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# Towards a Transatlantic Approach to Cultural Engagement in African Design

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## **Abstract**

In recent times, HCI has widened its horizon to a broad range of theoretical perspective and cultural stances that direct design practices. However, there appears to be a continual subjugation of 'Other' modes of knowing and theorizing in contemporary discourse, which unfortunately finds solace in postcolonial approaches to HCI, and computing more generally. In this position paper, I outline the preliminary ideas about a transatlantic approach to cultural engagement in African design practices. In particular, it focuses on identifying and analysing the integrative aspect of the trinities of African cultures as to bring about an approximate adaptation (to new design context) and translation (to new design conditions) of diverse perspectives in African cultures of design.

## **Author Keywords**

Africa, Culture, Design, Transatlantic, Triple Heritage

## **Introduction**

This short position paper presents the initial framing of cultural engagement in African design through the political praxis of the transatlantic. It attempts to lay bare the material implications of focusing attention on neglected inter-relations of power that direct the relationships between cultural dimensions across the Atlantic – what is commonly referred to as technology design practices in here and out there [25]. In particular, it examines how the current framing of culture in most African communities (largely viewed through the triple heritage) and in

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indigenous design work (largely as a manifestation of the cultural bazaar) can allow for deconstructing design narratives through the values of the symbolic **adaptation** and **translation**.

This is brought about by the intimate reading Cress collection of essays titled "The ISIS Paper: The Keys to the Colors" [28], which suggest how the crisis of the transatlantic symbolises a cultural function (and a by-product) of an ontological design outlook. When placed within the ontological framing of African design<sup>1</sup>, the crisis of the transatlantic might suggest how specific cultural practice of technology design reinforce (or rectify) the unequal representation of diverse perspective in transnational design work. This thus raises the fundamental issue of how equitable inter-relations can be created and sustained within already disputed narratives of cultural engagement with that hope the emerging technology design practices are both situated and plural. There is also the question of how a culture of 'differentiation' (which is embedded in Western ethics) might direct the coalescences (i.e., indigenization and domestication) of cultures of 'relationality' (which underpin African ethical principles) across existing boundaries of cultural identification? Or whether existing cultural stance to community technology design (such as inter-cross-multi-transcultural approaches [14, 22, 29]) could lead to an approximate identification of the integrative components of the 'triple cultural heritage' in most African communities? [17]<sup>2</sup>. Or whether existing approaches to cultural engagement

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<sup>1</sup> African design is considered as a cultural means of engaging with a 'world where many worlds fit'

<sup>2</sup> Although the term 'heritage' has been characterized as problematic in African political discourses, there is ample evidence that the Islamic and Western values are relatively

can reconcile the conflicting parameters informing African cultures of design or African designs in cultures? Or posing which cultural stance does one give primacy to in design thinking itineraries? Which thinking models tallies with what cultural values? Or asking which cultural parameters are considered authentic/alien to the indigenous practice of African design?

Although the question posed are not fully addressed in this position paper, and certainly not entertained in existing approaches to the analysis of cultural engagement in community technology design, their consideration in the ontological framing of the practices of African design is essential as could lead to the identification of representational mechanisms for ensuring that culture travels across polarised geographies without losing their logical structures while also enabling their appropriate integration (and preservation) to context other than the originating environment. This is an issue that is relatively unmarked and unremarked in HCI4D discourse, and one which is preliminary outlined below.

### **Related Work**

Research in HCI has shown how a range of cultural stance frame collaborations in design projects, direct design processes and activities, and inform community design narratives. This has led to the consideration of how a range of cultural engagement approaches can bring about a radical shift in the framing of HCI design paradigms and narratives. For

imposed onto indigenous peoples. Also, there is the awareness that the tripartite heritage goes through four stages: contact, conflict (friction and fusion), confusion (surrender, alienation, and survival), and coalescence (indigenisation and domestication).

example, the cross-cultural approach emphasises the difference between cultures as a way of modelling user's and their cultural attributes. The intercultural approach came about as a counter narrative to mainstream framing of community collaborations, thus depicting a hybridity of cultures in differential context [14]. Both multi-cultural and transcultural approaches point to the 'co-existence' and 'independence' of cultural dimension [22, 29]. These approaches present a narrative that is both reciprocal and reflexive, and one that seeks to transcend existing boundaries as to create mutually beneficial partnerships. The metaphor of fruit salad and smoothie best depict the multi-trans cultural approaches to cultural engagement in community technology design projects.

Although one can recognise the implications of the different approaches to cultural engagement within the ontological framing of African design, there remains the issue of how the unequal relations of power in the blending of cultures as tripartite can support and allow for reconstructing community narratives of autonomous design or designing for the pluriverse [12]. The transatlantic approach to cultural engagement extends on situated efforts in African HCI that seek reframe the assumptions that direct the processes and activities of designing and deploying technology in African communities [e.g., 1, 5, 30].

### **Bordering and Dwelling the Transatlantic**

The consideration of the transatlantic stance to cultural engagement in technology design extends on earlier work that has considered different

epistemological themes in computing and HCI (e.g., Postcolonial-Decolonial-Intersectional computing [3, 14, 16], Feminist HCI [6], Intersectional HCI [23] and Afrocentric design paradigm [30]). Here, I want to consider the possibilities of what it might entail to approach the practices of technology design from the 'borders' and the 'cracks' of the in here and the out there. By this, I mean, analysing what placing the trinities of African cultures of design in the framing of an asylum (which is considered as heterotopic space for continual creation, dialogue, and restoration) might suggest to the identification (and not defining) and representation (and not demarcating) of indigenous design of cultures [1]. It is presumed that the metaphor of an asylum, which denote uncertainty and temporality, could allow for finding plural points of understanding the transitional relationship between the composites of the tripartite so that emerging cultures of design are both Cosmo-cultural and Cosmo-politan<sup>3</sup>.

This is an intervention-in-progress that engages with the political praxis of Feminist standpoints and systematic decoloniality in transcending patriarchal mode of cultural inter-relations and collaborations. The rationale for drawing on the intersection of two critical theoretical outlook in framing the futuring practices of African design is that their praxis, specifically the situatedness and pluralism of knowledge practices, could allow for redrawing and re-earthing the epistemic boundaries imposed by Western discursive canons of identification and representation.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the trinities of Indigenous, Islamic, Western cultures in Nigeria, and the Africana, Sematic, and Greco-Roman culture in Ethiopia

In HCI, systematic decoloniality has presented the need for deconstructing the 'knowing' shaping socio-cultural assemblage of worldly things, while also identifying alternative mechanism for reconstituting itineraries for 'thinking' with/by the pluriverse (see. [20] for similar example). Feminist HCI has also emphasise the need for recognising and extending situated epistemologies as to widen the participation and bring about an equitable representation of perspectives [6]. In addition, transatlantic framing of feminism has developed travelling gestures that allow for examining the underlying premiss that constitute the dualities of cultural 'differences' and 'sameness' outside patriarchal discursive dependencies [9, 15]. This is extended through the factual analysis and presentation of the relationship enacted, sustained, and dismantled by the conversations the direct the coalescence of cultures across the Atlantic. It is presumed that the utilities afforded by feminist travelling gestures could allow for transgressively re-creating the inter-relations between cultures and one that does not re-produce the cultural dimension of dominant paradigms (or extend what Bhabha refer to as the culture of 'conditionality' or culture of 'coercive conditionality') [7]. Such an exercise, the continua reconciliation of disputed cultural parameters begins by creating a transitional imaginary time-lag of moving towards the 'projective past' of collaboration, thus showing the liminality of universalised cultures of design.

#### **Look Back to Move Forward**

How can we provoke the unfortunate 'past' to move towards a 'projective past' that could allow for reconstructing the inter-relations of culture in African design spaces? First, it is argued that the transatlantic option, as an extension of intersectional frameworks in computing and HCI [16, 21] could bring about an approximate

understanding of the applications and operations of power in collaborations beyond surface manifestation. Second, as the option avoids the rhetoric's of cultural absolutism and material prescription, it stipulates what can be unlearned and relearned in the processes and activities of envisioning preferable presents and of writing possible future of African designs. Arguably, two political stance that have directed the framing of collaboration in transnational design could provide some learning to the analysing of conflicting cultural parameters in African design – i.e. the fictional concept of 'Afrofuturism' [4] and the theoretical concept of 'Afropolitanism' [2, 18].

On one hand, the fictional concept of Afrofuturism operates at the fringe of contemporary discourses. As widely misconceived, 'Afro' is often linked to backwardness and primitivism, whereas 'futurism' to forwardness and progressives. The composition of the two opposing political stances might suggest how Afrofuturism could allow exploring temporal vocabularies from the relationship between historical and cultural lineage of identification (see. [13, 27] of how fusing Afrocentric vision with the praxis of design futuring bring about a future into being).

On the other hand, the theoretical concept of Afropolitanism came about as a critical alternative to the Afrocentric and pan-Africanist political projects in Africa [10, 24]. What started as an Africanist activist project later became widely considered as an intervention that mimic the binaries of techno-capitalist ideals – unfortunately exoticizing and commodifying African subjectivities, traditions, cultures, and phenomenology [8, 11, 26]. However, Mbembe's theoretical proposition has shown how framing its community assemblages and design itineraries in postcolony-decolonial traditions could

situate its emerging concept and practices in circular motion [18,19]. The consideration of the two futuristic positions in reconstructing the inter-relation between the tripartite of African culture is that they could function as methodological sensitivities for framing and staging design agenda and scenarios. The understanding that cultures go through contact, conflict, confusion and coalescence in community collaboration might suggest how relations of power and knowledge determine the democratisation of design processes and practices.

### Conclusion

The reliance on Cress's approach of analysing the composition of culture beyond surface symbolism has led to the preliminary framing of the conceptual ideas about the transatlantic approach to cultural engagement in technology design projects. The brief reporting of how the value of adaptation and translation can allow deconstructing cultures in indigenous design work was informed by the temporal analysis of the practice of designing and deploying educational technologies in the context of Nigeria. The project that informs the interpretation of design narratives using the metaphor of an 'asylum' and against the fruit salad and smoothies framing of multi-trans-cultural approach suggests how situated knowledge (which consists of people, places, and practices) direct design agenda's than pedagogies for teaching and learning.

I invite the participants of the workshop to, either in silence or aloud, reflect on the culture(s) they might identify with, begin to problematise its plural forms with the task of identifying its integrative and residual component, which I suppose might lead to the conclusion that culture came about because of the continua of travelling symbolism and conversations.

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