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# Researching family planning through proverbial Hausa — a UX case study



Proverbs are a powerful tool to convey a message that is firmly rooted in a local vernacular, and withstands the test of time as they are commonly passed down through generations and are widely understood by people of all ages. Interpreting proverbs — like interpreting the findings of a design research project — is rather



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Transform/PHARE initiative funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID). With an average of 7.6 children per woman, Niger has the highest rates of fertility in the world, and the region of Zinder has a fertility rate is closer to 8.5 children per woman. With nationwide strategic objectives set by the Government of Niger to increase contraceptive uptake in the country, a multitude of international NGOs and government partners are working to cultivate a better understanding of the social, cultural, and religious norms that stood in the way of that objective, and in doing so, work to promote a supportive environment for family planning through outreach and advocacy with religious and traditional leaders.

It is in the context that I became fascinated by the power that Hausa, a language extremely rich in proverbial expression, held to enrich our learnings as design researchers while allowing us to better convey our design objectives to the communities with whom we work. Rather than fully dissecting these hard-to-translate idioms (as a paremiology scholar would do), I will instead let the proverbs do the talking, and showcase instances where using proverbial language was compelling in:

1. How communities learn about us
2. How we learn from communities

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## 1. How to help communicate our work to communities





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locals as well. Working with a local team ensured that when we visited a community, introductions to village chiefs, religious leaders, or healthcare providers went very smoothly.

When we thanked our hosts for their time and hospitality, they would nod at our local colleagues and say “**Da dan gari akan ci gari**” (“**It’s through a villager that one earns the trust of a villager**”), because, with them, we were welcome here.



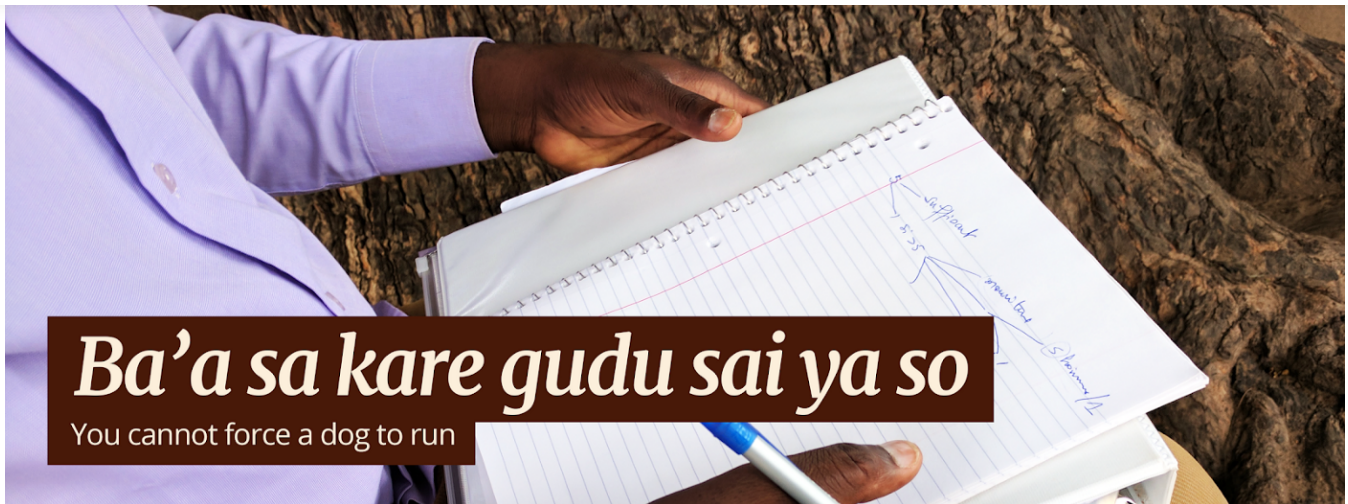
### How we explained human-centered design...

One interesting thing about Zinder is that it is a hotbed for both local and international NGOs. This means that members of the community are used to seeing people who want to talk to them and even have certain expectations around what those interactions would entail.

So when we came in, we wanted to make sure our design research approach explored the challenge through open and honest input from the community. We wanted people to freely share their opinions, so we could learn from them, but often this line of inquiry just led to incredulous reactions from those who were not used to being asked for their opinions.

It wasn’t until one of our Zinderis colleagues used this proverb to explain why we do what we do, that it made sense to participants: “**Mai daki chi ya san inda ke michi ruwa**” (“**Whoever stays in the room is the only one who knows where the water leaks**”), because you need to be on the inside to truly understand a problem.



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# *Ba'a sa kare gudu sai ya so*

You cannot force a dog to run

## How we conveyed the concept of participant consent...

At this point, we realized that proverbs could be a useful way to connect with locals and quickly explain our work, so we began to utilize them more. For example, we used the proverb “**Ba'a sa kare gudu sai ya so**” (“**You cannot force a dog to run**”) as a way to illustrate the concept of participant consent, before beginning any interview or focus group, which gave the participant liberty to stop interview any time, or skip a question they didn't feel comfortable answering. This meant altering scripts, like the one we had prepared in French beforehand to introduce consent forms, and letting our interpreters communicate the spirit of the law, rather than the letter, when translating them to Hausa.

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## 2. How to nuance and enrich what we learn from communities



# *Ciwon mace na mace ne*

The hurt of women, is for women





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When we first began to explore youth and religious leaders' perspectives on and knowledge of reproductive health practices, one thing that became clear very early was the strong role of gender norms in these communities. In most cases, prevailing social norms position men as the primary decision-makers in their households, even over issues of women's health.

But that doesn't mean that women don't form their own opinion on the matter. If the final say is the husband's, the wives generally are aware of each contraceptive method, where to access them, and have opinions on preferred methods. That's mostly because women talk to women. Women meet in the fields, at the health center, or during marriage and baptism ceremonies. They discuss their reproductive health choices, and trust one another's experiences. That's why, when a young father was having trouble persuading his wife to wait between pregnancies, he asked the women among his family and neighbors to talk to her and help change her mind. When asked why, he said: "**Ciwon mace na mace ne**" ("**The hurt of women, is for women**"), because only women understand the unique challenges they face, and can convince other women of the hurt — in this case, the health complications related to closely spaced pregnancies — they may face. So who better to persuade his wife if not other women?



### How we found out about money and polygamy...

Polygamy, or the practice of taking multiple wives, is widely acceptable for men in Niger who are of the Islamic faith, which allows husbands to marry more than one woman, but requires that each wife is treated equally, including equal financial



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actively trying to enhance awareness about the burden of polygamy to their peers: **“Jiki ma gayi”** (“**The one who feels, knows**”), because when men marry once, they know how expensive it can be and don’t want to remarry as a consequence.



### How we uncovered the importance of balance...

Similarly, when asked about their desired family size, we noticed that young people are gradually reducing their target family size as compared to preceding generations. Youth appreciate the importance of birth spacing and can cite the positive effects it has on maternal and infant health and quality of life. But it is the financial argument that seems to resonate most strongly, especially the cost implications of having and raising more children.

As we heard more than once: **“Dede ruwa dede tsaki”** (“**Just the right amount of water for the right amount of flour**”), because increasingly, more young families in Zinder recognize the importance of family planning to balance the number of desired children with the means of the parents.

This last proverb lent linguistic and cultural legitimacy to one of our most important design research findings — that expenses could be a powerful motivating argument. The phrase itself resonated strongly when incorporated into early prototypes and ultimately became the name of one of the programs that we recommended for pilot implementation. That program seeks to foster an understanding of household expenses and the importance of only having as many children as is economically feasible. Ultimately, this promotes family well-being and enhances young people’s





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## How to unlock the power of proverbial expression in design research?

Following these examples, I wanted to conclude with three lessons I've learned during this project, that I will carry with me moving forward:

- The first lesson, obviously, is the importance of engaging native speakers as key members of design research teams as only they can contextualize things in a way no one else can.
- The second lesson is to insist on the value of literal translation when working with local interpreters, and taking the time to get the translation right so the entire team understands that what is being said is equally as important as how it is being said.
- The third lesson is to shy away from rigid scripts (for example to introduce consent forms that needed to be signed by research participants), especially those originally written in a different language before being translated, and focusing on the spirit of the law, rather than the letter.



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