



## ICTs and Juju are Two Sides of the Same Magical Coin, Says Nyamnjoh: How True?

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### Commentary

Information Communication Technology (ICT) tools and services are designed from Western contexts, with an implied assumption that people in the West and the South will respond to the same technologies in similar ways. As a result, African realities are rarely considered in the design and deployment of digital technologies [1]. However, African societies appropriate digital communication technologies into African cultural repertoire and assign meanings that are significant in the Africa context [2]. This exemplifies the ongoing importance of domestication theory and its influence as a tool for understanding the socio-cultural and symbolic power of communication technologies [3], as re-enacting older rituals [4] akin to totem and fetish worship or beliefs and the circulation of myths and ideologies. In other words, digital technologies are connected to already existing local traditions and are shaped and transformed by them. A recent article by social anthropologist, Francis Nyamnjoh, "ICTs as Juju: African Inspiration for Understanding the compositeness of Being Human" [5], echoes a similar philosophical stance.

Author opens with this reflection on domestication as a way to sign a social zeitgeist of sorts. In highlighting how the West and Central African regions celebrate the notion of solidarity through interconnectedness, Francis Nyamnjoh offers a fresh perspective to the conversation on the transformative effect of ICTs on society and how the African region reconfigures itself both technologically and transculturally within globalisation. The prominent framing this brings to bear is around the notions of 'incompleteness' and 'compositeness' as the usual way of existence. The frameworks mirror the human condition and prepare the ground for explaining how this growing complexity of ICTs influence and impact social life. Although ICTs have produced interconnectedness, dependency and interdependency which cannot be ignored [6], they rearticulate the concerns of exclusionary ideologies [7] and boundary-making as well as how ICTs and globalisation processes are interlinked with the quest for social autonomy and recognition and the construction of privilege, status, and power. Specifically, the paper identifies ICT practices and patterns as imbued with spectres of traditional juju practices popular in West and Central Africa and demonstrates their

relevance in today's networked society, including how socio-techno practices arise within prior social worlds. Herein lies an indication of how vestiges of century-old forms of juju beliefs, customs and rituals and the science of folktales reverberate significantly with new technological and cultural practices.

The author draws from Amos Tutuola's fantastic literature, the palm wine drunkard, based on African mythologies, to capture the centrality and magnificence of traditional juju practices of the West and Central African regions and to illustrate the concept of incompleteness as it pertains to self-enhancement and self-deactivation. Nyamnjoh's anthropological concept of incompleteness and compositeness as enduring human conditions are hermeneutic tools for analysis that provoke ontological questions in the reader. Perhaps most importantly, they bolster the dominant discourse on interconnections, cosmopolitanism and conviviality as well as concerns over issues of privacy and surveillance. Similar to digital technologies, juju practice thrives on mythic, infinite virtual reality, characterised by the ability to transcend the physical and execute the extraordinary. In this regard, Nyamnjoh likens ICTs' virtual reality and forms of copresence to juju's supernatural, mystical and magical capability. On this basis, the author brings to our consciousness and understanding what we can learn from juju, the West and Central African's tradition of creative self-extension and self-activation even though it had been disparaged as part of a savage and rustic culture. For instance, Nyamnjoh made references to the similarities between the capability of the user of juju to be in more than one domain of reality simultaneously and the ability of digital communication technologies also to transcend time and space. Indeed, digital technologies extend the capabilities of humans and contribute to the strength of our autonomy. In this sense, Nyamnjoh contends that humans are incomplete and insufficient in and by themselves, hence, they employ digital technologies in a range of technological artefacts (digital devices and gadgets) to enhance themselves and extend their cognitive reach to make up for their inadequacies. However, he points out that these processes are not always in all aspects experienced as liberating because growing media reliance and reliance on technologies can also undermine an individual's sense of autonomy. This means that despite their apparent

formidability, technologies are sometimes without guarantees [5].

Indeed our cultures, being materially formed, are subject to change through the changing technologies which always constitute their fundamental processes [8]. Nevertheless, we remain in a transitional phase where technologies develop more quickly than our understanding of their impact. Thus, conceiving of incompleteness as an essentially critical concept to reconfigure how the social process in a wide variety of domains becomes ultimately dependent on technological affordances, raises interesting issues for exploration concerning the many different contexts in which we interact with ICTs. Advancing this further, Nyamnjoh offers a range of insights and provides a sense-making context in ways that we are individualised yet networked. He argues that our lives are inherently relational, made up of a network of ties shared with people, places and things and suggests ways in which we can envision and strive for human connections that are reciprocal and transformative even though the politics of identity, autonomy and geopolitics fracture us. He cautions that an understanding of incompleteness is one that requires us to place the region's or any other place's politics of exclusion and belonging in a broader perspective as it allows us to reshape how we might relate to social dynamics of identity formation that accounts for exchange and reciprocity. In this sense, he argues that completeness is difficult to achieve and no agency or human is absolutely self-sufficient or has a monopoly of incompleteness [5], because as humans, by living and interacting with the world, people and things are indebted one way or another. Thus, our interconnectedness humanises us.

However, the notion of completeness and compositeness with regards to ICTs also tends to generate more questions than answers. It provides a rather sweeping view of social transformation that is not necessarily tangible but idealistic. This is because it undermines resistance and the politics of visibility of indigenous knowledge production in a capitalist environment. Moreover, to an extent, Nyamnjoh's analysis of juju as an equivalent of modern technologies is hyperbolic. So much so that it creates an almost mythological version of technological determination. At the same time, he offers new grounds for understanding compositeness and the fluid and dynamic ways in which humans are linked and evolve together, socially embedded and inextricably interwoven with their social networks — family, friends and social-economic environment, and things without which they are incomplete.

In the penultimate paragraphs, Nyamnjoh calls our attention to the future of digital humanities as an insurgency that can bring about disruption and innovation within the field of the humanities. As a relatively nascent area of study, we are reminded to reflect on some of the questions and challenges and promises that is digital humanities. The author exhorts researchers including students of digital humanities to reimagine how the field can provide insight into current debates about identity, citizenship, migration and emerging

forms of creativity and expression that reflect the tenor and the politics of the African continent. Ultimately, Africa is arguably at the crossroads of technological transformation and social change where the incorporation of indigenous knowledge in research about social uses of ICTs illuminate different, yet convergent experiences of ICT appropriation. It embodies the struggle between tradition and innovation and the opportunities to enter new imaginative realms. Thus, the concept of incompleteness and compositeness takes us beyond the technological realm of media practice and refers to an epistemological approach to media practices.

Towards the end of the article, Nyamnjoh's call is most provocative precisely as it touches directly on the most sensitive points of contemporary debates around technological innovation that accommodates improvisation and the possibilities of emerging digital techniques in humanities. The concepts of incompleteness and compositeness of being human bring immense significance to the African ideology of ubuntu. A silent thread coursing through Nyamnjoh's article is a quest for decolonised anthropology. Rather than framing the debate in oppositional terms, this paper helped to build a more profound and innovative understanding of Africa's increasingly complex socio-technical environment, making it an essential resource for researchers and people with interests in digital anthropology, media studies and the emergent field of digital humanities.

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