

Techno-Dandy : Figuration of an African Digital Entrepreneur

Maurice Mbikayi's sculpture, *Techno Dandy*, solicits a reflection on African digital entrepreneurs. In light of my research interests, *Techno Dandy* evokes for me the interaction of local and global digital capitalisms and the fabrications that emerge. Fabrication here refers to 'making', 'making up' and 'making do'. At the global scale both digitization and capitalism are envisioned as part and parcel of a seamless system of technology production that is desirable and replicable in every locale. Zoom into the microscale and you find attempts to syncretize the globalising model into local modes of existence. In this process, it is remade. Mbikayi has stated that the *Techno Dandy* represents resistance:

Because Africa is changing, the way I use e-waste in my work can be seen as a proposal of [futuristic ideas of blackness]. The Techno Dandy is a concept that expresses rebirth, linking the past, present and future: from a techno trash man, exposed to e-waste dangers, to a techno dandy—from waste to style. It draws from diverse ideologies to represent similar personas, and to subtly insert a mark of resistance against race, technology and capitalism's existential crisis in Africa. My work draws on various ideologies related to African-style, technology and fashion to represent similar personalities.[1]

Indeed, processes of syncretism have often reflected resistance. Like the dandies of the *sape* sub-culture in Congo historically sought to indicate that they too fit in local colonial aristocracy [2]. Perhaps what Mbikayi is also getting at is a resistance against depictions of Africa as 'other' or lagging behind—that Africans can be modern, and futuristic too. This is a resistance that is constrained to re-writing a received imaginary of modernity. I interpret the sculpture as mirroring Africa's engagement with the archetype of the digital entrepreneur. An archetype that emerges out of a popular and influential imaginary of digital entrepreneurship forged (primarily) in the particular context of Silicon Valley. The *Techno Dandy* is a man, in Western garb. It is suggestive of the attributes one must "put on" in order to be successful at commercialising digital innovation. The character also signifies the mobility of the imaginaries of Western modernity. It is indicative of persistent hegemony that means EuroAmerica continues to imprint its visions and values onto other locales most readily.[3] Norms and imaginaries diffuse through various mediums. They do so even subliminally and overtly through expectations around behavioural norms, formal education and the media. These mechanisms of diffusion, which now include digital technologies and platforms, have led us to understand the predominant imaginary of innovation as one of techno-rational solutionism led by disruptive cowboy capitalists. That Mbikayi produces a sculptural costume that is not only Western but consists of attire that signifies elite class—a top hat, loafers, and a suit—is fitting given that digital entrepreneurship is an arena that is most easily accessed by elites, who have been exposed through birth, education and/or travel to networks of capital.

Technological disruptions are characterized as being perpetrated by tenacious entrepreneurs and captains of industry. Through their “creative destruction,” they accelerate economic growth.[4] Silicon Valley, USA, the place where this meta-narrative is from, is taken for granted not only as a metaphor but also as the standard model. This means that digital entrepreneurs outside Silicon Valley are evaluated and evaluate themselves according to criteria developed over there, thus, entrepreneurs seek to convey through their practices, language, narratives and materialities that they can relate to the archetype and wear it well. Even though their experiences and local contexts differ.

It is one of those things that, when I think about it, maybe what this continent need[s] is some breakthrough technology to happen so that people can be like, “You mean there can actually be a billion dollar business that can come from [Africa]?” Just the way it happens in Silicon Valley, where it’s like, “A bunch of young guys came together [...] na na na,” you know, the way they tell the stories. It’s so funny, I am reading this book on Jeff Bezos of Amazon and literally, what they were going through in terms of tech in the nineties [...] there’s no difference. [...] We’re in 2015, and that’s our story.[5]

The *Techno Dandy* is a material embodiment of the analogy that actors in Nairobi, Kenya, sought to evoke when they christened the local digital economy arena as Silicon Savannah; same as those in Buea, Cameroon, who call theirs Silicon Mountain. Digital entrepreneurs in Africa differ considerably in their recognition and awareness of how they are shaped by these taken-for-granted expectations. Those who are most aware can articulate how they play strategic games with archetypes and imaginaries in order to attract backing. Entrepreneurs are rewarded financially and through media coverage for appearing to enact the archetype successfully and by doing so, legitimating the Silicon Valley meta-narrative. It is a modality of mutual legitimation. To maintain its validity, the meta-narrative requires firms to explain their enactments using its terms. Mbikayi’s donning of the sculpture, then, can be evocative of strategic performances that digital entrepreneurs engage in to convey legitimacy and draw resources and support from those who expect that digital entrepreneurship will be enacted in a way that is informed by the global capitalist discourse.[6] This includes foreign investors and local policymakers. In this form, it is a disguise. Even though the figure of the Euro-American tech entrepreneur is all pervasive, operating in Africa also grants innovators some autonomy and opportunity for self-determination [7].

I will also say, there’s nowhere else in the world that anyone can literally, our age specifically, have an idea, say we are going to do it, and just do it, even if it is a struggle. There’s not any other place in the world where young people of chocolate color can come this far. If we were in Silicon Valley this would not be happening. We would have to work for all these shitty companies for twenty, thirty

years, build up a name, then people will give you money, if you have an idea.[8]

While incentivized to adopt the globalised imaginary, local adopters often have to modify it to make it apt in their environment—what Toluwalogo Odumosu calls “constitutive appropriation” and applies to the use of digital technologies, I apply to the adoption of digital imaginaries. [9] Though a model for digital entrepreneurship wrought particularly in Silicon Valley has captured the global imagination, in practice it produces heterogenous practices and use cases [10]. Thus, while the *Techno Dandy* can be understood as a donning of the archetype of the digital entrepreneur, it also represents a strategic local appropriation and differentiated enactment. It would be a mistake to view African enactments of digital entrepreneurship purely as mimicry or façade, for the amalgamation of Western imaginary and local context still produces singular enactments. Odumosu analyzes a process of constitutive appropriation where mobile phone users develop practices around the use of digital technologies that are specific to their localized context.[11] Similarly, “users” of the Silicon Valley imaginary also develop contextually relevant practices and values. From a distance, the *Techno Dandy* sculpture can appear as constructed from a singular material, even though it is a collage. Similarly, the imaginary of digital entrepreneurship can seem coherent and homogenous, when upon closer inspection it represents multiplicity.

Embedded in globally circulating ideas about what counts as ideal enactments of modernity is a misunderstanding of non-Western knowledges and ways of being as non-modern. Much of the discourse on establishing sociomaterial environments (or in the policy parlance, innovation ecosystems) for digital entrepreneurship specifies mindsets and aspirations that associate digital enterprise with high-value, global technology companies. Entrepreneurs in this fledgling industry need role models and mentors and they will take them from where they can get them. In this case, it means looking outside their proximal context for inspiration:

Yes. I'd say we don't necessarily have any significant background in this industry for these guys to look up to, do you know what I mean? We don't have, in a sense, people who have a professional education. [Aside to software developer, employee]: I don't know, Peter, is there anyone, in terms of tech, is there anyone in the country that you can look up to and be like, “you know this guy for the last fifty years...”? [Back to me]: This is an industry that is so new. There is very little professionalism or even just in a sense a background for guys to be able to look at and say, look at this technological company, and because of this professionalism and principles, they've built an industry that guys can aspire to and take lessons from, you know what I mean. Like the first crop, like the godfathers.[12]

The form of the *Techno Dandy's* aspiration reflects the limited options when it comes to role models. There are no alternative

designs for success, or so it seems. In fact there is much that African practitioners can contribute to knowledge about the practice of digital entrepreneurship. [13] Entrepreneurial competency is best developed in context[14] and the dominance of Silicon Valley over imaginations stifles the development of locally appropriate approaches. This is exemplified by the words of an 'elder' who offered his wisdom at a gathering of young(er) entrepreneurs in Nairobi. A tech-entrepreneur expressed his perspective that ruthlessness is required for modern business. The elder, not a 'techie' but a banker, contradicted this view, instead highlighting the importance of relationships. He also spoke of wrestling with the tension between the sociocultural values that he was taught "at home" versus the values communicated through formal education, particularly when he studied abroad: "At home I was taught that I owe the society. I battled with these ideas of how does one make money? Why should one make money? I had a folksy way of doing things. If you are not aware that people look at life differently, you may misunderstand intentions. Appreciate that we have different cultures." [15] Does the *Techno Dandy* hold the weight of similar tensions? Mbikayi's comment on how the "Africanness" of the *Techno Dandy* "subtly inserts a mark of resistance against racism, technological realities and the existential crisis of capitalism in Africa" suggests that it does. The banker went on to explain that from his perspective, "only unsuccessful capitalism has the characteristics of brutality. It is not a recipe of a successful society. [...] Part of the legacy of colonialism is that you never saw proper capitalism. You saw imperialism." [17] It's worth noting that the prevailing sentiment in many critical social science discourses is that capitalism and imperialism are linked. [18] Can imbuing these systems with 'Africanness' redeem them? Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga offers that digital enterprise at least, is already African. The startup—and certain aspects of its meta-narrative, like bootstrapping, making do and reliance on shared resources—are attributes often characterised as African modality. [16] Belief in the correlation between the Silicon Valley imaginary and the startup overlooks that in this specific way digital enterprise is a good fit for supposedly 'folksy' African locales. The figuration of the digital entrepreneur as a Euro-American inspired capitalist might be fashionable, but it is increasingly revealed as often alienating to technology users, workers, and the many kinds of digital entrepreneurs who are not included in the imaginary of mass consumption and global market domination. Digital workers of the "gig" economy in particular are beginning to question their fate in the supposedly liberating platform economy, which, rather than connecting customers and workers more directly, is opening a portal to a past of unprotected working classes. One could also analyse the *Techno Dandy's* construction from e-waste materials as hinting at these extractive and consumptive patterns in global technology production. The initial reaction to the adoption of digital technologies was one of great, techodeterministic optimism, but how old patterns of global and local exploitation and domination are replicated in the digital economy is becoming more apparent. There are many ways to read the *Techno Dandy*. Cues from the artist invite us to imagine an 'Africanness' that can withstand the worst effects of racial capitalism. On the other hand, it can also be apprehended as the

condition of “double consciousness” described and theorised variously by DuBois and Fanon, where marginalised actors express two different personas; one of which is learned from the powerholders. [19] From my chosen lens, the *Techno Dandy* signifies persistent hegemony of Western norms and yet is a reminder that there is no singular figuration of the digital entrepreneur. It represents the ability of Africa’s digital entrepreneurs to adapt ‘universal models’ to local modalities. The *Techno Dandy* is a collage—a collage that represents the multiplicities and amalgams that already exist in the performance of digital entrepreneurship in Africa.

[1] Maurice Mbikayi, *Mupia–Mupia*, Fondation Friedrich Naumann, Dakar, Senegal, May 3–June 2, 2018, <https://www.contemporaryand.com/exhibition/maurice-mbikayimupia-mupia/>.

[2] Ch. Didier Gondola, Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance among Congolese Youth. *African studies review*, 42(1), pp.23–48. (1999)

[3] Doreen Massey, “Power Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,” in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, and L. Tickner (London: Routledge, 1993).

[4] M. E. Porter, “Clusters and the New Economics of Competition,” *Harvard Business Review* 76, no. 6 (1998): 77–90; J. A. Schumpeter, *Business Cycles: A Theoretical, Historical, and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939).

[5] Entrepreneur in Nairobi, interview by the author, 2015–16.

[6] S. Katila, P.-M. Laine, and P. Parkkari, “Sociomateriality and Affect in Institutional Work: Constructing the Identity of Start-Up Entrepreneurs,” *Journal of Management Inquiry* 28, no. 3 (2019): 381–94.

[7] Nicholas Friederici, M Wahome & M Graham, *Digital Entrepreneurship in Africa: How a Continent Is Escaping Silicon Valley’s Long Shadow*. (2020) (Cambridge: MA, MIT Press)

[8] Entrepreneur in Nairobi, interview by the author, 2015-16.

[9] M. Graham, “Contradictory Connectivity: Spatial Imaginaries and Technomediated Positionalities in Kenya’s Outsourcing Sector,” *Environment and Planning A*, 47, no. 4 (2015): 867–83.

[10] Michel Wahome & M. Graham (2020) Spatially shaped imaginaries of the digital economy, *Information, Communication & Society*, 23:8, 1123-1138. The following explanations are based on my studies on digital entrepreneurs in six African cities and in particular a year-long ethnography, which I conducted in the years 2015–16 to prepare my doctoral thesis on the topic of arenas of development.[11] Toluwalogo B. Odumosu,

“Interrogating Mobiles: A Story of Nigerian Appropriation of the Mobile Phone” (PhD diss., Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2009). Odumosu, “Interrogating Mobiles”; Toluwalogo B. Odumosu, “Making Mobiles African,” in *What Do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?*, ed. Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 137–50.

[12] Entrepreneur in Nairobi interview.

[13] Lucy Suchman, “Anthropological Relocations and the Limits of Design,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 1–18

[14] Michael Zisuh Ngoasong, “Digital Entrepreneurship in a Resource-Scarce Context,” *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 25 (2018): 483–500. Friederike Welter, “Contextualizing Entrepreneurship—Conceptual Challenges and Ways Forward,” *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 35 (2011): 165–84

[15] Investment executive at national bank, community meeting, 2015–16.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Mbikayi, *Mupia–Mupia*.

[18] Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, ed., *What Do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

[19] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (1903). Frantz Fanon and C. L. Markmann. *Black Skin, White Masks*.(1967).