GLOBAL INTERCULTURAL INFORMATION ETHICS
FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT
This paper offers an overview of what has been going on in information ethics in Africa since the first Africa conference on IE in 2007. It highlights the relevance of these activities within the framework of the Action Line C 10 “The Ethical Dimensions of the Information Society” of the WSIS. In the second part, the concept of intercultural information ethics is analysed by giving account to an e-mail dialogue on this issue with South-African colleagues. In the conclusion, a practical project dealing with ethics, ICT and African schools is presented.

INTRODUCTION
What is global intercultural information ethics? It is an academic endeavour bringing together worldwide researchers interested in discussing moral issues of emerging information societies from an intercultural point of view (Capurro 2008). In other words, it is the vision of a global intercultural academic dialogue doing research on the impact of information and communication technologies on moral values and principles particularly if they are transmitted through oral or written traditions. Its scope is descriptive as well as normative. It should work as a catalyst of social
innovation. A global intercultural ethical dialogue takes seriously cultural differences concerning moral traditions and their foundations. Although it does not aim necessarily at creating a transcultural canon of values and principles such as the ones stated in universal declarations protecting, for instance, human rights or the human genome, it can be of use for the discussions, the creation and especially for the interpretation and application of such canons.

Of course, neither academic research nor a canon of norms and values can have an immediate impact on the moral traditions grown through centuries building the foundations and inner cohesion of societies and which are transmitted through education and learning. The task of global intercultural ethical research is to critically analyse such traditions, to compare them, to look at similarities and differences particularly concerning the reasons given (or not) for moral principles and value hierarchies ruling human action. Ethics or moral philosophy is a critical reflexion on a given morality.

In the field of information ethics in a narrower sense, that is to say related to information technology, this kind of research is obviously of recent date. Due to the world wide impact of information technology a global dialogue on intercultural information ethics seems to be particularly relevant. Issues such as privacy, secrecy, intellectual property, online communities, mobile phones, robots, human enhancement, ambient intelligence, ICT implants, information overload and e-waste vary in the interpretation and relevance to local cultural, political and geographical settings no less than on the ways they are assembled with customs and moral traditions.

This is the reason why we, in the academic world, should promote a global dialogue based on local communities and studies not only in order to better know and understand given situations and developments but also in order to build bridges between cultural differences by preserving them as a source for different forms of life.

In the following I give a brief overview of what has been going on in information ethics in Africa since the first Africa conference in 2007 including the relevance of these activities within the framework of the Action Line C 10 “The Ethical Dimensions of the Information Society” of the WSIS. In the second part I analyse the concept of intercultural information ethics by giving account of an email dialogue on this issue.
with several colleagues. In the conclusion I discuss the idea of a practical project dealing with Ethics, ICT and African schools developed by my German colleague and friend Felix Weil.

I. INFORMATION ETHICS IN AFRICA

1. First Africa Conference on Information Ethics

The First African Conference on Information Ethics was held in Tshwane/Pretoria, South Africa, 5-7 February 2007, under the auspices of UNESCO, sponsored by the South African Government, Department of Communications and organized by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, University of Pretoria, University of Pittsburgh, and the International Center of Information Ethics.

Under the heading 'the joy of sharing knowledge' and the patronage of UNESCO it brought together some 80 policy makers and academic minds from Africa and around the world to discuss the impact of the use of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the African continent and formulate a specifically African perspective on the challenges involved - locally and globally.

The following topics were addressed:

- Foundations of African Information Ethics (Facilitator: D. Ocholla, South Africa)
- Cultural Diversity and Globalization (Facilitator: P. Kanyandago, Uganda)
- Development, poverty and ICT (Facilitator: K. Mchombu, Namibia)

In addressing the ethical challenges of the information society on the African continent the conference was inspired by the Geneva Declaration adopted by the Geneva World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) of 2003. It was explicitly conceived as part of the implementation of Action Line C10 of the Geneva Plan of Action.

The conference produced some tangible results:
• Tshwane Declaration on Information Ethics in Africa adopted by the participants of the conference as a genuine African contribution to the UNESCO Code of Ethics for the Information Society.

• African Network for Information Ethics (ANIE) giving African scholars a platform to exchange and realize their ideas in the field.

• The proceedings were first published in the International Review of Information Ethics (IRIE vol. 7 - 09/2007).

• The publication of the “Africa Reader on Information Ethics” (R. Capurro, JJ. Britz, TJD. Bothma, BC. Bester (Eds), Pretoria 2010. (Capurro et al. 2010)

2. High Level Workshop on Ethics and E-Government in Africa

A high-level workshop on Ethics and e-Government took place on 23-26 February 2009 under the auspices of UNESCO. It was co-sponsored by the South Africa Government, Department of Communications and organized by the University of Pretoria, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the University of Pittsburgh, and the International Center for Information Ethics. There were some 40 participants from the following countries: Burundi, Botswana, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, India, Germany, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, Zwaziland, USA, and Zambia.

The following topics were addressed:

• Global perspectives on Information Ethics and e-Government
• Ethical Reasoning (Kgosi Maepa)
• Country experiences on Information Ethics and e-Government in relation to the following areas:
  • Access and accessibility
  • Intellectual property
  • Freedom of expression and censorship
  • Privacy / Public domain
  • Transparency / Secrecy
  • Right/responsibility/accountability
  • Education and training
  • Role of trust, culture, law and participation
The following issues were identified as crosscutting to all of the identified ethical areas

- Trust, attitudes and behaviors – Steve Mutula
- Culture and tradition – Coetzee Bester
- Participation (social inclusivity) – Kgosi Maepa
- Laws, rules, regulations, policy reforms – Woody Horton

In the Final Report prepared by Woody Horton and Toni Carbo and approved by all members of the Workshop Steering Committee it was stated that

[T]he central focus of e-Government in Africa should be on helping to accomplish development goals and objectives, which includes improving the quality of life of individuals and families, strengthening institutions in both the private and public sectors, and enlarging the role of elements of the civil society so that the civil society can partner more effectively with the other elements of the public sector and with the private sector. Development, in short, encompasses not just social and cultural goals, but governance/political and economic, business and industry strengthening as well. In short all sectors of an African society are embraced by development goals and objectives. If an e-Government team is considering an application that cannot be linked more or less directly to a development goal or objective, in all likelihood it should be accorded a lower ranked priority. (Horton and Carbo 2009)

3. WSIS Forum 2010

The WSIS Forum 2010 was held from the 10th to 14th of May 2010 at the ITU Headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland. The co-organizers were ITU, UNESCO, UNCTAD and UNDP. This event built upon the tradition of annual WSIS May meetings, and its new format was the result of open consultations with all WSIS Stakeholders.

On May 11 there was a session organized by UNESCO and moderated by Boyan Radoykov of UNESCO’s Information Society Division, on the Action Line C10: Ethical dimensions of the Information Society where the past, present and future activities of Information Ethics in Africa were presented (WSIS Forum 2010, Capurro 2010)
UNESCO summarizes the achievements of the global dialogue on the Ethical Dimensions of the Information Society according to the Action Line C 10 of the WSIS as follows:

UNESCO along with stakeholders takes affirmative actions and stimulates preventive measures against abusive uses of the information and communication technologies. The highlights of the actions in the area of info-ethics are:

4 regional conferences and seminars on ethic, for Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and for the Asia-Pacific region held from 2006 to 2008. The purpose of these conferences is to stimulate the reflection and the debate on the ethical, legal and social aspects in knowledge societies.

The contributions to and results of these conferences have been published and made available to all interested parties.

Creation of networks: University Network on Info-Ethics and Latin-American Youth Network on Info-Ethics, in order to integrate academic institutions and youth associations in Latin America in the awareness raising activities. Information Ethics and e-government High Level Executive Seminar followed by a training workshop held in South Africa, February 2009. (UNESCO 2009, 25)

Johannes Britz and myself have compared some of these achievements. In our opinion “the regional declarations are prima facie similar with regard, for instance, to the values and principles as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But if one makes a thorough analysis […] it is evident that most of the issues can and will be understood differently according to different cultural frameworks.” (Capurro and Britz 2010, 33). We also state that “it is important to distinguish between global ethics in the sense of a global code of ethics and global research on ethics. […] As any other academic field, ethics in general, and information ethics in particular, are essentially global.” (ibid. 34)
II. CHALLENGES OF INTERCULTURAL INFORMATION ETHICS FOR AFRICA

Information Ethics in Africa is a young academic field. Not much has been published on the role that African philosophy can play in thinking about the challenges arising from the impact of ICT on African societies and cultures. But there is also a long history of Information Ethics in Africa. It concerns Africa’s rich oral and written traditions throughout many centuries about different kinds of information and communication practices using different moral codes and media based on dynamic and complex processes of cultural hybridization. Critical reflection on this history promotes greater awareness of Africa’s cultural legacy, which provides the foundations of the digital information and communication technologies that will create unique and genuinely African information societies.

Information ethics opens a space of critical reflection for all stakeholders on established moral norms and values, it provides the catalyst for a social process, and is a space for retrieving the rich African cultural memory necessary to our field. This cultural memory permits to reshape African identities and contribute to the world's information and communication cultures – and to make a valuable contribution to the current global debate on intercultural information ethics. The function of cultural memory is not just to express what belongs to the collective memory of a community, but to engage the will of its members to connect themselves through the task of creating it. Cultural memory is connective. It is related to our myths and to our dreams.

The main moral responsibility of African academics in the field of information ethics is therefore to enrich African identities by retrieving and re-creating African information and communication traditions. From this perspective, cultural memory is an ethical task if we want to create a humane community based not just on the number of people but on the relations between them. I think that retrieving the African cultural memory with regard to information and communication norms and traditions is the main challenge for African information ethics. It should critically analyze the different strategies of social inclusion and exclusion in the history of African societies, including traumatic experiences such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid.
Since the emergence of the Internet, this challenge is discussed under the heading of the digital divide. But African information ethics implies much more than just the access and use of the Internet. The problem is not just a technical one, but one of social exclusion, manipulation, exploitation and annihilation of human beings.

Email dialogue with
Dennis Ocholla (University of Zululand, South Africa)
and Coetzee Bester (South Africa)
(March 2010)

Dennis

I have found the paper by Bernd Frohmann on assembling an African Information Ethics, IRIE, vol.7 (09/2007) quite interesting as a conceptual paper for starting off our Information ethics education part of the Botswana conference particularly in its attempt to discuss whether African Information Ethics is unique/distinct.

Rafael

My view on this subject is that each culture has unique historical and geographical and social and... experiences that build a kind of dynamic a priori when discussing questions related to good life. In this sense, there are African moralities as there are also moralities in other cultures that might be similar and even identical with regard to some common principles but that due to the singularity of historical experiences and life-world situations are articulated or interpreted in different ways. This is, I believe, what Frohmann addresses with the concept of ethics as an “ethical assemblage” where abstract universal ethical principles are “territorialized and reterritorialized in particular sites.” (Frohmann 2007, 7)

If such interpretations are done systematically within a theoretical and critical reflexion then we can call this practical philosophy or ethics. Your question is then therefore:

1) we have to analyse different African moralities, including the moral codes as well as the experiences that gave rise to such codes (Frohmann 2007, 8) and
2) we have to analyse African ethics (written or not) and
3) we have to analyze how IT enters into different life-worlds in African cultures and in the ethical reflexion in Africa, some kind of African IE about African IE in order to discover what is unique (or not) to Africa IE, which means doing a “genealogical” (I call it also “geological”) work as Frohmann states (Frohmann 2007, 8).

In order to construct “liveable collectives” (Frohmann) we must know where and on what basis such collectives are already living. The same question can be stated when assembling African and non-African scholars in order to think about the meaning of the term ‘African Information Ethics.’ If politics is interested in stabilizing moral assemblages, ethical reasoning, such as the one raised by Frohmann, deals with problematising such stable foundations including the ones underlying its own discourse looking for the questions and problems originating it. Sorry for these complex English sentences that are based on the German grammar in my head!

**Coetzee**

Thank you for your long sentences. How did you address this matter in Europe? Did you assume that all European countries more or less had the same cultural level/background against which you could reflect the matter of IE or did you maybe assume that the “European IE” should fit all the European cultures? Could the practical European approach to the challenge maybe assist us in Africa? If it takes long answers – I could call you.

**Dennis**

Very intriguing question Coetzee. Just like Africans, Europeans do not belong to one tribe/ethnic group/nationality nor one religion, or one ideology, or have been spared from civil wars and genocide, or specific cultures and traditions, or indigenous knowledge, or some level of poverty perhaps not to the level of destitution as in Africa, or different values etc. So their experience in dealing with all this from information ethics view point would be interesting. We are likely to draw a lot of similarities than differences when unravelling these classical parallels. Rafael and others are lucky that they can engage into this from a strong philosophical and moral perspectives.
Rafael

Europe has a long tradition, as you know dealing, with different ethics theories since Antiquity. There is a lot of discussion today on European values but it is not clear, at least to me, what does ‘European’ in this context mean, if not merely the will to a common political project, and how such values are supposed to be at the same time universal. Questions and tensions between different views on European values arise according to my experience in half-political half-academic bodies such as national ethics councils that deal until now mostly with questions of bioethics but, as in the case of the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE) to the European Commission of which I have been a member in the last ten years, also with regard to science and new technologies in general.

In a meeting of all European ethics councils in Madrid last week we the research methodologies used by such councils were presented and discussed. Some of them debate the issues and propose different ethical and legal points of view or their members while others including the EGE look for consensus but without excluding dissent. If you take a look at some of the last Opinions of the EGE, the last one on “Ethics of synthetic biology,” (EGE 2009) you can see different kinds of ethical arguments deriving from different (mostly Western) ethics theories such as deontology (Kant), utilitarianism, Christian ethics etc. I think that the European political dialogue on these issues is now opening itself to non-European cultures as it was the case also last week in Madrid at the Second Meeting of the European Commission’s International Dialogue on Bioethics.

Concerning information ethics as an academic discipline it is obvious that this intercultural dialogue could begin after the impact of IT on societies at a local and global level became a major issue. I suggested the concept of Intercultural Information Ethics in my 2004 presentation at the first conference on this matter that took place in Karlsruhe (Capurro 2007). This was the beginning of a fruitful academic discussion (Hongladarom and Ess 2007; Capurro 2008; Capurro 2008a).

In March 18-19, 2010, the First Brazilian Conference on Information Ethics with special focus on intercultural issues took place at the University of Paraiba (University of Paraiba 2010). As you know, Brazil is a multiethnic country with a high
level of ICT impact on society, its norms and values. I am sure that the Brazilian colleagues from different disciplines will start a fruitful discussion on this issue.

In a sense, our academic work is twofold. We should critically analyse different moral traditions and the impact of ICT on them as well as possible differences and commonalities. But we have also a responsibility of translating these discussions into the social, political and legal deliberation in a bottom-up as well as in a top-down perspective. With bottom-up I mean the social discussions on norms and values raised by new technologies and the Internet in particular. With top-down I mean the practice of ethics councils and other institutions that I already mentioned. We live in a multicultural world where different views on human life, our relation to nature, moral norms and values (codified or not) on human communication are a product of a long and complex social evolution similar to geological formations. If we understand ourselves as ethicists devoted to, as we could call it, moral geology we can provide some explanations for present and future on moral issues and ICT and their relation with politics, economy, ecology etc.

Universal declarations are – declarations. Their role is to promote a commonality of moral values and principles towards a less violent world. But they need to be interpreted and related to specific cultures and situations. Academic ethical reasoning can contribute to this task on a short and a long term basis providing thorough conceptual inter-cultural analysis. Otherwise the concepts used in such declarations will remain abstract and understood in different ways explicitly or implicitly. During the international bioethics meeting in Madrid I mentioned before, the Japanese representative said that in Japan they have difficulties to translate the concept of human dignity. This does not mean, of course, that Japanese have no sense of respect towards other human beings but that such a concept is rooted in other cultural tradition. Also in the West we have different views on this and other key moral concepts and values.

**Dennis**

I like the concept of multiculturalism very much as this is where we are and what we cannot avoid. Does this also mean globalisation Rafael?

**Rafael**
Yes, I think so. We can make a difference between:

- Multicultural analysis which means describing cultures without relating them to each other
- Intercultural analysis which means comparing and translating cultures
- Transcultural analysis which means looking for what is common ‘beyond’ the singularities of each culture

If you connect this with ethics and information ethics then you get a better overview of the different dimensions.

The key question is, of course, whether cultural differences are important or not when dealing with morality as well as with ethics as theory/ies of morality/ies. I recommend you to read the contribution by Philip Brey at the European IE Conference in Strasbourg (Brey 2008).

I agree with Brey that cultural differences have a deep influence on moral values and theoretical views on them. I also think that the richness of human cultures is expressed in human moralities. This does not necessarily mean moral relativism but I think that a transcultural morality for humanity is something Kant would call a "regulative idea". Kant, as you know, never proposed a decalogue but only a formal criteria namely the universalizability of moral maxims. This Kantian formalism might allow us to better handle an intercultural and transcultural dialogue even if it is itself the product of a specific European epoch and based on a specific understanding of ethics and morality as a critical stance to some main ethics traditions in Europe so far.

Coetzee

Thank you for the insight and guidance. I am sure that this matter will be included in our thinking for the time to come.

Maybe Dennis, Steve and I should start to prepare something to reflect our practical experience in Africa.

Dennis

This is very enlightening.
In a comparative study of ethical theories in different cultures, Michael Brannigan addresses African Ethics with the principle “To Be is to Belong” (Brannigan 2005). An analysis of this thesis could lead to a foundation of African information ethics based not upon a metaphysical concept of being but upon the experience of being as communal existence. The task of such an analysis would be to recognize the uniqueness of African perspectives as well as commonalities with other cultures and their theoretical expressions. A survey on information ethics research concerning, for instance, number of publications (books, journals, articles etc.), per country, language, topics etc. is needed in order to evaluate the present status of the field.

This analysis could lead to different interpretations and applications of ICT in Africa and correspondingly to possible vistas for information policy makers, responsible community leaders and, of course, for African research institutions, universities and, last but not least, for African schools and, more generally, for coming nearer to the Millenium Goals of the United Nations (ITU 2009; ICT 4 all Forum 2009; Infopoverty 2010).

PROSPECTS: CAN YOU BUY AN AFRICAN DREAM?

The final goal of ethics is not just to speak about the good but to do the good and to dream about it. We owe this insight about the relation between ethical thinking and action to Aristotle, the founder of ethics as an academic discipline in the Western tradition.

E-mail dialogue with
Dennis Ocholla (University of Zululand, South Africa)
Felix Weil (Quibiq, Germany),
Kimberly L. Douglass (University of Tennessee, USA),
Alex Antener (Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany)
(March 2010)
Dennis

Well I have read through the dream concept that is still quite exploratory. Felix, Is that so?

Felix

Yes. indeed it is more a foundation than yet an elaborated framework. But it so much more practical than any code and declaration because once understood engaging appropriately into the outlined digital dynamics is much more effective than pointing with some heavy moral code on the deficits here and there.

For example: putting up a website allowing school kids to put up there dreams and others to buy them (instead of donating) would pay for the purchasing of the PC needed for that (think of some 50 kids putting something up bought for some 15 $ each). You see you can connect (!) this so easily to the efforts to bring computers to African schools (which would be an imperative of a coded IE for Africa), provide an appropriate space (!) where children can learn how to behave successful and appropriate (that is the point) in the virtual world.

So in a nutshell: it is my suggestion for the direction of further engagement and not yet a descriptions of the ends to these means.

Kimberly

Felix, the concept you are describing reminds me of a website that was pitched at a conference I attended. Hopefully, you will find something there to move your idea forward. The address is http://www.thepoint.com/. Quote from the site: "Whether you’re asking people to do something or give money, people only contribute if they think it makes a difference. On The Point, all campaigns have a “tipping point” — people pledge to give money or do something, but no one does a thing until the conditions are met to make contributions worthwhile. That way, you can gather all the resources needed to be successful before anyone is asked to take action."

Felix

Kimberly, thank you for the hint. It is a good idea on the level of tactics. What I would like to focus on is the strategy. What genuin African can be made present in the
virtual space to be granted allowing for a networking structure (i.e. not sender receiver as this won't work in the eBusiness of today). The school kids platform is just one (simple) implementation. We have to tap the guys that spend 20 hours a week in Second Life or other online game platforms or Wikipedia and direct their engagement (that's why http://enadream.com) towards Africa, genuin African projects, subjects, necessary efforts. The dream is/was just an X for that. Hope I could clarify a little bit more of the drafted idea.

**Rafael**

Felix, do I understand you correctly?

(1) Africa at present is not on the focus of the internet people and the internet mediated economy.

(2) The general question is: how can we change this?

(3) Your idea “Can you buy an African dream?” is an example of the more general problem which is (1)

(4) The attention economy works on a capitalist basis as a necessary but not sufficient condition.

**Felix**

Dear all,

thank you all so much. The email discussion was very helpful to me. I think I got it now. In fact it was Kimberly's tipping point, Dennis question what was in the dream and a short history of the internet which I read on the plane the day before yesterday. The first thing sold via Ebay ways a broken laser pointer (for some 15 $). It was the unprecedented match making capability of the internet (or more precise: of a platform like Ebay) across distance, creed, social status etc. That way a freak collecting broken laser pointer was connected to one who wanted to get rid of his – impossible before.
Now what is in our dreams? We don’t have to know. But on a formal, abstract enough layer a dream is a project. And a project is abstract enough for the match making capabilities of a virtual platform. We only have to grant the space for it. Think of an African village that wants to preserve a certain language that otherwise would be extinct in a few years. What the platform should do is connect them to some freaks whose hobby is to preserve languages. And let them organize themselves, organize chats, Skype conferences etc. Of course, you need special hardware for that. But that is part of the game. The USP (unique selling position) compared with Youtube, Myspace, Ebay etc. is that we provide a virtual project management platform allowing for the match making across the world to make African dreams come true. It could be tapped water for village finding a retired engineer who organizes some more funding. I could also think of some direct sales for African handicrafts on school events through garage shops.

The platform should allow for the attractive articulation of such a dream and the definition of steps to reach it and do the match making with the resources needed (that is where the tipping point comes in). Once we brought the people together everything can happen like the cappuccino that led to the first ANIE symposium.

So, you see, Rafael, you hit the point with your summary. This should take us some further.

Alex

I am further interested in how teachers and professors look at the acceleration of information technology, when it comes to teaching. The social relationship between students and teachers differ vastly compared to Western countries. How do universities handle the gap of the digital divide and what ethical issues are emerging when Western companies ‘impose’ their products into the African market and education structures? Allow me to quote from a recent report on “Development through Electronic Networks. Information and Communication Technologies in Africa” by the Office of Technology Assessment of the German Bundestag:

The »100 dollar laptop« initiative is often accused of being a typically technology-driven project that completely ignores the most pressing needs of the education. [...] Although teachers and other adults are also to play an important role in the communities interlinked by the XO, they are clearly of little significance as far as the foundation is concerned. [...] The Indian government,
having shown initial interest, has now not only announced that it is not
interested, but also expressed strong criticism of the project, prioritising
instead the training of teachers and general equipping of schools and warning
against the negative effects of computer use on education.” (Coenen and
Riehm, 2009, 185-187)

Rafael

Thanks Alex. Your experiences with Free Software in Malawi are highly relevant for
the topics of our conference.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Alex Antener (http://lix.cc/projects/malawi/), Karlsruher Institute of
Technology (KIT), Institute for Technology Assessment and System Analysis (ITAS)
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