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# Reconceptualising Personas across Cultures: Archetypes, Stereotypes & Collective Personas in Pastoral Namibia

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**Abstract.** The paucity of projects where persona is the research foci and a lack of consensus on this artefact keep many reticent about its purpose and value. Besides crafting personas is expected to differ across cultures, which contrasts the advancements in Western theory with studies and progress in other sites. We postulate User-Created Personas reveal specific characteristics of situated contexts by allowing laypeople to design persona artefacts in their own terms. Hence analysing four persona sessions with an ethnic group in pastoral Namibia –ovaHerero– brought up a set of fundamental questions around the persona artefact regarding stereotypes, archetypes, and collective persona representations: (1) to what extent user depictions are stereotypical or archetypal? If stereotypes prime (2) to what degree are current personas a useful method to represent end-users in technology design? And, (3) how can we ultimately read accounts not conforming to mainstream individual persona descriptions but to collectives?

**Keywords:** Personas; Stereotypes; Archetypes; Collective Personas; User-Created Personas; User-Centred Design; User Experience; Namibia.

## 1 Introduction

Persona is a designerly communicational artefact in Human-Computer Interaction. Persona was originated by Cooper [1] as a representative of a specific group of users sharing commonalities when interacting with technology products or services [2]. Persona thus endeavours to inform design on the needs, requirements and aspirations of each of these groups of users regarding technologies or technological innovations. Paradoxically, however, some utilize persona to capture user-data that they then build upon assumptions and not on actual grounded data [3]. Besides Nielsen and Hansen [4] indicate a scarcity of empirical research on personas as research foci, which as a

result endures a lack of consensus on what this artefact comprises, as well as in many researchers and practitioners' reluctance to embrace it in design decision-making [5].

Experiential paucity is greater outside technology dominant settings [6], with persona mainly deployed following User-Centred Design (UCD) mainstream approaches –be this qualitative, quantitative or a mixture of the both [7]. This is a rather dangerous procedure as it can lead to users' misinterpretations through misrepresentations. Nielsen [6], a persona advocate and expert, ultimately questions whether different cultures may understand personas differently; while from India Chavan [8] acknowledges conceptualising designerly tools, techniques and methods like persona vary across cultures, as otherwise data captured by a method originated in one culture, if deployed in a different setting, it will taint this data, thus final outcomes may no longer legitimately correspond to the authenticity and veracity of the latter cultural milieu.

To further advance persona empirical research in cross-cultural sites this paper presents, debates and reflects on User-Created Persona (UCP) sessions in rural Namibia. This specific study condenses the findings presented at CaTaC by Cabrero et al. [9]. The study holds persona as research foci, while it belongs to a larger project where personas are co-created with urban and rural Namibian societies from different ethnic groups, namely ovaHerero, ovaHimba, Ovambo and Khoisan [10, 11, 12, 13, 14].

The core objective of the larger project is to discern cross-cultural representations of the persona artefact, and as such to attempt answering the following questions: (1)how do different Namibian populaces take-on, understand and co-create persona artefacts capable of representing their technological needs, requirements and desires; (2)what cultural assumptions may emerge regarding typical creations and depictions of personas and how these differ or mimic usual values, guidelines and concords, and (3)whether the persona co-design process, be it undertaken with users, may depict legit persona proxies relevant to the design of useful and gratifying technologies.

To answer such queries we began to co-design personas with ovaHerero citizens. In this process we encountered a set of additional questions regarding stereotypical, archetypal and collective persona events and depictions: (4)to what extent user representations are stereotypical or archetypal? If the former primes, (5)to what degree then are current personas still a useful method to think about users of systems designed or in the process of design? And, (6)how can we ultimately interpret accounts not conforming to typical individual persona description but to collectives?

Given the above questions, this manuscript first explores literature on personas, stereotypes, archetypes and collective personas to frame our accounts of UCP depictions. Second we propose the methodological approach related to the findings in the paper. Third results are presented as stereotypical, archetypal and collective portrayals. Fourth a reflection and a commentary regarding UCP as co-designed with ovaHerero pastoral communities tackle the concepts and the data presented, and scaffold our argument to guide the paper and the possible consequences regarding further theoretical and empirical research on personas in cross-cultural milieus around the globe. Ultimately a set of conclusions emerging from the data presented draw a close.

## 2 Persona Introduction and Conceptualisations

A brief literature review clarifies the persona concept and the distinctions between archetypes versus stereotypes, and between collective versus individual personas. Scaffolding from literature, findings across sessions are then framed to offer an account of the paths within the wider project and that keep persona research evolving.

### 2.1 Personas

Persona is a designerly tool generating from the UCD philosophy [1]. It works as a communicational proxy of groups of individuals sharing technological commonalities. Persona holds vital benefits such as (i) creating a solid understanding of target-users; (ii) providing early design requisites; (iii) introducing or reinforcing design thinking; (iv) enabling focus on users' goals and traits, and (v) portraying dimensions of the ecosystem where users operate. Further benefits of persona are stated in Cabrero [10].

Persona though holds on to a tendency by designers to use tacit [3] or explicit [1] assumptions on the users, instead of data grounded from user-research processes [15]. Persona also lacks an agreement about its definition, creation and its deployment [2], as well as it lacks on empirical research outside technology dominant settings [6]. Ultimately persona misses involving users in its creation and final representation [16]. As such, persona does not sustain a solid enough degree of scientific reliability [17], for what many designers feel reticent to use personas in design decision-making [5].

### 2.2 Archetypes vs. Stereotypes

Originally persona is held as an archetype of the end-users technology is aimed at [1]. Jung [18] defines archetypes as universal mythic characters residing in the collective unconscious of people across the world. Nielsen [15] claims archetypes as comprised of personality traits built on ideals of basic human patterns appearing as blends of stabled features defining the individual person. Archetypes according to Nielsen, thus, relate to three main dimensions typifying psychological preferences of an individual: extrovert-introvert, sensory-intuition, thinking-feeling [ibid]. These traits and dimensions Nielsen continues arguing that hold potential to communicating relevant user-data to the technology design process [ibid].

Stereotypes, however, are but shortcomings personas can easily result into [19]. Stereotypes are simplified clichéd ideas that express the way humans categorize people who are [or seem] alike by providing social images as synthesised reasons on why 'others' act as they do [15]. Under this situation it is not bizarre that Marsden and Haag state personas in design *run the risk of re-inscribing existing stereotypes and following more of an I-methodological than a user-centered approach* [20, p. 4017]. Ultimately, Nielsen claims that a persona resulting as a stereotype towards designing technological tools becomes *a so-called flat character with only one character trait and who does not create engagement or identification* [15, p.62].

### 2.3 Collective Personas vs. Personas

Where persona acts a proxy of a set of users sharing commonalities about technology, Collective or Collaborative Persona (CP) comprises groups and communities by including relevant data informing the design of tools intended for collaboration [21].

CP dissimilates individual-based personas, amongst other features, in holding on to (1) multiple inter-related individuals playing specific if intertwined roles and duties; (2) a focus on collective goals and elaborating individual ones affecting collective's; and (3) new attributes characterizing collaborative aspects of the group's work [22]. Thus CP is aimed to groups with common behaviours, problems to solve, and interactions amid themselves as cultural or traditional groups. CP solves pitfalls whereby designers create collaboration tools by using methods focusing on individuals [ibid]. This is so for CP strives to lead to tools that are well-targeted at the group by addressing specific interactional properties of different types of collaborations in order to improve tool adoption of collaboration tools [ibid]. Thus this is an important shift in the culture of creating and deploying personas towards the design of technologies.

Furthermore, Gaudioso et al. [23] point out that collective portrayals of users often (4) involve considerations of dynamic social factors such as interactions and relationships between users currently not present in individual models such as UCD personas; (5) allow for an individual's degree of satisfaction that may importantly impact upon other group members through either emotional contagion or through conformity; and (6) allow to make visible challenges on physical, cognitive or social skills, as well as factors such as experience and availability. Ultimately, practitioners prefer CP when technological aims and collaborations are at stake due to the advantages this type of artefact provides [24].

### 2.4 User-Created Personas

Persona is typically deployed within UCD. This means UCD methods, techniques and artefacts such as persona are exclusively created and solely utilised by design experts. However, a main disapproval upon the workings of UCD as a philosophy in design, and by extension on the persona artefact, is that it neither grants users with methods, nor with artefacts capable of bringing about cultural and contextual nuances with which laypeople can achieve full appropriation of the technology design process [25].

As such persona empirical studies outside predominant settings are mainly carried out by designers themselves, usually following UCD guidelines and concords [26]. Functioning through methodologies originated somewhere else encourages ways of thinking and logics that may be far from those of milieus where a project is deployed. This enhances the prospect of using guesses and assumptions in cross-cultural design; it also endangers persona providing reliable user data to technology design processes.

A recent emergence of persona projects has, though, either pinpointed this situation or taken an active part in tackling the issue of *seeing 'us' when looking at 'them'*.

As design methods, tools and techniques differ across cultures [8], and due to the lack of persona research [4], we argue involving users in persona depictions will aid eliciting major cultural elements for the diverse societies where UCP is positioned. This scaffolds from our theoretical appreciation [26] and practical study [10, 11, 12, 13, 14], and from inspiring, hands-on projects such as those presented as follows:

Lecomte et al. [27] deploy frugal re-design to create prosthetics for underprivileged amputees in Vietnam, and claim that when creating and deploying personas local knowledge must be taken into account and adopted. Their persona representations embrace dimensions of the ecosystem, for which they conclude that there is an imminent need for a locally situated awareness to respond to *new questions on the personas role and into collaboration for articulating implicit, local, embedded and grassroots expertise with more formalized information and methods* [ibid, p. 1].

In the Malaysian jungle Zaman and Winschiers-Theophilus [28] adopt and adapt the persona artefact in a Participatory Design project with some Long Lamai youth. Researchers propose creating depictions of local youth and elders in the surroundings by creating personas that possess a name, a gender and a set of usual characteristics. This facilitates the design process to first draw upon participants' necessities regarding styles of communication, and in turn it enabled the suitability of local affordances to co-design an SMS App based on a local disappearing signs' language.

In the attempt to co-create personas in rural and urban Namibia, our theoretical appreciation has in turn ascribed to what Chavan points out [8] in that persona is a westernly conceived method that either needs adaptation or full redesign when deployed somewhere else [26]. This we have observed through practical studies with persona as research foci, and whereby results have shown vital differences between UCD persona as it currently is and the methods to elicit data representative of the users for whom technological products or services may eventually be aimed at [10, 11, 12, 13, 14].

To reach a persona cross-cultural dialogue in design, thus to avoid misrepresentations, we then promote UCP for users to create self-representations aimed to support design processes. UCP works as an instrumental way to enable laypeople exploring and creating ways in which they desire to be depicted towards technology designs that, ultimately, strive to become useful and gratifying in people's daily lives.

Inspiration about UCP comes from *World Machines* defined by Light et al. *as a new archetype for systems that draw together computational powers to connect, sense and infer with a social agenda of crossworld collaboration... to raise the profile of tools that maintain a collaborative agenda and resist a tendency towards networks as giant surveillance and marketing devices* [29, p. 1]. Thus UCP aims to avoid cross-cultural misrepresentations by enticing heterogeneity and a myriad of respected viewpoints.

### 3 Methodology

The lack of persona empirical research beyond dominant sites is an irregular situation that can easily lead to user misrepresentations by seeing ‘us’ when looking at ‘them’. In Marsden and Haag [20] terms, this is but to do with the very *person perception*. The methodology of our findings frames such perception via stages presented as per (1) context, (2) data collection and (3) analysis of the different sessions.

#### 3.1 Context

Four sessions held with pastoral ovaHerero communities between 2014 and 2015 attempted to identify their cultural variant representations of personas. Sessions occurred in three different villages in the Omaheke region in the East of Namibia – Okomakuara, Erindiroukambe and Otjinene. A snippet about ovaHerero comes as:

OvaHerero comprise around 10% of Namibia’s populace (200,000). They do not seem to have developed historic, literary or artistic heritage, while literature on them is scarce and mainly focuses on the German genocide between 1904 and 1909 [30]. Today, ovaHerero are concerned with their kinships and wealth conveyed in cattle counts, though only elderly and some infants live in rural areas. Other kin have “temporarily” migrated to urban areas in search for further careers beyond agribusiness.

The aim was to explore and test UCP by building on and sharing benefits of persona via immersive, participated, experientially gained community design practice.

#### 3.2 Data Collection

In the 4 sessions a set of assorted methods to elicit personas was gradually scaffold. The methods utilised were deployed chronologically and they did evolve as follows: (1) a focus-group in Okomakuara with 8 female ovaHerero elders in October 2014; (2) a ‘persona’ session in Erindiroukambe: 4 male elder and 1 youth in October too; (3) a scenario narration in Otjinene with the same female above in November of 2014; (4) a focus-group in Okomakuara with 4 male and 1 female elder in March 2015.

Worth noting, we did not intend to co-create personas at once but to probe diverse methods to find if data elicited would respond to queries proposed as in page 2 above. Also worth noting, methods did not focus in particular technologies but in the study of persona as the research foci per-se. However, as sessions with ovaHerero groups amounted we realised the complexity of our attempt in co-creating personas from a methodological and conceptual view. We observed occurrences of archetypical, self-stereotyping and collective representational accounts. At this point in research though, we can only speculate the cause for such variants by posing the following questions:

(4) To what extent user representations are stereotypical or archetypal?

(5) If stereotypical representations prime, to what degree are current personas still a useful method to represent end-users in technology design? And,

(6) How can we ultimately interpret accounts not conforming to mainstream individual persona descriptions but to collectives?

### 3.3. Analysis of Different Sessions

To answer the queries above this section groups sittings as per archetypical, stereotypical and collective accounts/depictions as they emerged. Thus Archetypes comprises (1) a focus-group in Okomakuara in October 2014 with eight female elders, as well as (4) a focus-group also in Okomakuara with 4 male and a female elders. Stereotypes: (2) a 'persona per-se' session in Erindiroukambe with 4 male elder and 1 youth and (3) a scenario narration in Otjinene with 1 female. CP covers sessions (3) and (4).

#### 3.3.1. Archetypes

In Okomakuara 8 local ovaHerero females engaged in a session inspired by the relevance of things that matter in October 2014. The first part was on *concrete things* that matter; the second dealt with *wishful possibilities* for future User Experiences (UX). The objective was two-folded: to introduce oral, visual and tangible stimulus via a tablet device to elicit relevant UX, and to then corroborate the UX by enticing partakers to think of possible futures based the concrete things as possibilities for progress. Two foreign facilitators carried this 2-step method with local researchers translating.

The sitting began presenting a family portrait from the tablet to provide intercultural interaction, trigger stimulus and elicit UX features scaffold from the abstraction of the family as a concrete concept for inspiration, meaning and design thinking (Fig. 1). Sequentially participants unanimously stated their love for and comfort with their families. Next they got asked about their likeability of flowers. Once a participant conveyed her love for flowers the rest tailed on endorsing such feeling.

In the next part of the session participants got enticed to convey *wishful possibilities* with no guidelines or a defined starting point. A participant conveyed her family discomfort due to her brother-in-law possessing the cattle she lost to widowhood and tradition, while her daughter firmly supported the livestock regain (Fig. 2 & 3). When further enquired about having flowers, they stated that none but the mother and daughter above (neighbours of another village nearby) had or looked after flowers.



**Figs. 1, 2 & 3.** Families & Flowers in a Tablet & Mother-Daughter Discuss Family Issues.

By having proposed the above two-step method around *concrete things* that matter and then *wishful possibilities* for future UX, initial statements of family niceness and flora attention gave way to prompting issues of family disputes to do with legacies and tradition, and to the fact that flora barely exist in such a dry settings.

Thus this session initially provided misguided archetypical indications on mythic features and characters inherent to the collective unconscious of these participants. Apropos technology design this could have led to false results and misunderstandings. However outcomes also hinted the collaborative efforts through the collective behaviour in answering to the questions provided. On the other hand the session provided a relevant glimpse into things that matter to the participants when aspirations were let free to participants' own choice of expression.

In a subsequent session in March 2015 in Okomakuara a focus-group compounded of 2 female and 4 male elders devised a scenario of their choice where a young woman got pregnant and the father took-on the fatherhood. Participants described the young woman as raised by her mother while learning household chores and duties; whereas the young man was a gentle person capable of looking after the homestead and cattle, and taught farming by his father. Despite the amount of detail provided throughout the storytelling exercise, participants claimed nowadays this is an impossible scenario for youngsters are all gone from the village in pursuit of further careers in urban settings. Participants keep recurring to the past indicating previous generations dedicated to crafts such as stick-makers and horse-trainers which they yet appealed now as extinguished. They also claimed that in spite of the changes undergone in recent times responsibilities in the village for the youth are still but the very same. So when male youth come back to the village during school holidays they are still taught cattle managing, how to slaughter a goat, and how to look for cow-footprints. Participants argued such skills as still paramount even if usually living in the capital. They also exhorted that for urban girls to become women they must nurture the way they walk as ovaHerero and to be properly groomed. Participants also detailed despite school 'trains' children, these must follow tradition and customs when in the village and that, for instance, *the sun may not rise while one is still in bed!*

Regarding fun activities participants stated young men as hunters, horse riders, and catching cows and putting them down; also going in the field to look at the cattle. For girls it was about milking cows, fulfil domestic tasks, and playing *catching-the-girl*.

Lastly, when confronted with activities like football, modern music, earphones and technology, one participant stated those are bad things due to the amount of time they take away from youth. The others, though, said it is not all bad by any means.

Thus this session demonstrated conflicting archetypes with incompatible realities.

### **3.3.2. Stereotypes**

In Erindiroukambe four elders and one youth met in a focus-group in October 2014. The session aimed to co-design personas per-se. It was led by a western researcher, while a local facilitator translated and accommodated the questions proposed.

Participants were first explained the concept of personas as typical people in the village and then they were asked to describe those. The conversation drifted into a self-stereotypical account of ovaHerero men (reiterating the significance of the men's

hat, stick and chair as recurrently noted in other sittings stated in Cabrero et al. [14]) with a further emphasis on the ecologies of the context (i.e. homestead, holy fire, cooking fire and cattle) rather than the persons themselves. Next, participants were asked to focus on individual traits, which they did not understand. Subsequently they were asked to portray themselves as individuals. After a further lack of comprehension, they allocated themselves desirable features such as “the elder”, “the youngster” “the naughty one”, “the humorous one” and “the doctor or wise man” (Figure 4).



*Fig. 4.* Five Participants; Five one-single traits.

This session in Erindiroukambe eventually showed a lack of understanding of personas, drifting into self-stereotyping and also over-simplifying archotyping.

In the attempt to avoid stereotyping, an ensuing session held in November 2014 in the town Otjinene enabled us to propose an elder woman to describing other persons through storytelling an initial scenario. The scenario was about her having first seen a school-girl passing-by in front of her homestead, and sometime later the father of this girl also passed-by asking the elder whether she would have seen his daughter around.

The elder stated that her recount on the facts would vary if the girl was in a hurry, looked calmed, or held a jumping rope, as she would look different in each situation. She also claimed that if the girl was in a group, the narration would be subjected to whether she had, for instance, committed a mistake, as in this case she was bound to be surrounded by others and put in the spotlight. As for the girl’s physical appearance, the elder argued the girl being clean, well-dressed and groomed, and also respectful.

Then the elder got further asked to comment on the girl having become a woman. She claimed she would be a good wife looking after the house, though she remarked the woman would probably hold on to her personality as acquired during childhood. To clarify on traits and adopted behaviours she went on contrasting a good girl -the one detailed above- versus a bad one -clubbing, drinking, looking scruffy. Eventually she drew and coloured the school girl and the woman on a notepad (Figures 5 & 6).

In comparison to the girl’s the good woman’s description did not bring about as many emotional states. This we argue because of the conformity to her social role within the ovaHerero culture. On the contrary, the settling of the contrast with the bad

one who goes clubbing, drinking, and that looks scruffy provided detail entailing implicit emotional states through the traits depicted.



*Figs. 5 & 6.* Participant Drawing and Final Drawings of School Girl & Woman.

## 4 Reflections and Discussion

We run four sessions with ovaHerero in pastoral Namibia to find whether persona conceptualisations carry cultural variants. This has brought up a set of vital questions around persona in relation to archetypes, stereotypes and collective depictions.

During such sessions we realised the complexity of our effort to elicit personas from a methodological and conceptual angle, as we observed such occurrences of self-stereotyping, archetypical and collective accounts, thus the further queries posed in this paper. Currently though, we can only speculate the causes for such variants.

### 4.1 Archetypes

Archetypes have come about in both sessions Okomakuara in that the mythic characters still reside within this particular collective when describing an ideal set of female and male youngsters, as well as when collectivising the information provided about family relationships and ecologies such as flora. Rather than unconscious, though, the people depicted, the young man and woman in pregnancy, have come as fully acknowledged in the existing situation. They have thus arise as argued by Nielsen [15] in that they have compounded of personality traits built on ideals of basic human patterns expressed as combinations of stabled features describing individual persons. This has been similar in Otjinene, whereby the elder woman clearly referenced dimensions characterizing psychological preferences and traits of an individual such as the school girl being extrovert or introvert depending upon the emotional situation, as well as via the array of possibilities she offered to this scenario regarding feelings. Equally the grown-up woman was described as ‘the humble wife’ as found through many ovaHerero narratives, thereby bordering amid archetypes and self-stereotypes. However these dimensions and traits have shown to be engaging to the participants’ conception of legitimacy, and which, besides, upholds tradition on ovaHerero milieus.

Thus we would argue that the above characterisations can be capable of communicating relevant user-data to the design process as it has been stressed by Nielsen [15]. Yet this needs further analysis on realities, underlying values and archetypical traits.

#### **4.2 Stereotypes**

As seen in the sitting in Erindiroukambe, participants also showed a tendency towards self-stereotyping. Nielsen states to avoid stereotypes, as they create flat characters with one only trait which does not create engagement, nor identification [13-15, p.62]; However considering for example the representation of a ovaHerero elder through his hat, stick and chair reoccurring through different sessions and locales seem stereotypical, yet they carry a much deeper meaning and significance within ovaHerero culture. Thus we could argue that in a cross-cultural context, self-stereotyping does contribute to empathy towards and understanding of the users. In all sessions individual accounts have pointed towards commonalities of the different communities.

#### **4.3 Collective Personas**

The mythic features and characters inherent to the collective unconscious of the 8 female participants in the first session in Okomakuara hinted the collaborative efforts via the collective, unquestioned behaviour in answering to the questions prompted.

Describing other people rather than deriving attributes from themselves played well with ovaHerero communities in engaging participants and avoiding stereotyping. This also provided vital insights on traits, emotional detail and physical appearance. In such settings the persons described were mostly related to others over a narrative.

Since we observed a strong sense of community and aptitudes toward working scenarios of interrelated people, we hypothesize that collaborative persona seem more suitable to ovaHerero communities than individual persona representations.

## **5 Conclusion**

In an attempt to engage Namibian pastoral ovaHerero communities into UCP sessions we soon encountered incomprehension about the concept of persona per-se, while exploring cultural variants did not allow us typifying typical persona descriptions. Thus we deployed different triggers such as probes and narrations. While probes and meaning designation to objects clearly failed, narrations showed to be more fruitful. Yet in a cross-cultural setting, tendencies of stereotyping and archetypes need a deeper analysis to ensure that interpretations of narratives are contextualized appropriately.

Reoccurring descriptions like the hat, stick and chair of the ovaHerero male elder are good indications they are indeed illustrative cultural markers and not stereotypes. This has been set by our own observations and by local ovaHerero researchers alike. A similar case emerged in the depiction of the ovaHerero female elder. Moreover descriptions of conventional individual personas seemed inappropriate within the rural, collectivistic community contexts in Namibia. An indicative of this has been the

interrelatedness of the characters hinting at collaborative persona, opening possibilities for deploying Information Systems that allow interactions where multi-user environments hold the potential of introducing relational elements like emotion, motivation and satisfaction. Thus, we argue that collective persona can help to address challenges on modelling groups and therefore community collaboration.

However, and to reach a persona cross-cultural dialogue in design thus to avoid misrepresentations, we postulate that UCP brings out specific characteristics of the cultural setting by allowing laypeople designing persona artefacts in their own terms. Hence we promote UCP for users to create self-representations aimed to support design processes, as UCP functions as an instrumental way to enable laypeople exploring and creating ways in which they desire to be depicted towards technology designs that will ultimately be useful and gratifying in their daily lives. The above concepts and methods will be pursued in detail in upcoming research.

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