

**ICTs as *Juju*:
African Inspiration for Understanding the Compositeness of Being Human
through Digital Technologies**

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by Francis B. Nyamnjoh
nyamnjoh@gmail.com
francis.nyamnjoh@uct.ac.za
University of Cape Town

On Incompleteness

I am Francis Beng Nyamnjoh. I was born without any of such labels that I have been assigned or have acquired through my life journeys and in my encounters with others – individuals, cultures, worldviews, belief systems and modes of social organization and practice.

I grew up in West and Central Africa where we believe, organise and conduct our lives around the idea that everything in the world and in life is incomplete: nature is incomplete, the supernatural is incomplete, Humans are incomplete, and so is human action and human achievements. We believe that the sooner one recognizes and provides for incompleteness as the normal way of being, the better we are for it. We also believe that because of their incompleteness, people are not singular and unified in their form and content, even as their appearance might suggest that they are. And so are things. Fluidity, compositeness of being, and the capacity to be present in simultaneous multiplicities in whole or in fragments are a core characteristic of reality and ontology of incompleteness. West and Central Africa is a region where interconnections and interdependencies are recognised and celebrated, and used as the dominant and desired template for organising relationships among humans, and between humans and the natural and supernatural worlds.

It is in recognition of incompleteness that humans in West and Central Africa are ever so eager to seek ways of enhancing themselves through relationships with other humans, and in using their creativity and imagination to acquire magical objects that can extend themselves in their relationships with fellow humans and with the whims and caprices of natural and supernatural forces/agents. Such magical objects, which in the language of modernity are referred to as technologies, are more commonly known in West and Central Africa under local names that I have roughly translated as *Juju*. The cosmologies and ontologies that lend themselves to such beliefs and practices have in the past been, and still largely continue to be mischaracterised and disparaged as witchcraft, sorcery, paganism, superstition and primitivism. Paradoxically, not even the currency of new information and communication technologies championed by the digital revolution are seen as a redeeming factor for such cosmologies and ontologies, beliefs and logics of practice.

Yet, ambitions of dominance and superiority through conquest and refusal to acknowledge debt and indebtedness aside, it becomes evident that the future belongs with such disregarded popular beliefs and practices informed by the reality of incompleteness. If the ordinary human at the state of nature is incomplete, all efforts at seeking to enhance themselves through relationships with fellow humans and through borrowings and technologies, far from making them complete, points them to the humility of being composite and in acknowledging and providing for their debts and indebtedness to others – humans, nature and the supernatural. The fact that completeness is an illusion that can only unleash sterile ambitions of conquest and zero sum games of superiority,

is an invitation to explore, contemplate and provide for a world of open-endedness, interconnections, fluidities, and conviviality; a world in which no one has the monopoly of power or powerlessness, a world in which humans and things complement each other and double as one another.

The Complete Gentleman

The late Nigerian writer, Amos Tutuola – author of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, published respectively in 1952 and 1954 in London by Faber and Faber – was a genius at depicting the universes of incompleteness popular across West and Central Africa. One example from *The Palm Wine Drinkard* illustrates the point of this talk superbly.

The story revolves around a very dependent, overly materially endowed drunk, who believes that he is independent because of the predictable regularity of service and servitude he receives from his faithful harvester of palm wine. Then, all of a sudden, he is made aware of just how dependent he really is, when the palm wine harvester and provider falls from a tall palm tree and dies. In the course of his quest for his palm wine provider who has suddenly dropped dead, the *Drinkard*, comes to a town where a beautiful girl has been lured away by the ‘Complete Gentleman’ into the distant bushes inhabited by curious creatures. It happens that the ‘Complete Gentleman’ is not that complete. There is a lot less to his glitter and dazzle than meets the eye. His charm and handsomeness are less than skin deep. Indeed, almost everything about him belongs to others. He is in every way a composite being – a sort of Ubuntu human.

He belongs with a community of curious creatures deep in the bushes who are reduced to a bare-bones lifestyle – they live their lives as skulls. When the wind blows their way rumours of a young beautiful girl in a distant town who repeatedly turns down every suitor, this curious creature reasons that a girl who turns down every man’s hand in marriage must want as husband an otherworldly man. So, he decides to try his luck by embarking on a journey of self-enhancement through borrowing body parts from others along the way to the town of the girl with high standards. He borrows all the body parts he needs, as well as a lovely outfit and a horse. As a composite being, he felt truly handsome. In Tutuola’s words, the skull turned human thanks to his borrowing became the ‘Complete Gentleman.’

As soon as the girl sets eyes on him, she abandons everything and everyone and decides to follow him. He was as gentlemanly as he appeared to be complete. He warned the girl repeatedly that there was a lot less to him than met the eye. But the girl insisted that she had found what she desired: a truly handsome gentleman – the realization of her fantasy. Her eyes knew what they had seen. At the crossroads, he warned her for the last time, but when she insisted, he branched off and took the path leading back to his community deep in the bushes.

As junctions of myriad encounters, crossroads in Tutuola’s universe are significant in the manner in which they facilitate creative conversations and challenge regressive logics of exclusionary claims and articulation of identities and achievements. Being the gentleman that he truly was, and having acquired the wife he had set out to win, the man began the process of self-deactivation by returning all the things and body parts that he had borrowed for the occasion and paying the price he had agreed with the lender. The bride learned too late how deceptive appearances sometimes are. If only the ‘Complete Gentleman’ was not so much of a gentleman as to insist on recognizing and paying back the debt of things and body parts he owed others, he just might have continued to live a lie.

What does this teach us about the relationship between digital technologies and humans? The story invites us, as scholars of humanity and its extensions, to emphasis interconnections and

interdependencies, in our perspectives. The story invites us to embrace incompleteness as a normal state of being and becoming, by systematically disabusing ourselves of zero sum aspirations to superiority. It is an invitation to see the relationship between humans and technologies as a non-linear conversation on the entanglements or intricacies between change and continuity, nature and culture, past and present, tradition and modernity, the human and the non-human.

Digital Technologies as *juju*

In this address, I liken ICTs or digital technologies to what we in West and Central Africa have the habit of referring to as *juju*. I invite you as scholars of the digital humanities to see in the region's belief in incompleteness and the compositeness of being human, as well as in the capacity to be present everywhere at the same time an indication that we have much to learn from the past on how best to understand and harness current purportedly innovative advances in information and communication technologies. The idea of digital technologies making it possible for humans and things to be present even in their absence and absent even in their presence is not that dissimilar to the belief in what is often labelled and dismissed as witchcraft and magic that lends itself to a world of infinite possibilities – a world of presence in simultaneous multiplicities and eternal powers to redefine reality. The popular world of West and Central Africa – a world of flexibility, fluidity and incompleteness that was dismissed and continue to be disparaged – is one in which time and space are not allowed to stand in the way of the truth and its nuanced complexities. It is a world that we have come to understand a great deal better only much later with the advent of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the internet, the cell phone and the smartphone, along with their 'magic' and 'witchcraft' of instant availability and reachability, as well as their propensity to facilitate narcissism, self-indulgence and the keeping up of appearances.

Granted that we, scholars of the digital humanities, have learnt the right lessons from unequal encounters fuelled by ambitions of dominance, and above all, that there is often a lot less or a lot more to things than meets the eye, there is need to think less in dichotomies and explore interconnections even among apparently unlikely bedfellows. The digital may not be the hyper-rationalised world apart that some of us would wish, nor is it necessarily a less authentic experience from our everyday lived off-line realities. With this in mind, it could be argued that the future is firmly in the past and the unfolding present, even as we continue to claim and provide for creative innovation. The West and Central African tradition of self-extension through creative imagination that privileges cosmologies and ontologies of interconnections in myriad ways, holds great promise for theorising the intersections between humans and ICTs.

Juju as used in this address is a technology of self-activation and self-extension – something that enables us to rise beyond our ordinariness of being, by giving us potency to achieve things that we otherwise would fall short of achieving, were we to rely only on our natural capacities or strengths. It is true that our bodies, if well cultivated, could become phenomenal *juju*, enabling us to achieve extraordinary feats. But even such technically trained, programmed or disciplined bodies are likely to encounter challenges that require added potency. In other words, while our bodies have the potential to be our first *juju*, they eventually require additional *juju* for us to be efficacious in our actions. As we have gathered from the example of the Complete Gentleman above, the writings of Amos Tutuola and the universes he depicts are replete with examples how humans, the natural and supernatural worlds summon creativity and imagination through *juju* to interact with one another, and to make evident that no single agent (human or non-human) is free of or has the monopoly of incompleteness.

Any of us remotely familiar with Amos Tutuola's writings would know what I mean by *juju*, as well as understand the ubiquitous presence of *juju* in the universes which Tutuola choreographs and depicts. The same is true with those of us familiar with social life in West and Central Africa. The following passage, from Tutuola's novel, *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town*, on how the brave hunter of the Rocky Town prepares for the long and dangerous journey to see the Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town for a cure to his wife's barrenness, captures remarkably the centrality of *juju* as a great activator in Tutuola's universe and its rites of passage:

I entered my room and I first drank one keg of the palm-wine. Then I wore my hunting dress, I wore many kinds of juju in my loin, I wore many on my neck, both on my elbows and limbs. Several others which were the skulls of snakes, birds of prey, lizards, etc. were tied on my huge cap and I put it on my head. Having dressed like that, I took my bow and the poisonous arrows. Many kinds of juju were tied on every part of the bow as well. Then I hung the bow and arrows and my long and heavy matchet on my left shoulder. Then I put the juju ring which could make a person invisible on one of my left fingers.

... Having equipped myself like that, again I drank one keg of the palm-wine ... then I staggered from my room to the outside of the house

As I knelt down before the people, and as I began to shake from feet to head for the intoxication of the powers of all the juju which I wore and as well for the power of the strong palm-wine which I had drunk in the room, so they all prayed for me. After the prayer, each of the people including my mother, father, my wife, her mother and her father, hung several kinds of juju gourds all over my dresses, head, neck, breast, loin, etc. After all these juju gourds were offered, I did not waste time at all but I stood up and I started my journey immediately.¹

To Tutuola's nimble-footed, bordering transgressing, quest-hero narrators such as the brave hunter of the Rocky Town, things such as *juju* (spells, charms, magic, etc.) can make a difference by enabling the hero or heroine to transform themselves into something else when hard pressed by their adversaries or the formidable challenges facing them, and to revert to their forms of origin after the danger, challenge or adversary has been overcome. Tutuola's characters employ the technique of metamorphosis extensively as a means of self-protection and as a facility to display the potency of their *juju* when confronted by other beings with overwhelming powers or *juju* of their own. A digital era parallel to the above preparation for a journey of a thousand dangers and unpredictability would involve wearable technologies such as Fitbit activity tracker watches, along with smartphones and high-range four-wheel drive cars that are armed with Google Maps and GPS navigators, related Apps, automatic weapons and kindred accessories.

The more *juju* a person has at his or her disposal the better their chances of being efficacious, for not only do *juju* work best in combination, they tend to disappoint or to let their owners down when the latter need them the most. We as students of digital media know this only too well. Even with our purportedly perfected modern *juju* (technologies built to perform with scientific precision and reliability), there is no absolute guarantee that, however potentially powerful such *juju* are, they will work when one summons them to enhance one's potency. The fact that *juju* often rely on a complicated network of interconnections to function properly is an added and humbling complication and a deterrence to any propensity for hubris. Equipping or extending oneself with purportedly more scientific and technical *juju* such as computers (desktops or laptops), cell phones

¹ Tutuola, A. (1981) *The Witch-Herbalist of the Remote Town*, London: Faber and Faber, pp.23-24.

(basic or smart) and other mobile devices (tablet, iPad) is still no guarantee that these will not freeze or deactivate themselves just when one needs them the most.

It is perhaps for this reason that the *juju* men and women of West and Central Africa do not shy away from the use of modern/scientific technologies (smart phones, tablets, iPad, etc.) alongside what some prefer to call their 'African electronics'. They used these blends of traditional and modern *juju* for self-activation and extension, and to enable them to meet and attend to clients in multiple locations outside their villages, in towns and even in other continents. A simple Google search for words such as *marabout* in France, Canada or Belgium, for instance, would take you not only to websites and contact details of marabouts in Senegal, Mali or Niger, but to their offices, agents, phone numbers and schedules abroad. In Cameroon, for example, it is not uncommon to find diviners summoning diasporic Cameroonians on computers, smartphones and tablets to appear and answer to the afflictions and predicaments of concerned relations left behind.

Just as one needs *juju* to activate oneself, some *juju* equally need activation by other *juju* to be effective. Hence the need to constantly lubricate relations with one's *juju* supplier – witchdoctor, soothsayer, diviner, manufacturer, software maker, service provider or whoever has supplied one the *juju*, which are almost always accompanied by strict instructions to be followed scrupulously. The insistence on interconnections and interdependencies suggests a perception and an approach to life, sociality, encounters and relationships that is cognizant of the importance and centrality of charging, discharging and recharging. One can only stay permanently charged if one is in splendid isolation, disconnected, aloof and inactive. Even then, one's charge risks leaking or wasting away (draining itself out unproductively for lack of interactivity) and with that, one's life eventually also drains away with little to bequeath to society and to the world, which have given so generously to one. To be social and in relationship and interaction with others requires and simultaneously makes possible actively charging, discharging and recharging oneself as well as the others involved. Discharging within relationships is not a wasteful exercise as it entails charging others (energy expended is not necessarily energy depleted), just as recharging entails drawing from the charge of (or being energised by) others. Symbiotic relationships and sociality are full of charge, discharge and recharge. As long as one loses one's charge to others in a social relationship, that cannot be considered as sterile leakage or wastefulness, as long as recharge or reactivation is possible. Tutuola's universe of prevalence of *juju* and interventionist natural and supernatural forces is a universe in which everything is possible, and thinking the unthinkable is currency thanks to the circulation of charging, discharging and recharging.

Although set in his native Yorubaland, Tutuola's *juju*-centred stories are common throughout Africa, where the belief is widespread that there is a lot more and a lot less to people and to things than meets the eye, just as there is much more to life than Cartesian logic. Many an ordinary African credit people with an ability or a capacity to be present in many places at the same time, and to be able to see, feel, smell and hear things that are not tangible and visible in ordinary terms. Put differently, they believe in the human capacity to decipher the multiple spices and ingredients of being human and to discern interconnections despite an appearance of discontinuities. In religious circles, we would capture this ability to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time as a godlike ability for presence in simultaneous multiplicities. God the omniscient and omnipotent is also omnipresent – something which human beings, in their singular and unified ordinariness, and in their obsession with completeness and superiority cannot be. Like the god of information and communication, digital technologies, thanks to their compositeness of being, and to the interconnections and interdependencies that activate the fullness of their potency, have the equally godlike capacity of present absence and absent presence. And like with God, humans who embrace

digital technologies can feel themselves activated to formidable levels of omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence, provided everything works according to plan.

Hidden Activators: From Diviners and Witch Herbalists to Software Makers

As one of Chinua Achebe's proverbs on invisible power goes, 'When we see a little bird dancing in the middle of the pathway we must know that its drummer is in the near-by bush'². To be able to claim godlike attributes of omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence, humans must seek to enhance their ordinary selves with extraordinary activators – *juju* – defined as techniques and technologies of self-extension. Hence, the widespread belief in West and Central Africa that, ordinary though we are as humans, our ability to be omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent can be significantly enhanced by *juju* (which include but are not confined to charms, spells, concoctions, potions, etc.). Such *juju* is usually specially prepared by clairvoyant or spiritual experts who are known in different contexts by different names (in parts of Cameroon these are people of *ngang*; in parts of Nigeria they pass for *babalawo*; and in parts of southern Africa, they are *sangoma*). Reliance on *jujus*, charms, spells and clairvoyance might seem primitive and irrational, but these are part of the potency repertoire from which we draw agency in view of the fact of our incompleteness. In this regard, as argued above, *juju* are not much different from the supposedly more scientific, rational and modern technologies of self-extension with which we are familiar (photos, computers, internet, cell phones, smart phones, mass media, social media, books, electricity, washing machines, artificial intelligence, nuclear weapons, etc.).

Indeed, on June 22, I came across an article on the BBC website that buttresses this point. Titled 'Is there a spy in your pocket', the article discusses the phenomenal, growing, and disturbing powers of software designers in the age of digital technologies and the surging potency of algorithms. It is no longer beyond imagination for hackers to remotely install spyware in our smartphones that enables them to access all our content, including encrypted messages, and allows them to remotely control the microphone and camera without our knowledge. Such software is currently being developed and sold to repressive governments interested in tracking the work of journalists, activists, lawyers and public intellectuals critical of them. Some of such sophisticated espionage software is reportedly so powerful that it is 'classified as a weapon, only to be sold under strict conditions'. According to Mike Murray, a cyber security specialist in San Francisco, 'The operator of the software can track you with your GPS... They can turn the microphone and camera on at any point and record everything that's happening around you. It steals access to every social media app you have; it steals all your pictures, your contacts, your calendar information, your email, every document you have... It literally turns your phone into a listening device that they can track you with – and it steals everything on it.'³ Such spyware makers are not dissimilar to a spirit medium in the bushes of West and Central Africa drumming their clients and protégés into intoxicating frenzies of fearless overindulgence in full view.

When they are not at the service of repressive governments and states, such spyware makers collaborate with the big technology corporations to mutually enhance their potency economically, often to the detriment of individuals who willingly and unsuspectingly deliver themselves, their personal data and privacy to be preyed upon. Both spyware makers and dealers in data basically make money by monitoring and monetising the privacy of the users of various social media platforms and digital consumer applications. By way of example, Facebook clients such as the now

² Achebe, C. (1974[1964]), *Arrow of God*, Oxford: Heinemann (African Writers Series), p. 40.

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/mXtpBVzfVHYswmRFN7gtKb/is-there-a-spy-in-your-pocket>, accessed 22 June 2019.

defunct Cambridge Analytica are able to use the facts gathered from the browsing histories of Facebook users to create a web of disinformation online, inviting those entrapped to click on things that make them think things are happening, when it is actually an invitation to live in a truthless (post-truth or post-consensus) world, available and amenable to being manipulated ad infinitum by the hidden persuaders who control the algorithms that make that world possible. This is evidence not only of the manipulability of social media, but also of the fact that the cheap and affordable delivery of goods and services made possible by social media come at great costs to privacy and individual freedoms. With digital technologies in a context in a context of zero sum games of power, opportunities come with opportunism. Just as people employ digital technologies to extend themselves and establish intimacies, so too are very same technologies actively employed to distant people collective ways of thinking and doing that they have internalised and naturalised.

***Juju*: A Necessary Evil?**

Yet, despite their contradictions and manipulability, life would be very ordinary, predictably standardised and routinised without the exciting sense of adventure and ambition that the ever unfolding creative effervescence in *juju* (technics and technologies) brings. The very idea of creative innovation would be dead, as individuals and societies would lose the ability to improvise and reinvent themselves. This highlights the importance of *juju* in society and social relationships. Individuals and collectivities use *juju* to influence, persuade and control situations and others, and to overcome and complicate adversities in ways that would otherwise not be possible without their repertoire of *juju*.

With the ubiquity of *juju* should be associated the idea that power, far from concentrated in the hands of a few, is actually something that comes and goes, often without warning. However powerful a person is, he or she is always seeking to enhance themselves with extended body parts and extra senses on the one hand, and *juju* (technics and technologies) on the other. One cannot be too sure, so one must never rest on one's laurels. Complacency is a dangerous thing in a world of impermanence, where there is always more or less to things and people than meets the eye, ear, nose, mouth, heart or any other of our sensory organs. This should sensitise us more to the need to cultivate and champion a *palaver* sauce disposition to take the outside in and inside out.

Just as life is full of hierarchies informed and sustained by inequalities, so too are there inequalities and hierarchies among *juju*. The more powerful one's *juju*, the better one's chances of being, seeing, doing, feeling and smelling things, tangible and intangible, as well as of influencing and controlling other people, things, events and phenomena. *Juju* can be used either alone or in combination with others, in order to maximise their potency. With a good *juju* (take the case of drones), one does not need to be physically present to be efficacious with those one is seeking to influence for good or bad, in love or in hate. Nothing brings this home better than the capabilities of a well-resourced (with applications and contacts) smartphone – one of the most sensational *juju* in vogue – with access to Wi-Fi, a hotspot, or Bluetooth, in the age of social media, supra connectivity and the growing imperative for conviviality.

Conclusion: Inspiration for Digital Humanities as an Area of Scholarly Inquiry

I have argued above in favour of incompleteness as a normal way of being. I have challenged us, as students of humanity, to envisage a relationship between humans and digital technologies that is founded less on dichotomies and binary oppositions, nor on zero sum games of conquest and superiority. If humans are present in things and things in humans, thanks to the interconnections, the flexibility and fluidity of being that come with recognition of and provision

for incompleteness, it is important to see things and humans not only as intricately entangled, but also as open-ended composites.

If you permit me, I would like to end with a few questions that are relevant to the study of the intersections between digital technologies and being human.

To what extent does the idea of incompleteness challenge us to rethink our current approaches to digital humanities as a field of study? Would more inter- and multi-disciplinary conversations informed by the reality of interconnections and interdependencies challenge us to contemplate conceptual and methodological conviviality? If yes, what form would they take? And would factoring in the interconnections within and between categories such as race, ethnicity, culture, geography, class, gender, sexuality and age affect the form and content of such conceptual and methodological conviviality? Beyond the conceptual and methodological implications of doing digital humanities research, what does it mean to actually understand and relate to ICTs in terms of incompleteness as a philosophy of personhood and agency?

As a field, Digital Humanities would be truly enriched by a disposition to accommodate improvisation and innovation. In support of this, let me draw on another Chinua Achebe proverb, from his novel, *Arrow of God*: ‘The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place’.⁴ The idea of Digital Humanities as a dancing mask is suggestive of its potentials to become a truly inclusive field of inquiry that continues to enrich itself through its open-ended encounters and conversations with the creative diversity of subjectivities of a truly universal humanism.

⁴ Achebe, C. (1974[1964]), *Arrow of God*, Oxford: Heinemann (African Writers Series), p. 46.