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Whose AI, Whose Power? An Afrofeminist Perspective on AI

Whose AI, Whose Power? An Afrofeminist Perspective on AI

Our second Equity & AI session brought participants into an exploration of whose knowledge, languages, and lived realities AI centres or sidelines. Facilitated by Varaidzo Magodo-Matimba (she/her), AI + Africa Lead at the MERL Tech Initiative, the session drew from the Made in Africa AI for MERL Landscape Study and examined questions of power, language, and whether current AI systems actually fit the contexts in which they are being deployed.

Why This Session Matters

AI is not neutral. It reflects the data it is trained on, the assumptions embedded in its design, and the power structures that shape its development. When systems are trained primarily on datasets and frameworks rooted outside African contexts, they can misinterpret language, flatten culture, reproduce deficit narratives, and reinforce existing hierarchies. At scale, these distortions amplify inequality and obscure harm. Through an Afrofeminist lens, Vari invited us to interrogate these dynamics directly. We reflected on personal moments when AI tools misunderstood local context, missed language nuance, or failed to reflect lived realities – and what this reveals about how AI systems are built.

What We Explored Together

Drawing from the Landscape Study, Vari began by defining what "Made in Africa AI" means. It is:

- Built by Africans, for Africans
- Designed with communities in the driver's seat
- Grounded in real conditions
- Focused on solving African problems

This definition centres agency and authorship. It asks who is designing AI systems – and whether they reflect lived realities on the continent. Vari then highlighted practical recommendations emerging from the Landscape Study.

1. Develop an African Practitioner Competency Framework for AI

A central recommendation was the development of an African-led AI competency framework. Vari emphasized that many practitioners are already experimenting with AI tools, often without structured guidance on ethics, governance, contextual fit, or long-term implications. A competency framework would:

- Define what AI literacy looks like in African contexts
- Ground technical skills in ethical and governance considerations
- Reflect infrastructure realities and multilingual environments
- Be shaped by African practitioners – not imported models

This is not simply about training people to use tools. It is about strengthening professional judgment, contextual awareness, and collective standards for responsible AI use.

2. Invest in African Languages and Linguistic Inclusion
Many African languages are underrepresented in dominant AI training datasets. This directly affects how systems interpret meaning, context, and nuance. When language is excluded, knowledge can be distorted or rendered invisible. Investing in African language datasets and model development is not simply about translation. It is about protecting knowledge systems, ensuring accuracy, redistributing power in whose knowledge counts, and preventing the reproduction of structural harm through linguistic exclusion.

3. Avoid Donor-Driven Policy Adoption Without Local Deliberation
As global AI governance frameworks expand, there is a risk that African governments adopt externally designed AI tools and policies without sufficient local debate about their societal implications. AI governance requires informed, locally grounded decision-making – not alignment with global trends for their own sake.

4. Critical and Responsible Adoption – Including the Choice Not to Use AI
Rather than assuming AI should always be adopted, Vari encouraged practitioners to ask whether AI tools are appropriate in specific contexts. Responsible adoption includes:

- Considering ethical and social impacts
- Evaluating whether tools genuinely solve locally defined problems
- Recognizing when non-AI solutions may be more appropriate

AI use must be intentional, contextual, and accountable.

Applying an Afrofeminist Lens on AI

Vari introduced an alternative starting point for AI design: Afrofeminism. Afrofeminism is not simply about adding women into existing conversations. It simultaneously challenges patriarchy, racism, sexual discrimination, and global imperialism. At its core, it asks a fundamental question: ***Who holds power over whom?***

Applied to AI, this shifts attention away from technical performance alone and toward structural dynamics – who designs systems, who controls data, who benefits, and who bears risk. This approach begins deliberately at the margins – particularly with African women who experience intersecting and compounding inequalities. As Vari emphasized: "African women don't experience just gender discrimination and bias. They face compounding, interacting oppressions. Race, sex, gender, ethnicity, class, literacy, disability, and geography all shape how AI harms or helps."

Beginning at the margins generates different questions, safeguards, and measures of success. It asks us to evaluate AI not for accuracy or efficiency, but for how it redistributes power, shapes representation, and determines whose knowledge is validated. Without intersectional analysis, AI tools risk reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than disrupting them.

To move from principle to practice, Vari translated these ideas into reflective questions mapped across the monitoring, evaluation, and learning cycle – embedding accountability at every stage of AI use.

Guiding Questions for Applying an Afrofeminist Lens on AI

Beginning before selecting an AI tool, practitioners are asked to interrogate origin and ownership:

- Where was this tool developed, and by whom?
- What happens to the data I feed into this tool?
- Can I actually afford to NOT use this tool?

During data collection, the lens shifts toward extraction and representation:

- Who is being left out of this AI-assisted data collection?
- Am I asking communities for their data without giving them control?
- What assumptions is this tool making about my respondents?

In data analysis, the focus turns to voice and interpretation:

- Whose voices is this AI tool amplifying or silencing?
- What would co-analysis with communities reveal that AI alone misses?
- Am I defining "success" and "impact" through whose lens?

When reporting findings, the ethical stakes become explicit:

- Who benefits from the efficiency this AI tool provides me?
- What harms could my AI-assisted evaluation perpetuate?
- Have the people I evaluated had meaningful input into how I interpreted and presented their data?

Finally, in decision making, the lens centers dignity and justification:

- If I stripped away this AI tool, would my evaluation be less extractive or more dignified?
- Can I justify this AI use to a non-technical person who shared their story with me?

Taken together, these questions operationalize the core Afrofeminist concern: who holds power, and how is it redistributed through technology?

Flipping the Script on "Capacity Deficit"

Another central part of the session focused on reframing the so-called "capacity deficit" in AI conversations about Africa. Rather than accepting the narrative that African institutions lack readiness, skills, or infrastructure, Vari invited participants to question the premise itself: What if the deficit lies in dominant AI systems? Dominant AI systems often lack:

- Indigenous data reflecting African contexts
- Nuance to capture Made-in-Africa realities
- Cultural responsiveness to African epistemologies
- Linguistic sophistication for multilingual African environments

In this framing, deficiency is not located in African institutions. It appears in systems trained on narrow datasets, built within limited epistemological frames, and optimized for contexts that do not reflect African lived realities. The question shifts: Not Are African institutions ready for AI? But Are AI systems ready for African contexts?

This reframing was grounded in a collaborative exercise. Participants were asked: Have you experienced a moment when an AI tool misunderstood context, culture, language, or identity? What happened? Participants described AI tools:

- Generating stereotypical responses about African contexts
- Changing culturally appropriate names to more "Western" ones
- Failing to recognize non-binary identities in qualitative analysis
- Translating technical terms into politically sensitive or inaccurate language
- Privileging Canadian vendors over African ones without understanding contextual needs
- Hallucinating statistics or inventing sources

Across the reflections, a consistent pattern emerged: the deficit lies in systems that lack contextual depth, epistemological diversity, linguistic grounding, and relational accountability.

Closing Reflection

This session leaves us with both a challenge and an invitation. If we are serious about equity in AI, the work is not only technical – it is epistemological, political, and relational. It requires shifting investment, governance, and design power toward those whose realities have too often been treated as peripheral. The Made in Africa AI for MERL Landscape Study offers a deeper exploration of these questions and practical implications for practitioners. I encourage you to read the full report and reflect on how these dynamics show up in your own work – and where you may still be locating the "deficit" in the wrong place.

Key Resources

- **Launching our Made in Africa AI for MERL Landscape Study:** https://merltech.org/africa-ai-merl-landscape-study/