

## BETWEEN CYBERMAP AND COLONIAL BOUNDARIES IN WEST AFRICA: RETHINKING CITIZENSHIP IN THE INFORMATION AGE

By

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There are two contending contradictory but not mutually exclusive dynamics currently playing out in the West African sub-region. At formal state level, there is an increasing attempt towards regional integration. This is evidenced by recent developments such as the move to a common currency, the establishment of West African Central Bank, etc. At another level, there is the mobilization of exclusivist identities, creating political instability in many of the countries in the region.

Both of these dynamics raise serious questions relating to the concept of citizenship as historicized by colonial boundaries. While the state-led integration push tends to think of citizenship in a much more plural form, eroding the boundaries, the identity mobilization tendency evokes pre-colonial boundaries and cultural set ups as the basis for citizenship.

These two contending dynamics are occurring simultaneous with the emergence of a cyber world whose boundaries are defined not by territoriality but by access to the information highways. The cyber community that occupies this space is not homogenous in its agenda but the impulses of globalization push it through the dynamics of integration at every level.

How does this cybermap engage the two dynamics in the West African sub-region? What notions of citizenship is the cybermap constructing? What are the implications of these constructed notions of citizenship to the development prospects of the region? Is it being contested by the other dynamics? These are some of the substantive questions this contribution seeks to address.

The paper would argue that while the information age is redefining the practice of citizenship, access to the information society is itself a contested terrain of access to power and resources, two of the key elements

implicated in the mobilization of exclusivist identities by both citizens and states.

This is made worse by the marginality of Africa in the cyberspace. This marginality at once insulates sections of African populations from the cyber-mediated discourse, thus giving space to both identity mobilization and state-led integration discourses of citizenship. This is however increasingly being contested by non-state actors in the region, who are promoting an integrationist agenda as a counter to globalization in the region.

How far the discourse of civil society towards a pluralist conception of citizenship in the region will contest the others depends to a large degree on the level of cyber connectivity in the West African region. The paper therefore posits that while information and communications technologies can redefine the practice of citizenship in the region as it is doing in other parts of the world, the efficacy of this new “citizenship” in resolving identity based conflicts in the West African region is dependent on engendering an inclusive cyberspace in the region.