From Extraction to Gardening: Ubuntu-Inspired Provocations for Relational AI and CSCW

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a workshop examining how African indigenous philosophies can reshape Human-Computer Interaction and AI development. Drawing on discussions, storytelling activities, and thematic analysis of participant reflections gathered during a workshop in Egypt with researchers and practitioners from across Africa, we articulate a set of provocations for CSCW and AI research. We challenge dominant HCI paradigms rooted in

Euro-American traditions that render African experiences invisible through "WEIRD" (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) frameworks. Drawing on Ubuntu philosophy's emphasis on relational intelligence, "I am because we are" we propose shifting from extractive, individual-centric design toward community-oriented, dialogical approaches. Workshop participants identified fundamental disconnects between African realities and current AI architectures, advocating for "Small AI" models that are situated, sustainable, and locally governed rather than energy-intensive "God models." We present three provocations: redefining intelligence as relational stewardship relying on local knowledge rather than extraction to other contexts; acknowledging researcher positionality through "seamful design"; and achieving technological sovereignty through cooperative, right-sized AI ecosystems. Our findings suggest that centering African indigenous intelligence requires not merely dataset translation but fundamental counter-visualization of technology futures rooted in community exchange where data and its usage can be trusted.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → *Field studies*; **Participatory design**.

Keywords

indigenous practices, community, futuring, connectedness, place-based

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1 Introduction

Indigenous philosophies and cultural frameworks are frequently marginalized, often treated as peripheral, rather than viable sources of methodological and theoretical insight for shaping HCI theory, methods, and design practice [12]. One compelling example is Ubuntu, a Southern African philosophy that centres on values such as interconnectedness, compassion, and human dignity[4, 14]. While dominant HCI traditions have often emphasized individual users and individualized interaction into HCI design [21], focusing on technologies tailored for such interactions, Ubuntu offers a contrasting lens. It situates users and participants within their broader communities, acknowledging their intersectional identities [7] and historical contexts[17]. This shift in perspective has practical implications for interface and system design, encouraging researchers to prioritize community needs over individual ones. Such a reorientation fosters interdependence and collaboration [22], moving beyond the limitations of individual-centric design. By adopting a community-oriented approach grounded in Ubuntu, HCI researchers can better address socio-economic and historical barriers to technology access, embracing an intersectional framework [7] that extends beyond individual capabilities to consider the collective.

This paper is based on the discussions that happened at the "Weaving Indigeneity and Culture into the Fabric of HCI Futures: African Threads" [10] Workshop that was conducted as a part of AfriCHI 2025 in Egypt. We invited participants to critically reflect on the role of Indigenous philosophies and cultural perspectives within HCI and specifically AI, while also challenging the status quo to drive meaningful inclusion/change.

Across the workshop discussions, participants repeatedly contrasted dominant computational notions of intelligence with what we describe as relational intelligence: forms of knowing grounded in interdependence, stewardship, situatedness, and collective accountability.

Ubuntu represents just one of many philosophies with the potential to reshape HCI research, steering it toward new, intriguing, and sometimes challenging directions. Another philosophy that could shift perspectives in HCI research is Ma'at, a philosophy originating in Ancient Egypt, linked to the goddess with the same name. Ma'at is associated with concepts of truth, virtue, justice, morality, balance, and law [23]. Its emphasis on virtues and embrace of unity over dissension [2] can reconfigure how we think about engagements within HCI research and how we collaborate [11]. Thus, there is a significant opportunity to explore how methodologies rooted in Indigenous philosophies and under represented cultures can inform HCI practices, fostering innovative, mutually beneficial, and culturally diverse collaborations. It is also important to translate these Indigenous values into practical HCI applications, to explain the link between theoretical frameworks and real-world implementation [8, 9].

This paper builds on our team's earlier work describing the same broader project, including the workshop report itself [12] and prior explorations of Ubuntu-inspired participatory design methods [8, 10]. Distinct from that earlier work, the present paper's contribution is to narrow the focus specifically to AI systems and their relationship to CSCW, to synthesize the workshop's discussions into three explicit, actionable provocations for relational AI, and to develop "Small AI" and cooperative, right-sized AI ecosystems as a concrete design and governance direction for the CSCW community.

2 The turn towards indigeneity in HCI

Initially, Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research and practice relied heavily on "universal approaches" rooted in Euro-American academic traditions, often neglecting the cultural nuances and diverse knowledge systems that shape interaction. Scholars have since recognized that technology is context-dependent, shaped by societal norms and values[1], prompting a cultural shift in HCI over the past decade. This shift has emphasised pluralist perspectives[20] and decolonial approaches[15], yet indigenous knowledge and practices remain marginalized within the global HCI movement due to lack of experience or contact with these approaches. Creating spaces for collective learning that embrace tension, discomfort, and healing is essential to engage researchers, practitioners, and students with indigenous philosophies. Centering marginalized

voices can foster ethical, responsible design practices that address historical injustices and systemic inequities. Scholars like Rankin and Henderson [19] highlight the need to critically examine how race, gender, and class influence technology, advocating for equity-focused frameworks. Similarly, Winschiers-Theophilus and Bidwell [24] call for an Afro-Centric Indigenous HCI paradigm, emphasizing the localization of design to reflect users' cultural contexts. Such approaches not only respect cultural differences but also enhance user experiences by aligning technologies with community values and practices. This participatory approach is echoed in the work of Duarte et al., who emphasize the importance of creating safe spaces for participatory design, particularly with marginalized communities [5]. By fostering environments where diverse voices are heard and valued, HCI can develop technologies that are not only user-friendly but also culturally relevant and empowering.

The intersection of technology and cultural heritage offers a vital opportunity for indigenous philosophies to shape HCI practices. Liu's [16] work on grassroots' heritage in crisis contexts illustrates how social media can enable culturally sensitive design that honours community narratives, while Haddad et al. [13] emphasize the need for HCI to move beyond superficial cultural adaptations and engage deeply with users' cultural contexts. By integrating cultural heritage into design, HCI can create technologies that resonate on both personal and communal levels. This approach also addresses structural inequalities in technology development, shifting focus from "fixing" systemic issues to empowering communities through meaningful engagement. Indigenous values, such as the 7 Grandfather Teachings: Love; Respect; Courage; Truth; Humility; Wisdom; and Honesty, provide guiding principles for fostering inclusivity and healing within HCI frameworks, ensuring that indigenous traditions and perspectives are respected and integrated into technological solutions[3].

3 Our Approach

The conversations and resulting provocations mentioned in this paper were results of a workshop conducted at the AfriCHI 2025 conference. This workshop took place in Egypt with participants mostly from different parts of Africa. The workshop structure included a keynote, followed by narrative storytelling from the participants.

Workshop discussions, keynote reflections, and participant storytelling activities were documented through field notes and synthesized using an inductive thematic analysis approach [6]. Themes and provocations were iteratively refined with workshop participants following the event. Participants included HCI researchers, students, and practitioners from multiple African countries. There were a total of 8 participants, 2 organizers and 1 keynote speaker. All participants are authors in this work. As all workshop participants are co-authors of this paper, we understand this work as a collaboratively produced reflection on shared experience rather than research conducted on external participants. Given the page constraints of the paper format and to protect the anonymity of individual co-authors in our own reporting, we present illustrative examples from the workshop (Section 4) without verbatim quotations or individual identifiers; these examples are drawn directly from the field notes and thematic analysis described above.

4 Conversations

4.1 The limits of current AI paradigms

Participants and presenters identified a fundamental structural disconnect between African realities and current AI architectures, which are described as being trapped in "binarity" and incapable of handling the layered complexity of indigenous culture. The keynote visualized current Large Language Models (LLMs) as "kaleidoscopes" designed elsewhere systems that dazzle with fragmented, fabricated patterns but lack true context or "relational intelligence". They are designed to find the common denominator in a context or format of material, so obliterating innovation and creativity. This critique extended to the logic of the models themselves, participants argued that because these systems view the world through "marketplace logic," they prioritize data extraction and monetization over the deepening of knowledge systems. Consequently, the current frameworks are not merely biased but are viewed as fundamentally "WEIRD" (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic), creating a default human standard that renders the majority of the African experience invisible.

Furthermore, since these models are developed from what is "on the web" the workshop highlighted a visibility gap where African youth, despite representing vast majority of the global youth population, remain excluded from the training data and governance of these systems. Discussion participants noted that this exclusion is exacerbated by a high barrier to entry, the hardware and software interfaces are designed for software engineers, creating a privilege gap where only those with specific technical literacy can contribute their data and shape the technology. This ivory tower dynamic was acknowledged even within the workshop itself, with participants noting they were speaking from positions of privilege, potentially disconnected from the grassroots communities who must navigate these colonial structures embedded in the code.

4.2 The Ubuntu lens and relational intelligence

The workshop proposed Ubuntu not merely as a philosophy but as a rigorous design methodology defined as "Clariscopic Vision," or the ability to see the "whole relational field". In this framework, technology is reimagined, "relationships are the infrastructure," shifting the focus from "monologue UX" to "dialogical design" that mimics African storytelling circles. Participants argued that bias should not be viewed simply as an error in code to be debugged, but rather as a reflection of the humanity and structural histories of the people behind the systems. Therefore, true intelligence in an African context is defined by how one interprets the world relationally "I am because we are" rather than through isolated data points. Artificial approaches do not venture near this intelligence.

Despite the theoretical critiques, the discussion revealed a nuanced, practical tension where participants found significant utility in existing, flawed tools. One participant described using ChatGPT to communicate with an aunt in a dialect they had never learned, effectively using the AI to bridge a generational gap and preserve a family link. Another example involved a Ghanaian storyteller using AI to assist in translating and generating children's stories. These instances led to a consensus that while current tools are accidental in their bias and rooted in colonial structures, African users are "sitting with that tension" to solve immediate problems.

If treated as an augmented intelligence we can work to create new contexts for these tools. This reflects a finding that users are adopting these tools out of necessity and finding value in them, even while acknowledging that the tools do not truly understand their context.

4.3 Proposals for small AI and sustainability

A major finding was the rejection of "God models", massive, energy-intensive, general-purpose AIs in favour of "Small Language Models" (SLMs) or "Small AI" that is situated and data-light. The keynote advocated for a counter-extractive approach, asking "how much AI is enough?" similar to asking "how much internet is enough?". This necessitates a shift in business models from the unicorn archetype (rapid scaling, winner-takes-all) to zebra models (cooperative, sustainable networks). Participants noted that because there is no single model that can represent the linguistic diversity of the continent (e.g., Swahili, Arabic, and regional dialects), the future lies in "right-sized," complementary models that collaborate rather than compete. This is reinforced by a practical reality, where cloud connectivity is unreliable or absent, SLMs can operate on edge devices without dependence on centralised infrastructure. Their smaller footprint also makes them more sustainable to run, but also easier to repair, adapt and maintain locally. Their smaller footprint may also make them more sustainable to run, and potentially easier to repair, adapt, and maintain locally; we present this as a hypothesis for future investigation rather than a demonstrated outcome.

This focus on Small AI aligns with a broader call for "sustainability by design," drawing inspiration from African material culture where objects are repurposed and disposable tech is held accountable to the earth. Participants criticized the adoption of shiny trends, warning that relying on fleeting technological fashions creates systems that lack longevity. Instead, the findings suggest a "seamful design" approach that slows down interaction admitting unreliability and encouraging delayed, thoughtful responses rather than instant, potentially hallucinated answers. This approach prioritizes "purposeful, relational, and dignifying" interactions over speed, ensuring that systems are built to serve future generations rather than just the immediate market.

However this approach requires greater engagement in the development of small models, the integration of more communities into the skills of collecting data and generating new models, through suitable interfaces

4.4 Embodied and situational knowledge

The workshop findings challenge the prevailing notion of intelligence as abstract computation residing in the machine, advocating instead for a framework where knowledge is "rooted (in land/place and community)" and embodied in values of perennial wisdom. Participants argued that current AI systems impose a specific vision of the world that shapes intelligence through a WEIRD lens, whereas true intelligence involves interpreting the world through "interconnectedness recognition". In this view, technology is not defined by physical infrastructure but by social connections, leading to the assertion that "relationships are the infrastructure". This necessitates a shift away from modelling humans in isolation toward modelling "humans with others and land," acknowledging that relationality is fluid and context-dependent.

To operationalize this, the workshop proposed moving from monologue UX to dialogical design, which mimics the rituals of African storytelling circles and encourages many-to-many sensemaking rather than solitary user interactions. This approach rejects the God model of general-purpose AI in favour of situated systems that are hyper-localized and tailored to specific socio-linguistic datasets and regional dialects. Such local models may find commonality or comparisons that can be shared, as Indigenous narratives build up knowledge about a topic from many different storytellers. Providing an interface to these could be the new "pattern matching" that is required for intelligent communication. Furthermore, participants highlighted the difficulty of training models on knowledge that is embedded in artefacts or oral texts that cannot be read by standard machines but are understood differently by indigenous communities. This finding suggests that capturing situated knowledge requires reinventing frameworks with multimedia capabilities to handle the complexity of culture and tradition, as current binary systems have a ceiling that prevents them from processing these layered realities.

5 Provocations

The three provocations below are interconnected, relational intelligence (Provocation 1) provides the conceptual foundation, seamful design operationalizes positionality (Provocation 2), and technological sovereignty through Small AI (Provocation 3) offers a structural pathway for enacting both. Table 2 summarizes, for each provocation, the dominant assumption it questions, the alternative proposed, and an open question for CSCW research.

5.1 Provocation 1: Redefining Intelligence: From Extraction to "Gardening"

The workshop discourse challenges the foundational definition of "intelligence" in HCI. Current AI models are criticized for being extractive [18], mining data for capital, while also utilizing concerning data to feed the models like WEIRD texts and images. Furthermore the use of data that are written by writers and tourists in colonial language and forms has been critiqued with a push for more accessible forms, considering context and diverse information pathways. We argue for a "gardening" approach, where data is treated as "storykeeping" and informed consent is collective and intergenerational. This aligns with the participant finding that "bias is not an error in thinking" but a reflection of the structural humanity behind the code. Future research must therefore address how to encode relational philosophies into AI architectures and interaction patterns in ways that can support community accountability. Where statistical models are presently considering the dominate views of the online community, the nebulous "digital natives" [sic], there is a need to develop models that draw out patterns of local approaches. This reframing shifts what "good AI" means in HCI, prioritizing relational accountability and community stewardship as first-order design and evaluation criteria. This raises a concrete question for CSCW: how might collaborative systems support community-governed, intergenerational consent processes for the data used to train local AI models?

5.2 Provocation 2: The Paradox of Privilege and "Ivory Tower" Design

A significant point of discussion is the positionality of the researchers themselves. The finding that "the way we solve the problem is the problem" suggests that traditional problem-solution linear thinking in HCI may be insufficient. Instead, a "seamful design" approach, one that admits unreliability and encourages slow, deliberative responses may be more culturally appropriate than systems optimized for speed and efficiency.We propose, as a hypothesis for future investigation rather than an established outcome, that this could also acknowledge the incomplete knowledge of the models, help reduce hallucination-related harms, and give users more confidence to assess responses. This would also acknowledge the incomplete knowledge of the models, reduce hallucination and give more confidence to the user to assess the response. We treat positionality as a design constraint and derive methodological implications for designing with communities rather than for them. This raises a concrete question for CSCW: what would a genuinely dialogical AI interface support, in terms of collaborative sense-making, that an individual-facing chatbot does not?

5.3 Provocation 3: Sovereignty via "Right-Sized" AI

The discussions advocate for a "Small AI" or "Small Language Models" (SLMs) approach as a form of resistance against the hegemony of global tech giants. The argument is that no single model can represent the linguistic diversity of the continent. However, this introduces the challenge of governance and competition. Participants noted that current AI development encourages silence and competition rather than the horizontal collaboration found in Ubuntu philosophies. The discussion suggests that for African AI to succeed, it must reject the "unicorn" model of startups in favour of "zebra" models, cooperative, sustainable networks that prioritize community resource sharing over rapid scaling. We argue that sovereignty requires not only smaller models but also cooperative governance, and we articulate implications for building sustainable, community-stewarded AI ecosystems. This raises a concrete question for CSCW: how might multiple communities negotiate ownership, disagreement, and accountability when locally governed models are connected or federated across regions?

For CSCW specifically, these findings raise questions about how collaborative systems might move beyond individual-centric "universal" interaction models toward infrastructures that support collective/distributed stewardship, dialogical participation, and community accountability. From these models, more holistic interfaces can be generated to provide a means of comparing and linking local models, enabling cross-community pattern-matching and knowledge exchange while preserving each community's local specificity and governance.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued that reimagining AI and CSCW through an Ubuntu lens requires requires a shift in what we take "good" AI to mean. Drawing on a workshop with African HCI researchers, students, and practitioners, we offered three provocations: treating data as story-keeping rather than extraction, treating researcher positionality as a design constraint rather than a bias to be debugged away, and pursuing technological sovereignty through cooperative, right-sized AI ecosystems rather than centralized God models. Together, these provocations point toward a CSCW research agenda centered on community-governed consent, genuinely dialogical interfaces, and accountability across federated, locally governed models. As an exploratory, workshop-grounded contribution, this paper does not offer definitive answers, it invites the CSCW community into the kind of dialogical, relational engagement it advocates for. We see this as a starting point rather than a conclusion, and we welcome future collaborations that test, extend, and challenge these provocations in practice.

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