helping hand from China. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summits, held every three years, make plain the scale of Chinese investment in African economies. As part of Chinese policy, under the names of *New Silk Road* and the *Belt and Road Initiative*, in 2018 Beijing provided \$60 billion of aid and loans, in the form of financial and intellectual capital, technology and logistics (Brautigam, 2018). The West looks upon these developments with a jaundiced eye. Most experts in international relations (Arungo, 2016) find Western governments hypocritical in openly disapproving China's foreign policy in Africa as economically neo-colonial and inconsistent with good governance, sustainability and human rights. The policy of the US Department of State in Saudi Arabia is, for instance, selective and unconcerned about human rights. And while president Macron promotes the philosophical roots of the Enlightenment for the French diplomatic corps (see Macron, 2019), the French policy in Africa is not exactly known for liberty, fraternity and equality.

The debates surrounding the Sino-Africa relationship concern the choice between the so-called *Beijing Consensus* and the *Washington Consensus*. In essence the *Beijing Consensus* stands for state capitalism and national unity through a one-party political system, while the *Washington Consensus* supports free markets and democracy. The *Washington Consensus* is characterized by a doctrine of policies to be adopted by African nations, such as opening up their markets and privatizing public services (Galchu, 2018). The *Beijing Consensus* avoids these unilaterally formulated policy reforms. Unlike the *Washington Consensus* dictating universalism, China stresses African nations should run their own affairs, policies and institutions in accordance to local orientations.

In the relationships of African governments with East and West it is also '*le ton qui fait la musique*'. China encourages influence with soft power in contrast to the West's hard power style. And China's presence is visibly on the rise. For example, government-funded Confucius Institutes are appearing at African universities, teaching Chinese cultural and philosophical orientations.

The *Bandung Consensus*, as it was promoted in the 1965 Bandung Conference, represents principles of respect for human rights, justice, cooperation, integrity of nations, equality of all races, refraining of serving the interests of big powers. But

the Chinese money streams cannot be perceived as a form of Asian-African solidarity inspired by *Bandung*. The consensus does mark a meaningful connection between Asia and Africa, aimed at improving collaboration and offering a bulwark against colonialism. But then again the Bandung Conference never brought about a revolution in thinking about international relations in general, or Asian-African relations in particular. The Bandung Consensus has been overtaken by the geo-economic and political reality of a Chinese hegemony.

In their navigating across global influences, the question is what African leaders and activists do, in their societies polarized by social media, to support national unity whilst maintaining respect for African values. For this we turn to the voice of the social movements on social media and their call for social change.

## 4. The Process of Social Change

The process of social change will be pointed out as follows:

- 4.1 *#MustFall Movements*, this paragraph reveals the social movement's demands for academic, social, political and economic change in South Africa.
- 4.2 *Africa's Ubuntu context* follows an African philosophical view on the economy, technology, politics and culture.
- 4.3 *#Palaver Platforms and Bandung*, this part presents the opportunity of a space on social media, a platform for public discussions moderated by philosophers, possibly from Africa and Asia. A key term is *Seriti*, a concept which stands for vital communication.

### 4.1 #MustFall Movements

Calls via social media have resulted in riots of mass street protests in recent years, from Algiers to Cape Town, by those striving for a fairer society (Smith, 2019). If there had been no Covid-19, such protests would certainly have continued into 2022. The relationship between state and social movements, fundamental to national unity, is in deep crisis and both parties are rapidly developing strategies to realise a new political condition. Social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, MeWe, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, Tinder, Twitter, etc.) are readily available to both the social movements and the state as tools for attempting to influence the power relationship with the other party, for example by mobilising people or closing down the internet.

Social movements can be understood as groups of repressed and marginalized people raising their voices to powerful political forces within society. Social

media empowers social movements, people championing a cause of the repressed and marginalized, such as African students, professionals, trade unionists, unemployed youth who are demonstrating against state governments, financial institutions, universities, etc. The protests are against corruption, high tuition fees, higher fuel prices, and include demands for better salaries, employment or education. Davis (2013) speaks about *hashtag politics*, indicating the role of social media as a political power to define the agenda for national debates. What fuels the *hashtag activism* is the absence of political or economic prospects for the common citizen. *Hashtag politics* are not intended to simply manage the interests of a limited group of people or a specific profession, but rather are hinged on changing the entire society.

The transcending theme (Branch & Mampilly, 2015) is a demand for democratic and economic change, driven by political grievances (e.g., social justice, human rights) of a mostly small middle class and material grievances by mostly a very large underclass of young poor (Mueller, 2018). The grievances, especially political, were for instance illustrated in the 2015-2016 protests by South African students, which the government suppressed by force. The nationwide protests started in reaction to the raising of tuition fees, but morphed into an attempt to correct historical misconceptions with the call for decolonized education and institutes. The students' hashtag #FeesMustFall was quickly followed by #RacismMustFall, #ColonialismMustFall, #SexismMustFall, #PatriarchyMustFall, #CapitalismMustFall and, ultimately, #EverythingMustFall. The hashtags communicated despair and the deconstruction of the trends based on all forms of hegemony.

Important topics for the so called #MustFall movements are Africanisation and decolonization. Africanisation of academia translates as more African PhD students and lecturers, the integration of African perspectives into the curricula and research methods, as well as the visible presence of South African role models through statues and images of Wangari Maathai or Steve Biko in place of the likes of Cecil Rhodes. There is no signal or message from African students about the growing number of buildings of the Confucius Institutes on their campuses. But there is unease in the unions because of the practices of Chinese companies, which consists of bringing their own labour instead of employing local people.

In South Africa the activism connected with the #MustFall movements has led to a power struggle with the authorities governing the state and universities. The dependency on social media makes the social movements vulnerable to state interference and intervention. But despite interventions, discontent is still latent and students, as well as other groups, continue to try to make their voices heard on campus and on the streets. The #MustFall movements have an idealistic inten-

tion, focusing on transforming universities and society, whilst challenging the hegemony within these originating from neo-colonial structures and orientations. The students are united around the removal of all unjust mechanisms nationwide such as capitalism, racism and colonialism; they are united around the restructuring of society in a bid to reflect African values (Booyesen, 2016, p. 328).

The activists come together against a national unity dominated by the political and economic models of state – and market capitalism, against both the *Beijing Consensus* and the *Washington Consensus*. Ubuntu stands in the rich tradition of African humanism and socialism, the philosophy is connected with ethical principles such as Ujamaa (Cornell, 2014, p. 150). The #MustFall movements desire an Africanisation of society and community, a dialogue of encounter based on African values. The urgent call for Africanisation is a “reminder of the need to revisit with considered attention what Nkrumah began in terms of the need to move knowledge production in Africa out of the colonial shadow and its attendant ideologies. Nkrumah was unequivocal about the need to recenter Africa” (Mungwini, 2022, p. 137). As a consequence, there is an imperative for African philosophy to deconstruct new concepts of colonialism or paternalism and to emphasize the African philosophical orientations on social media in the domains of economy, technology, politics and culture.

#### 4.2 Africa's Ubuntu Context

While section 3.2 explained the neo-liberal influence on African economy, technology, politics and culture, section 4.2 examines the Ubuntu perspective on these domains. According to the *Washington Consensus* and the *Beijing Consensus*, the foundations of a society are formed by, respectively, the free market or the state. A feature of Ubuntu in relation to national unity is the advocacy for consensus. The position of the majority is not pushed through, but one includes the opinion of the minority in the decision-making process. One takes into account the views of all participants (Dokman, 2013). Leadership naturally has the right to make quick decisions, but there should be agreement on important issues and strategies. Consensus is promoted through Palaver, a term meaning conference or gathering. The palaver model can be used within families, communities or organizations. In the local perspective of Ubuntu, community forms the basic condition for society, a foundation to which both state and market are subservient. Africans experience their lives from the perspective of being in relationships. A central notion at Ubuntu is the solidarity in the relationship between the individual and the community (Shutte, 1993). There is the notion that all people are connected to each other. The well-being of the community depends on cohesion (Mnyandu, 1997). Through

the Ubuntu philosophical orientations, the domains of economy, technology, politics and culture reclaim their communal dimensions of serving cohesion via social media.

## **Economy**

The Ubuntu economic concept has as its key principle the inclusion of all people (Kasonga wa Kasonga, 2005), in contrast to the neoliberal view with its dichotomy of centre and margin. Where the included and excluded are labelled accordingly as economic winners or losers. Ubuntu corrects the indifference to those apparently less successful. An important principle of Ubuntu philosophy is the equal economic participation of all members of the community (Mbigi & Maree, 2005). The meaning of Ubuntu is to restore and enhance all forms of economic well-being of current and future generations, without categories such as privilege and under-privilege. Rightly or not, enterprises refer to Ubuntu for their projects such as the Ubuntu Tribe from Ivory Coast, which aims to boost financial inclusion of all by offering digital tools. Or the company Ubuntu, which has changed from a profit machine to a sponsor of projects. Their sale of life bags, shoes and accessories is funding health programs.

## **Technology**

In the connection between the community and technology, sharing knowledge is the key issue according to Ubuntu philosophy. In traditional African societies technology was already a part of the knowledge system, as manifested in domains such as agriculture and medicine (Du Toit, 2005b). Man-made technology belonged to the community. With their knowledge, which also includes the digital part, the creators of technology nowadays help the community to move forward.

The current dominant narrative claims that a monopoly of governments, the military and multinationals have made the internet and social media possible. It is, however, the community-based organisations and social movements who have established internet and social media. They caused the initial growth of the digital social networks, for instance by sharing their knowledge with the global community via free software. These organisations and movements played a pioneering role in the increased influence of the internet and social media with the intention of generating social change (Rohlinger & Earl, 2012; Milan, 2013, pp. 46-47).

## **Politics**

From an Ubuntu perspective, state and market are essential for society, but more important is the community. Due to its emphasis on surveillance and data-mining,

the integration of state and tech giants does not particularly benefit the community. They increase activities that take place away from the view of the community's representatives. The conflicting aims of state and tech giants versus social movements obstruct social cohesion, just as the lack of transparency hinders national unity. These hampers stimulate a reflection on social media through the Ubuntu concept of Palaver. Palaver is a traditional African decision making process based on dialogue with a place for consensus and dissensus. Rather than the Western democratic compromise (Bueya, 2017) Palaver contains a discourse of traditional ethical orientations (Gichure, 2006, pp. 43-50). It contributes to the moral awareness within politics, by pointing out participants' responsibility to the community. Social media has the potential to serve the national unity and community participation via Palaver Platforms (see section 4.3).

## Culture

Google and Facebook are increasingly criticized for their platforms censoring African cultural expressions and that the tech giants' policy strives to homogenize lifestyles with regard to culture. Africans, including Afropolitans, may consider constructing *Palaver Platforms* to stimulate discussion about the Africanisation of social media, to share thoughts about the dominating role of tech giants, to debate the ethics of online technology, etc. The insights of Ubuntu support the movement for a more African and more human face of technology and social media. With the assistance of social media, the interest in Ubuntu has grown already beyond the cultural boundaries. From a geographical and historical point of view, Ubuntu philosophy has expanded to a global community. Ubuntu is rooted in the African cultures but also inspiring people from all over the world, beyond a fixed time and space. Consequently, a challenge to Ubuntu as a philosophy is the understanding of the transformations of its principles and what they mean for a global community (Binsbergen, 2001).

### 4.3 #Palaver Platforms: Ubuntu and Bandung

As we have seen Ubuntu aims, from a counterview, to promote humanity and community values via social media in the domains of economy, technology, politics and culture. As a possible bridge between strong opinions Palaver offers a contemporary framework, based on an older community model for dialogue without dominance because of the respect for all positions of all stakeholders. This principle gives participants, in essence, the space to express their needs and parties are called to account. Palaver provides then an efficient instrument for reaching common ground. Contact between participants is based on human dignity. The

model offers the opportunity for solving conflict, whilst at the same time reinforcing community harmony (Bujo, 1998). Ubuntu advocates community-based solidarity, expresses empathy with the weaker participants and communicates the consensus to be reached via Palaver. Who could be against this process of Palaver?

Well, youngsters and women, for example. The mantra of 'neo-liberalism is the problem, Ubuntu the solution' is clear and convenient, but not entirely complete when bearing in mind social constructivism. For example, within a Palaver, (older) men traditionally assume a prominent social position. However patriarchal Palaver is, the role of women and young people is different; their views are not rejected but a council of men has the final say (Bujo, 2001; Dokman, 2013). This manner is totally different from the western and feminist understanding. Prolonged deliberation or 'palaver' is aimed at reaching consensus in such a way that everyone's interests are named. This is in contrast to the Western meeting technique in which the primacy of reason prevails to such an extent that the interest of consensus prevails over the interest of persuasion.

But presented as traditional harmony and togetherness, Palaver is a 'good-keeper' for the marginalised (Hountondji, 1996). In this way Palaver is an invention that rejects the final decision-making by women and youngsters. Traditional Palaver excludes their final say and thereby stagnates the process of expressing dissensus in contrast to consensus. This misconception of Palaver limits free expression and diversity of thinking, as promoted by social movements and their channels on social media. Hashtag channels like #PatriarchyMustFall and #SexismMustFall are clear protests from social movements against male dominance and the concept of simulated, fake harmony. The Ubuntu-oriented interpretive framework of Palaver, therefore, needs to abandon its paternalism and allow space for other orientations, such as matriarchy, if Ubuntu philosophy is to be realised in its true sense of serving all citizens and the national unity.

A hereby-suggested new style of Palaver should provide a space for public discussion and helps resolve broken social bonds and support the stability of post-colonial African states (Bueya, 2017, pp. 104-105). Palaver can be a form of African participative power which is valuable for community life. For social movements, it can be an instrument to institutionalise their opposition. Palaver is required to find a possible pathway forward through the impasse that exists between state and social movements. It is good to realise however that, if we are to understand and realise Palaver as a humanistic and dynamic concept, it is, like all human other conceptions, imperfect. And even if Palaver was perfect, we in our imperfectness would not be equipped to receive it. A good example is the Palaver model as South Africa's foundation for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As a

model for national unity, the re-establishment of the sense of humanity did not heal all wounds and misconceptions.

But then again, the element which transcends Palaver from other models of dialogue is *seriti*. Seriti means being true to yourself, showing integrity. At the heart of Ubuntu philosophy lies the principle that we are all human beings connected through seriti and participate as equals in the vital force. Only humans are connected via seriti (Setiloane, 1986). It unites humans in their personal interactions with others. There is a flow of seriti when people connect with each other. Vital communication only takes place when participants are physically present; only the physical attendance of the participants contains the exchange of seriti within Palaver. Seriti is the unifying vital force in all human relationships and interactions, from political to communal (Shutte, 1993).

Ubuntu contains the vitalistic concept of seriti as a base for humane interconnectedness and is critical of the mechanistic views of social media. Influenced by technology, the human subject in social media is marginalised. Therefore, a social media with a more human dignity is required, even if this lacks the flow of seriti from a physical encounter. One rationale of this is the holistic perspective of Ubuntu philosophy, which merges dichotomies such as the individual and community, the state and social movements, leaders and followers, technology and humanity. From an Ubuntu viewpoint, these notions are not opposite but complementary.

A social media application of Palaver, a Palaver Platform, provides a fruitful opening for blocked social dialogues worldwide between international institutions such as the AU and African citizens, between tech companies and activists, between academics, etc.

In this recommended form, Palaver Platforms are intended to change human misunderstandings and to process insights. The platforms can provide an international digital stage to debate the implications of social media and ways of governance, as well as various perspectives on realities. This includes the willingness to deconstruct African, Eastern, Southern and Western certainties, whilst constructing new insights.

From the social constructivism perspective Ubuntu orientations are politically influenced too and are used by actors (states, tech giants and social movements) to strengthen their power position. There is the tactic of manipulating the public debates via social media around Ubuntu. For instance, the leading political parties dominate discussions on social media in an effort to push society towards a homogenized ideology. In Burundi and South Africa, catchphrases such as *Batho Pele* (people first) are promoted via social media and Ubuntu orientations

are included in political practices. The aim is to narrow freedom of expression by creating a comfort zone of consensus without discussion (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013; Falisse & Nkengurutse, 2019). This manipulation of Ubuntu emphasizes a static uniform thinking in support of political and economic interests. Meanwhile, within the context of Ubuntu there can't be consensus without discussion; that is what the concept of Palaver is about.

This limiting of freedom of expression is a contradiction to an Ubuntu philosophy that brings people together in the domains of economy, technology, politics and culture. Both traditional Palavers and Palaver Platforms are intended to help build 'speech-communities' with an ongoing continuous communication of meanings. In this dynamic, the platforms highlight an international cooperation between people from all orientations. From a holistic point of view, one could say, all participants of Palaver Platforms contribute to the interconnectedness of humans.

## Conclusion

This chapter has studied the question: what relevance does Ubuntu philosophy have for national unity on social media? The analysis has focused on the ideology of power and the process of social change.

African national unities are confronted with an impasse between states and citizens. The weave of state and tech giants is determined by a power factor, in which these actors pursue strategies preventing free speech via shutdowns of internet and implement datamining. Social movements are mobilizing and informing the people to retain or achieve power. The South African #Everything-MustFall have raised demands on political leaders to speak with underrepresented citizens. These requests have been accompanied by calls for decolonizing. The overarching conviction of the hashtag activists is that African orientations are hindered by excessive forms of capitalism, techno-colonialism and globalization, based on neo-liberal power structures. There is a plea for transformation, based on Africanisation which places community at its core. African governments find themselves meanwhile in a dilemma. One, being trustworthy in a capitalist world system based on Western and growing Asian orientations; another, respecting the orientations of their African constituency. A concern that African activists recognize in their own way. They reject the universal claim of Western values and interpret democracy, diversity and freedom via Africanisation.

Ubuntu is confined to philosophical and material aspects as Africans value communal life as well as material wellbeing. Contrary to the Beijing and Washington

Consensus, Ubuntu as an expression of African socialism alters the concepts of economy, technology, politics and cultures. Ubuntu philosophical principles are not intended to present unilateral African values. It does mean 'taking a risk', especially by the privileged African heads of state, for a reciprocal equal exchange. However, African politics could possibly benefit from a type of meeting which is not over-influenced by capitalism and power play. To promote unity in society in general and on social media in particular, both government and social movements would need to take steps towards a dialogue of encounter and consensus based on Palaver.

But the practices of traditional Palaver are debatable and Ubuntu is used by those in power to promote a uniform, homogeneous ideology rather than a lively discussion to reach consensus. Therefore, this paper provides a new possibility. The creation of a Palaver Platform as a forum could motivate parties who are vital for social cohesion, such as politicians, representatives of tech giants and activists, to participate around the table and physically meet in the spirit of seriti. Seriti asks for a willingness to passionately argue out political conflicts, based on contemporary orientations of Palaver such as openness and equality. The outcome of such a process of Palaver Platforms may not be perfect, but it could be as good as it gets in a complex political context.

Just like a Palaver Platform, other social media platforms similar to the #Palaver Platforms depend on their content and on who manages them. The questions around platforms are marked by a mechanistic tone. Who produces the template and the platforms' programming language? Who distributes the contents to whom? Based on which orientations, mechanistic or human (Leonhard, 2016), do algorithms select categories of participants? This paper advocates the importance of addressing these issues. From the Ubuntu Palaver perspective, there will be no national unity if states and tech giants ignore the involvement of Africans and their orientations in economy, politics, culture and technology. The practices of Palaver Platforms will guarantee their status as beacons of free speech:

- Participants' data will not be passed on to state and tech giants. Users' IP addresses are protected.
- The state does not restrict online media platforms.
- No recommendation algorithms or advertisements are allowed.
- The servers are supervised by moderators of social movements.
- The moderators are responsible for ethical expression of views.
- The platform should be transparent about the content of messages.

Inspired by the Bandung Conference of 1955 Palaver Platforms could be positioned with moderators from Bandung countries' universities. An African-Asian cooperation on social media implies an appreciative approach to one another's orientations. And from this benevolence toward each other's points of view, Asian and African politicians and activists can interact and overcome local tensions. As such Palaver Platforms would refresh the spirit and principles of *Bandung Consensus*.

Particularly now that dominant Western theories, such as actor-network theory (ANT), place man and technology on an identical footing, an alternative humanist concept is required to answer questions on the relationship between people and social media. A communicative consequence of the assimilation of humans and technology is the integration of human discourse and technological programming language (algorithms) on social media. A more humane Ubuntu counternarrative is wanted opposite the entirely capitalist and technocratic forms of social media. A narrative in which categorization of personal data is limited, where citizens can have a say in the applications of social media by state and tech giants. Increasingly, social media is shaping our social practices as well as our communications. Currently the polarization and exclusion of people and opinions are a threat for national unity. Palaver Platforms do provide a tool for communal dialogue and for social cohesion.

The suggested creation of Palaver Platforms means opening up space for communicating with fellow-humans and exchanging the various meanings. It is about maintaining human relations, which extend beyond the borders of your own orientation. It means sustaining relations with diverse people. Palaver Platforms need to stand up for dialogue, particularly against the threat of polarization, corruption and neo-colonialism. *This* is the contribution Ubuntu has to offer for national unity via Palaver Platforms on social media.

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