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Article

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UBUNTU AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: RETHINKING HUMAN-TECHNOLOGY INTERACTION FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of Ubuntu philosophy and Artificial Intelligence (AI), offering an African-centered rethinking of human-technology interaction. As AI systems increasingly shape social, economic, and cultural realities, there is an urgent need to engage indigenous philosophies that emphasize communal values, ethical responsibility and human dignity. The philosophy of Ubuntu, rooted in the principle "*I am because we are*", provides a relational framework that challenges the hyper-individualism and a worldview which emphasizes technology and places it at the center of decision-making, problem-solving and societal development. By focusing on concepts such as interdependence, communal well-being and respect for life, Ubuntu offers a regulatory ethical lens through which AI technologies can be developed and deployed in ways that preserve and promote African cultural values. This paper argues that integrating Ubuntu into AI policy, design and applications, can help mitigate cultural erosion, digital colonialism and the marginalization of African voices in global technological discourse. Ultimately, this approach calls for a reimagining of AI not as a tool of domination or efficiency alone, but as a relational partner in advancing shared human flourishing in harmony with African philosophical traditions.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Artificial Intelligence, Technology, Interaction, African.

Introduction

The rapid and explosive rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies, have brought about transformative changes in virtually every sphere of human life. These technologies are visible in the areas of economics and businesses, communication and governance, healthcare and education as well as agriculture. However, as these technologies become increasingly embedded in African societies, critical questions also arise regarding the cultural, ethical and social implications that come with their usage. Most AI systems are

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designed within Western frameworks that prioritize individualism, efficiency and technocentric progress, where technology is placed at the centre of almost everything that concerns human activity including decision making. These underlying assumptions often conflict with African communal values and risk undermining traditional knowledge systems, social and communal life, as well as gradually eroding African indigenous cultural heritage. In response to these tensions, the paper advances the philosophy of Ubuntu, as a uniquely African framework for rethinking human-technology interaction in which emphasizes a culturally rooted, ethically grounded and socially inclusive practices

Ubuntu, as expressed in the saying “I am because we are”, underscores a relational and communal understanding of personhood. It emphasizes values such as mutual respect, interdependence, compassion, inclusivity and shared humanity. Rather than viewing technology as a neutral or purely instrumental force, Ubuntu invites a reconsideration of how technologies such as AI should serve the collective good, protect cultural identity and uphold human dignity. By so doing, it can digitize, translate and promote African oral traditions, proverbs, folklore and languages using natural language processing (NLP). Invariably, the application of the principles of Ubuntu to the development, governance and application of AI, most African societies can establish a regulatory and ethical model that resists cultural homogenization and digital colonialism. This model foregrounds human relationships, community values and moral responsibility, thereby offering a counterbalance to the dominant global discourse on AI ethics. The paper submits that integrating Ubuntu into AI discourse, will not only provide a culturally responsive approach to technological development, but will also empower African communities to shape the future of technology leaning on their own terms. Hence, it positions Ubuntu as a guiding philosophical and theoretical framework, capable of preserving African cultural heritage while also fostering inclusive, just and ethical innovation in the age of artificial intelligence.

Understanding the Philosophy of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a South African traditional philosophy that emphasizes communal relationships, interconnectedness and the inherent dignity of every human being. At a noun, the term *Ubuntu* is encapsulated in the Nguni Bantu expression “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”, which means “a person is a person through other persons” (Mbiti 1969:141). This adage reflects the belief that individual identity and well-being are inextricably connected to the community and that humanity is realized through mutual care, respect, responsibility and inclusivity. Historically, Ubuntu originates from various Bantu-speaking communities in Southern Africa and has been practiced for centuries in traditional African societies. While its articulation may vary depending on cultures and languages, the ethical framework remains intact and consistent: promoting harmony, compassion, reciprocity and collective responsibility. Therefore, the communal ontology of Ubuntu, contrast with the Western notion of individualism, where personal autonomy and self-interest is highly emphasized (Shutte 2001:2). What this means is that there are some AI systems that are designed strictly to meet individual preferences. These AI systems make use of machine learning algorithms to create personalized experiences by analyzing an individual's behavior, preferences and past interactions. Netflix for instance, makes recommendations for movies and television shows based on a user's viewing habits. This contrasts with typical African setting that fosters communality. Therefore, in Ubuntu's thought, the self is inherently relational, for which moral development is judged not by what one achieves individually, but by one's contribution to the community and one's relationship and co-existence with others.

Moreover, in the Ubuntu worldview, personhood is not a static state attained at birth but an achievement that is realized and attained through moral conduct and social interaction. Ramose (1999) observes that, “to be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others” (1999:52). Personhood in this case, becomes a social and ethical process, where one becomes a “*muntu*” (a full person) through acts of solidarity, generosity and communal engagement within the society. This moral anthropology fosters a culture of belonging, where justice, interdependency, hospitality and empathy are foundational and highly preached. By so doing, Ubuntu offers a rich moral vocabulary for addressing social justice, reconciliation and human rights. Such is the case when it was notably invoked during South Africa’s post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a philosophical basis for restorative justice. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who happens to be a notable advocate of Ubuntu, remarks that “my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours” (1999:31). In this way, Ubuntu provides a framework for healing, acknowledging that justice is not merely punitive but transformative, geared towards restoring broken relationships.

The relevance of Ubuntu however, extends beyond the confines of traditional African settings. In the face of global challenges such as inequality, climate change, racism and ecological degradation, Ubuntu provides a counter-narrative to dominant paradigms rooted in competition and alienation. This explains the reason why some scholars and activists such as Metz, has advocated for Ubuntu as a basis for global ethics, proposing that its emphasis on solidarity, care and communal responsibility can inform policies on development, healthcare, education and technology (2011:538). Ubuntu thus emerges not only as a cultural heritage but also as a fundamental and viable moral compass in a disintegrated world. Although, the philosophy of Ubuntu may have gained global recognition, it is not free from some inherent limitations. For instance, some critics such as Nussbaum, argue that its idealism may overlook internal inequalities and patriarchal practices within African societies (2003:21). Others caution against the romanticization of Ubuntu in political rhetoric, where it can be co-opted to mask injustice or avoid accountability. Still, these critiques did not rule out the need to apply Ubuntu thoughtfully and critically, since it is capable of ensuring that its implementation genuinely reflects its ethical tenets, especially in a rapidly advancing technological world.

An Overview of Artificial Intelligence and its Concerns

Artificial Intelligence, simply referred to as AI, is a field of computer science that is focused on the creation of machines or systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence. Some of these tasks include: learning, reasoning, perception, language understanding, problem-solving as well as even creativity (Chadley 2020:26). More specifically, AI systems are built to simulate or human cognitive processes. By doing so, their ability to make decisions, adapt and learn from, and manipulate data, has made them increasingly central to technological development across industries. John McCarthy, who is said to have coined the term “Artificial Intelligence” in 1956, described it as “the science and engineering of making intelligent machines” (McCarthy et al. 1955:3). However, modern definitions AI have expanded this view to include any system that can perceive its environment, process inputs and take actions to achieve specific goals (Russell and Norvig 2021:1). AI is broadly categorized into narrow Weak and strong AI. The weak, otherwise called Narrow AI, refers to artificial intelligence systems designed to perform specific tasks or solve problems that are narrowly defined. These systems operate under predefined rules or learned patterns and do not possess consciousness, understanding, or general reasoning

abilities. An example of weak AI includes: voice assistants like *Siri*, which is able to simulate intelligence but do not understand or think in real sense. On the other hand, Strong AI, otherwise known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), refers to hypothetical systems that have the ability to understand, learn and apply knowledge across a wide range of tasks at a human level or beyond. They fall under the category of machines that can accurately mimic human intelligence. Besides, Strong AI is capable of demonstrating genuine consciousness, reasoning and emotional intelligence, enabling it to operate independently in diverse and novel contexts. Therefore, while weak AI is already integrated into daily technologies, strong AI remains largely theoretical and raises significant philosophical, ethical and technical questions about consciousness, agency, and the future of human-machine interaction.

As astonishing and amazing as AI technologies have been, many AI systems are designed and built around individualistic paradigms, prioritizing individual autonomy, self-interest, and independent decision-making. These models, as observed by Floridi, are perceived to be deeply rooted in Western philosophical traditions that tend to emphasize the primacy of the individual, as seen in Enlightenment thought and liberal democratic ideologies (2011:9). For example, some Personal Assistants applications such as *Siri*, *Alexa* and *Google Assistant*, are tailored to individual users' preferences and needs. As observed by Crawford and Calo, these tools can learn personal habits, schedules, interests and consumption patterns in order to optimize service delivery (2016:76). That is to say that they are architecturally designed to respond to one user at a time, reinforcing and initiating a model of individual-centered interaction. Another example could be said of autonomous Agents such as; Self-Driving Cars and Trading Bots).

These agents can operate independently devoid of human direct manipulations. These operations optimize their behavior based on performance metrics like efficiency or profit. They reflect utilitarian and self-maximizing principles that are often at odds with relational or community-oriented ethics. Moreover, there are other systems that can mimic human companionship, built to meet individual psychological needs. Although potentially helpful, they reflect an atomistic view of well-being, where emotional support is abstracted from human relationships and placed into AI-human dyads (Turkle 2011:5).

Meanwhile African communalism is a foundational belief system that emphasizes collective identity, shared responsibility, interdependence and communal harmony and inclusivity. Hence, Philosophies such as *Ubuntu*, *Complementary reflection* of Asuozu and some other African theories, often emphasize the African way of life, knitted in communal life and shared relationship. *Ubuntu* specifically, summarized as "I am because we are", encapsulate the idea that individual identity and moral agency are inseparable from the community (Mbiti 1969:106). For Ifeanyi Menkiti, "the African view of personhood is defined by community membership rather than individual autonomy" (1984:172). Moral and social development are judged based on one's contributions to communal well-being rather than personal achievement or independence. If this be the case therefore, promoting any idea that alters community life and distorts human relationships, is questioned, since it is likely to manifest negatively in several ways. To this end, AI in relation to African belief system, could manifest in the following ways:

- i. The over reliance and application of AI, especially applications that focus on personalized optimization such as social media algorithms or political ad targeting, could undermine the traditional African practice of consensus-building. As observed by Gyekye, in many African societies, decisions are made through dialogue involving elders, community leaders and affected groups, not through individual action alone (1997:45).

- Therefore, when AI systems prioritize personal preferences and minimize community input, they risk disrupting traditional governance models which are ordinarily rooted in consensus and dialogue.
- ii. Also, AI technologies that isolate users into personalized feedback loops can disrupt communal practices such as storytelling, communal gatherings, and collective rituals. For example, recommendation systems may steer individuals toward entertainment content that does not reflect shared values or local histories, thus weakening cultural continuity. According Francis Nyamnjoh, “the digital era’s emphasis on self-expression and individual visibility often marginalizes the communal voice and collective memory in African societies (2013:56).
 - iii. Furthermore, the idea of personhood in African philosophy is earned through one’s active participation in community life. AI systems, however, treat individuals as isolated data points, whereby decisions making is based on behavioral data rather than social context. This view therefore tends to conflict with the African notion that one’s value is tied to one's social responsibilities, relationships and roles (Wiredu 1996, 39).
 - iv. On another note, importing AI technologies without contextual adaptation can lead to cultural alienation. This is so because African users are forced to adopt foreign norms embedded in AI logic and design. As Ndagijimama and Uwizeyimana rightly observe, this phenomenon, often termed "technological imperialism," risks displacing indigenous knowledge systems and moral frameworks (2021:48). The effect of such alienation could further encourage erosion and misplacement of African cultural heritage and values.

Considering the above points highlighted, the pervasive, yet compelling AI technologies, requires that some ethical guidelines be enmeshed in designs to enable and enhance inclusivity across cultures. This has become imperative especially as it concerns African belief system. This is so because most AI systems are developed using data and assumptions that highly undervalue or fail to reflect African epistemologies. For instance, most machine learning models, rely on datasets and algorithm that often exclude African contexts, languages and knowledge systems, leading to biased or incomplete representations (Birhane 2021:8). Moreso, the logic of personalization in AI as earlier stated, such as in recommendation systems or social media algorithms, often fosters hyper-individualism, reinforcing Western patterns of thought. These designs, marginalize African communal narratives, ritual practices, oral traditions and collective memory that are fundamental and central to cultural identity (Oyèrónké 2014:60). In light of these difficulties, it becomes vital to investigate methods for creating and utilizing these technologies in a more inclusive manner. Therefore, because *Ubuntu* is a normative philosophy that defines humanity through social interconnection and communal values, rather than merely a cultural ethos, it provides a more solid foundation for guaranteeing the aforementioned.

Ubuntu as an Ethical Framework for AI

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* could form a foundation for moral AI design in Africa. This will further necessitate that the significance of community, consensus and moral agency be acknowledged when creating AI systems. Besides, an Ubuntu-informed AI would perceive users as relational beings who are influenced by and accountable to others, as opposed to autonomous entities. This could be expressed in a few different ways:

- i. In line with Ubuntu’s emphasis on shared identity and mutual responsibility, data used in AI systems should be communally governed. This could be actualized through data

- cooperatives or community-based digital trusts where the community decides how data is collected, used and shared (Chakravorti 2020:3).
- ii. Secondly, AI systems must be designed to recognize African languages, idioms and oral traditions. Natural language processing tools informed by *Ubuntu* would ensure that proverbs, stories, folklore and ancestral wisdom are encoded as valid knowledge systems, preserving oral traditions that are central to African belief systems (Adeeko 1998:15). What this implies is that AI technologies, especially those dealing with language, like Natural Language Processing (NLP), should be intentionally built to understand and respect African languages, idioms and oral traditions, instead of only recognizing dominant Western languages or thought systems.
 - iii. Also, Ubuntu-centered AI could be used to analyze, document and digitally preserve traditional ceremonies, initiation rites and even indigenous healing practices, making them accessible to younger generations in respectful and educative ways. For example, Chilisa contends that AI-driven virtual museums or augmented reality systems could simulate traditional practices in culturally appropriate contexts (2012:31).
 - iv. In terms of decision making, *Ubuntu* prioritizes inclusive and participatory decision-making. By so doing, AI systems used for governance or community planning can be designed to foster consensus rather than competition, incorporating deliberative models that align with African forms of consultation, such as the *indaba* or *palaver* (Metz 2007:328). Meaning that decision making could come out of community meetings, gatherings and consultations in the truly African traditional way.
 - v. AI systems can be trained on indigenous knowledge systems, cosmologies, agricultural techniques, ecological knowledge and moral instruction, thereby preserving and revitalizing traditional beliefs that are endangered and threatened by globalization. Therefore, when integrated with Ubuntu, such systems would not extract this knowledge but honor it as a living tradition with custodians who must be acknowledged and respected.

Be that as it may, integrating *Ubuntu* into AI will not come easy devoid of some difficulties. For instance, one primary concern is that digitizing cultural beliefs could lead to commodification or misrepresentation. What this implies is that, some African cultural beliefs are digitized without care, they may be misinterpreted or even packaged, marketed or sold for profit, especially by people who do not understand or come from such cultures. For instance, a traditional African ritual or dance being used in a video game or advert without consent from the community (which in some cases could be considered abominable). Furthermore, Western-designed AI frameworks are often designed within empirical structure with little or no trust for metaphysical realities such as ancestors, gods, spirits, rituals etc., which characterize the African culture. That is to say that, AI, built with Western background, is not flexible enough to incorporate non-binary, spiritual or metaphysical understandings of reality that are common in African cosmology. For example, many African traditions view ancestors as active participants in community life, a notion that resists easy translation into algorithmic models (Wiredu 1996:148). Consequently, ethical AI development in Africa ought to be grounded in continuous dialogue with communities, elders, philosophers and technologists, ensuring that *Ubuntu* is not merely appropriated but actively shapes the underlying logic and purpose of technological design.

Be that as it may, this paper maintains that incorporating the philosophy of *Ubuntu* into AI technological designs, offers significant and robust cultural, ethical and social benefits.

Ubuntu, rooted in the African expression “*I am because we are*,” emphasizes community, interconnectedness, empathy and human dignity. By integrating these values into AI systems, technology can become more inclusive, ethical and culturally sensitive. It therefore challenges computer scientists of African background, to foster and encourage the above concern since it will: first foster human-centered design which not only prioritizes efficiency or profit alone, but also fosters technologies that serve collective well-being and social harmony. This can further address issues like algorithmic bias, surveillance and inequality by ensuring AI systems are developed with a deep respect for human values and diversity. Secondly, *Ubuntu* can enhance the preservation of African cultural heritage. In this case, AI tools informed by *Ubuntu*, can recognize and integrate indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions and communal languages, thereby resisting cultural erasure in digital spaces. moreover, such integration encourages collaborative decision-making in technology development. It can help in shaping AI ethical frameworks that prioritize mutual respect, justice and community participation, mostly in regions often excluded from global technological discourse. Based on the foregoing therefore, *Ubuntu* offers a pathway to create AI systems that not only perform tasks but enhance and foster human relationships, affirm shared values and support sustainable, culturally rooted technological advancement and growth.

Conclusion

The philosophy of Ubuntu provides a compelling lens through which to rethink human-technology interaction in the age of AI. By emphasizing interconnectedness, collective well-being, and respect for human dignity, Ubuntu offers a pathway to ethical, inclusive and human-centered AI systems. Such integration offers a transformative pathway for preserving African heritage in an increasingly technologically-driven world. By grounding technological innovation in the values of community, interconnectedness and shared humanity, *Ubuntu* ensures that AI systems do not merely replicate Western paradigms, but rather reflect the diverse cultural identities and moral frameworks inherent and predominant in African societies. Hence through the respectful inclusion of indigenous languages, oral traditions, folklore and ancestral wisdom, Ubuntu-oriented AI becomes a fundamental and key tool for cultural preservation and empowerment. It repudiates the erasure and commodification of African belief systems by affirming their relevance and legitimacy within digital spaces. Furthermore, Ubuntu philosophy promotes inclusive participation, ensuring that African communities have a voice in shaping the technologies that affect their lives. In this way, Ubuntu not only humanizes and shapes AI, but also safeguards the cultural continuity and spiritual depth of Africa in the face of rapid technological change.

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