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Assembling an African Information Ethics

Abstract:

The Tshwane Conference on African Information Ethics of 5-7 February 2007 forces the question, What is an African information ethics? This question is addressed with reference to the complexities of a distinctly African information ethics, taking into account the distinction between ethics and morality, and the assumptions of the language of the Tshwane Declaration on Information Ethics in Africa. Gilles Deleuze's concept of assemblage, analyzed from the perspectives of Bruno Latour's concept of "reassembling the social" and recent anthropological approaches to global assemblages are put to work to investigate possibilities of an African information ethics, with special attention to the concepts of universality and African identity. The task of assembling an African information ethics is then analyzed in terms of Latour's call for building "livable collectives".

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An African Information Ethics?

The first African Information Ethics Conference was held in Tshwane, South Africa, on 5-7 February 2007; the conference's full name was *African Information Ethics Conference: Ethical Challenges in the Information Age*. But what is an African information ethics? Is there a distinctly "African" characteristic that distinguishes it from "Asian", "European", "North American", "South American", or "Australian" information ethics? Does "African" in this context denote a specific flavor of information ethics, analogous perhaps to distinctly African styles of music, fashion, or cuisine? The Tshwane conference meets an obligation of the new field of international information ethics, which was inaugurated at the ICIE Symposium 2004 in Karlsruhe, Germany, to think globally about information ethics. The Karlsruhe conference questioned locality in its problematic tension with "the horizon of a global digital environment" (International ICIE Symposium 2004). To distinguish kinds of information ethics according to national, and pan-national (e.g. continental) criteria is a state-centred interpretation of Karlsruhe's problem of local culture. But how effective are state boundaries as criteria of locality? And, can the continental boundaries of African nations map onto a distinct field of philosophical work in information ethics? If the locality in question when attempting to determine a uniquely African information ethics is the whole continent, then in terms of Karlsruhe's main theme the problem becomes simultaneously *large*—Africa is an immense "locality"—yet at the same time *small*, because it is *reduced* to ethical issues arising only within the continental boundaries of Africa. The question then becomes one of how *ought* global, digital information networks be installed in Africa in the light of a global, digital information environment?

That such a question avoids much of ethics can be seen by considering where it fits in a common and popular division—at least in Northern/Western thinking about ethics—of ethical theories into three main areas: metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Deployments in particular nations or continents of specific technological instrumentalities such as global, digital information networks pose problems in applied information ethics. Whatever might be particularly African about such problems derive from characteristics distinguishing the continent of Africa from—what? other continents? or specific African countries from countries in the rest of the world? There is no need to deny that the specificity of the problems many African countries face, such as violence, poverty, armed conflict, disease, genocide, poverty, and the economic injustices of global, Northern/Western market domination raises questions about how information technologies and systems *ought* to be deployed according to specific moral codes. But does the moral imperative of *urgency* that applies to such African-specific problems justify directing less attention to problems Africa shares with other continents, or specific African nations share with nations in other parts of the world? The use, power, and value of the concept of the *nation-state* in pursuing an international information ethics pose *problems* rather than provide stable *resources* for ethical thinking.

Most of the work of the Tshwane conference was formal and documentary: creating moral codes governing the development of information systems and technologies in Africa. But *ethical work* is different: it questions the nature of ethical and moral reasoning, the reality of moral values, the meaning and truth value of moral judgments, the compatibility of differing values and moral judgments, the forms of philosophical justifications of consequentialist, deontological, or virtue-ethical conceptions of norms and values, the nature and practice of the virtues and the good. Roughly speaking, the distinction between ethics and morality maps onto the distinction between, on the one hand, metaethics and normative ethics, and on the other, applied ethics. Ethics questions the philosophical foundations of the good and of morality, whereas morality questions what is right and wrong according to specific moral codes. Ethics conceived as reasoning about the practice of virtue and the pursuit of the good can dispense with moral codes, whereas morality conceived in the modern sense cannot.

In spite of what actually occurred at the Tshwane conference, the references in its Declaration on Information Ethics in Africa to information ethics as "the field of critical reflection on moral values and practices" and "ethical reflection on norms and values" (African Information Ethics Conference 2007) suggest a recognition of a distinction between ethics and morality. Armed with such a distinction, we can pose the question, What is an African information ethics?, as one about whether and how African intellectual, cultural, and philosophical resources might broaden and deepen the field of *ethics*, where the adjective "African" does more than simply denote nations of the African continent.

The question of specifically African resources for developing an African information ethics quickly confronts boundary problems and problems of scale. Africa is a vast territory, teeming with multiplicities of intellectual, cultural, and philosophical resources, and multiplicities of connections to the rest of the world. Consider, for example, the complexities of "African philosophy". Because Africa includes Muslim nations and peoples its philosophical resources therefore include Islamic philosophy, which itself traces influences from Chinese, Hindu, Persian, Greek and Roman, Ancient Egyptian and Phoenician philosophies, as well as influences on Jewish and early to modern European philosophies. As of April 2007, the Association of African Universities boasts 119 member universities from 31 countries. Many of the academic philosophers in those universities were trained in Northern/Western philosophical traditions, and are as familiar with and interested in their canonical texts and issues in logic, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, or history of philosophy as their Northern/Western counterparts. Moreover, controversy about what constitutes African philosophy is itself a philosophical topic in both Africa and the African Diaspora, as just a small sample of book titles makes clear: *African philosophy: Myth or reality*? (Apostel 1981), *African philosophy: Myth and reality* (Hountondji 1996), *African philosophy in search of identity* (Masolo 1994), and *African philosophy: A historico-hermeneutical investigation of the conditions of its possibility* (Okere 1983). About a third of an early introductory reader in African philosophy is devoted to the question of whether there is a specifically African philosophy (Wright 1979).

Any hopes that might be raised for a manageable corpus of sources in African philosophy by the Library of Congress's list of only 188 items bearing the subject heading "Philosophy, African" is dashed upon comparisons to its lists of 111 items under "Philosophy, European", 174 under "Philosophy, French", and 295 under "Philosophy, German". The more comprehensive keyword search joining "African" and "philosophy" exceeds the display limit of 10,000 of the Library of Congress Online Catalog—and this from a library whose holdings are biased by the distortions of south-north information transfer! Library searches do not clinch an argument that there is something wrong with supposing the adjective "African" has a unified and coherent meaning when modifying the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical resources we might hope to find useful in developing a specifically *African* information ethics. But they do turn our minds not only to the multiplicities crisscrossing that vast continent but to asking similar questions about the concepts of European philosophy, Asian philosophy, or American philosophy, to name just a few. Is there any reason to suppose that enlisting "African philosophy" in the service of developing an African information ethics is an imperative more urgent than enlisting "European philosophy" in the service of developing a "European information ethics"? Does "international information ethics" refer only to information ethics *other than* "European" or "Northern/Western" information ethics, or does it mean information ethics practiced deliberately *without regard* to nationality?

The very idea of an African information ethics is therefore bedeviled by suspicions about the coherence of grand, noble totalities conjured up by adjectives such as "African", "European", "Asian", "American", etc. in any meaningful sense beyond simply referring to national or pan-national political boundaries. If we mean by "African information ethics" the information ethics pursued only in Africa, the meaning is clear but philosophically uninteresting. But if we hope to *discover* a uniquely African information ethics in a meaningful conceptual sense that can perform useful work, we are likely to find neither a stable finished product in some hitherto neglected locality nor parts ready-to-hand for use in building it, such as specifically African thought-styles, ethos, philosophies, or ethical cultural traditions. What we are more likely to find are controversies, debates, and disputes in each of these areas, just as we find elsewhere on the terrain of ethical thought.

The problem is exacerbated by the way information ethics is framed in existing documents. The recently formulated Tshwane Declaration is a good example. Repeating the language of universal human rights inscribed in a long line of international agreements such as the Charter of the United Nations, its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Tshwane Declaration's statement of principles for information ethics in Africa asserts: "utilization of information in and about Africa should be grounded in an Ethics based on universal human values, human rights and social justice". African information ethics is treated as a plug-in to a system of stable phenomena already assembled together in a fixed totality by these three absolute and already stabilized virtues. The Declaration also refers to a number of "social objects" imagined as already given and sutured together into what we know to be among the most unstable of conceptions should the

controversies surrounding it be taken seriously: "the global Information Society". The most prominent of these objects—sustainable development, freedom and democracy, global Millennium development goals, the "development-oriented Information Society", "Information and Knowledge Societies"—populate the document stripped of all their fierce controversies, fragile contingencies, and historical, political, economic and cultural singularities. The role envisioned for African information ethics is presented in terms of an imperative to plug into this set of taken-for-granted global arrangements, demonstrably to the profit of identifiable "players". We are told that Africa should connect its special strand of information ethics into an international ethical machinery ethics already busily servicing a presumed global information society. Thus "the distinctive contribution to be made by African thinkers and intellectual traditions to the global information ethics community" is part of a wider "mobilization of academic research" presented as *what we already know* to be "crucial for sustainable social, economic, technical, cultural and political development". "Africa", we read, "should be a key player in [the] movement...towards Information and Knowledge Societies", and to this end should strive to "make the global Millennium development goals a reality". Insofar as Africa has something unique to contribute, there should be no doubt about the beneficiaries of its gift: "Indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity is a valuable contribution Africa can make to the global Information Society. It should be preserved, fostered and enabled to enrich the world body of knowledge" (there is no mention of how such preservation might enrich the *producers* of indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity). In issuing definitions of jobs serving invisible actors assumed to have already constructed the global information society to the "academics from the international community [who are] experts in the field of Information Ethics", and the "African scholars in the field of information ethics within the international scholarly community", the Declaration reflects the political reality of the Tshwane Conference, where instead of pursuing scholarly discussions of *ethics* in any philosophical sense the academic delegates were set the task of crafting a document—the Tshwane Declaration—only to find that none of their recommendations survived the final draft.[1]

The combination of instrumentalization of scholarly intelligence such as that on display at the Tshwane Conference, easy references to taken-for-granted, large structural totalities such as those itemized above, and uncritical assumptions about indissoluble links between information access and democracy, peace, and social justice bureaucratizes African information ethics by reducing ethical thinking about information to the production of moral codes governing the installation on the African continent of information technologies for e-government, e-education, e-health, e-culture (e.g. digital heritage projects), and many other "e-projects". Language that envisions African service to a taken-for-granted reality—the global information society—recalls for even moderately critical readers the analyses of critical global political economists who have labored to show that the primary advantages of such bureaucratization and service accrue to the owners and developers of those information systems who along with other corporate giants have long recognized the public relations value of installing ethical modules in their organizational structures.

How can we get a grip on the problems raised here? How can African information ethics, even international information ethics, engage a deeper, more fundamental ethical thinking that problematizes the very idea of information ethics? An important task for such thinking is to ask how and why, at particular historical instances, ideas such as information ethics, international information ethics, and African information ethics become problems that collect in specific constellations a wide variety of things, persons, institutions, ideas, documents, and many more heterogeneous elements. In my Karlsruhe paper (Frohmann 2007), I argued for the value to information ethics of the ethical thought of Michel Foucault and Gilles

[1]The political in contrast to the academic nature of the conference was highlighted by the conflict between two imperatives, the first to produce a document on information ethics for UNESCO, as stipulated by its representative, Boyan Radoykov (UNESCO, Information Society Division), and the second to produce the Tshwane Declaration for the South African government. The latter imperative prevailed. The delegates were divided into working groups, each with a mandate to produce two sentences on topics previously specified in the Declaration draft. Because, to no one's surprise, groups of academics can not easily condense their thoughts into just two sentences, especially when working collaboratively, their more fulsome work was ignored in the final draft, which was the product of a small group of conference organizers.

Deleuze. In this paper I develop Deleuze's idea of *assemblages* to address some of the issues raised so far.

Assemblages

Agencement is a central concept of Deleuze's philosophy. Usually translated as "assemblage" or "arrangement", the concept has done important work in a variety of fields, from Deleuzian social theory (De Landa 2006), to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (2005) and his studies of science and technology (1987; 1988; 1993; 1996; 1999), to recent anthropological approaches to globalization (Ong and Collier 2005).

In Deleuze's philosophy (see especially Deleuze and Guattari 1987), *agencement* is closely connected to the concept of *affect*, according to which the power of a body to act is analyzed in terms of its assemblage or arrangement with another body or bodies. His ethics proposes an ethos of *becoming*, analyzed in terms of a body's affective power to generate intensities in assemblages with another body or bodies, aimed at both resistance to the ways in which we are formed by what he calls lines of rigid segmentarity, and at freedom from the dominating effects of those lines through the practice of the three virtues of imperceptibility, indiscernibilty, and impersonality (see Frohmann 2007). Assemblages are always individuated and singular. To study what they do by tracing the diagrams of their affective powers is to practice a mode of analysis called "transcendental empiricism". Ethics is therefore connected to singular, individuated assemblages through the concept of a body's affective power to escape rigid segmentarity made possible by the intensities generated in assemblages with another body or bodies. Deleuze's ethical thought leads us to the concept of *ethical assemblages*, which enact an ethos of freedom from domination.

Latour puts the concept of assemblages at the centre of his actor-network theory as elaborated in his 2005. He contrasts a *sociology of the social* to a *sociology of associations*. The former conflates two different meanings of "social", referring first to stabilized states of affairs, and second to a specific kind of matter or substance that distinguishes *social* worlds from *natural* worlds. When these two meanings are conflated, the "social" stands for stabilized states of affairs made of "social" stuff. This kind of sociology, Latour argues, is no longer capable of providing the understanding promised by sociology in its original sense of a "science of living together". He lists its main assumptions:

> *"there exists a social 'context' in which non-social activities take place; it is a specific domain of reality; it can be used as a specific type of causality to account for the residual aspects that other domains (psychology, law, economics, etc.) cannot completely deal with; it is studied by specialized scholars called sociologists" (Latour 2005:3–4).*

The sociology of associations, by contrast, makes neither mistake. It studies the composition of the social in terms of assemblages of heterogeneous elements, *none* of which are "social" in the sense of being made of social stuff—because there is no such thing. And rather than begin with stabilized concepts or states of affairs, it recognizes that the social is revealed most clearly by processes of assembly, whether in building associations between disparate kinds of elements, or when such associations break down, are interrupted or transformed from one assemblage to another. Once we see that the strength of these fragile assemblages extends no further than the contingent associations currently holding them in place, stability becomes a *problem*: how do specific assemblages get stabilized and how is their stability maintained? The main tasks of a sociology of associations are: (1) to follow controversies in order to identify the elements at stake in any future assemblage; (2) to follow actors in their work of stabilizing connections or associations holding assemblages together; (3) to compose assemblages for living together collectively in the face of contemporary crises—a political and ethical task of "assembling a common world" (Latour 2005:260).

Acknowledging the work of Deleuze and Latour, recent anthropological perspectives on globalization shared by a growing number of social scientists also make powerful use of the concept of assemblages (see Ong and Collier 2005). Rather than analyze globalization as a broad, structural phenomenon of planetary scale that enters social analysis as a stabilized, *global* state of affairs (e.g. Manuel Castells' (2000) "network society"), the anthropological approach stays much closer to Deleuze and Latour in analyzing globalization through investigations of specific kinds of ongoing processes of assembly and reassembly. In such a view, globalization is analyzed as a set of spaces where specific kinds *anthropological problems* arise—problem-spaces "in which the forms and values of individual and collective existence are

problematized or at stake, in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflection and intervention" (Collier and Ong 2005:4).

This mode of analysis pays special attention to a broad range of "global forms", which assemble a wide variety of people, institutions, technologies, things, discourses, values, disciplined routines, standards, documents, and many more disparate sorts of elements. Global forms

> *"have a distinctive capacity for decontextualization and recontextualization, abstractability and movement, across diverse social and cultural situations and spheres of life. Global forms are able to assimilate themselves to new environments, to code heterogeneous contexts and objects in terms that are amenable to control and valuation" (Collier and Ong 2005:11).*

Global forms are not ideal types whose operations can be reduced to effects of stable causes, such as the "logic of capital" or the "invisible hand of the market". Instead, they are "delimited by specific technical infrastructures, administrative apparatuses, or value regimes" (11). In other words, they are "articulated in specific situations—or territorialized in *assemblages*" (4). This use of "assemblages" to emphasize that global forms are always singular and individuated reflects the influence of Deleuze and Latour. Stem cell research is an example, as Stephen J. Collier and Aihwa Ong explain with reference to Sara Franklin's paper in their collection: "*Potentially*, [stem cell research] bears on biological life—every human (and, presumably, nonhuman) being on the planet—and can transform how we understand, intervene in, and indeed, live human life *qua* biological life" (4). But what the authors call "the actual global" takes different forms in different assemblages: "the actual scope of stem cell research is determined by a specific distribution of scientific expertise and global capital...Also crucial are regimes of 'ethical' regulation instituted through the political system in various countries" (5). The United Kingdom, for example, has become a centre of stem cell research through a "relatively lenient regulatory regime", but in the United States research has been restricted by the success of connections to an "ethical regime" with a global character, invoking "a form of humanism that claims to be concerned not with a culture or a particular group but with human life as such" (5).

Global forms are therefore more like what Latour calls *mediators* rather than *intermediaries*. An intermediary "transports meaning or force without transformation"; "defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs". But mediators "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry"; "[t]heir input is never a good predictor of their output" and "their specificity has to be taken into account every time" (Latour 2005:39). From this perspective, the "ethical regimes" cited by Ong and Collier are not seen as stabilized states of affairs, but as dynamic assemblages of human and nonhuman actors whose connections and associations are revealed by studying their traces. Writing in a Latourian and Deleuzian spirit, Ong and Collier note that an assemblage

> *"is the product of multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic. The temporality of an assemblage is emergent. It does not always involve new forms, but forms that are shifting, in formation, or at stake. As a composite concept, the term 'global assemblage' suggests tensions: global implies broadly encompassing, seamless, and mobile; assemblage implies heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated" (Collier and Ong 2005:12).*

Thinking about globalization through the concept of assemblages leads to the conclusion that "local" and "global" do not refer to two different *properties* distinguishing different kinds of stabilized states of affairs. They do not, for example, designate differences in spatial magnitudes or scale. *Localizing* and *globalizing* are what actors *do*. The actor-network approach investigates how, where, and through what connections or associations context, structure, macro-levels and global levels are constantly being assembled. Latour puts it this way:

> *"whenever anyone speaks of a 'system', a 'global feature', a 'structure', a 'society', an 'empire', a 'world economy', an 'organization', the first...reflex should be to ask: 'In which building? In which bureau? Through which corridor is it accessible? Which colleagues has it been read to? How has it been compiled?' (Latour 2005:183).*

The global is therefore made in sites as local as any. Relative scale is *assembled*: "the small is unconnected, the big one is to be attached" (Latour 2005:180). We need to "ferret out the places where 'up', 'down', 'total', and 'global' are so convincingly

staged" (184). The work of putting something into a frame, of contextualizing and identifying a phenomenon as "global" is constantly being performed. But rather than take these frames, contexts, and the "global" as stabilized concepts readily available for deployment in social theory and analysis, Latour argues that "it is this very framing activity, this very activity of contextualizing, that should be brought into the foreground" (186). "'Ups' and 'downs, 'local' and 'global'", he argues, "have to be made, they are never given" (186).

An African Information Ethics

How can the concept of assemblages be put to work in thinking about the possibilities of an African information ethics? We might begin by following some implications of treating an African information ethics as an *ethical assemblage*. The strength of assemblages consist in their connections and associations: how many are there? how widely distributed are their elements? what degree of heterogeneity do they exhibit? Following Latour's (2005) rules of method, we would look for controversies that evidence actual or potential intensities for mobilizing the work of assembly and its stabilization.

Following controversies is radically different from deploying cherished certainties as stabilized resources. No matter how many people march in step to the beat of concepts like universal human values, human rights, and social justice, if their only connections are to each other the power of their small homogeneous assemblage will be feeble. There is little to be gained by restricting membership from the outset in the assemblages we want to create to those who share our convictions. Multiplicity and heterogeneity, not uniformity and universality, generate the intensities needed to build assemblages.

Universality

Dani Wadada Nabudere, a scholar of imperialism in Africa, presents an example of how some revered beliefs, even those enshrined in decades of United Nations charters, declarations, and statements, are put to the test, problematized, or become the subject of controversy. His study (Nabudere 2005) of how universalist conceptions of human rights actually interact in specific cases with cultural diversity and identity in Africa—an antagonism found on an abstract level in UN documents espousing both universal human rights and ethical imperatives to defend cultural diversity—demonstrates the value of approaching human rights not as stabilized states of affairs applied in the manner of universal standards but as assemblages territorialized and reterritorialized in particular sites. Donor aid to women's communities in north-east Ugandan villages in the early 1990s was provided under the umbrella of universal human rights to gender equality, a principle well established in UN documents. The female aid recipients soon discovered that their new "empowerment" undermined family cohesion by disempowering the men in their community. The women complained of increased drinking among the men and withdrawal of their participation in family activities. The men expressed frustration about what they saw as a reconfiguration of community life around aid projects directed at just the women. Nabudere reports that only through a series of dialogues between husbands and wives— "generated by [the women's] own experiences to maintain family cohesion by bringing their men into their organizations" (Nabudere 2005:7)—were relations between them realigned, "without any external pressure and lectures being given about 'human rights' or 'gender equality' in the villages" (8). Nabudere observes that "the critical phase" was when "the women became concerned not so much about their 'rights' as women, but more importantly, their concern about their men being marginalized and being left out of the donor funding" (8). The "universal" human right to gender equality, which was forged through a long and conflicted history in Northern/Western nations, did not work as a universal standard, but was reconfigured in assemblage with elements of the specific community situation.

Collier and Andrew Lakoff explain "regimes of living" as "situated configurations of normative, technical, and political elements that are brought into alignment in problematic or uncertain situations"; "they may be conceived as abstract categories of ethical reasoning and practice that are incited by or reworked in problematic situations, taking diverse actual forms" (Collier and Lakoff 2005:31). In Nabudere's example, abstract categories of ethical reasoning about gender equality were reworked in Ugandan villages by the female recipients' appropriation of the universal right to gender equality attached to donor aid. The actual rather than the abstract relationship between these elements were assembled in this singular and specific situation. The case shows that to *see* what "universal human rights" actually *look like*, attention

has to turn from *abstract ideas* to the *world*; one has to investigate the configurations of specific assemblages.

What Does It Mean To Be African?

Thinking about assemblages also helps with the question of what might be meant by a specifically *African* information ethics. It was suggested earlier that a continental meaning of "African" is problematic. Following Latour's (2005) advice to "feed off controversies", we can trace the fortunes of a particularly *African* information ethics by first seeking *claims* and *controversies* in a *variety* of sites about what it means to be "African": philosophy, art, religion, ethics, architecture, values, music, customs, fashion, cuisine, etc. Understanding what it means to be African in the actual rather than the theorized world requires investigation of *where* controversies take place (eligible locations should not be restricted to African nations), *who* speaks (eligible speakers should not be restricted to those holding passports from African nations), *how* and *with what means* controversies get stabilized (the agents busily at work settling controversies should not be restricted to humans; see especially the chapter, "Third source of uncertainty: Objects too have agency", in Latour 2005), and the *number*, *kinds*, and *extensions* of the connections and associations made through the work of stabilization. An African information ethics can gain strength through connections and associations with *diverse* problematizations of what it means to be *African*.

African Ethical Assemblages

Ethical assemblages are constructed from the work of stabilizing controversies about values, norms, and ways of living together. Collier and Lakoff's "regimes of living" are ethical assemblages. They remark that to "say that such regimes relate to questions of *living* means: first, that they concern reasoning about and acting with respect to an understanding of the good; and second, that they are involved in processes of ethical formation—that is, in the constitution of subjects, both individual and collective" (Collier and Lakoff 2005:23).

Many regimes of living, the authors note, "illustrate the centrality of biopolitics and technology to contemporary ethical problems. In diverse sites, one finds forms of moral reasoning that are not linked by a common culture but whose shared characteristics can be analyzed in terms of intersections of technology, politics, and values" (23). The information technologies that produce many of the problems and controversies of information ethics also raise issues connected to globalization, because, as Ong and Collier note: "Technoscience—whether material technology or specialized social expertise—may be exemplary of global forms" (Collier and Ong 2005:11). Thus the *regime of living* at stake in the development of an African information ethics is implicated in the ongoing work of globalization through connections and associations already forged by the highly concentrated ownership and control of information technologies.

The problem of developing an African information ethics can be approached by following Latour's (2005) rules of method: first, identify sites of existing controversies, tracing the associations and connections between all the actors, human and nonhuman; second, trace the means by which controversies are settled and assemblages are stabilized; third—and this is the stage of the politics of *assembling* an African information ethics—guide *intervention* in the processes of assembly by the knowledge gained in the first two steps.

Identifying sites of controversies can be guided by Foucault's ethical "recentering", thinking about information as he thought about sexuality: instead of looking for the forms of morality imposed upon us by such phenomena, locate the areas of experience and behavior regarding information that become problematized, that is, how they become "an object of concern, an element for reflection…a matter for debate…a domain of moral experience" (Foucault 1990:23–24). Such an approach to African information ethics implies *genealogical* work rather than generating declarations that limit debate from the outset by assumptions that the many problems and controversies about concepts like social justice, democracy, universal human rights, the global information society, and the value of access to information and communicative rights either do not exist or have already been settled. It might be worth asking about such concepts, who is speaking? from which position? to whom? in which institutions? to what effect? *Whose* problem is it, and *which* problems are championed as the most salient? Latour insists that the three steps of his method remain distinct and be carried out in the strict order indicated above. But the first and last step are connected, because the politics of "reassembling the social" by constructing *livable collectives*, as he puts it, involves identifying sites that bear upon the ethical matters considered to be most urgently at stake. This is not to suggest that his first step not

be rigorously followed, but it is to acknowledge that his last step involves participating in controversies.

At the present time sites where at least some controversies relevant to an African information ethics flourish are not hard to find. Arguments about the role of civil society arising at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) provide an example that illustrates the problem of selecting the most useful sites for assembling an African information ethics. Although the inclusion of civil society actors was acknowledged as a significant step forward, a recent study (Raboy and Landry 2005) of the first phase of WSIS in Geneva in 2003 documents controversies arising from the perspective of civil society. Limitations of space permit only a short list here of the most salient areas of contention:

(1) the structure of WSIS "innovated little compared to previous UN events" (Raboy and Landry 2005:26), upholding "the pre-eminence of governments in decisions on the major aspects of the Summit" (25), relegating civil society to the status of "actors who set directions for reflection and orientation that may or may not be addressed" (63), and limiting debate:

> *"controversial positions from civil society or positions that risk affecting a powerful State have very little chance of being adopted in this political and diplomatic arena. Certain governments did not see the WSIS as an event tackling broader questions of communication, and preferred to concentrate on specifically targeted issues. The United States, for example, was only interested in three items on the WSIS agenda: network security, infrastructure development, and human capacity building" (63);*

(2) the Summit ignored rules of the UN Economic and Social Council that prohibit accreditation of members of the private sector, thus changing "the relationship established between the United Nations and civil society over the past fifty years", weakening civil society, "whose influence was diluted amid private sector interests", and raising "many questions about the legality of this practice within the UN framework" (30);

(3) the role of civil society was politicized through the use of its presence to legitimate governmental protection of commercial interests under the guise of "an equitable and development-centred information society" (31);

(4) a technological reductionism framed the Summit's responses to civil society's concerns about "universality of access to the information society": "the universality of the ICTs will be achieved through the development of infrastructures and a climate conducive to investment", a view "very strongly held in the private sector, and by some governments, led by the United States" (34);

(5) privileging among civil society representatives an elite group with funding and organizational resources: "many organizations and NGOs based in the South were excluded from the Summit because there were almost no financial and organizational structures to enable their meaningful integration" (65);

(6) weakening of a unified civil society position through ideological divisions, notably conflicts among proponents of a *right to communicate* and opponents who saw such a right as imposing restrictions on freedom of expression, the latter supported by powerful media lobby groups (83–84).

The fortunes of civil society were not much improved in the second phase of WSIS in Tunis. The title of the Civil Society Declaration of 2005 is *Much more could have been achieved*; although acknowledging progress in some important areas, the Declaration observes that "WSIS documents… mostly focus on market-based solutions and commercial use" (World Summit on the Information Society 2005:13). Moreover, the language of the Declaration repeats much of the language of UN documents, suggesting the Declaration shares with them assumptions about universal human rights, the information society, sustainable development, etc. as already stabilized states of affairs.

The controversies about the role of civil society in the WSIS process raises questions about the value of particular kinds of assemblages in building an African information ethics. Latour observes that the political and ethical task of building *livable collectives* arises only as the work of *reassembling* the social. Once controversies get settled, consensus closes debates, and ideas are black-boxed, the work of assembly is finished: there is nothing more to do. If the connections between the human and non-human actors in UN and government-dominated assemblages are no longer open to reassemblage, then there are no more ethical *problematizations* to drive ethical work. If, for example, UN and government-dominated assemblages primarily become documentary machines for production of documents whose stabilized language is repeated

time and again, and for processing tolerable perturbations generated by marginalized actors such as civil society groups for their value as legitimations of commercial interests, perhaps it is time to seek out *smaller* and radically *singular* ethical problems.

Are there ethical problems regarding communication, information access and dissemination, and processes of identity formation or "subjectivation" through the use of information technologies (see Elichirigoity 2007) on a *scale* analogous to the problems of donor aid to Ugandan women investigated by Nabudere? Can the project of assembling a viable African information ethics learn from trying to build *small ethical assemblages* from *small problems*, which arise even at the level of the *village*, on a scale analogous to the small micro-lending assemblages of the Grameen Bank of Muhammad Yunus? Is it worth investigating controversies, difficulties, debates, and conflicts occurring in sites of interest to African information ethics that are *impersonal*, *imperceptible* and *indiscernible* to the powerfully stabilizing assemblages of governments and commercial interest? What do such problems, which appear "small" to international, governmental assemblies, but not to the actors involved in those problems, have to offer an African information ethics? If Latour is right, we can expect to find in these "small" problems all the philosophies, moralities, norms, values, ideas about African identity, relations to technologies, connections to various kinds of practices, routines, institutions, organizations, and things (including documents, communications devices, libraries, the trading of information) we need to start thinking about how to assemble an African information ethics.

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