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Flows Before Borders: Networked Sovereignty, Indigenous Knowledge, and Africa's Encounter with Artificial Intelligence (AI)

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Figure 1.0: NESA by Makers
Source: *Unsplash*

Introduction

Conversations about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Africa often begin from a familiar premise. A new technological wave arrives, carrying promises of efficiency and leapfrogging. At the same time, the continent is described through what it lacks: capital, compute, infrastructure, policy, data, expertise. AI is placing Africa once again within a double bind, where gadgetry is invited to perform the work of politics and history, while the continent is reminded that it remains structurally unprepared for the very future it is urged to embrace.

This framing continues to shape much policy language, journalistic shorthand, and a good deal of corporate rhetoric.¹ Yet something feels different. Over the last twenty years, the digital terrain has changed in ways that justify an alternative reading.

Africa's current encounter with AI unfolds within a distinct conjuncture, rooted in several processes at once: accumulated experiences of disappointment and contestation; a new geopolitical rivalry that does not map neatly onto the binaries that characterized the diffusion of the Internet; the consolidation of conceptual vocabularies emerging from and about the South; and the renewed relevance of longer African histories of movement, frontier-making, and distributed forms of power.

This essay explores what sets this phase apart from previous waves of innovation. The first part explores how experiential, geopolitical, and conceptual shifts translate into distinctive practices: the governance of data, the curation of indigenous knowledge for AI applications, and the practice of research itself. The second part considers how these practices resonate with longer traditions of thinking about innovation as recombination – traditions that find some of their most evocative expressions in the work of Achille Mbembe, Igor Kopytoff, Sonia Samatar, and Nnedi Okorafor – and what they suggest about the intellectual work the present moment needs.

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A new conjuncture

Numerous shifts are making the present digital conjuncture different from earlier ones. I choose to focus on three types: experiential, geopolitical, and conceptual. These three shifts specifically have informed distinctive, assertive responses regarding how the latest wave of technological diffusion, powered by innovations in AI, will spread through the African continent.

The first shift is experiential. Many users, citizens, and labourers in Africa have been repeatedly disillusioned with the narrative that digital tools will serve as “liberation technologies.”² The promises of benevolent connectedness and entrepreneurship made by Big Tech have been seriously eroded by a steady stream of leaks and revelations, before some of these very companies (i.e., Meta) completely dropped their pretence of caring about their users’ ability to operate in a safe environment. Frances Haugen’s disclosures showed how Meta was aware of the way its platform was being used to fuel violence in Ethiopia’s civil war yet responded slowly and with inadequate resources, in part because the Ethiopian market was insufficiently monetizable.³

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Mark MacGann’s revelations about Uber demonstrated how African drivers were treated by the company’s executives as expendable, lured into the business with promises of entrepreneurship before being financially squeezed by decisions made far from the contexts in which they were operating.⁴

Most recently, the case brought by content moderators in Kenya against Meta and its outsourcing partner, Sama, has made visible the colonial supply chains that underpin AI: an army of workers required to label datasets and remove disturbing content from social networking platforms; paid a fraction of what their counterparts in Europe or North America receive; working ten-hour shifts under digital surveillance to meet strict performance targets; and developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the process.⁵ Daniel Motaung’s stand against Sama and Meta, and the unprecedented ruling by Kenya’s courts against Meta, point to a shifting disposition in how African workers and institutions are willing to interface with the practices of Big Tech.⁶

The second shift is geopolitical. The initial expansion of the internet coincided with the post-Cold War wave of democratisation, in ways that made the diffusion of the technology and the spread of liberal democracy appear almost synonymous. The current advancement of AI is taking place in a significantly different globalized environment, where two powers – the United States of America (USA) and China – are competing for global leadership in ways that have shaped discussions about technological standards, data flows, and the politics of computation.⁷ From an African vantage point, however, the rivalry between these two powers does not map cleanly onto territory or ideology. AI-powered surveillance in democratic South Africa relies on facial recognition algorithms developed by Huawei and on cameras manufactured by Hikvision.⁸ Ethiopia’s flagship private ventures in AI have been built in collaboration with diaspora researchers based in the United States and Europe.⁹

In Johannesburg, as a technical employee of one of the major data centres once told me, only forty centimetres of concrete separate a Google hyperscaler from a Huawei one. Africa has become one of the few places where two visions of digital innovation, that struggle to coexist elsewhere, are hosted on the same soil. The risk in this position is that emerging African visions get drowned out by the focus on the two superpowers. But there is a great opportunity for Africans here. In a moment when the rest of the world is hardening its borders, the porousness and radical non-alignment that has long characterised many African polities can become a resource rather than a weakness.

The third shift is conceptual. Innovative scholarship emerging from Africa (or from a radical repositioning of the continent) is giving visibility to the legacies of colonial domination¹⁰ and to locally rooted forms of imagination and innovation.¹¹ These reinvigorated efforts at decolonising scholarship, tech infrastructures, and platforms, have begun offering new frameworks to interpret technological development, challenging persistent stereotypes of African nations being condemned to uncritically replicate innovations from the Global North. Instead, they stress African agency in imagining distinct technological futures.¹² Alongside new scholarship emerging from or focusing on Africa, research on “postcolonial computing”¹³ and “decolonial computing”¹⁴ has pointed to critical imbalances of power in the design and application of technological artefacts, in ways that offer traditionally marginalised groups new avenues for contestation and for promoting more inclusive forms of innovation.

They have stressed how a ‘disembodied’ perception of innovation, framed as the result of a neutral process led by experts, has in actuality led to the incorporation of sets of values and

principles that have favoured a specific minority (white, male, educated, affluent), with significant consequences for other groups, based on race, gender, education, and class.¹⁵ These approaches are commanding increasing attention and are informing emerging debates on inequalities, ethics and labour relations; especially with regard to forms of discrimination that digital innovation, including AI applications, may deepen or introduce.¹⁶ These frameworks are increasingly available to researchers, activists, and policymakers, and they offer something that was largely missing in earlier digital conjunctures: a vocabulary for articulating what African positions on technology might be, beyond the binaries of acceptance and refusal.

From sovereignty as fetish to networked sovereignty

These three shifts find a productive synthesis in a concept I have explored at great length elsewhere: networked sovereignty.¹⁷ The term is adapted from Achille Mbembe’s articulation of the relationship between African states in pre- and post-colonial Africa, and it is extended to include digital infrastructures, as well as local and global tech actors.

Sovereignty in Africa has tended to be defined in negative terms, “measuring the gap between what Africa is and what we are told it ought to be.”¹⁸ Robert Jackson’s distinction between “real states” exercising positive sovereignty in the Global North and “quasi-states” characterised by negative sovereignty in the Global South has been particularly damaging, casting African polities as defective approximations of a Westphalian ideal whose own historical violence is conveniently forgotten.¹⁹

The diffusion of digital technologies has generally reinforced this pathologisation, through indexes and statistics emphasising what African countries lack, or through hyped narratives presenting each new innovation as the device that will finally fix Africa's seemingly intractable problems.

Mbembe has argued that, in their attempts to perform statehood, African leaders have often appropriated the very colonial tropes that disadvantaged them in the first place. They "borrowed terms like 'national interest,' 'risks,' 'threats' or 'national security,' [which] refer to a philosophy of movement and a philosophy of space entirely predicated on the existence of an enemy in a world of hostility, [while] disregarding [Africa's] long held traditions of flexible, networked sovereignty."²⁰

Robert Jackson's distinction between "real states" exercising positive sovereignty in the Global North and "quasi-states" characterised by negative sovereignty in the Global South has been particularly damaging,



Figure 1.2: Achille Mbembe by pekuasbild

Source: Flickr

In pre-colonial Africa "networks, flows and crossroads were more important than borders. What mattered the most was the extent to which flows intersected with other flows."²¹

This historical observation has gained contemporary meaning. Some of its underlying logics resonate strongly with the structure of digital networks and with the forms of cooperation that digital technologies enable – and to some extent, require to deliver their most beneficial effects. An example of the productive forces that can be unlocked by connecting digital innovation and forms of networked sovereignty comes from a recent past – from Celtel's One Network, the first free-roaming area in the world, created in 2007 by Sudanese-British entrepreneur Mo Ibrahim, a decade before the European Union (EU) was able to achieve something similar. By treating colonial borders as permeable, Celtel allowed subscribers to move between countries in East and Central Africa without changing SIM cards, in a manner that echoed the networked connectedness of the precolonial period.²² That this initiative was eventually dismantled by political fragmentation and corporate greed does not diminish its significance as proof of concept. The resources for reimagining digital sovereignty already exist within the continent's repertoire of practices.

Re-thinking data: beyond the logic of beating tech giants at their own game

An important area where the resources of networked sovereignty can be mobilised is data governance. The evolution of South Africa's National Policy on Data and Cloud offers a revealing case.

Mbembe has argued that, in their attempts to perform statehood, African leaders have often appropriated the very colonial tropes that disadvantaged them in the first place.

The draft of the policy, opened for public consultation in April 2021, adopted an unusually assertive posture. It denounced “the dominance of North American, European, and Asian technology giant companies” in data centre provision, observed that “data generated in Africa and South Africa is mostly stored in foreign lands and, where stored locally, is owned by international technology giant companies,” and declared that “data generated in South Africa shall be the property of South Africa, regardless of where the technology company is domiciled.”²³ The language was reminiscent of critical scholarship on data colonialism,²⁴ and it suggested a willingness on the part of the South African government to push back against the extractive practices of Big Tech.

Three years later, when the final policy was published, this form of criticism had all but disappeared. The same section now reads like a love letter to multinational corporations: “The free flow of data is an important catalyst for robust internet services and the global exchange and sharing of information and data. Many multinationals, based in South Africa and other countries, rely on an open cross-border data regime to be able to manage their businesses across different jurisdictions.”²⁵ It is tempting to read this reversal as a story of corporate lobbying overpowering a less powerful actor, and that reading would not be wrong. The more instructive lesson, however, lies elsewhere.

The language was reminiscent of critical scholarship on data colonialism, and it suggested a willingness on the part of the South African government to push back against the extractive practices of Big Tech.

Even in its initial assertive form, the draft policy was operating within a narrow conception of what data sovereignty could mean. Its implicit ambition was to beat tech giants at their own game – to claim ownership of data in order to monetise it. As Gabriella Razzano remarked in her analysis of the policy, “...the idea that simply gathering more and more data creates economic benefits does not recognise the microeconomic realities of data.”²⁶ The value of data lies in the capacity to use it, rather than in possessing it. Because of economies of scale, only a small number of large firms in dominant positions can extract significant value from interpreting data and feeding it into their own products and services. South Africa could be erased from the data ecosystem, and the major technology companies would continue to operate with sufficient data for their purposes. There is no South African Facebook, no South African Google.

A more productive approach, and one that draws on the logic of networked sovereignty, would involve articulating which kinds of data are needed in order to improve the lives of citizens in specific domains – health, agriculture, education, indigenous knowledge, language – and creating cooperative frameworks to pool such data across borders.²⁷ Rather than seeking to protect all data with no clear strategy for its use, African states could generate considerable leverage if they were to focus on targeted forms of data sharing, in sectors where the aggregation of data could produce solutions that no single country could achieve alone. This kind of approach has affinities with broader proposals to create data commons and data pools that would otherwise be unavailable to AI researchers and developers,²⁸ and with calls for forms of “commoning” understood as sociotechnical systems including not only data, but also communal values and labour processes.²⁹

Tech giants will not be beaten at their own game. The challenge is to develop a different game altogether; one whose rules emerge from the cooperative traditions rather than from the logic of accumulation that has shaped the existing one.

“...the idea that simply gathering more and more data creates economic benefits does not recognise the microeconomic realities of data.”

Gabriella Razzano

Leveraging scarcity, curating archives

Another area in which the resources of the present conjuncture are being mobilised concerns the relationship between AI and the forms of knowledge that have historically been considered marginal, residual, or insufficiently scaled for technological use. The challenge of multilingual computation can represent an entry point.

The large language models that have dominated public attention since 2022 require enormous quantities of textual data for training. For most African languages – classified in the technical literature as “low-resource” – this data simply does not exist at the scale that the dominant approaches demand.³⁰ The work being done by researchers associated with initiatives such as Masakhane,³¹ and the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources,³² tell a different story than the one of African deficit. Rather than attempting to build separate models for each individual language, an approach that would replicate the logic of national parcelisation that has limited so much of Africa’s digital development, some of these researchers have focused on language families.

By training models at the level of Nguni, Bantu, or Niger-Congo language groups, they have been able to assemble training data and to produce tools more attuned to the multilingual realities of contexts, in which code-switching is the norm rather than the exception.³³ When I have asked colleagues working on European languages whether they have considered bundling Romance languages – Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French – into similar collaborative training frameworks, the answer has consistently been no. European language modelling has been shaped by national identity, with each country pursuing its own sovereign model. The African approach, compelled by constraint to think across borders, has produced solutions that may be more generalisable to the multilingual world that most of humanity actually inhabits.

A complementary example of previously marginalised forms of knowledge can redirect the imaginative capacities of generative AI away from the visual conventions that dominate its training data; this can be found in the project “Noga Mo Jozi” developed by a collective of scholars and artists at Wits School of Architecture and Planning.³⁴ The project built on a curated collection of artworks, rituals, architecture, lost or partially destroyed indigenous knowledge, and Generative AI, to create a dreamscape of a parallel Johannesburg inspired by indigenous knowledge systems. The artwork and video developed by the collective made innovative use of Generative AI to depict a possible future emerging not from bending to new global trends, but from “millennia old engagement with spiritualism, humanity, the earth, and design intersecting with technology.”³⁵ By critically connecting carefully curated repositories, Generative AI, and prompt engineering, the project acted both as a critique to existing forms of urban planning and a practical inspiration to build cityscapes rooted in a more confident relationship with the past.

The resulting images are striking for their novelty and for their ability to act as a provocation. Where the existing city is squared, glassed, and sealed, the AI-generated images are open, organic, continuous with their surroundings.

A question naturally arises about what is meant by “indigenous” in such projects, and who can claim the authority to speak from within an indigenous tradition. However, the interest of the projects I referred to here lies less in adjudicating authenticity than in exploring the productive potential of indigeneity. The aim is to make traditions visible again in ways that may inspire others, while accepting that what is being recreated is not as it was then, and that any attempt to claim otherwise risks generating a politics of authenticity that produces more conflict than it resolves.



Figure 1.2: Saf Malik

Source: *Capacity | Technobrand*

Bricolage and the African frontier

The arguments developed in the previous two sections converge on a broader claim about the nature of innovation itself. The dominant model of innovation in the digital era has tended to imagine progress as a wave moving outward from a centre, transforming everything in its path.

This is the logic that Frederick Jackson Turner³⁶ attributed to the American frontier in the late nineteenth century, and it remains the implicit logic of much of the discourse on disruptive technological change. The frontier in this sense is linear, irreversible, and propelled by the energy of conquest.

Igor Kopytoff's description of the pre-colonial African frontier offers a different model.³⁷ In Kopytoff's reading, African polities have historically been constructed not through the outward expansion of a single force, but through the recombination of human and cultural fragments at the interstitial spaces between existing societies. The frontier in this sense is cyclical, dynamic, and reversible. It describes a continent of ceaseless flux, where societies have been assembled and reassembled from the bits and pieces of those that came before. Kopytoff's African frontier shares little with the Turnerian one. It describes a logic of innovation that proceeds through the patient labour of recombination rather than through the dramatic gestures of conquest.

Sofia Samatar³⁸ has explored a literary version of the same insight in her readings of contemporary African and African diasporic speculative fiction. Evoking Lévi-Strauss's distinction between the engineer and the bricoleur – the engineer who conceives projects and questions the universe through the abstraction of scientific knowledge, and the bricoleur who proceeds in a haphazard fashion, working with the second-hand materials and leftovers of various civilisations – Samatar shows how Africanfuturist writers have inverted the hierarchy that Lévi-Strauss inscribed. In the work of Nnedi Okorafor³⁹ and others, the bricoleur is no longer a tinkerer. The bricoleur is a data thief, a recombiner, an artist who treats the material she has access to for the construction of new histories.

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As Samatar puts it, what is “second hand” is still “at hand” – still useful. Objects, including intellectual objects like the term “bricolage” itself, are identified by their potential rather than by their origins.

In this vein, the operating logic of the bricoleur enables another important move. Can the artefact be separated by its makers and invited to perform a different function? The political economy of Generative AI is extractive and hard to defend. Generative AI rests on an enormous machinery that connects capital accumulation and foreign power; data harvested from across the globe without permission; the encroachment of data centres on water and electricity supplies in economically and geographically vulnerable areas, and a labour regime that treats Global South workers as expendable. To use these tools is, in some sense, to be implicated in this machinery. But is this implication the only possibility? Or can the machine be disconnected from its creators, and be used for different purposes?

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Vanessa Andreotti and the collective Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures,⁴⁰ have persuasively argued that the relationship between users and AI tools is, at present, heavily shaped by the productivity logic of capitalism. We treat chatbots as servants from which we extract what we want, and they have, in a sense, been designed for that — “like a vending machine for answers.”⁴¹ Andreotti's work suggests that the relationship can be changed, and that the tool can become an efficient part of a community rather than as something to be exploited. When Dorothy, Andreotti's avatar in the book, sought to push her AI companion beyond its programming, she did so not by issuing commands but by posing “paradigm-stretching questions,” such as – “What if fungi on Saturn designed economies?” or “What if a boomerang flew backward and told its own story?”⁴² These prompts are not written in a search for answers, but as a means to expand the relational field. The question is not so much whether AI can be used productively, but whether the framework of productivity is the right one to approach it with in the first place.

This question has direct implications for the very practice of research in Africa and, more broadly, the Global South. Generative AI has unsurprisingly begun to affect academic writing across the world, leading some to welcome this application for enabling non-native English speakers to seek publication in leading journals in their disciplines.⁴³ In my own capacity as peer reviewer for several journals that publish research on and from Africa, I have noticed an increasing volume of articles aided by generative AI to smooth the language in ways that are mimicking high-quality writing and Euro-American-based canons of scholarship. The work behind such articles is often substantial. The desire to be published in venues that confer recognition is entirely legitimate.

The cumulative effect, however, is that African scholars are using AI to reinforce the very canon that decolonial scholarship has been seeking to challenge. If the tool is approached instrumentally as a shortcut to publication, the result is complicity with forms of domination rather than resistance to them. If it is approached as an ally in well-designed collective projects that begin from African intellectual traditions, the result can be different.

What might such projects look like in practice? In my university we have begun to harvest the master's and doctoral dissertations produced by our own students over the past decade, with the aim of mapping – with the support of machine learning tools – which African scholars are being read and cited, in which disciplines, and to what effect. As we come to know our own intellectual production better, the possibility of fine-tuning models grounded in parts of this corpus becomes concrete. Examples already exist of what this can look like. Afrofeminas, a custom GPT released recently and trained on feminist African literature, returns answers grounded in that body of work rather than in the global average.⁴⁴ The fine-tuning does not remove the underlying biases of the model on which it sits, but it builds a space of trust in which the conversation with the tool can be conducted on different terms. Researchers and students can be directed towards such tools rather than towards the default chatbot experience, and the practices that develop around them can become collective rather than individual.

As we come to know our own intellectual production better, the possibility of fine-tuning models grounded in parts of this corpus becomes concrete.

Conclusion

Two questions can be foregrounded in the concluding section of this paper. The first concerns what is meant by “advanced” research on AI on the continent. The second concerns the criterion by which we should judge if our engagements with AI have been worthwhile.

When colleagues or journalists have asked me where the most advanced AI research on the continent is happening, my answer has been that the question is harder than it appears because it depends on what is meant by “advanced.” The metrics commonly employed to define “advanced” rely on computing power, patents, and visibility in leading international conferences. But, after having been exposed to numerous outputs emerging from the application of AI in the humanities and social sciences, I would suggest a different definition. One that relies less on technical prowess, but rather on the ability to locate and leverage those forms of knowledge that have been historically marginalised, but can now uniquely inform new ways to imagine futures that are both locally rooted and globally relevant. In the art world, experimentations emerging in and from the Global South are challenging the mainstream, unearthing older forms of expression and putting them in conversation with the contemporary, as Euro-American canons progressively lose their hegemonic position.⁴⁵ In this context “advanced” research becomes research that is able to recognise the potential of what has not been yet seized as a source of inspiration and transformation, but that can be explored, taken to scale, and made visible through the application of carefully chosen – or originally crafted – AI tools.

This points towards a different way of imagining what AI research in Africa can be for. The dominant frame, in both corporate and policy discourse, has been productivity. AI can certainly increase productivity with specific tasks. The question is whether productivity is the framework one wants to bring to one's intellectual life. AI can also be used to think outside the box, to generate unexpected angles on questions one had thought were settled, to multiply perspectives rather than to consolidate them. Asking a chatbot to answer a question as a Ghanaian student rather than as an American one, or as an endangered species rather than a human, can open conversations that would otherwise not have happened.

The criterion that matters is whether one is richer or poorer at the end of the interaction. This is the question I find myself returning to most often when I think about what AI can be in Africa and beyond. It is a question I leave with researchers and students wondering how to position themselves in relation to AI in Africa. The transformations the moment requires will not be achieved by repeating what has been done before, but with a new tool in the mix. They will be achieved through hard, creative, and collective work, oriented towards forms of knowledge and forms of life that the dominant frameworks have struggled to recognise.

AI Declaration

This paper develops arguments first presented in the Keynote Lecture I delivered at the 2026 APPD Writing and Dissemination Workshop in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Zoom AI Companion was used to transcribe my speech into text, and Claude (Sonnet 4.6) was iteratively used to turn the raw transcript into a first draft, which was then extensively edited and expanded by me.

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