

SANKOFAI

**Ethical AI
For Africa**



The Imperative of African Narratives in Shaping Global AI

The pervasive influence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is undeniable, shaping virtually every facet of modern life, from healthcare and education to economic opportunity and social interaction. However, a critical void exists within the global discourse on AI narratives: the profound absence or marginalization of perspectives emanating from Africa. This omission is not merely an oversight; it carries a significant "cultural cost" and holds profound implications for how AI systems are designed, deployed, and regulated, particularly within the African continent itself.

The scarcity of data reflecting Africa's rich tapestry of life philosophies, such as Ubuntu, alongside its diverse thought processes, spiritual beliefs, traditions, and customs, creates a dangerous vacuum in AI development. This analysis will illuminate the inherent dangers arising from this exclusion and underscore the immense, untapped benefits of integrating African perspectives.

The Perilous Path: Dangers of AI Without African Narratives

The development of AI without adequate representation of African narratives presents a multifaceted array of risks, ranging from the perpetuation of systemic biases to the erosion of cultural heritage and the exacerbation of digital inequalities.

Algorithmic Bias and Digital Apartheid

AI systems are inherently dependent on the data upon which they are trained; consequently, they are "only as good as the data used to train them". This fundamental characteristic means that if these datasets reflect historical inequalities and prejudices, the AI models inevitably transfer and amplify these biases, perpetuating existing disparities. This phenomenon can lead to what has been termed "algorithmic apartheid," a digital mirroring of historical injustices.

For example, in South Africa, AI-driven technologies that rely heavily on historical data risk establishing new forms of discrimination in the digital age. Allegations have surfaced regarding biased algorithms within medical aid schemes that disproportionately flag Black African medical doctors for fraud, waste, and abuse. This discriminatory pattern is deeply rooted in the racial hierarchies established by apartheid. Similarly, in healthcare diagnostics, algorithms trained predominantly on datasets derived from populations of European ancestry and lighter skin tones exhibit reduced accuracy when applied to more diverse groups. This can result in misdiagnoses or less effective treatments for marginalized, predominantly Black communities, affecting critical health metrics such as oxygen saturation levels.

Beyond healthcare, AI-driven credit scoring systems in Kenya have demonstrated bias against low-income communities, leading to higher rejection rates for loan applications originating from rural regions. Furthermore, gender bias in AI hiring algorithms can favor male candidates if trained on data from male-dominated industries, a significant concern in Africa where gender inequality remains a persistent challenge.

The notion that AI is a neutral technology is a misconception; it serves as a mirror, reflecting and amplifying the biases embedded within its creators and training data. This process leads to a digital perpetuation of systemic societal issues. Without conscious intervention, AI risks becoming a tool that reinforces, rather than dismantles, existing power structures and inequalities, effectively creating a new form of digital apartheid. This necessitates a broader understanding of the societal responsibility of AI developers, extending beyond mere technical functionality.

Cultural Erasure and Epistemic Injustice

AI tools are not neutral; they "inherently represent the ideologies, cultural practices, and political values of their creators, often from the Global North". This implies that a "transfer of technology is a transfer of their creators' cultural values". Africa, characterized by a rich tapestry of over 1,500 distinct languages and cultures, presents unique challenges in this regard. AI systems developed in Western contexts frequently fail to account for these nuances, leading to the erosion of cultural identities and the imposition of foreign values.

In the realm of education, AI tools are often trained to produce curricula and information geared towards technologically advanced Western nations, frequently ignoring indigenous customs and knowledge. For example, agricultural practices based on contextual ecological knowledge, prevalent in many African societies, are often excluded from AI-generated curricula, thereby depriving students of indigenous learning content. Moreover, AI tools like ChatGPT and Gemini have demonstrated a tendency to overgeneralize information, struggling to provide accurate, contextual educational facts relevant to African environments. A notable example is their

response of "four seasons" when asked about climatic fluctuations, which is incorrect for West Africa, where there are typically two main seasons.

Many African indigenous education systems, such as those of the Maasai and Kipsigis people in Kenya, emphasize social interpersonal skills and a community focus. However, AI educational technologies are frequently designed around values of individualized, screen-based learning, which can threaten and undermine these collaborative cultures. Furthermore, educational AI tools are often "monocultural multilingual," meaning they retain cultural biases from the language of their training data, largely excluding indigenous epistemologies and languages. This effectively nudges African students towards Western speech patterns and the worldviews they embody, rather than embracing their indigenous languages and knowledge systems through AI tools.

The absence of African narratives in AI models represents not merely a data gap but a profound epistemic injustice, actively contributing to cultural displacement and a continued intellectual dependency on the Global North. This is not a passive omission but an active process of cultural transfer that undermines unique epistemologies. The broader implication is a significant loss of global intellectual diversity and a perpetuation of a colonial mindset, where one knowledge system is deemed superior, thereby hindering the development of truly innovative and contextually relevant solutions for Africa's unique challenges.

Data Sovereignty and Neo-Colonialism

The collection, storage, and utilization of personal data in Africa raise significant ethical concerns, primarily due to the lack of robust data protection laws in many countries. This regulatory void leaves African citizens vulnerable to data exploitation by both local and international entities. A particular concern arises when AI systems are developed by international technology firms, as data generated by African users is frequently stored on servers located in Europe or the United States, subjecting it to different legal and regulatory frameworks. This practice raises critical questions regarding data control and its subsequent use, with concerns that data collected from African users might primarily benefit users in other parts of the world rather than contributing to local development.

This situation poses substantial risks of "data colonialism," where data is collected by foreign companies with little equitable benefit flowing back to Africa. The current global data infrastructure, coupled with Africa's nascent regulatory landscape, creates a fertile ground for this phenomenon, reinforcing economic dependency. Inadequate local frameworks enable foreign entities to control Africa's digital assets. The implication is that AI development within Africa might be stifled, as the raw material (data) that fuels AI innovation is controlled and monetized externally, potentially leading to a new form of economic and technological neo-colonialism. This underscores the urgent need for robust data governance frameworks within Africa to ensure that the continent retains control over its digital resources.

Exacerbating the Digital Divide

The digital divide represents a significant barrier to the equitable deployment of AI in Africa. Poor internet access, low digital literacy, and pervasive infrastructure disparities severely hinder AI adoption and accessibility, particularly in rural areas. For instance, AI-powered learning

platforms reach only 25% of students in rural areas compared to 85% in urban settings, a direct consequence of disparities in connectivity and infrastructure. Similarly, while telemedicine platforms hold critical potential for remote areas, their effectiveness is contingent upon access to reliable internet and digital devices, which are often unavailable across the continent, thereby potentially exacerbating existing healthcare disparities.

Furthermore, the lack of resources dedicated to collecting, digitizing, and cleaning data in countries like Zambia leads to significant gaps in representation within datasets. This forces reliance on unrepresentative external data sources, such as Kaggle, which lack the relevant context for local populations. The digital divide in Africa is not merely an access problem but a foundational barrier to equitable AI development. It tends to create a feedback loop where lack of infrastructure leads to data scarcity, which in turn leads to biased AI, further entrenching inequalities. This extends beyond who can *use* AI to who can *contribute* to and *benefit* from its development. The causal relationship is clear: infrastructure limitations directly result in data gaps, which then produce AI models that are neither representative nor effective for African contexts. The implication is that without comprehensively addressing the digital divide, AI will deepen existing socio-economic inequalities, making the technology a privilege rather than a widespread tool for development.

Africa's Ascendance: A Global Imperative for Inclusive AI

Beyond the dangers of exclusion, Africa's demographic trajectory and growing influence present a compelling case for the proactive inclusion of its narratives in AI development, transforming it from a regional concern into a global imperative.

The Demographic Tsunami: Workforce and Population Projections

Africa is on the cusp of an unprecedented demographic shift that will fundamentally alter the global landscape. By 2035, "more young people from Africa will be entering the workforce each year than from the rest of the world's countries combined". This demographic surge is set to continue, with Africa's population, currently around 1.2 billion (2017), projected to increase to over 1.8 billion by 2035, making it considerably larger than that of India or China by that time. Looking further ahead, the United Nations projects that by 2050, Africa's population will reach close to 2.5 billion, meaning "more than 25 percent of the world's population will be African". Some projections even suggest Africa's current population of 1.4 billion could double by 2050. By the end of the century, one in three people on Earth will be African, and sub-Saharan Africa alone will be home to almost half of the world's young people.

This demographic surge uniquely positions Africa to "influence artificial intelligence (AI) development and governance". It is imperative that young Africans "have a say in how it develops and the standards that govern its future". This is not merely about population numbers; it signifies a profound shift in global human capital. This demographic dividend, characterized by a growing working-age population, has the potential to drive increased productivity and foster inclusive economic growth across the continent. However, this potential can only be fully

realized if supported by inclusive development strategies, including the responsible integration of AI. The broader implication is that if AI models fail to represent this vast, future workforce and consumer base, they will be fundamentally incomplete and ineffective on a global scale. This transforms the challenge from an ethical niche to a core global economic and innovation imperative.

The Interdependent Future

"Humanity cannot afford to have African narratives absent from AI models". This assertion is supported by the understanding that the world itself is "becoming more African. Fast". Africa's diverse perspectives are therefore "crucial to shaping global AI standards". The interconnectedness of the global future with Africa's demographic trajectory means that the exclusion of African narratives in AI is not merely a regional problem but a systemic flaw that undermines the very concept of a truly responsible and universally beneficial AI for all of humanity. This emphasizes that if AI is to serve all of humanity, it must reflect the diversity of humanity. A Western-centric AI is inherently limited and incapable of effectively addressing global challenges, especially as Africa's influence grows. This sets the stage for the benefits of inclusion, demonstrating that it is not an act of charity but a strategic necessity for global well-being and progress.

Forging a New Path: The Benefits of African-Centric AI

Integrating African narratives and philosophies into AI development offers transformative benefits, moving beyond risk mitigation to unlock unprecedented potential for equitable and sustainable global progress.

Decolonizing AI Ethics: Ubuntu as a Guiding Philosophy

A significant "ethical tension" exists between the ethics frameworks developed in the Global North and the African understanding of ethics, health, and care. Existing frameworks often reflect Western values, such as individualism, while the African setting is largely communalist. Decolonization serves as a "useful tool" to understand and apply AI ethics in Africa, ensuring that AI is beneficial to all. This process involves integrating African moral traditions, such as community-focus and interconnectedness, into ethical frameworks for AI development.

The philosophy of Ubuntu, meaning "I am because we are," is central to many African states, particularly rural communities. It emphasizes communalism, where an individual's well-being is intrinsically tied to the well-being of their community. This contrasts sharply with Western individualistic approaches and can guide AI development to consider the impacts on entire communities rather than focusing solely on individual outcomes.

The integration of Ubuntu, and similar philosophies, into AI ethics offers several profound benefits:

- **Communal Well-being:** By prioritizing the greatest good for the greatest number, Ubuntu aligns AI development with community health initiatives, moving beyond a sole focus on personalized medicine.
- **Inclusivity and Justice:** It promotes fair treatment and equity, ensuring that research communities have access to health resources and benefits, aligning with the ethical principle of justice.
- **Transparency and Explainability:** Ubuntu's emphasis on openness and communal understanding aligns well with the need for clear, understandable AI processes, ensuring that decisions made by AI are comprehensible to all stakeholders.
- **Accountability:** It defines explicit lines of accountability for AI outcomes, ensuring developers, organizations, and users are answerable for the effects of AI technologies.
- **Cultural Relevance:** By integrating these values, AI is not only technically robust but also culturally sensitive, socially acceptable, and trustworthy within African contexts.
- **Global Enhancement:** Ubuntu-informed guidelines have the potential to "enhance the ethical use of AI in health research worldwide, promoting more responsible and relevant practices".

Ubuntu philosophy offers a transformative paradigm for AI ethics, moving beyond Western individualism to a communal, relational approach that not only addresses Africa's unique needs but also provides a universal model for more holistic, responsible, and globally beneficial AI development. By prioritizing communal well-being and interconnectedness, AI systems become inherently more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable. Ubuntu offers a decolonized framework that can enrich global AI ethics, moving away from a "one-size-fits-all" approach and towards a more nuanced, context-aware methodology that benefits all of humanity.

To further illustrate the distinct approaches, consider the following comparative analysis:

Feature / Principle	Global North (Typical)	African Values (Ubuntu-centric)
Core Focus	Individualism, Autonomy	Communalism, Interconnectedness
Decision-Making	Individual Rights	Group Benefit, Collective Well-being
Healthcare AI	Personalized Medicine	Community Health Initiatives, Relational Care
Data Ownership	Individual Privacy	Data Sovereignty, Community Benefit
Accountability	Individual/Corporate	Shared Responsibility, Community Engagement
Knowledge Base	Western-centric	Indigenous Knowledge, Local Context

Culturally Aware AI: Fostering Relevance and Trust

Culturally aware AI involves designing systems with a deep understanding of the local cultural context, actively respecting and reflecting the values and beliefs of the communities they serve. This approach is crucial for fostering relevance and building trust in AI technologies across Africa.

Methods for achieving culturally aware AI include:

- **Participatory Design:** Involving local communities, health workers, traditional healers and community leaders from the outset ensures that AI solutions are culturally appropriate and genuinely meet specific needs.
- **Cultural Competence Training for Developers:** Equipping AI developers with the knowledge and sensitivity to understand and appreciate the cultural and social dynamics of the regions where their technologies will be deployed.
- **Inclusion of Diverse Data Sets:** Utilizing data that accurately reflects Africa's cultural and linguistic diversity is paramount to preventing bias and improving AI system performance in local contexts. This includes incorporating traditional remedies and indigenous knowledge systems.

Grassroots initiatives are already actively engaged in combating AI bias and epistemic injustice within African contexts. The Masakhane project, for example, is a volunteer-based pan-African

initiative dedicated to building Natural Language Processing (NLP) networks. These networks are trained by African students, teachers, researchers, and coders, with the aim of translating online information into various African mother tongues. Culturally aware AI, driven by participatory design and localized data initiatives, transforms AI from a potential tool of cultural imposition into a powerful instrument for cultural preservation, local empowerment, and fostering deep trust, thereby accelerating equitable adoption and innovation.

By advocating for local knowledge integration and diverse datasets, culturally aware AI directly addresses the scarcity of data reflecting African life philosophies. This is not merely about making AI function more effectively; it is about making it resonate and be trusted by communities. The positive relationship is clear: local ownership and participatory approaches, exemplified by initiatives like Masakhane, lead to more relevant and widely accepted AI solutions. This approach fosters indigenous knowledge production and technological independence, directly countering the historical trend of external imposition.

Unlocking Africa's Potential

By prioritizing cultural relevance, social responsibility, and inclusive innovation, African nations can effectively harness the power of AI to drive sustainable and inclusive development. This strategic approach unlocks significant potential across various sectors.

In **healthcare**, AI can dramatically improve access to services, address tropical diseases that are not prevalent in the Global North, and provide evidence-based treatment recommendations, which are particularly valuable in regions with limited access to specialist care. Integrating Ubuntu principles further ensures equitable benefits and communal well-being in health research. In **education**, culturally relevant AI can significantly improve learning outcomes by aligning content with local contexts and fostering collaborative learning environments. For **agriculture**, AI offers solutions to optimize farming practices and increase crop yields. A notable example is the Nigerian startup Zenvus, which utilizes AI to monitor soil conditions and provide actionable insights for smallholder farmers on optimal planting, watering, and harvesting times.

From an **economic perspective**, Africa's growing workforce and increasing share of working-age individuals can contribute substantially to economic growth. Inclusive AI can play a pivotal role in leveraging this demographic dividend. Recognizing this potential, a \$60 billion AI fund has been launched by African countries and international partners, specifically aimed at mobilizing resources for critical AI infrastructure and talent development across the continent. Inclusive and culturally relevant AI, by addressing Africa's specific challenges and leveraging its unique strengths, transforms the continent from a mere recipient of foreign technology into a global leader in responsible AI innovation, unlocking unprecedented economic and social development. The direct connection is that context-specific AI leads to more effective and impactful solutions. By embracing this approach, Africa can not only overcome its development challenges but also emerge as a significant contributor to global AI standards and innovation, leveraging its demographic dividend to foster inclusive economic growth.

The SankofAI Solution: Reclaiming Narratives, Building the Future

The SankofAI Project, accessible at sankofai.org, offers a comprehensive and vital solution to the critical problem of AI models distorting or erasing the nuanced realities of African tribes, traditions, and belief systems.

SankofAI's Vision

The core mission of the SankofAI Project is to ensure that AI, which is rapidly becoming the dominant medium for learning about history, identity, and cultural heritage, authentically and respectfully represents African cultures. This initiative is crucial for preventing what the project terms "cultural genocide by omission," a scenario where current AI models produce inaccurate images and information due to a lack of verified and culturally accurate input in their datasets.

Core Principles (Ethical Framework)

SankofAI's approach is guided by a robust ethical framework comprising five core principles:

- **Cultural Sovereignty:** The project acknowledges the inherent right of African peoples and communities to define, share, and protect their cultural knowledge and traditions in the digital age. It recognizes indigenous and traditional knowledge as intellectual property and commits to respecting the meaning, origin, and custodianship of all cultural data.
- **Just Representation:** SankofAI is committed to ensuring that AI includes Africans in their full ethnic, historical, and cultural complexity. The project actively aims to counteract erasure and distortion with intentional inclusion, designing AI models to reflect Africa's multilingual, multitribal, and multigenerational identity.
- **Participatory Design:** Operating under the principle "Nothing about us without us," SankofAI pledges to treat knowledge holders as co-creators, not merely as data sources. This commitment extends to consultation, consent, and fair compensation at every stage of the data collection and AI development process.
- **Transparent Governance:** The project emphasizes ethical oversight that is open and accountable. Its efforts will be guided by an independent Cultural and Ethical Advisory Council, and it commits to publicly documenting all data sources and methodologies.
- **Minimizing Harm, Maximizing Dignity:** SankofAI operates on the belief that sacred knowledge must not become speculative content. It will respect boundaries around sacred, ritual, and spiritual knowledge, designing AI with cultural "red lines" and built-in respect protocols to protect sensitive information.

Practical Implementation

The SankofAI Project directly addresses the socioeconomic limitations of existing open-source applications, such as Crowdsourcing by Google, which often require digital cameras/smartphones and expensive data plans, thereby excluding a significant portion of Africa's population. To overcome these barriers, SankofAI plans to establish its future headquarters and regional offices in African countries equipped with Starlink High-Speed Internet service. By leveraging

cutting-edge technology and implementing an ambitious outreach program to traditional communities that includes fair compensation, SankofAI offers a practical and ethical solution to ensure that the future of AI is both representative and inclusive. While acknowledging the daunting challenges of gathering comprehensive data from over 3,000 African tribes, some located in potentially inaccessible or unsafe regions, the project emphasizes the absolute necessity of this endeavor to prevent cultural genocide by omission.

The SankofAI Project offers a comprehensive, culturally grounded, and practically actionable blueprint for decolonizing AI, demonstrating how ethical principles can be translated into concrete implementation strategies that empower communities and ensure authentic representation. The project serves as a model that directly addresses the dangers of exclusion and embodies the benefits of inclusion. By adhering to principles like cultural sovereignty and participatory design, SankofAI directly counters cultural erasure and ensures just representation. The broader implication is that SankofAI serves as a proof-of-concept for how the theoretical principles of responsible and decolonized AI can be practically implemented, bridging the gap between ethical discourse and real-world impact, and setting a precedent for future initiatives.

Conclusion: A Call to Action for a Shared AI Future

The absence of African narratives in AI development represents a profound global challenge, risking the proliferation of biased systems, the active erasure of rich cultural heritages, and the forfeiture of immense opportunities for innovation. However, Africa's unprecedented demographic ascent presents an unparalleled opportunity to shape a truly inclusive and beneficial AI future for all.

To navigate this critical juncture, the global community must move decisively beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach to AI ethics and development. It is imperative that global stakeholders—including governments, industry leaders, academic institutions, and civil society organizations—prioritize substantial investment in African-led AI initiatives, robust digital infrastructure, and comprehensive talent development across the continent. Support for pioneering projects like SankofAI is crucial. Such initiatives are vital for building diverse, culturally aware datasets and for establishing ethical frameworks that are deeply rooted in African values, such as Ubuntu.

An equitable, culturally rich, and truly responsible AI ecosystem is not merely beneficial for Africa; it is an indispensable prerequisite for the progress and prosperity of all humanity. The future of AI, much like the future of the world itself, is increasingly African. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that African narratives are not only heard but deeply understood, respected, and seamlessly integrated into the very fabric of AI development.

[The SankofAI Project](#)

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