

AIAL Report of the Workshop “An Introspective Look at the African AI Landscape”

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This report is a summary of the discussions at the 2026 Deep Learning Indaba Conference Workshop, “An introspective look at the African AI Landscape” that was organized by AIAL. The author compiled the report and the editors provided input and feedback. The ideas and direct quotes are from participants, panelists and invited speakers we list at the end of the report.

Abstract

*In several eras of innovation, the African continent is often portrayed as the “left behind.” Yet, over the years, African scholars have responded by attempting to dismantle the gates of exclusion and ensure their communities are part of the global conversation. Beyond a push for inclusion, African researchers are consistently carving out a space for fostering local innovation and scholarship. This is evident in the field of Artificial Intelligence, where we are seeing African datasets, models, and governance frameworks emerging across the continent. Deep Learning Indaba (DLI) is a premier example in an African-built space of innovation for African AI research, entrepreneurship, and practice. Spaces like DLI are at the forefront of shaping the direction of homegrown African AI innovation and technology, resulting in a thriving AI community. Yet, deliberations around what distinguishes African AI research/practice from Western traditions, what African values we should attempt to anchor our technical work in, or what kind of uniquely African future we should envision are largely missing. This workshop held at the 2026 DLI oriented towards active co-deliberation and community-guided introspection around **“What is uniquely African about the African AI community?”***

Introduction

Throughout history, the African continent has consistently been “left out” of global revolutions in technology and innovation [1]. Yet, much of the world’s innovation could not take place without the resources and labour exploited from the African continent. Hence, while African communities fuel the global revolutions, we reap none of the benefits. Further, the fact that African communities are not included in design and innovation is used to justify interventions from Western countries, with slogans that boast of “modernization,” the same rhetoric that was used to justify colonization of the continent [2]. African countries often become testing grounds for new technologies and dumping sites for failed technological interventions that take little-to-no account for the reality of the community members [3].

Technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) is often portrayed as a tool to resolve challenges and simplify tasks. While we have seen some benefits of AI, for instance, in sectors such as agriculture [4], it also poses critical harm, especially to marginalized communities [5]. Coming to the African continent, AI tools designed with Western standards and by Western researchers have resulted in 1) models that do not include many African languages and cultures, excluding community members from use of such tools [6], 2) tools that have high error rates for African use-cases, resulting in material harm [7], and 3) models that require African users to alter their ways of being, facilitating a form of cultural shift and erasure [8].

Further, while African researchers are constantly working to address the shortcomings of AI for their communities, they are continually excluded from participating and presenting their work in the global research community, limiting the exposure of African research and African solutions. The Deep Learning Indaba was born as a resistance to this reality—to carve a space for African research and innovation that moves beyond pushing for inclusion. Within this African AI landscape, we see innovations that address African problems through African innovation. The Indaba is intentional in its programming and initiatives, reflecting pan-African values in our decisions. Perhaps a good example of this is how our awards aspire to celebrate and uplift the values and visions of our historical intellectual giants.

A long-standing approach thus far in AI innovation has been to adopt tools and approaches that are built for Western contexts for African contexts. African scholars have continually criticized this approach for its tendency to mirror colonial practices through algorithmic advances [9] and for its tendency to limit what is possible to Western technological visions [10]. Further, the African AI landscape is not just limited to tools and innovations; data workers in African countries serve as underpaid backbones for the global AI revolution [11]. Hence, considering the rapid scale of global AI hype, we are at a juncture where we need to critically examine the ways we sow African values not just in our gatherings and programming but also in the very innovations we build.

This workshop was designed to serve as the ground for much-needed community deliberation and self-reflection of the African AI community. Through the discussion and co-learning of theories of sovereignty and pan-African values, it served as a space to allow African AI researchers to 1) reflect on our trajectory thus far and understand what is uniquely African about our approach to AI for Africa, 2) map our future trajectory as a community, and 3) outline the material effect of the African AI landscape on the continent. The workshop consisted of a panel discussion with experts working across subfields and regions on the continent, followed by invited talks on the progress of AI in the continent in Natural Language Processing, Dataset collection, Computer Vision (CV), and Speech Processing. Finally, the workshop ended with an interactive session with participants where we co-defined what African values are and mapped how we can integrate each of those values into how we conduct our work as various stakeholders in the AI ecosystem. Below, we give a summary of each of the sessions and the overall discussion of our workshop.

Panel Discussion

Our panel discussion was a conversation with four experts from a variety of backgrounds in the African AI ecosystem: Dr. Chinasa T. Okolo, a computer scientist whose research focuses on the governance and safety of AI systems especially for the Global Majority; Joy Olusanya, a linguist and NLP researcher who is the founder and CEO of the Center for Low-Resource Languages and Cultures and focuses on ethical data curation and community driven innovation; Ayantola Alayande, researcher from the Global Center on AI Governance who has worked on international AI policy and cooperation and is currently looking at AI infrastructure policy; and Dr. Yanick Kemayou, co-founder of Kabakoo Academies, a community organization focused on up-skilling youth in West Africa with the help of AI systems.

Three key themes emerged from the conversations during the panel discussion: 1) definitions and axis for African AI sovereignty, 2) navigating collaboration with external actors while resisting extractivism, and 3) the roles of state, continental, and global actors in shaping the African AI ecosystem. Below, we give a brief summary of each of the themes.

African AI Sovereignty

A core conversation in the panel was around the definition of African AI sovereignty and the various axes that contribute to its realization. During the panel and the follow-up questions from participants, the following key points emerged:

Sovereignty goes beyond data; it applies to the entire value chain.

While current conversations on sovereignty with regards to AI are focused on data sovereignty practices, the consensus in the room was that sovereignty goes beyond data. As Ayantola described, sovereignty requires us to look at the full value chain, not isolated points in the overall pipeline. While data sovereignty is a crucial point of deliberation for the African AI community, it is equally important to remember the human and mineral resources extracted from the continent to fuel the global AI industry. The labor of underpaid data annotators on the continent [12] and the raw materials extracted for the sake of building micro-chips [13] rarely make it to the conversation around AI sovereignty. Additionally, questions around local access to GPUs and hardware infrastructure needed to develop large AI models are also a crucial part of the sovereignty question. Further, as Dr. Kemayou stated, sovereignty is not just about the technical aspects of AI development but also about the idea of independent scholarship and "epistemic sovereignty." Dr. Kemayou further elaborated that sovereignty should materialize in economic gains to the community; a point supported by Ayantola in discussing the alluding promises of job creations through data centers that on the ground do not result in much economic growth for the community.

Sovereignty can be realized through government involvement, infrastructure building, and inclusion of community members.

In discussing avenues for ensuring sovereignty, Joy brought up the concept of meaningfully engaging community members in the design and development of AI systems and questioning whether the systems we are deploying truly address the needs of the community members. Dr. Okolo elaborated how governments are currently moving towards owning GPUs and even potentially manufacturing their own chips in the next 10 years. Some African countries are also currently investing in locations for data centers and state developing agencies are funding AI research in Africa. Ayantola also brought up that South Africa is a prime example as a country with a sizable amount of technical infrastructure as compared to other African countries and raised the point of continental collaboration as a potential avenue for easing sovereignty issues around data sharing and model training.

Navigating Collaboration Vs Extractivism

The second theme that emerged from the panel was around navigating collaboration with international actors while guarding against extractive practices. The following key points emerged from the discussion:

Policies should prioritize the community.

Dr. Okolo raised a point around the need for AI policy that prioritizes the needs of the community. A prime case to consider in this is perhaps the “America First” Global Health Strategy, a bilateral global health agreement signed by 34 countries as of August 3, 2026 [14] and grants “US agencies access to digital health systems and outbreak databases, and authority to audit a sample of facilities, in exchange for large-scale funding that is framed as helping these countries achieve “health sovereignty”[15][16]. This overtly permissive data sharing agreement also brings to question issues around data and research sovereignty on the continent [16]. Some African countries either rejected or halted the agreement, including Kenya where the court intervened based on a petition that argued against the violation of the country's constitutional protections [17]. This demonstrates a case where an extractive policy that comes wrapped with funding opportunity while risking data and national sovereignty can and should be contested through public intervention (petitions) and legal recourse (involvement of courts).

State governments should be involved in efforts for sovereignty.

As Dr. Kemanyo expressed, collaboration with the state governments are essential in ensuring the AI ecosystem is aligned with the sovereignty of the nation and the protection of individuals within the state. However, this requires navigating the differing interests of government bodies and tailoring conversations in manners that are appealing to them. Relating back to earlier discussions on sovereignty as a tool for economic gain, aligning discussions around AI sovereignty with tangible economic benefits is one potential approach to getting government bodies on board.

Community members should be informed and involved.

Dr. Kemanyo raised how community members are usually “okay” with having their data open source as they may have limited understanding to how exactly their data is used. Further, even among AI researchers, the rhetoric of how we think about our languages and communities in relation to Western institutions shapes how we approach concepts such as sovereignty. “I have never heard German or French be described as a “local language” in the countries they are spoken in...but Swahili, a language spoken by millions of people on the continent across different countries is labeled a “local language”” remarked Dr. Kemanyo. Joy further elaborated on the need for community engagement through field work, citing the experiences of Masakhane projects, as avenues for sovereignty in the AI development cycle.

State, Continental, and Global Policies and Actors

The final theme from the panel discussion, both from panelists and questions raised by participants, was on the role of different actors—state, continental, and global actors—in shaping the sovereign practices of AI development in Africa. The following points emerged from the discussion:

Lack of frameworks for implementation of policies.

A thread that kept coming up in the discussions was on the lack of the necessary infrastructure to go from policy to action. Ayantola discussed the AU continental strategy and how it had been difficult to actualize and suggested the role of intercontinental data exchange and collaboration across different countries. Dr. Okolo also raised how there is currently a lack of clear pipelines for public contributions. While there are independent think tanks such as Pollicy¹ who are doing the groundwork in engaging the public for policy work, there is a need for better laws that adapt to the community needs. Dr. Okolo further commented on the role of global institutions like the UN who can serve as facilitators for promoting full scale AI governance across continents. Overall, the consensus on the point of discussion was that actors at the different levels of governance—state, continental, and global—have individual roles that, to coherently work, need proper infrastructure and frameworks for implementation.

¹ <https://firn.genderit.org/researcher/pollicy>

Comparison with other global actors like India.

An audience question that sparked an extended conversation was on a comparison of African countries with South Asian giants such as India and China—if colonization and exploitation are the primary conspirators for the lack of progress on the continent, why are India and China AI ecosystems thriving? In response, Ayantola gave an extended description on the AI strategies of India, including the government investments in data centers, tax relief policies, and the recent AI Summit held in India. However, it is important to also note the negative side of such strategies, especially to community members. In a related theme, the role of local philanthropists and the lack of investment from such bodies was also brought up by participants. There were two differing views this thread of discussion: one was the need to “give grace” to African communities and the African AI landscape instead of comparing with what is happening in South Asian countries while the other was to involve local business owners and philanthropic bodies as investors to boot up the AI ecosystem locally instead of waiting for external support. These differing approaches are perhaps a reflection of the divergence in underlying motivations for research and development—one that prioritizes community-oriented, slow-paced progress and another that is operating at scale while conserving community ownership to a certain degree.

Invited Talks: Progress of AI on the Continent

In the second session of our workshop, we invited experts from across sub-fields in AI to provide a summary of progress of AI on the continent in their specific subfield. Below, we give short summaries of the key points from each talk.

Invited Talk 1: Data Collection

Speaker: Chris Emezue

Chris presented the African AI Atlas², a project from Lanfrica that has been documenting available resources for African languages. The main thesis of the talk was that we are looking in the wrong place for African datasets. While many African languages and data related to African communities is “missing” from mainstream data storage avenues, data that does not cleanly fit into our standards of AI datasets exists. Prior work documented 4k African datasets; by looking beyond the rigid structures of what a datasets is, the African AI Atlas uncovered 30k resources. Hence, we are at a juncture where we may need to reconsider how we build AI systems: instead of collecting more data under the premise of lack of data that fits our existing (Western) practices, how can we build AI systems that can utilize the data that already exists?

² <https://lanfrica.com/en/atlas>

Invited Talk 2: Natural Language Processing

Speaker: Tadesse Destaw Belay

Tadesse gave a presentation on his recent paper [18] looking at the trends in Africa NLP research from 2005-2025. In looking at contributors across the years, the talk highlighted how the number of African authors on NLP papers increased after 2018, coinciding with the formation of community movements such as Masakahne and Deep Learning Indaba. In terms of non-African influence on African NLP research, the talk also showed that funding and support mostly comes from outside the continent and affiliations of authors are also heavily dominated by Western institutions. Another interesting insight from the talk was on the fact that the number of speakers of a language does not necessarily correspond to research attention given to the language—a language with less number of speakers may have more papers that include it as compared to a language with higher number of speakers.

Invited Talk 3: Speech Processing

Speaker: Kathleen Simnyu

Kathleen gave a chronological account of the speech processing landscape for African languages, highlighting how the bible had been the main source of data for speech processing tasks at the early stages of the field. Further, linguistic resources that are often gated behind paywalls or simply inaccessible and hosted in European institutions were also common in earlier days of the field. More recently, community driven dataset collection efforts and dataset from non-conventional sources such as radio stations are dominating the data needs for speech processing. Yet, with larger scale projects that are more popular these days, issues with data leaks where the evaluation data is scraped and used to train large models that then have conflated performance are increasingly hindering tangible progress for many African languages. Further, current systems do not account well for code-switching and dialect differences, resulting in systems that require conformity by speakers of non-mainstream varieties.

Invited Talk 4: Computer Vision

Speaker: Raesetje Sefala

Raesetje gave an overview of Computer Vision in Africa focusing on community co-learning and its tangible impact in research outputs. She highlighted how, even at Deep Learning Indaba, there had been less computer vision posters over the years, as most submissions focus on language processing. A closer look at the educational structures on the continent revealed that there is an extreme lack of dedicated Computer Vision courses in many African institutions. Further, Raesetje highlighted how, when there is CV research, it mostly relies on less compute intensive algorithms, shying away from state of the art methods that are resource intensive. Further, even when there is access to resources, Raesetje commented on how students often rely on inefficient training methods. As a solution to this gap, the African Computer Vision Summer School³ has been running since 2024 supporting students with a 10 day intensive training on CV basics and methods.

³ <https://www.acvss.ai/home>

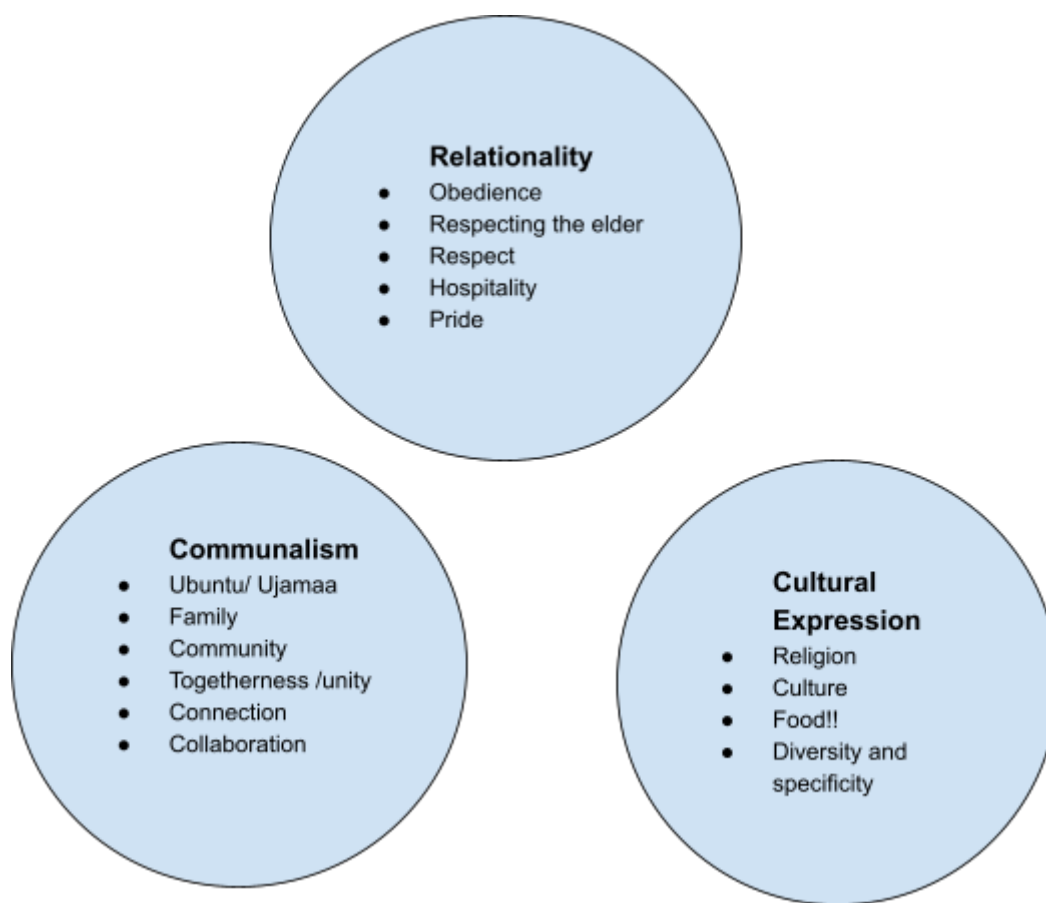
Mapping our Future: How do We Integrate African Values across the AI innovation pipeline?

In the last session of our workshop, we engaged our workshop participants in a mapping activity. We first asked participants to list African values. We then randomly assigned participants to play different roles as stakeholders and use the following prompt to think about how they would apply African values in how they approach their work:

“ As a __Stakeholder X__, I will integrate _Y_ African value in my work by _Z_ ”

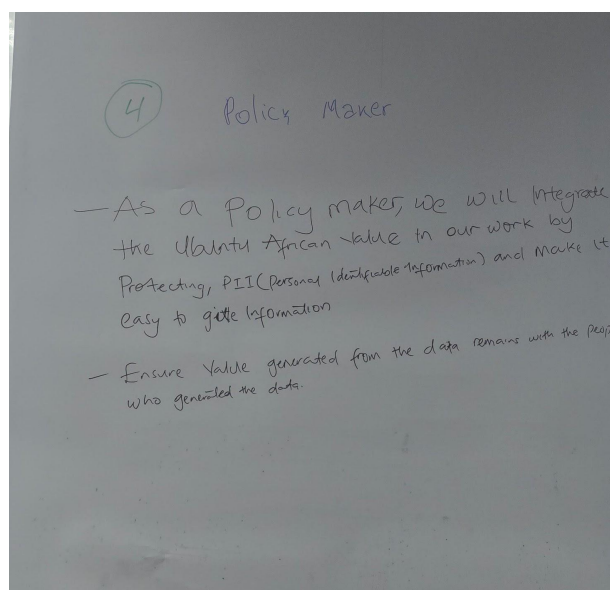
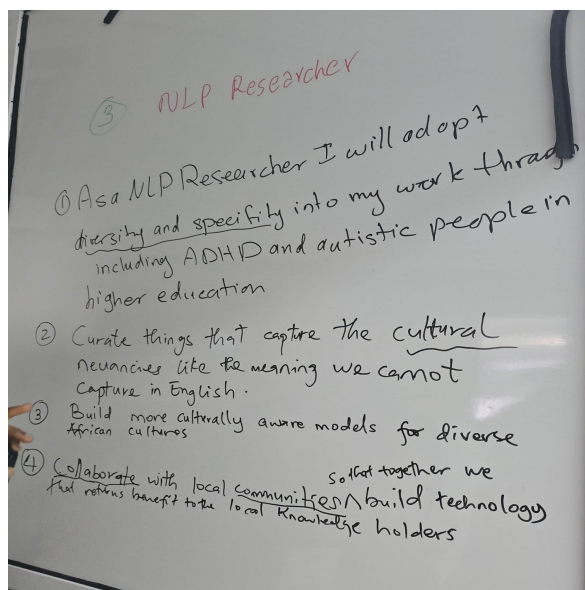
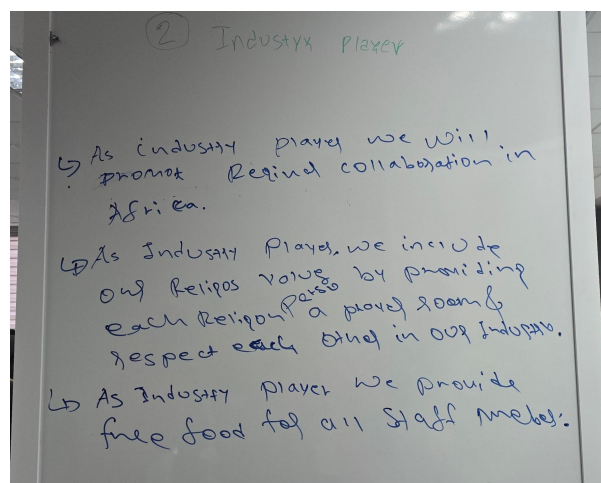
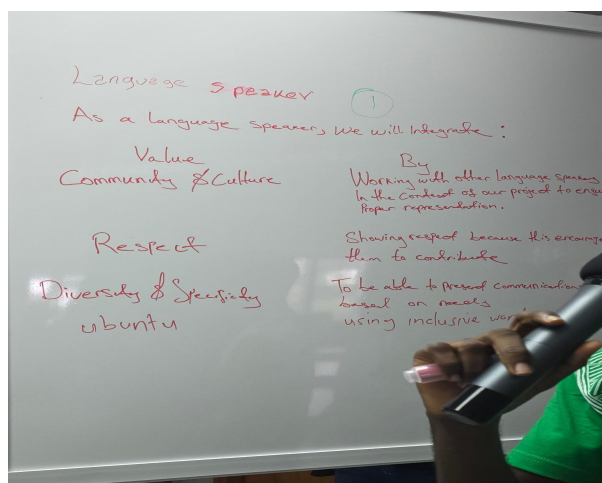
What are African Values?

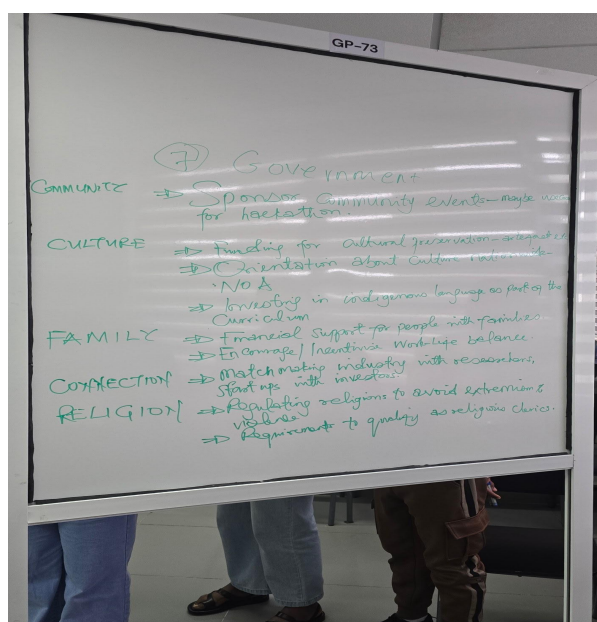
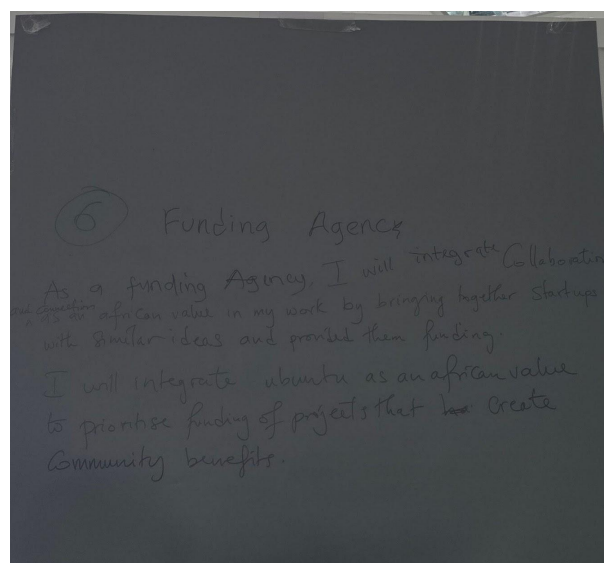
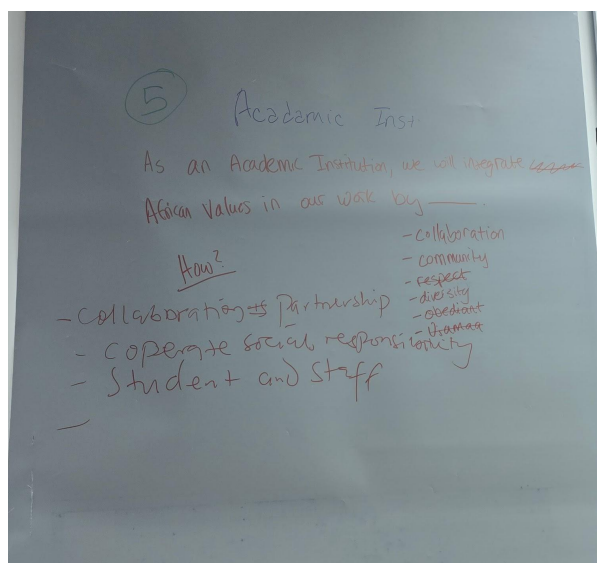
The values our participants listed can broadly be categorized into three categories: Relationality, Cultural Expression, Communalism



Integrating African Values in Workflows of Stakeholders

We listed stakeholders and randomly assigned our workshop participants to each stakeholder group. Below, we share pictures of the ideas that our participants put forth:





Summary of Mapping Exercise

The interactive session resulted in multiple discussion points around how to integrate African values in our workflows as stakeholders to ensure that African AI sovereignty is respected. Below, we outline three major threads as a summary of workshop attendees' discussions:

1. Our actions should prioritize direct (economic) benefit to the community.

This line of discussion directly feeds to the points raised in the panel discussion around sovereignty needing to materialize as economic benefit to the community members and the several points raised around co-designing with community members. Practical ways stakeholders can adhere to this recommendation include:

- Funding agencies should prioritize providing funding for projects that directly benefit community members. This also relates back to the discussions in the panel with regards to involving local philanthropic organizations to invest in the AI ecosystem.
- Academic institutions should engage in public collaborations. As institutions situated within communities, African academic institutions hold a key position as potential facilitators of community oriented research. Further, academic institutions can strengthen or incorporate community-based participatory research practices in their engineering programs.
- Policy makers should prioritize policies that ensure benefits generated from data collected from communities are retained with community members.
- NLP researchers should collaborate with communities to build technology that returns benefits back to the local knowledge holders. This requires going beyond data collection and carefully planning data protection and sharing strategies that prioritize direct economic benefit to the community.

2. The axes we consider for inclusion should not start and end with language and ethnicity.

In the context of African communities, issues of diversity and inclusion have to take several axes of identity into account. In the context of AI, questions of inclusion are often limited to gender [19] and in the context of multilingual evaluation, to language and culture [e.g. 20] The interactive session sparked conversations around other axes to consider and perhaps prioritize, starting with the African values that were listed.

- Stakeholders across the board should prioritize and integrate the needs of persons with disabilities, an often overlooked marginalized group. In addition to building systems exclusively for them (e.g. automatic sign language interpreters), stakeholders should also account for potential ways that mainstream tools may marginalize persons with disabilities.
- Researchers, academic institutions, and government bodies have the responsibility to provide communication about research projects, potential benefits and risks to community members. This relates back to the point raised in the panel around meaningful public engagement with policies and touches on *civic and political inclusion*.
- Policy makers should ensure that the policies around data sharing and access are inclusive of all community members regardless of political, financial, or educational stance. Often, data request procedures and reporting mechanisms are obscure to community members who do not have legal or financial means for recourse.

3. Respect should be a key aspect of our design approaches.

The idea of respectful design has been explored within HCI by prior work, especially in relation to Indigenous Knowledge preservation [21, 22]. Stakeholders within the AI ecosystem can integrate these principles into their workflows to ensure that respect for communities and their values are respected by design.

- NLP researchers and other stakeholders involved directly in the research process should account for religious values that community members hold. This includes the careful consideration of processing religious data, such as text and audio from the Holy Bible, Holy Quran or traditional religious practices [23, 24].
- Governments and academic institutions should integrate Indigenous Knowledge into their curriculums while respecting the proper preservation practices.

Contributors

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