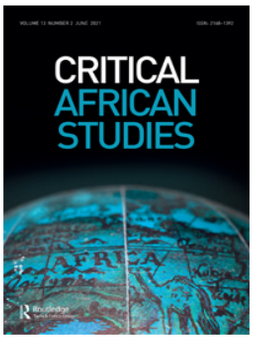

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Maasai perspectives on modernity: narratives of evolution, nature and culture

Perspectives Massaï sur la modernité: récits sur l'évolution, la nature et la culture

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The narrative of evolutionist modernity is a former scientific theory which has fuelled and legitimized deeply harmful imperialist hierarchies, but increasingly influences how Maasai make sense of modernity. Borrowing from narratology and building on twelve years of intermittent ethnography in East-African Maasailand, I respond to recent calls for cognitive justice. Firstly, I contribute to insight in how Maasai, as Indigenous Southern people, conceptualize key scientific concepts such as modernity, as to further the availability of their understandings as partners in the dialogue of theory building. I especially regard continuities and shifts in their uses of nature/culture and Culture/culture dichotomies. Secondly, I disclose, question and deconstruct the continued centralization of Eurocentric narratives and modernist assumptions in academic sense-making, as this unreflexively denies the gradual difference and continued entanglements of scientific, ex-scientific and non-scientific narratives, and the need to include Southern experiences and knowledges to make science a truly global knowledge system.

Keywords: modernity; nature/culture; modernist; evolutionist modernity; Maasai; cognitive justice

Le récit de la modernité évolutionniste est une ancienne théorie scientifique qui a alimenté et légitimisé des hiérarchies impérialistes profondément néfastes, mais influence de plus en plus la façon dont les Massaï comprennent la modernité. J'emprunte de la narratologie et m'appuie sur douze ans d'ethnographie intermittente en terre Massaï en Afrique de l'Est, je réponds aux appels récents pour une justice cognitive. Tout d'abord, je contribue en donnant un aperçu dont les Massaï, en tant que people indigène du Sud conceptualisent des concepts scientifiques clés tels que la modernité, afin de faire avancer la disponibilité de leurs compréhensions en tant que partenaires dans le dialogue de la construction de théorie. J'étudie en particulier les continuités et les modifications dans l'utilisation qu'ils font des dichotomies nature/culture et Culture/culture. En second lieu, je révèle, questionne et déconstruis la poursuite de la centralisation des discours eurocentristes et des hypothèses modernistes dans la construction de sens universitaire, puisque cela nie de façon non-réflexive la différence graduelle et les enchevêtrements des discours scientifiques, des anciens discours scientifiques, et des discours non-scientifiques, et le besoin d'inclure des expériences et des connaissances du Sud pour que la science devienne un système de connaissance véritablement mondial.

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Mots clés: modernité; nature/culture; moderniste; modernité évolutionniste; Maasai; justice cognitive

Introduction

The concept of modernity in scientific[1] approaches is still considered highly problematic, because it continues to be Eurocentric (Bhambra 2007) and is often imagined as standing outside or beyond culture (Argyrou 2015). Southern scholars highlight the continued need to decolonize the historical imagination and problematize how modernity is approached in relation to Southern societies (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001; Zhiping 1999). Although the idea of multiple modernities is now common (Eisenstadt 2000, 2004; Huntington 2002) and research has been done on what modernity looks like in different parts of Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Eisenstadt 2004; Geschiere, Meyer, and Pels 2008; Martins and Abreu 2001; Wright 2003), there is still too little insight in and dialogue with Southern, and especially Indigenous, approaches and conceptualizations of modernity. Allen (2006) has provided a critique of Giddens' (1990) conceptualization of modernity from a general Indigenous perspective, but focuses mainly on Indigenous peoples' supra-national political struggles, and a similar activist angle is prevalent in literature that employs the concept 'indigenous modernities' (Hogan and Singh 2018; Robins 2003; Ravindran 2015).

In this article, instead of describing a general, externally focused Indigenous agenda, I discuss the specifics and shifts in East-African Maasai' approaches to modernity. I focus on the dilemmas that arise as Maasai seem to increasingly employ modernist assumptions, such as the narrative of evolutionist modernity, to grapple with the transformations they are experiencing. Originally developed as a scientific theory, this narrative has become heavily criticized for fuelling and legitimizing unwanted colonialist, imperialist and racist ideas and practices as well as postcolonial repression, violence and exploitation (Kratz and Gordon 2002; Sobania 2002). However, to dismiss Maasai understandings as simple appropriations of Northern scientific theories which installed a 'false consciousness', would be to continue a tradition of paternalistic, non-dialogical and exclusivist Eurocentric scientific approaches.

My objectives are twofold and interrelated. Firstly, I wish to further insights in Indigenous conceptualizations of key social scientific notions such as modernity. Secondly, I aim to contribute to the continued disclosure, questioning and deconstruction of modernist, Eurocentric and non-reflexive views in academic knowledge making. I thus respond to concerns that the necessary multiplication of points of view in scientific conversations is hampered because Southern conceptualizations often remain unknown, and when known, have not been taken as valuable players in the construction of theories and understandings (Connell 2007; Moichela 2017).

This is urgent because Northern knowledge constructs are still represented unequally in academic thought, to the detriment of other knowledge systems (Chilisa 2012; Smith 2012). Thus, the experiences and perspectives of the majority of humankind are largely passed by, prompting complaints that resulting analyses are inadequate, unhelpful, or even irrelevant to most of the world's population (Connell 2014). If Northern frames of thought and constructs of truth continue to be presented as dominant and universal, centralizing Northern experiences and interests, science is prevented from being a truly global knowledge system. As academic thought is of great importance in education, politics and other spheres of professional and daily life, Southern scholars have pointed out this produces a 'cognitive crisis' with 'millions of … people … bearing the uncomfortable burden of speaking and living in unfamiliar cultural idioms' (Hoppers 2015, 98–99). This does not only lead to self-doubt and insecurity, but also impacts community livelihoods, human rights and democratic citizenship, resulting in calls for cognitive justice, which is

the right for a multitude of knowledges to exist, be valued and used to serve the needs of people in their societies (Hoppers 2001; Visvanathan 2009).

I base my discussion upon twelve years of intermittent ethnography, including multiple stays of up to six months in localities in East-African Maasailand.[2] Although I worked with a broad variety of Maasai from different Maasai sections with divergent socio-economic statuses and disparate formal education levels, here I focus on Maasai who engage in a sedentary lifestyle, having their (main) homes in small villages in rural areas, and generally combine income from livestock with subsistence agriculture and/or occasional wage labour.[3] In my approach, I borrow from narratology, which is the study of how narratives structure perceptions of the world around us (Bal 2009). I will use the designations 'Global North' and 'Global South' ('North' and 'South' in short), because, although geographically incorrect, many Southerners prefer these terms (Connell 2007).[4] A certain reproduction of problematic concepts and dichotomies seems inevitable to capture the experiences, analyses and understandings of non-academics and academics alike, but I consider these categories fluid, temporary and with open boundaries. Although some might consider my approach postmodern in places, I will omit this term because its definition and usefulness are still under discussion, and its distinction from modernity is problematic (Bruner 1994; Kellner 1999; Kirby 1993; Lutkehaus and Cool 1999).

Below, I shortly discuss my approach following narrative theory, and introduce the concepts of modernity, the modernist discourse and the narrative of evolutionist modernity. Then I will address the modernist nature/culture and culture/Culture dichotomies as they gain ground in Maasai understandings. Finally, I will explore the intricate entanglements between scientific, ex-scientific and non-scientific narratives around evolutionist modernity, and how an awareness of the interwoven tapestry of understandings can further theoretically productive dialogues.

Narrative approaches and understanding modernity

According to narrative theorists, 'practically everything in culture has a narrative aspect to it' (Bal 2009, 225), and I agree that 'narrative structures organize and give meaning to experience' (Bruner 2007, 134). Following the insight that 'stories are interpretive devices which give meaning to the present' (Bruner 2007, 134), I approach the writing of history and scientific knowledge making as narrative processes too, which fosters the awareness that theories cannot be timeless or value free, because it is impossible to disentangle the events which happened in the world from their subjective interpretations (Jackson 1998). The heightened reflexive awareness that acknowledges this situation is one of the aspects that distinguishes scientific knowledge making from other narrative productions (Kuhn 1962; Popper [1963] 2002). One way to feed and strengthen this reflexivity which has been insufficiently used, is the employment of contrasting views to spur (self-critical) analysis of concepts and theories (Wijngaarden and Idahosa, forthcoming). As the engagement with discourses and viewpoints of people from a variety of reference systems has the capacity to unveil seemingly self-explanatory, incoherent, unsound, unproductive or missing aspects in dominant thinking (Keet 2014), this may broadenen the validity as well as the relevance of the knowledge produced.

The scientific definition of modernity continues to fuel discussions, not in the least because the complex entanglements that result from the academic thought system having developed in modernity's womb (Connell 2007; Lutkehaus and Cool 1999). Until relatively recently, the now considered problematic narrative of evolutionist modernity was said to achieve an understanding of the world according to scientifically adequate principles (e.g. Parsons and Toby (1977) and Rostow (1960)). This classical modernization theory has roots in the philosophical explorations of Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau ([1754] 2004, [1762] 2005), and teleological theories describing social evolution (Marx 1867; Morgan 1877; Tylor 1878, 1920; Weber

[1905] 2016). It essentially relates how a select group of humans in Europe evolved from primitive natural men to civilized humans as they found the key to objective knowledge, describing a fundamental hierarchical schism between nature and culture as well as pre-moderns and moderns in which the latter are considered more advanced. Placing societies on a highly problematic, unilinear scale of development from a Eurocentric perspective, it presupposes 'the West' is a model for 'the Rest' (Hall 1996) and places the monopoly of truth into the hands of Northern dominated science, informing a deeply harmful hierarchy between 'self' and 'other'.

Today, most academics agree that modernity is an era that is characterized by qualitatively new relationships among people and between nature and culture. Its heightened reflexivity and questioning of transcendental visions and ontological conceptions has resulted in technological advances and highly dynamic societies, as well as communist, fascist and fundamentalist movements (Eisenstadt 2000). Although most social scientists agree that modernity emerged as a result of unique circumstances and developments of 18th century Europe (Diamond 1998; Giddens 1984), it never existed in a single, homogenous form, instead being constituted of a variety of cultural and institutional forms even in different parts of Europe (Bud and Shiach 2018; Eisenstadt 2004; Wittrock 2000). Furthermore, the innovations that increased the dominion over nature can only be understood taking a global approach including the South (Frank 1970; Wallerstein 1979) as they were rooted in Industrial Revolution and capitalism, which relied heavily on colonial conquest and global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. However, the resulting 'new global cultural economy … cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center–periphery models' (Appadurai 1996, 32) but rather as the interplay between a variety of massive and speedily operating global cultural flows that results in cultural forms which are fundamentally fractal, consist of polythetic overlaps and resemblances, and are in constant flux. Thus, the simple understanding of modernity as a singular and essentially European phenomenon, a cultural programme which spread and was appropriated by other societies, or even forms a model for other parts of the world, is now severely criticized (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Eisenstadt 2004; Eriksen 2001; Ferguson 1999).

Furthermore, the modernist idea that there is a strict separation between the subjective inner world of people's thoughts and perceptions, and an objective natural outer world – which can be known according to mathematical laws that provide absolutely certain knowledge, and will make people fully rational – has been attacked (Scarborough 1994). Based on insights from postmodernism, philosophy of science as well as quantum physics and chaos theory, academics have reflexively come to the conclusion that they produce knowledge of which they are part (Davies 1999), and which is fragmentary, paradigmatic (Kuhn 1962) and continually under construction (Popper [1963] 2002). Even in the supposedly more objective natural sciences, wave/particle duality (Eibenberger et al. 2013) consistently indicates that the researcher does not stand outside the reality (s)he observes (Hobson 1995). Incompleteness, subjectivity and temporality of knowledge are considered to play an even greater role in the social sciences.

Thus, modernist claims that specific forms of thought (rational and logical) generate timeless and universally valid knowledge, produce a situation in which essentially falsifiable theories (Popper [1963] 2002) come to be used as truths in an ideological sense (Cox 1983). The influences of power and 'Zeitgeist' on former scientific understandings are often quickly identified. However, the subjectivities present in contemporary knowledge are much more difficult to detect, as is illustrated in recent discussions that break down the supposed objectivity of colours (Surrallés 2016; Wierzbicka 2008). Awareness rises that non-scientific categorizations can also be based on empirical criteria (thus being objective in the sense that they are justified by observable distinctions) only that these distinctions might be different from those that Northern academics make (Sahlins 1995). As a result, even though scientific thought is a system which is in some ways different from narrative systems that rely on mythological or religious sense-making

(Deschamps 1997), these differences are gradual and contextual instead of absolutist binary oppositions.

Although cultural relativism already broke down hierarchical classifications between cultures during the 19th and 20th century, there are recent academic publications that still build their frameworks and vocabularies on the logic of evolutionist modernity (Inglehart and Welzel 2007) and (underlying) assumptions in social scientific theories still reflect evolutionary presuppositions, also because an exoticizing gaze of the South was immanent in the thinking and language of many founding fathers of social science, who continue to be of high importance (Hall 1996). The narrative of evolutionist modernity informs the hierarchical modernist dichotomies of traditional/modern, them/us, nature/culture, value/fact, irrational/rational, other/self, body/mind, animal/human and female/male, which lay not only at the basis of (post)colonial imperialism, but are also complexly intertwined with the fundaments of science. Up till today, they have only been partly deconstructed, with the nature/culture binary often regarded as the core underlying dichotomy, as it forms 'the key foundation of modernist epistemology' (Descola and Pálsson 1996, 12).

Engagement with a nature/culture system

The modernist rationale of a nature/culture binary is not universal, and has never been clear-cut. As Latour has argued, there is actually no way to logically create an absolute distinction between nature and culture; only relative distinctions make sense (Latour 1993). Anthropologists have established that a variety of Indigenous peoples, from the Amazon and beyond, perceive the human and natural worlds as interactive and indivisible (High 2010; Ingold 1994; Viveiros de Castro 2004). The essential difference between nature and culture is now often understood as a relatively recent, specific Northern notion (Descola 2013; Mullin 2002).

Maasai people also make a distinction between nature and culture, but these are intensely related and permeable, and intersect with the gradual transition between domestic and wild spaces. The cultured space starts in the *ɛnkáji* (house) moving outwards to the *ɛnkâŋ* (circular homestead including domesticated animals) and into *oséro* (the bush country, including wild animals) which is the part of nature where a lot of human activity takes place, such as grazing livestock, gathering firewood or building materials, executing ceremonies and travelling to the market or to other homesteads. As described by Spencer (2003), the bush country holds uncertainty, ambiguity and dangers as compared to the safety of the homestead, which is ruled by the elders. The bush country is essentially controlled by the *ɨlmʊ́rran* (warriors), who in Maasai thinking, are associated with the wild (see also Hodgson 1999). Consequently, executing an activity inside or outside the homestead's gates, or passing through these gates into the bush and back is common as a ceremonial symbol (Spencer 2003). Finally, the word *ɔlŋâm* refers to remote nature spaces that are considered to lie outside any human presence or influence. No people can be encountered, and it is described as 'empty', a place where people would be 'lost'. Most areas in Maasailand that Northerners would consider wild nature, Maasai consider *oséro,* a partly domesticated nature–culture space. Many Maasai have settled more or less permanently now (Hodgson 2011), but when their lives were still semi-nomadic and the *ɨlmʊ́rran* lived in *ɨmányát* (ceremonial or warrior villages) out in the bush country, boundaries between spaces of nature and culture are likely to have been even more gradual.

In Maasailand's nature–culture spaces, Maasai-wildlife interactions can best be described as a complex entanglement that consists of aspects of exploitation and conflict as well as reverence and symbiosis, which permeate all spheres of material and symbolic life, even after death (Wijngaarden 2012). Wild animals provide a variety of goods and services, including objects for daily use or of ceremonial value, medicines and charms. For example, during milking, cows are

generally tied with strips of wildebeest skin; the sole Maasai musical instrument is a Kudu horn; the *isípólio* (newly circumcised men) hunt birds to decorate themselves; warriors' leg pieces are made of colobus monkey and their shields of buffalo skins; and the elders carry a fan made of wildebeest hairs. At the same time, elephants provide for the availability of firewood; wild grazers' watchful eyes increase herders' safety; and the bodies of the deceased are left for wild animals to eat. Wild animals play an important role in mythological stories and in the clan structure, including for example the clan of the elephant (*ilmolelian*), rhino (*ilaiser*) and hyena (*iltaarosero*) (different spellings are used, see Kipury 1996; Reid and Chapman 1997; Wijngaarden 2010a).

However, when working in tourism or cooperating with NGOs, Maasai commonly underline the separation between them and wildlife, often vigilantly expressing that they only consume domesticated animals, and despise anyone who kills and eats wildlife. By reproducing the modernist nature/culture dichotomy, they establish themselves as conservationists as well as cultural people according to a modernist logic, in the process eliminating information about their personal use of wild animal products, including the consumption of meat. The same Maasai privately told me they have eaten eland and buffalo, whose meat is favoured as they are considered to resemble cows, and many consumed giraffe, bushbuck, topi and gazelle occasionally, while young boys often feed themselves by hunting smaller game while herding. Moreover, lion fat is drunken to strengthen the body and heal it from internal injuries (Wijngaarden 2012; Read 1982).

To be sure, the statement that Maasai do not eat bushmeat is not fully foreign, and does have roots in a narrative that is present widely in Maasai societies, which establishes a hierarchy between *ɨlTórróbo* people, who are Maa-speaking hunter-gatherers, whom are generally considered to live closer to nature by (supposedly) pastoralist Maasai. However, when formulated in an absolute form, the fluidity of the boundaries between the wild and domesticated animal, and the natural and cultural realms are erased, in favour of a strict nature/culture distinction as is common in modernist Northern discourse that prevails in conservation and tourism.

Over the past decades, Maasai have also taken on a modernist logic that strictly divides nature and culture in the establishment of conservancies on their lands. According to modernist discourse, the daily life of moderns is increasingly artificial, subdued to technology and choked off by ordered and managed society, leading to the desire to escape modern life by visiting places that are supposedly outside modernity (Chambers 2000; Cohen and Kennedy 2007; MacCannell 1973). This desire fuelled the creation of protected 'parks', which are actually as concerned with the production of nature as with its preservation, as they are created based on an ideal image of areas that are 'primordial, undisturbed, unchanging and pure, in the absence of humans' (Neumann 1995, 154).

In much of Africa, this started with establishing colonialist hunting grounds according to the reasoning that animal resources had to be protected from local 'poachers', only allowing the occasional colonial hunting party to enter (Steinhart 2006). Foreign conservationists continued to rely on the logic of the human separation from and control over nature in the creation of subsequent reserves, even though 'the idea of nature as a pristine, African wilderness was largely mythical, and could only become a reality by relocating thousands of Africans whose agency had in fact shaped the landscape for millennia' (Neumann 1995, 150). Even 'the savannah ecosystems of East Africa, which support the richest variety and density of large mammals in the world have been strongly shaped by human activity and are not the "wilderness" areas so often considered by early explorers and naturalists' (Little 1996, 37).[5] The typical Rift Valley savannah landscape, stretching from Lake Turkana in Northern Kenya until the Maasai Steppe in central Tanzania, has been actively shaped by Maasai herders, their livestock and use of fire essentially opening up the woodlands. These influences have become apparent especially when colonial relocations expelled the Maasai from the green hills and highlands of Kenya and

Tanzania to dryer areas, in order to expand agriculture as well as parks, reserves and other conservation areas (Hughes 2006; Lamprey and Reid 2004; Spear 1993).[6]

As they continue to be denied fertile land and water resources, Maasai living adjacent to protected areas have been adapting their lifestyles and sources of sustenance. A good example are the areas surrounding the Mara National Reserve, where a process of subdivision and allocation of lands resulted in Maasai obtaining title deeds in the early years of the new millennium. Many have fenced their plots, started agricultural projects and built permanent houses, in addition designating considerable parts of their lands as conservation areas, which often continue to be managed communally (Wijngaarden 2010a). Following a modernist model, these protected areas are set aside exclusively for wildlife and tourism, reinforcing bans on any other human presence as well as grazing. Reminiscent of colonial times, their establishment caused Maasai people to be resettled, sometimes against their will, only that now they were relocated under pressure exerted by Maasai controlled forces, regardless of the title deed to their land (Wijngaarden 2010a).

The modernist nature/culture model is followed, even though most Maasai are aware that many species of wildlife are actually more abundant outside than inside protected areas, because the influences of Maasai grazing, burning and semi-permanent settlement produce a more varied and attractive ecosystem (Ibid.), and local research confirms that conservation policy that completely excludes 'traditional pastoral use may inadvertently impoverish the very lands it was instituted to protect' (Reid et al. 2003, 129). The partly integrated and fluid nature–culture ecosystem dynamic that makes up Maasailand is changing fundamentally not simply due to modern changes in activities and lifestyles (Veldhuis et al. 2019), but also due to Maasai's increased active engagements with a modernist narrative that separates nature and culture rigidly.

Balancing culture and culture

A special variety of the nature/culture dichotomy is the modernist distinction between culture and Culture. The narrative of evolutionist modernity supposes that pre-moderns still live their lives determined by a nature–culture continuum, where nature and society overlap, while moderns, who have separated themselves from nature, live in Culture (high culture or civilization). The culture/Culture distinction thus signifies the dichotomy between nature/culture, and constitutes a reformulation of the pre-modern/modern, other/self, primitive/civilized dichotomies.

Drawing inspiration from tales of Swahili traders (Hodgson 1999), early colonizers, missionaries and explorers in East Africa (i.e. Hinde and Hinde 1901; Hollis 1905; Merker 1904; Roosevelt 1910; Thomson 1887) described Maasai as 'a global image of African tribesmen' (Bruner 2001, 882) and 'the antithesis to modern Europeans' (Hodgson 2001, 124), making them one of the most famous representations of people devoid of and resistant to modernity (Galaty 2002; Palmberg 2001; Schneider 2006; Sobania 2002). As other supposedly pre-modern cultures, they have often been approached as 'nature people' (Wijngaarden 2016) who are 'part of the fauna' (Neumann 1995, 155).[7]

The 'othering' of Maasai has continued under the ruling African elites after independence (Hodgson 1999), for example through the infamous development campaign 'Operation Dress-Up' of the late 1960s. Some of the government imposed restrictions of traditionally clad Maasai to access public facilities and medical institutions as well as public transport, bars and restaurants lasted till the 1970s (Schneider 2006; Spear 1997; Talle 1999), and until today, Maasai continue to be considered primitive, ignorant and 'behind' in the wider East African society (Wijngaarden 2016). The tourism sector has monetized this Maasai image, often presenting them in one breath with wildlife, as unchanging, authentic, ideal, wild and natural beings who date from a timeless era before the arrival of Europeans, and are in danger of dying out, but

can be encountered as part of the tourist adventure (Bruner 2001; Corbey 1993; Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994). As the constructed nature parks, the constructed Maasai image promises a fulfilment of modern tourists' yearning for the authenticity, harmony and naturalness which the imagined Edenic pre-modern societies have supposedly not yet lost (Cohen and Kennedy 2007; Lanfant, Allcock, and Bruner 1995; MacCannell 1973).

Of course, Maasai were not 'without history' (Wolf 1990) before the arrival of Europeans. Originally from the Northern African Nile region, their focus on pastoralism became possible only due to changes in weather patterns 3000 years ago (Spear 1997). Who Maasai are today is the result of centuries of life in a modern world, and the appearance and way of life of Maasai has been severely influenced by modern institutions, technologies and events, as they continually engage with the increasing flows of commodities and ideas to add to their perpetually evolving cultural archives (Bruner 2002; Hodgson 2001, 2011; Hughes 2006; Kratz and Gordon 2002; Spear 1993; Wijngaarden 2018). For example, the tartan blankets and colourful beads which are supposedly original, timeless and emblematic markers of the Maasai image, are all relatively recent trade acquisitions that have their origin in Europe (Laizer 2018; Vierke 2008). In fact, Maasai developed their arsenal of beaded jewellery during two decennia at the end of the 19th century, spurred by colonial interventions that prevented them from publicly expressing themselves through their weaponry (Vierke 2008), and most beads today are still imported from Czech Republic (Sciama 1998; Vierke 2006; Wijngaarden 2018). Moreover, the motorcycle tires that make up typical Maasai sandals are mostly Asian.

Maasai were not simply influenced, but actively (re)shaped, used and manipulated the colonial and postcolonial system for their own purposes, for example in the context of Maasai leader Olenana's alliance with the British in the late 19th century, and in the 1911 appeals against relocations, when Maasai were one of the first Indigenous people to bring a case against the colonial rulers in the High Court of Britain (Hughes 2006). More recently, many Maasai started to employ the tourism imagery for their own benefit (Bruner 2002; Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994; Salazar 2012; Wijngaarden 2012) and adopted novel strategies and discourses to engage with (inter)national actors including the United Nations, governments and NGOs (Hodgson 2011). Instead of having simply been affected or overtaken by modernity, they are in conversation with it.

It is this dialogue that has led Maasai to commonly express themselves in terms of an evolutionary modernist perspective, for example when they suppose a hierarchy in which the North is said to be 'ahead', while their own society still has to 'grow up'. The modernist approach presumes that pre-modern cultures are static, unified, localized, isolated and pure entities until influences from modernity pollute them. Consequently, the teleological evolution towards being modern means leaving your culture behind. Related concerns with pure origins and fears of acculturation have increasingly occupied Maasai, seemingly reflecting centuries of Northern concerns with Maasai 'disappearing' (Hinde and Hinde 1901; Bruner 2002). This has resulted in an ever increasing number of local initiatives to produce books in which Maasai wish to describe their cultural practices (such as Ole Saitoti 1980), often motivated not primarily commercially, but by the fear that aspects of Maasai culture are being forgotten.

Spencer already recorded an 'ambivalence of the Maasai towards modern opportunities' (2003, 129), and over time, money, Northern medicine, religion and education have been perceived as powerful as well as potential threats to the cultural and moral order (see also Hodgson 1999). In my research projects, Maasai who perceive themselves in the midst of the process they designate as development, also increasingly speak of a feeling of estrangement and yearning for a simpler, less commercialized and less fast-paced life, in ways which resemble well-researched Northern desires to escape modernity and return to a more original, less

complicated and more natural state of being (Bruner 2002; Cohen 1989; Echtner and Prasad 2003; MacCannell 1973; Salazar 2017).

Modernist logics are also well reflected in the emic expression *ɨlmaasáɨ́ ote*[8] ('Maasai original'), which Maasai use to refer to Maasai in (more) remote areas who are supposedly 'pure' and 'follow up on the culture'. 'Maasai original' are designated 'natural', for example by the expression '*ootiu anaa apa ake pee etumi*', which literally translates 'who are original as the way they were found' and can be interpreted as 'unchanged'. Key aspects include speaking Maa and the absence of 'mixing' with other peoples, which is understood in terms of 'blood' (intermarriage) as well as cultural practices and behaviour.

Overall, Maasai with more formal education and in higher socio-economic positions are most concerned with purity. They judge many of the practices of the wider Maasai society as behaviours that 'pollute' the culture with other influences, for example proposing that a person should not combine t-shirts, sweaters, suits, shoes or jackets with Maasai *ɨlkárâsh* (sheets worn as clothing) or *intukutukí* (sandals). Themselves, they tend to wear either their full Maasai attire or slightly formal European style dress, and consider anything in-between bad in taste and detrimental to their culture. An interesting example is a Maasai wedding which took place with the groom and bride being dressed in a suit and bridal gown. However, during one section of the celebrations, groom, bride, flower girl and flower boy entered in full Maasai regalia. To the surprise of many, the beadwork they wore had been made on special request to reflect the colour schemes of the *Nyangusi* age-set of the groom's grandfather (who was born in 1918, and passed away twenty years ago) instead of the fashion of the groom's own or the contemporary age-set. This wedding seemed organized according to a modernist idea of Culture/culture, the 'modern' being adopted, and the 'traditional' being a heritage.

So, have Maasai stopped seeing culture as something that they live in? Certainly, recent Maasai wedding celebrations increasingly contrast with those taking place several or even many years ago, which followed other extensive sets of details with regard to cultural dress and ceremonial content, including an obsession with the latest Maasai beadwork fashions as created by every new generation (Vierke 2008) as well as the strict separation of age-sets and genders due to food taboos. However, to say the newly emerging wedding styles are not part of Maasai culture is to deny the famous Maa and Swahili gospel artists blaring through electronic speakers, the importance of plastic chairs for the elders, the dinner of pilau eaten by the women sitting on the ground in a separate area, the language used by a warrior as he flirts with his girlfriend on his cellphone, and the live performance of a choir in unified *ɨlkárâsh* costumes. This is the unique bricolage of aspects of European, American and a variety of African marriage traditions that were selected, appropriated, reshaped, combined and even transcended to create a contemporary, uniquely Maasai event.

The idea of 'Maasai original' is an ideal type, also to many Maasai. Most are aware that their people immigrated from more Northern African areas, and that different sections of Maasai have been in ongoing disputes with regard to which peoples are truly Maasai. Moreover, they know their people have received considerable amounts of strangers for a long time, who through intermarriage, initiation into the age-set system and language, were integrated as Maasai, often not taking more than two generations (Spear 1993), being celebrated as acquisitions that confirm the appeal of Maasai culture. It is common knowledge to them that much of contemporary daily life, also in more remote areas, includes objects and practices that have been introduced from outside Maasailand. In fact, beads that carry the label 'made in Czech Republic' are considered original as opposed to Chinese beads, and the dynamic age-set system has spurred many innovations, including beadwork fashions that feature symbols of helicopters, police sirens as well as flags of political parties for generations (Wijngaarden 2010b).

Despite a long list of ongoing changes in Maasai lifestyles, power constellations, rituals and regulations (Galaty 1993; Hodgson 1999), Maasai have not always been without ambiguity or resistance towards (certain) changes in their culture. Illustrative is the use of the label *olméékí* (plural *ilmeék),* which Hodgson designates as 'an implicit critique of all that modernity represented to Maasai' (1999, 36). The term was originally (and still is) used to pejoratively refer to non-Maasai. However, in early colonial times it came to be a derogatory label Maasai used for 'modern' Maasai men, for example because they wore Northern clothes, were associated with the colonial government, were baptized, had gone to school and/or were ignorant of cattle. These days, many elders proclaim they were fools for having clung to pastoralism whilst rejecting education and involvement with the state, and increasingly depend on their *ilmeék* sons for support. The view that the power of the pen has replaced the power of the spear has become common all over Maasailand (Hodgson 1999), as Maasai have widely chosen to actively engage themselves with the modern world, however, emphasizing they are deciding to do so *with* their culture (Allegretti 2018; Wijngaarden 2010b).

The rise and shifts in the meanings of concepts like *ilmeék* and 'Maasai original' reflect the dynamic, progressive, communicative and reflective approaches which have accompanied Maasai as they reshuffle old and new interpretations surrounding perceived hierarchies in cultures as expressed in a culture/Culture dichotomy. However, contrary to what modernist narratives suggest, such a dualism was already present before modernity, and has been dynamic and relative, with the two sides never being strictly separated or opposed, nor subjected to a simple or consistent hierarchy, because their contents are continually shifting. This interactive dynamism is well captured by the Maa way of saying 'modern', which is *lɛ́ táatá* (literally meaning 'of today') and used to refer to anything that is considered of recent times or new. Both novel Northern ideas and technology as well as the beadwork of the contemporary age-set are considered *lɛ́ táatá* and provide Maasai modernity with its constantly renewing colours and designs. This Maasai approach aligns with contemporary social scientific understandings of cultures as 'emergent' (Fischer 2018), dynamic, fluid and negotiable constructions that contain aspects which are constantly (re-)invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Through interactions with the modernist discourse, novel ideas about having a culture and heritage have emerged and become part of the contemporary Maasai cultural repertoire.

Interactions between narratives

The idea that the modernist narrative is essentially a European narrative which the Maasai simply appropriated, is a Eurocentric modernist assumption in itself. In the first place, social inequality (whether in ethnic, gender, class or other relationships) has been framed in terms of hierarchical nature/culture or culture/Culture divisions in many times and spaces, generally in order to legitimize power differences by deeming 'the other' closer to nature (Eriksen 2001). Maasai have used these kind of conceptualizations regularly not only with *ɨlTórróbo,* but also with whites (for example designating them as uncultured, unrestrained or even animal-like (Wijngaarden 2014)). Secondly, and related to the first point, the narrative of evolutionist modernity has been built upon and influenced by a variety of older narratives, most of which are not European at all, but can be traced to Asia.

The story of evolutionary modernity is rooted in ancient Hebrew narratives now collected in Genesis, in which eating from the tree of knowledge produced a fall from the original, perfectly innocent and natural human state in Eden. The related concept of the 'noble savage' was recorded to be used long before the 16th century, for example to characterize the Scottish and Irish during English expansionist conflicts (Ellingson 2001). The texts of Genesis 1 and 2 are in turn imbued

with Mesopotamian narratives, containing clear traces of the creation myth of *Enũma Eliš* and the *Atra-ḫasîs* epic (Carr 1996; Lambert 1965), reminding strongly of the Sumerian narrative about the beautiful lush garden of Edinu, the earthly paradise which was supposedly located to the East of Sumer, the current Southeast Iraq (Meagher 2002).

Another narrative which is likely to have influenced the narrative of evolutionist modernity is the Genesis 9 curse of Canaan. This story in turn contains Mesopotamian influences, most prominently from the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic (Lambert 1965; van der Kooij 2010), and has been used widely in imperial and colonial conquests to legitimate slavery. It relates how Noah had three sons, Shem, Japheth an Ham, who repopulated the earth after the flood. When Noah got drunk, his youngest son Ham saw his nakedness, telling his brothers, but not covering his father. This prompted Noah to curse Ham's son Canaan to serve as a slave to Shem.

Maasai as well as a variety of other Africans I encountered related this story, sometimes in slightly different form, as the reason for the hierarchy between what they consider white, Indian and African people, pointing to the lack of modernity in Africa as caused by Ham's cursed behaviour. Amongst the Kisonko Maasai, I found the lack of modernity is further explained by a story which relates how originally, *olóíbòrr* (white person in Maa; at times the Swahili equivalent *mzungu* is also used) and Maasai were half-brothers, sons of an old man who had a Maasai wife as well as a white wife. The father favoured the Maasai son, but the white boy tricked and stole the blessing of the dying father, inheriting all knowledge, including the ability to create technology. According to this story, the Maasai boy was left with herding the cows, but maybe one day would be educated and lifted up by his white half-brother. This Maasai narrative is almost similar in structure and detail to the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 27 (Wijngaarden 2014), which in turn is probably a modified version of trickster stories early Israelites told each other in hill-country villages in Canaan after they had escaped from Egypt (Carr and Conway 2010, 45–48).

These Hebrew narratives might have come to the Maasai through missionary efforts in the past centuries, as most Maasai are now Christians. However, versions of them have possibly accompanied the Maasai for a much longer time, as these tales have their roots in the African Nile region, as do the Eastern Nilotic speaking Maasai (Spear 1993). Some Maasai point to the mentioning of the name of their people in 1 Chronicles 9:12 and 12:18, arguing they are part of the tribes of Israel. Moreover, it is striking that a narrative that is told among Purko Maasai about the historical hero Olonana and his brother Senteu, (sons of *olóíboni* (prophet) Mbatiany),[9] whose battle was deeply connected to colonial interventions and caused one of the most prominent schisms in Maasai history (Ndege 2003), also clearly follows the same narrative structure as the Genesis account of Jacob and Esau, this time with Olonana stealing the blessing (Wijngaarden 2016, see also Kareithi 2012).

However, another possibility is that the Hamitic myth played a role in the suggestion of historical contact between the Israelites and Maasai. After all, the narrative of Noah's sons was also used in a slightly different form to account for the existence of advanced African civilizations such as Egypt. As the British allied with the Maasai in their colonial wars, they included Maasai as the noble descendants of Ham (Rigby 1996; Waller 1976), basing themselves on Genesis 10, which relates how only Ham's son Canaan was cursed, with the rest of his offspring being reimagined as Caucasoid (Sanders 1969, 532; Seligman and Seligman 1932). Although part of scientific discourse for a while, contemporary anthropologists consider this a racial narrative which is not useful as a physical or linguistic classification (Rigby 1996). Nevertheless, as outlined here, the continued influence of discarded narratives should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Culture is a perpetually contested, interactive process, which is neither completely integrated, nor sharply bounded (Bruner 2005), and as a result, the narratives that cultures carry, are partly shared and continually adapted. Kearney poses that 'the human self has a narrative identity based on the multiple stories it recounts and receives from others' (Kearney 2003, 231), because it is through contact with 'the other' that people come to define 'the self'.

According to Rigby, a variety of racist ideas such as the Hamitic myth have 'even penetrated Maasai ideas about themselves' (1996, 67), and many scholars have related how a variety of Southern and Indigenous peoples' understandings of themselves and their position in the world have been influenced by narratives of colonial Europeans, which projected an inferior message onto them (Bruner 2007, 135; Fernandez 1982; Jackson 1998; Lawrence [1964] 1971). Jackson, who has outlined the importance of the curse of Canaan to contact myths in a variety of societies, however explains that

> although many of these myths suggest biblical sources – particularly Genesis 9:18–27 (the story of Noah's sons and Ham's curse) – there is commonly an indigenous narrative that foreshadows them. Moreover, the myths often appear so soon after first contact that they cannot be explained as mere internalizations of European racial prejudices (Jackson 1998, 120).

This observation supports a less Eurocentric approach, which acknowledges that people from all backgrounds continually and actively (re)construct narratives, and that they do so in co-creative interaction with each other. Such an approach allows an awareness that in unequal processes such as colonization, also the colonizer is changed, in often unexpected ways, and that critical theories, such as those that point to the underdevelopment of the South by the North, are often still trapped in essentially Eurocentric approaches (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1993).

The narratives people use worldwide form an interwoven tapestry, its threads being selectively adopted and adapted to make sense of experiences that partly overlap with as well as diverge from those of others. Evolutionary modernity is one of those narratives, and I used it to highlight that scientific understandings are dynamic, partial and interactive, and they never existed in isolation from other narratives used by people to create meaning. Thus, science has not only been a means towards knowledge production, but has also obscured, deleted and masked insights by leaving them untold (Bruner 2005). The unequal representation of Northern realities and frames of thought continues to colour the way scientific concepts are formulated, to the detriment of contributions of Southern experiences and analyses, which may help to make science a more truly global knowledge system.

In the past, Southern perspectives have helped to deconstruct scientific ideas that were once considered factual, objective and universal (Sahlins 1995; Surrallés 2016; Wierzbicka 2008) and they increasingly do so. A recent example is the ontological turn, which included the disruption of fundamental Northern frames of thought by using Southern views, including the destabilization of the premise of a single objective nature upon which cultural divergent meanings are imposed (Pickering 2017; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Descola 2013), (potentially) revolutionizing relations between humans, other organisms and their life-worlds. The Maasai experiences and narratives I described here, increase insight into how the narratives of modernity affect our perspectives. Moreover, the Maasai nature–culture continuum is of interest, because the recently observed geological impact of human activity which has inspired earth system scientists to speak of an Anthropocene, has spurred renewed interest in the idea that nature and human beings should be approached as inseparable (Dibley 2012; Latour 2017).

The ontological turn has further challenged the already partly blurred distinction between the supposedly objective/physical/environmental/structural realm of nature and the supposedly subjective/non-physical/social/agency defined realm of culture, which opens up 'an entirely different intellectual landscape, one in which states and substances are replaced by processes and relations' (Descola and Pálsson 1996, 12). It may also stimulate the awareness of and engagement with Southern and Indigenous experiences and conceptualizations as equal partners in the dialogue of theory construction.

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Notes

1. I use the term science to refer to the totality of the natural and social sciences/humanities, because their division is rooted in the modernist Cartesian dichotomy of nature/culture, object/subject (Hauhs, Widemann, and Klute 2018) which, as discussed in this article, does not hold in many Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies (Descola 2013; High 2010; Ingold 1994; Mullin 2002; Viveiros de Castro 2004) and therefore cannot be taken as an a-priori.
2. The respective fieldwork mostly took place in Narok County in Kenya and Arusha Region in Tanzania, and to a lesser extent in Nakuru, Kajiado, Laikipia, Nairobi, Pwani and Mombasa in Kenya, and Dar es Salaam and Mjini Magharibi (Zanzibar) in Tanzania.
3. Some of these individuals have seldom or never been in a city or watched television, while others spend significant parts of their lives in (semi-)urban contexts, often to engage in schooling or wage labor, but remain strongly connected to their rural roots, where they have their homes and families.
4. Following Hall (1996), I decided against the terms 'West'/'non-West', and in my argument my objections to the terminology 'developed–undeveloped/developing/underdeveloped' will become clear. While the terms 'metropolis–satellites' (Frank 1970) and 'core–periphery' (Wallerstein 1996) correctly point to the hierarchies and connectivity involved, they fail to highlight the long-term historical dynamics and the agency of Southern actors on which I focus.
5. These human factors were not only Maasai or African. For example, the great migration of the Serengeti was severely affected by a 1963 livestock vaccination campaign that eradicated rinderpest (which was in turn probably introduced in Sub-Saharan Africa due to Italians receiving infected livestock from India or Arabia). It is only after these vaccination efforts that the recorded number of migrating animals erupted above a million, from 300,000 in 1961 to 1.3 million in 1977 (Sinclair 1979), and the migration started spilling into Kenya only since 1969 (Lamprey and Reid 2004; Little 1996).
6. The Maasai now living near Masai Mara National Reserve were relocated to the region from the Northern Maasai reserve in Laikipia by the colonial authorities in 1913. Shortly after their arrival they were forced to move North because of the expansion of Tsetse flies, which cause sleeping sickness. However, over time, the woodlands near the Mara opened up due to the Maasai use of fire and increased elephant activity, and people settled closer and closer to the Mara Reserve, in the process progressively affecting the landscape and wildlife.
7. Although often relocated for the creation of protected areas, colonial logic also allowed Maasai to live in some (albeit with imposed restrictions on their way of life), such as Serengeti National Park, which was in a painful hierarchical colonial designation, officially 'reserved as a natural habitat both for game and human beings in their primitive state' (Neumann 1995, 160).
8. Literally '*il*' is the Maa suffix for people, while '*ote*' is an expression or exclamation meaning 'just' or 'only', which is used among the Kisonko and Parakuyu in Tanzania and Moitanik and Uasinkishu of Kenya.
9. Spencer (2003) acknowledges that there are many versions of the narrative of Olonana and Senteu, reproducing the Matapato version in his book.

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