

Context, Culture, and Fabulations: In Search for a Home for Our Veiled African Design Stories

Hafeni Mthoko

Muhammad Adamu, Lancaster University

Shaimaa Lazem, City of Scientific Research and Technology Applications (SRTA-City)

In 2006, Jonathan Grudin posited that the field of HCI might have no home or many homes [1]. This raises a range of questions about the status of HCI as either a metadiscipline, an eclectic discipline, or an interdisciplinarity. The HCI narrative in Africa is even more sporadic, with the continued tensions faced when importing and uncritically adopting HCI methods, approaches, and techniques to technology design projects there. Asserting an alternative constitution of identities in HCI, the subprogram of African HCI came about as a community of researchers and practitioners designing and evaluating interactive systems for African communities [2]. This and growing decolonial efforts continue to challenge the status quo of technological innovation and reimagine interaction design that considers the plurality of the principles, practices, and knowledge foundational to any design project in Africa. As African HCI researchers and educators, we continuously quest for finding/making an intersectional space for our distinctive African HCI identities. This is not new, as Indigenous researchers have moved toward making HCI a household term in African institutions and industries [2,3], either through the design of living curricula to meet local challenges and opportunities or through the integration of HCI's knowledge practices into capacity development programs and projects. In our collective conversations, we draw upon such initiatives to consider, *How has/may HCI take root in Africa?* [3].

With the proliferation of technology development on the continent, exposing technology enthusiasts and practitioners to HCI's practices becomes crucial as a tool to curb the technocentric narrative that is pervasive in technological discourses. However, technology designers and implementers do not always have access to mainstream HCI facilities and resources, which are often curated for academic institutions. Moreover, existing HCI curricula have been met with complexities where there is a mismatch between the culture of origination and the context in which they are applied. Consequently, ongoing conversations with HCI researchers, academics, and practitioners in Africa highlighted the need for an African HCI curriculum since the early inception of the AfriCHI community [4].

In an attempt to reshape some of these narratives, a workshop to codesign an African HCI curriculum was conducted in September 2021, specifically aimed at African educators and sponsored by the University of Namibia and Google Research (AIR program, 2020). The workshop sought to discuss ideas about teaching and doing HCI research in Africa and what this curriculum could look like to give rise to HCI knowledge practices that are suited to African realities. Through this curriculum effort, there was once more a consensus that a distinctive African HCI curriculum is needed to fill the gap between what educators convey, often from Western HCI resources, and what students might encounter on the ground. This was manifested in a strong desire to share practical case studies with the hopes of identifying lessons and strategies that could help guide those embarking on HCI work on the continent.

In the quest for an expanded living curriculum, the authors pursued the question, *What is African about an African HCI curriculum?* In this dialogue, we reflect on our collective intellectual journey with that question and our attempts to find frameworks that could accommodate the complexities of problematizing this issue. Although a loaded question, we recognize the complexities of interrogating it dialectically. We approached this issue as one that is foundational to the future identities of African

HCI, and particularly one that recognizes how the earlier constitution of African HCI identities and narratives are positioned against a prior discourse of difference, nothingness, and backwardness [3].

In our first attempt to unpack the question, we tried to identify how culture and context figure in the appropriation of HCI's methods of design. Is there something distinctive about African cultures of design and design(s) in the African context that we need to be aware of in our technology design projects? We felt that a subtle distinction is desirable to explain where a social context is called upon in design spaces, and where cultural attributes are framed in design thinking. The emphasis of the distinction was to draw some implications or guidelines on how to do practical HCI research in Africa. Presumably, we were attempting to develop a nuanced understanding of context and culture by identifying where their loose translation in design work might help us to define a worldview for African HCI.

We approached this effort from two strands. First, we were interested in documenting how dominant HCI has approached culture and context as a placeholder for understanding the specificity of a domain of work. Second, we were interested in identifying how the entanglement of context and culture interferes with designing for and with African communities [5], thus attempting to unpack this complexity when practitioners and researchers import (i.e., translate and apply) HCI approaches to emerging locales of design [6]. This led to the recognition in the literature that subtle differentiations have been made between the pair when reflecting on technology design projects from Africa. However, culture and context were often used interchangeably and continuously adopted to mean different things in transnational design spaces (e.g., [5]), which we recognize as extending the value-free attributes associated with Western cultures of representation. However, we assert that the distinction between culture and context in transnational design spaces is desirable, but not required, as it might make visible the obscured social values and power relations that otherwise might go unnoticed.

We therefore attempted to untangle the common framing of culture and context as interchangeable terms in our past projects on community empowerment and digital education to draw out cultural attributes and contextual factors that might be considered African. We soon realized, however, that the nuances we identified reflecting upon the culture/context distinction were not uniquely African; these attributes could similarly be identified in other design spaces beyond Africa. At this point, we were puzzled: Why could we not pinpoint specific "African" traits in our own design work? We know from our lived experiences with these projects that there were moments our Western HCI training could not accommodate. Yet we wondered how the stories and lessons that we would have taught our students were rendered invisible in our collective reflection on cultural and contextual factors. What was it that we had missed? In our desperate attempt to locate our African HCI identities, we sought an alternate framing that then elucidates the appreciation for difference without separability and builds solidarity across varied contexts and cultures.

This led us to explore feminist solidarity as a useful framework for comparative research across polarized borders [7]. We approached the notion of *feminist solidarity* as an alternative approach for unsettling prior discursive boundaries. From this preview, feminist solidarity provides us with a framework to draw alliances across differences and commonalities. However, reflecting on both the culture/context and feminist solidarity framing, we felt we were reproducing a narrative that centers Western approaches to HCI while trying to elicit what differentiates our identities or those of our users, thus prescribing how Western HCI practices could be applied elsewhere. In distilling the African differences, we felt that the idea of African design is still rendered as an exotic object to

which a manifesto for design should be devised. Accepting this frame of thinking was troubling, and we asked ourselves what it was that pushed us toward our initial quest for a home for our collective identities. It might be that we desire an intellectual space where differences are appreciated rather than identified as a token for classification; a space where not all conform to one way of thinking and doing design work. Or maybe we need to rethink the rules of engagement and knowledge production in and about Africa as expressions for investigative activism. Could we find an alternative way to reflect on our work that would bring our aspirations for technological innovation and social change to the fore?

In our attempt to retell our stories and probe into what might have been possible, we looked to critical fabulations. In her 2018 book, *Critical Fabulations: Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design* [8], Daniela Rosner outlined four tactics for fabulating design as investigative activism that explores the past, present, and future: 1) building alliance across differences, 2) interfering with dominant narratives, 3) recuperating the residues of erasure, and 4) extending existing forms of circulation. Would critical fabulations help explain the mismatch between our collective lived experiences and the fragmented stories that foreground our design reports? We asked ourselves, based on Rosner's questions concerning whose stories underpin our design, what forms of innovative work did we omit or silence when we published insights from our design projects? We revisited our past projects with this perspective in mind, leading us to consider the tensions at play as we attempt to (re)present the sequence of events through rewriting against our recollection of the records. This is not restoring historic lived experiences nor shifting traces of events for the sake of an alternative story, but rather a movement toward understanding the discursive conditions that give rise to specific narratives being told or untold.

By reflecting on whose stories we might be blurring or showing in our reporting of specific projects, we can rework the ontologies of design by tracing the ideas we might have erased. This kind of fabulating could take two different forms: first, focusing on the residual tales that might emerge from the process of blending fragmented and recollected accounts of social events; and second, identifying how specific actions perpetuate a particular worldview of the methods of thinking and making the African world. Our new set of reflections prompted us to peep through the veil and yield new stories. Shaimaa foregrounded the nondigital innovations when developing digital collaborative games for teaching mathematics; Muhammad reflected on the unintended consequences of particular mindsets toward the creativity of local actors in software development; while Hafeni reimaged the communication of project activities through art and music (detailed stories outlined in supplementary material). In our fabulation attempt, we recognized how our subscriptions to the worldviews we adopted manifested in centering the digital as the only/dominant form of innovation; in Western models of human-centered design dominating how "users" are centered; and in the marginalization of local ways of knowledge production and dissemination—consequently limiting the ways of doing and creating. When the exercise was redone this way, we had a "moment of truth." By asking the right questions, the questions whereby the politics of design were surfaced and interrogated, many of our veiled stories unfolded conveniently. In this light we saw that African design(s) might have taken different paths. We contend that we would have reported different stories if we had paid close attention to the voices we ignored, as they represented different views of innovation and success.

From our intellectual experiment, fabulation as a lens didn't show us how to do HCI design work in Africa; instead, it provided a critical way of looking at the bigger picture of doing HCI work—its general problem, its practices, and its knowledge—and the stories that are told and untold in the process. Fabulating our collective stories has drawn us closer to our quest for making/finding an

intersectional home for our distinctive African HCI identities. It has brought to the fore the politics of our design encounters and narratives. Moreover, this exercise has helped us realize the challenges of interrogating the worldviews directing our design identities and narratives. It showed the limitations of adopting apolitical frameworks to examine and report design encounters where politics and power are inherently central.

So perhaps the uniqueness we have been trying to identify in African HCI might not be in certain contextual factors or cultural traits but rather in the political and ethical relations surrounding design innovation and, in building up awareness of their implications. Our fabulation experience taught us that building this level of self-awareness and reflection does not come naturally to researchers and practitioners. Reflective tools and methods are needed to help designers a) develop such awareness, b) appreciate and tune in to existing and emerging power differences, c) recognize when and how to downplay their own voices, and d) interrogate the mindsets that dominate design encounters. These, we argue, should be the focus of an African HCI curriculum—a curriculum that inspires us to be reflexive and critical of our understanding of the world before “remaking the world through design” [9]. The acts of tuning in and downplaying are not free of challenges, particularly when practitioners are expected to downplay their voices as activists rather than interventionists. For example, Hafeni downplayed her voice as an outsider to the community when working with community partners, which is a commendable practice; however, she inadvertently also downplayed her voice in not challenging the existing forms of circulating project research findings as written reports, despite her inherent desire for this change to align with the way in which community members expressed themselves. This was another aha moment for us, as it not only revealed an assumption that the contexts in which we work are the sites of activism but also the truth that activism is needed to challenge and change Western academic practices to fit with multiple worlds. This observation is in line with others reported by Leal et al. [9], who provided a set of reflective questions to guide us into deeper engagement with the kinds of meaning we create in our work, the kind of impacts we have, and the futures we are creating. Future work could explore how such reflexive practices can be adopted as tools to navigate toward a living curriculum that encourages critically engaged research.

In this piece, we reflected on our shift in perspective as we grappled with the question of what is African about African HCI. It is fair to say that we felt fabulating was a liberating experience, to move away from the academic reporting norms we are accustomed to, without the fear of being judged by our peers, and instead permit ourselves to tell the other side of our stories—the sides that might not follow traditional academic convention. Through this shift we recognized the need for the methodological tools and capabilities to enable critical discussions on the politics of engaging multiple worldviews, an issue that we presume could further shape future trajectories of doing design work in transnational and transdisciplinary spheres. Blevins et al. [10] draw our attention to the significance of being mindful of what we make in the world and the implications thereof as core to a fourth wave in HCI. Such concerns foreground the ethical and political frameworks needed to disrupt dominant design narratives and give way for other experiences and perspectives to also have a voice. Our journey to define the identity for our African HCI curriculum asserts the need for this disruption and further suggests that the methodological toolboxes required for the fourth wave should emerge from or at least be inspired by the practices at the periphery.

In concluding this dialogue, we invite Anicia Peters, founder of AfriCHI, and Daniela Rosner, author of *Critical Fabulations*, to respond to our attempt at finding a home for the stories that underpin HCI’s taking root in Africa.

Endnotes

1. Grudin, J. Is HCI homeless? In search of inter-disciplinary status. *Interactions* 13, 1 (Jan.–Feb. 2006), 54–59; <https://doi.org/10.1145/1109069.1109108>
3. Peters, A. HCI magic across Africa. *Interactions* 27, 3 (2020), 20–21.
4. Anjum, B. A Conversation with Shaimaa Lazem: Toward inclusive design methodologies for technology. *Ubiquity* (Sep. 2022), 1–6.
5. Savard, I. and Mizoguchi, R. Context or culture: What is the difference? *Research and Practice in Technology Enhanced Learning* 14, 1 (2019), 1–12.
2. Bidwell, N.J. Decolonising HCI and interaction design discourse: Some considerations in planning AfriCHI. *XRDS* 22, 4 (2016), 22–27.
6. Lazem, S., Giglito, D., Nkwo, M.S., Mthoko, H., Upani, J., and Peters, A. Challenges and paradoxes in decolonising HCI: A critical discussion. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* 31, 2 (2022), 159–196.
7. Kumar, N., Karusala, N., Ismail, A., Wong-Villacres, M., and Vishwanath, A. Engaging feminist solidarity for comparative research, design, and practice. *Proc. of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, CSCW (2019), 1–24.
8. Rosner, D.K. *Critical Fabulations: Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design*. MIT Press, 2018.
9. Leal, D.D.C., Strohmayer, A., and Krüger, M. On activism and academia: Reflecting together and sharing experiences among critical friends. *Proc. of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2021, 1–18.
10. Blevis, E., Chow, K., Koskinen, I., Poggenpohl, S., and Tsin, C. Billions of interaction designers. *Interactions* 21, 6 (2014), 34–41.
11. Google Research. Award for inclusion research programme. 2020 <https://research.google/outreach/air-program/recipients/?category=2020>

Hafeni Mthoko has experience in monitoring and evaluating ICTD-related interventions in rural contexts, citizen engagement, and health communicative ecologies. She has an interest in identifying innovative ways, including technology, to facilitate meaningful change in African settings. She has a Ph.D. in information systems from Rhodes University. hafenimthoko@gmail.com

Muhammad Adamu is a postdoctoral researcher at ImaginationLancaster, a design-led research lab at Lancaster University. His research focuses on developing approaches to the design and deployment of indigenous technologies with and for African communities. m.adamu@lancaster.ac.uk

Shaimaa Lazem is an associate research professor at the City of Scientific Research and Technology Applications (SRTA-City). She completed her Ph.D. in HCI at Virginia Tech. She is interested in HCI in non-Western cultural contexts, participatory design, and decolonizing HCI. She is the cofounder of the ArabHCI community (<https://arabhci.org>). slazem@srtacity.sci.eg

Insights

-Defining the identity of an African HCI curriculum calls for a disruption of dominant design narratives.

-Reflective tools that enable designers to better tune in to the subtleties and nuances of the African context should be core to an African HCI curriculum.