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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Osotua and decolonizing the academe: implications of a Maasai concept

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Abstract

In this paper, an Indigenous elder and non-Indigenous scholar together explore and reflect on attempts to grasp and work academically with the Maasai concept of osotua. We aim to take up this concept not as a piece of data to analyze, but as a partner in theoretical conversations. Osotua describes relationality, in the form of kinship, sharing, symbiosis, and accountability. It aligns and reinforces concepts and approaches of a variety of Indigenous knowledge systems and paradigms, as described by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. It also has clear parallels with academic theories, for example, in the ontological turn as well as new materialist and post-humanist approaches. Through these cross-fertilizations as well as by its original stance, it may provide novel ideas and practical incentives towards the decolonization of the academe, for example, by enhancing diversity and multi-vocality, while simultaneously inviting incentives to contextualize and reflect on "the self" as part of a dynamic inter-reliant community of academics. Specifically, we focus on the potential theoretical value and resulting practical impact of osotua for decolonizing higher education. A variety of scholars arguing for the decolonization of the academic system has pointed out and criticized the continuities between colonialism and neoliberalism, and outlined how both have influenced a university system where students are graded based on standards informed by specific dominant ontologies and epistemologies; scholars are judged on the number of publications in certain high-ranking journals; and universities are funded based on the quantity of students they "process" within a certain period. How would the perspectives on and dynamics of this system be affected if the symbiotic and nourishing reciprocity of all relationships involved became increasingly visible through the concept of osotua?

Keywords Indigenous · Osotua · Maasai concept · Relationality

Introduction

A growing number of (Indigenous) scholars outline and criticize how historically Eurocentric ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics continue to marginalize alternative ways of knowing and being, as they masquerade as a universal body of thought (Abbott, 2021; Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Harvey, 2013; Kimmerer, 2013; Landry, 2019; Sepie, 2017; Watts, 2013). This has led to widespread calls to decolonize academia, which includes making visible cognitive imperialism and decentering Northern hegemonies and politics of naming, for example, by relativizing Eurocentric ideologies, philosophies, and structures that marginalize other heritages, knowledges, and experiences in research and curricula (Woldegiorgis, 2021).[1] In the African context, this means "recognising and prioritizing [sic] Indigenous methodologies and ways of knowing; specifically, with regard to African contributions to the production, dissemination, application, promotion, protection, control, and utilisation of knowledge" (Turner et al., 2021, p. 1). We argue that such a shift toward the recognition and acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge is of high value not only in

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[1] Although underlining the importance of pedagogy and curricula as first steps in decolonizing the mind, Tuck and Yang (2012) warn that without any relinquishing of land, power, and privilege, decolonization remains a mere metaphor. This is in line with Fanon (1963) who insisted that decolonization is a historical process that ultimately culminates in changing the social order. We consider higher education a powerful pillar in maintaining, legitimizing, and transforming social orders, and with this article hope to contribute to a necessary foundation for deeper material and political shifts.

African, Indigenous, or Southern contexts, but in academia worldwide.

As Dei (an African professor in Canada researching Euro-American educational settings) has outlined, working with Indigenous knowledges can "critically interrogat[e] hegemonic knowledge systems within schools, colleges and universities" (2000, p. 128) and "rupture the sense of comfort and complacency in conventional approaches to knowledge production, interrogation, validation and dissemination" (2000, p. 111). This is of importance worldwide, and maybe especially in Northern settings. We are therefore arguing for a radical multivocality and adamant reflexivity in an academe that aims to be a global knowledge system (Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2021). Our approach is clearly distinguished from incentives toward inclusion of Indigenous knowledges, which often actually strengthen the colonial project (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Using Dei's (2000, p. 119) metaphor, we do not wish to simply open up the "club" to new members. Instead, we are envisioning the whole structure and idea of the "club" to be examined and reinvented. As some of the deep challenges (and possible solutions) that come with such an endeavor have been outlined at length elsewhere (e.g., Dei, 2000; Guttorm et al., 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Watts, 2013; Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2021), here we like to focus on the possibilities for conversations with Indigenous knowledges that have opened up, as academia increasingly invites more reflexive and relational ways of understanding.

To be sure, Indigenous and academic knowledges have continually influenced each other through a dynamic interplay. They have fed off, drawn from as well as contested and distinguished themselves from each other, in the process bringing each other into being and remaining in conversation. These influences and interactions have often been distorted or erased in the imperialist project, which portrays Indigenous knowledges as premodern, pristine, or inferior. This obscures that the very definition of Indigenous knowledge is the result of a process of struggle and resistance against Northern ideologies, as people sought to protect what had been handed down for generations (Petrovic & Mitchell, 2019). At the same time, many of the origins of academic thought sprout from Indigenous cosmologies and knowledges that formed its primary foundations (see, e.g., Giraldo Herrera, 2018), but the practice of claiming individual ownership has denied the collectivity and ongoing collaborative nature of knowledge as a dialectic exchange (Dei, 2000).

Awareness and concern regarding the (mis)appropriation of Indigenous insights are rising. This highlights the urgency and importance of careful, respectful, and consensual collaboration with Indigenous partners to illuminate the influences and values of Indigenous languages, understandings, and the ethico-onto-epistemological foundations in which they are embedded. This is especially important now, because many of the theories of the ontological, multispecies, and postqualitative turns have strong parallels with understandings found in a diversity of cosmologies and metaphysics of Indigenous and other subdued peoples (Guttorm, 2018; Rosiek et al., 2020). These shifts enable a deeper, more explicit, and serious engagement with Indigenous insights, which were long discarded or mythologized as "symbolic" or "beliefs" in dominant academic views (Hunt, 2014; Watts, 2013). As the significance of long-held Indigenous insights is becoming clear, some scholars have even questioned why, in the turn to ontology, continental European philosophers and empiricists are centered at all (Wu et al., 2018). Without dismissing the high quality and importance of the works of scholars such as Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Derrida, and Braidotti, as well as the contributions of wider Northern thinkers including Butler, Barad, and Haraway amongst others, we need to find ways to pay homage to Indigenous traditions when using concepts like entanglement, immanence, and the inseparability of ontology and epistemology (Wu et al., 2018). In this paper, we argue for and apply ourselves to an engagement with Indigenous knowledge, not by extracting concepts and worldviews in order to subject them to analysis, but in a way that resonates with "anti-colonial theorists[‘] work with alternative/oppositional paradigms, based on the use of Indigenous concepts and analytical systems and cultural frames of reference" (Dei, 2000, p. 118). Thus, academic theory and alternative knowledges become eye-level partners in academic conversation.

This article is set up as an exploration and reflection on Vanessa Wijngaarden's attempts to grasp and work with the Maasai concept of *osotua* (*o-sótúá*).[2] Wijngaarden is a non-Indigenous scholar in allyship (Doiron-Koller, 2022) with Maasai communities in Kenya and Tanzania. She grew up in the Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s, and since then has been largely nomadic, having traveled, lived, and worked in over 60 countries. Studying political science (international relations) and cultural anthropology in Amsterdam and Calgary during the early years of the new Millennium, she completed her PhD in social anthropology in Germany in 2015. She has lived with Maasai in East Africa for extended periods of time (up to 6 months) repeatedly over the past 15 years. Maasailand being one of her most stable homes, she aims to collaborate with its people in a spirit of relational accountability, mutual respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. This solidarity is, as Tuck and Yang (2012) describe, an

[2] The language of Maasai is known as Maa and spoken by approximately500,000 to 1 million Maasai of different sections as well as closely related people in Kenya and Tanzania. Each word is introduced phonetically at its first mention, with the basic tone patterns written over the vowels, following the Maa dictionary that was collaboratively created by Payne and Ole-Kotikash (2005) https://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~maasai//Maa%20Language/maling.htm.

uneasy and unsettling process. As other allies, Wijngaarden made "a lifelong commitment to self-education [by] carrying the teaching [she] received … to bring awareness to others … especially educating [her] own (non-Indigenous) people" (Doiron-Koller, 2022, n.p.). Aware that she is also caught up within what Wu et al. refer to as the "perpetual knowledge power dialectic" (2018, p. 507), she recognizes the consequence and complicity of her own positionality as a white[3] European. However, she understands and agrees with Snaza et al. (2014) that there is a need for studies that are cognizant of non-Northern traditions. Thus, in cooperation and conversation with her Maasai counterparts, she has taken up the concept of *osotua* as a guiding principle and a theoretical framework from which to (reflexively) analyze discourses and situations, in written as well as in audio-visual publications (Wijngaarden, 2020, 2022; Wijngaarden & Ngulupa Letaiyo, 2021). This paper is one of those attempts, in which she has been honored to cooperate with Maasai elder Paul Nkoitoi ole Murero.

Ole Murero is from the *Ilwuasi nkishu* (*il-Wúásinkíshu*) section (*ol-osho*) and the *olkitoipi* age set (*ɔl-áji*). His exact year of birth was unrecorded, although he has deduced that it must have been around 1952. He grew up in a remote area near Maasai Mara game reserve in Narok County Kenya, being one of the first children to be chosen to go to school in September 1964. Through involvement of the Catholic priest Frans Mol, a pioneer missionary in his area who used to camp outside his village, the elders of his community agreed to send him and other children to school. Although they gave their permission, his parents were not happy, because at the time, children who were chosen to go to school were considered lost (Ole Saitoti, 1986). Even if Ole Murero has grown up with a knowledge of God because this is embedded in Maasai culture, he only got to know Jesus Christ when he went to Catholic school and considers that Maasai culture and Christianity compliment each other. In 1992, he joined the Christ the Teacher Institute of Education, Tangaza University College in Nairobi, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Education degree. Ole Murero has worked with Fr. Mol since 1964, becoming fully engaged with him from 1984 until 2004 to create the first complete Maa dictionary and grammar (Mol, 1972) and collaborate toward the development and publication of the improved version of Mol's original Maa grammar book (Mol, 2013 [1995]. Ole Murero has taught Maasai language and culture since 1996 at the Lemek Maasai Centre, the Kajiado Mission, and finally at Oltepesi Cultural Institute in Kenya. As a peace ambassador in Narok South, he also teaches peace and reconciliation seminars, in which he employs the concept of *osotua* to express the relationship and intimacy of all peoples as connected to God, who is their creator regardless from which nation they come or which language they speak. He was Wijngaarden's teacher when she studied Maa in Oltepesi in 2012. They have remained in conversation and social connection since, and Wijngaarden regularly consults Ole Murero regarding translations and understandings of Maa language and culture in her academic work.

In this paper, we describe the value of *osotua*, specifically to inform transformations in the decolonization of higher education. Our decision to co-author testifies to our contemplations regarding "who has *author*-ity" (Bawaka Country et al., 2016; Tynan, 2021) to share stories, and acknowledges that knowledge is co-created "in relationship with." This relationship is not limited to us two alone, but includes other Maasai, scholars, our families, friends, reviewers, and non-human entities, natural, spiritual, and ancestral. Thus, our work lies in "all our relations." Cognizant of the importance of transparency and accountability regarding different ideas in this text, we have used our last names to separate our voices wherever necessary. To be sure, this does not imply that we understand our voices as detached or representants of binaries. Instead, by bringing them in conversation, we have aimed to transparently explore the in-between space of "voices in dialogue" (McCall, 2014). Overall, in this text, Ole Murero has employed his personal and professional expertise to focus on transferring understandings of *osotua*, which forms a foundation as well as an overall guiding framework for the further argument. Wijngaarden has occupied herself with connecting with and integrating voices and understandings from a variety of Maasai individuals and localities, relying on her research and presence in different parts of Maasailand. She is also responsible for outlining the position and value of *osotua* in current academic debates. Because neither of us can oversee the other's world, we are deeply grateful and honored that the other wishes to work together and hope that our cooperation will further understandings and relationships across difference. In Ole Murero's words, "Let's be aware of the ways that language and channels of communication are used to support conflict and violence. In doing this we shall be able to bring in peace and reconciliation. This article could contribute to the success of these goals on an intercontinental scale; if there is awareness, if people are made to know, love, and respect the cultures of other people."

Below, we will first describe the meaning(s) of *osotua*. Next, we will describe the difficulties and transformations Wijngaarden and other Dutch people experienced when attempting to understand *osotua*, providing an impression of its relationship with dominant Northern ontology. Cognizant of the huge diversity of peoples in the global North—which incorporates divergent geographical areas, cultures, ethnic groups (including a large number of migrants and

[3] We are acknowledging that whiteness cannot be equated to phenotype.

Indigenous peoples), states, localities, and generations—we do believe that we can speak of a certain Northern ontology, which is dominant and underlies the colonial project. Our subsequent discussion of Maasai approaches toward sharing knowledge like *osotua*, illuminates the variety of intersections, and contrasts between relational ethico-onto-epistemologies and dominant and other Northern approaches. Finally, we will use *osotua* as a framework to understand academia and further its decolonization. Our goal is to take the reader *into* a perspective that is considered "other" from a dominant point of view, and then look back at dominant understandings from this vantage point. Through this process, an Indigenous concept, and the worldview that it is embedded in, is taken as a (theoretical) framework or lens, to reflect on dominant understandings. Employing *osotua* as such, we will produce a subversion and "othering" of the hegemonic system, which helps to decenter and reimagine it.

The meaning of *osotua*

Maasai cannot be considered a homogenous or neatly bounded group (Spear & Waller, 1993) and Maasai from different sections, age sets, genders, religious affiliations, localities such as rural and urban, and personalities have different approaches to and relations with the concept of *osotua*. Here, we will give some insight into this variety, while underlining core current meanings. *Osotua* is a guiding principle of society and of high importance across Maasai sections and contexts, even if its influence is stronger amongst more communally living Maasai. It was one of the first Maa words Wijngaarden was introduced to when she came to live in a Maasai community near Maasai Mara in Kenya in 2007. It is a designation of relationship, a model for, as well as a description of, how life functions. Simultaneously an ideal that is to be strived toward as well as a reality that ultimately cannot be broken, one can choose to perceive *osotua* as part of politics and ideology (as it describes how the world is, as well as how it should be) but also as part of science and cosmology (describing how the world functions, while relating ontological, epistemological, and ethical principles). As Indigenous knowledge more generally:

> [i]t is a worldview that shapes the community's relationships with surrounding environments. It is the product of direct experience of nature and its relationship with the social world. It is knowledge that is crucial for the survival of society. It is knowledge that is based on cognitive understandings and interpretations of the social, physical and spiritual worlds (Dei, 2000, p. 114).

Osotua is integrated in the lived experience of people and transmitted orally rather than in written theoretical works. Providing an entry into a holistic understanding of the world, it challenges the divide that has often been maintained between academic theory and experiential ways of knowing. As is the case with other Indigenous knowledge, *osotua* has multiple and collective origins, as well as collaborative dimensions, affirming that the interpretation or analysis of social reality includes divergent, sometimes even oppositional perspectives (Dei et al., 2015; Le Grange, 2011). As a result, it is not easily translated. Below we will discuss the multiple ways in which the concept is used, in order to provide an entry into its meanings and implications.

Ole Murero suspects that the noun *osotua* is rooted in the verb *asot* (*a-sót*) which means to collect, to bring together, and put in one place. To Wijngaarden, the meaning of *osotua* was first explained by a Maasai from the *Ilpurko* (*il-Purkó*) section in terms of the umbilical cord of a cow. It is the connection through which the mother feeds her baby, which brings them intimacy and makes them one. No one can come into existence without being connected and fed through the umbilical cord, as the mother lovingly and selflessly gives of herself to provide life for another. Indeed, also the Maa dictionary developed at the University of Oregon, which focuses on Maa in Maasai *Ilpurko*, *Ilwuasi nkishu*, and *Ilkeekonyokie* (*il-Keékonyókie*) and Samburu (*I-Sámpûrr*) societies, translates *osotua* as umbilical cord, and both umbilical cord and "navel" are translated as the related *o-sorórūā* (Payne & Ole-Kotikash, 2005). Ole Murero adds that Maasai observe that the umbilical cord is both the physical and emotional attachment between mother and child. It is not only the channel through which the fetus is receiving oxygen and nourishment, but also ensures the removal of all waste products from the fetal circulation, so that they can be maternally eliminated. Finally, it plays a role in curing diseases. These functions are also attributed to *osotua* in Maasai society: *Osotua* feeds the community. By eliminating evils, *osotua* removes the "waste" from the community. Finally, *osotua* cures all misunderstandings in the community.

Besides umbilical cord, the word *osotua* is used to refer to relatives, whether they are related by blood or through marriage. These people form the direct community that holds and provides for the individual, the human environment in which a person comes into being, which supports him or her, to grow. Here, the mutuality of the relationship is underlined, because while being fed, supported, and formed through the family, the person also co-creates this family by being part of it, feeding and supporting others. The term is not strictly reserved for relatives alone and can also be used for friends. This is more prominent amongst Northern Maasai sections, especially when the relationship is built on an exchange of gifts (for example, livestock). As amongst other peoples, a certain closeness and sharing results in friends who are "like family."

Related is the practice of giving animals in the care of those who are in need. This was more common when people more exclusively relied on a pastoral subsistence, but still happens today. These animals' offspring become the property of the carer, who can thus start to build his own herd. At times, even children can be given to another family, for example, when a family cannot have children themselves, or when their offspring has passed away. In rare cases, a family may have only girls, and could be given a boy. Overall, it is considered common for people who have more, to provide for those who are in need, as they are also expecting to be helped by others in times of scarcity. A related practice that is common inside as well as outside Maasai settings is to collect contributions from relatives and friends, to finance a wedding, medical procedure, cultural or educational rite or ceremony, or other large investments. *Osotua* can thus be seen as an exercise of empathy, and while some Maasai of the *Ilkisongo* (*ɨl-Kɨsɔ́nkɔ*) section consistently underline the relationship between *osotua* and mercy in response to the suffering of others, Ole Murero outlines that because *osotua* is reciprocal, an agreement between people, it is not the same as an action of mercy, which is exercised solely from one side to another. In either case, exchanges are not always equal and often do not take place at the same moment. Gifts offered in support are not to be reciprocated, and the giver should forget out them completely. Overall, *osotua* is about carrying and caring for each other through an inter-relationship that consists of a multitude of interactions. Thus, as a community, people all over are of assistance to each other in one way or another.

The related idealistic connotation that is part of *osotua* becomes clear in its translation as "peace." The Maa word for peace in English is also translated as *eseriani* (*e-seríáni*), but *eseriani* does not equate *osotua*: When we have peace, that does not necessarily mean we have *osotua*. When we have *osotua*, that however does mean that there must be peace. After a quarrel, making *osotua* means not only to stop fighting, but to achieve reconciliation and forgiveness. Warring people may come from diverse backgrounds, but gather and reason together, having long discussions to invoke what unites them, signifying *osotua* either with their own blood or that of a slaughtered animal. There is a Maasai proverb that says "*Meramat inkishu oowuesha*," which literary means "Those who are entangling each other do not herd cattle." It is to say that people who are fighting do not tend to the things that are vital. Especially in small scale, communal societies, when persons occupy themselves with conflict, the lack of productivity will cause harm to everyone. Maasai consider that they become a people when they are united. Unity is strength, and they will stand if united, but fall if divided. And that unity can only be there if there is peace.

Finally, *osotua* is used to refer to intimacy and loving relationship itself. The togetherness and harmony that comes from being in good relation a connectedness that through its broad orientation creates stability and security, a "home" and environment of care in the unpredictability of the dynamic highs and lows of life. As such, *osotua* is related to another key Maasai concept that guides people to have a good life together. This is *enkanyit* (*ɛnk-ányɨt*), which can be translated as respect or honor, but is also used to describe shame or shyness, as part of a positively regarded humility. *Enkanyit* is the important virtue of remaining in harmony with and showing respect for others. This is rooted in an awareness that they (have) provide(d) the context and support for you to be(come) who you are. It is of great value to remain accommodating and humble in all situations, as the odds may change, and you may find yourself in a position of need. Having the intimate and loving relationship of *osotua* is important for all people because no one can traverse life alone.

In a variety of ways, *osotua* reminds of other Sub-Saharan African philosophies (Metz & Gaie, 2010) including the Afro-communitarian framework of *ubuntu* in Southern African context, "which derives from the aphorism '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' found in the Nguni languages of Zulu, Xhosa or Ndebele" (Le Grange, 2019, p. 56). It can be translated as "A person is a person because of other people", or "I am because we are." In the Sotho-Tswana languages, the similar concept *botho* exists (Le Grange, 2019; Metz & Gaie, 2010). Some have argued that *ubuntu* (humanness) is an anthropocentric or even per definition speciesist concept, as it would focus only on relationships between humans (Enslin & Horsthemke, 2004). However, Le Grange (2019), amongst others, refers to *ubuntu* as a concrete form of the broader but similar Shona concept of *ukama* (relatedness), arguing that it should finally be understood as a relatedness to the entire cosmos. The notion of "ecological togetherness" (Murove, 2009) that is embedded in this is part of a more widely held African (and wider Indigenous) notion of the interconnection of all things in the universe. In this notion, the human does not stand above or outside nature, but is part of nature as a community that consists also of non-human agents, resulting in an understanding of kinship beyond the human.

In similar vein, *osotua* can be between marriage partners, in-laws, friends, or communities, but also exists beyond the human, for example, between humans and other animals, or between humans and spiritual entities. Christianity is of high importance in most Maasai societies these days, and in prayers, God is often referred to as *Enkai o sotua* (the God of peace/relationship). The Old Testament is known as *Osotua Musana* (*o-sótúá mʉsána*) and the new as *Osotua Ng'ejuk* (*o-sótúá ŋéjúk*). The old entails a confession of human mistakes and their relationship with God (*osotua*) being sealed with the blood of animals. After breaking the previous agreement, the renewed relationship (*osotua*)

has been sealed with the blood of Christ. As *osotua* reaches beyond the human, relationships with animals can be *osotua* as well. In the film (Wijngaarden, 2020), *Ilkisongo* (*ɨl-Kɨsɔ́nkɔ*) Maasai Namajani uses the concept in reference to her relationship with her cow, as it captures the symbiotic togetherness where the cow is seeing her need and providing her with milk, while she sings to it in praise, and makes sure the animal is safe, fed, and watered. She underlines the love and mutual appreciation involved in this entanglement of lives, explaining how Maasai normally do not tie their cows when they are obstinate, rude, or aggressive. Instead, they sing to them with appreciation until they become soft-spirited, humble, and willing to give, allowing themselves to be milked. Similarly, people are supposed to speak to each other using good words, with the goal of creating mutual understandings and agreements from the heart. The humility involved in these relationships is not enforced through dominance, but chosen, and grounded in a spirit of cooperation that aims at living a good life, life being understood as necessarily involving togetherness.

The context for understanding *osotua*

As an MA student on her first fieldwork in Kenya in 2007, Wijngaarden's first encounters with *osotua* gave her a view of and entrance into an ontology that was foreign to her. At first, she understood *osotua* from the outside, placing it within her own frame of reference. This frame of reference was importantly shaped by an individualistic neoliberal paradigm, in which autonomous, mostly selfish, and rational humans let their own interests guide competitive as well as cooperative relationships according to the personal benefits these produce for them. She acknowledged that in such a constellation, situations of mutual benefit are certainly a possibility, and that materialistic and social incentives both play important roles in human interactions. She was accustomed to separating the political, economical, spiritual, and social realms into different categories or silos. In her eyes, this separation was of practical as well as moral concern, because their entanglement was likely to produce corruption and exploitation. In the real-life situations in which such entanglements do take place, she had learned to look out for de-facto zero-sum games being covered up by ideology. Thus, when her *Ilpurko* (*ɨl-Purkó*) Maasai friend spoke to her about the importance of *osotua*, and of the possibility of them living such a relationship, she was quite skeptical. She thought that it was natural he wanted to include her, a relatively resourceful European, into his family structure for support. Instead of thinking about the merits of having relationship, and the communal well-being targeted with such a proposal, she considered if and how such a relationship would be beneficial (or harmful) to *her*. She recalls: "He spoke to me in powerful rhetoric about the higher blessing that comes with giving. And I couldn't help but wonder, were his beautiful words just an idealistically phrased cover-up of his attempts to fulfill his own interests?".

In the film Maasai Speak Back (Wijngaarden, 2020), Dutch tourists describe similar suspicion when they are confronted with the words and behaviors of the rural *Ilkisongo* Maasai they encounter. Although there is a severe gap in wealth between the tourists visiting the Maasai villages and the local women, the latter are not pushy or demanding when selling their beadwork. In fact, they often sell their jewelry below the cost price. The women explain that this is not only because they are in urgent need of money to buy food, but also because they want to serve their guests: Their visitors came from far, obviously like the beadwork, and communicate that the prices are too high, or that they are unable to pay more. The Dutch tourists, on their side, explain that they expect prices to be superficially inflated because of their relative wealth. They consider people to behave according to self-interested individualistic economic principles, and also follow these principles themselves. However, the Maasai involved are rather prioritizing *osotua*, aiming to establish loving and nourishing relationships with others by being respectful, helpful, and in agreement. When through the camera and research process access to each other's logics and life worlds is enhanced, the tourists are surprised by the Maasai's attitudes. Some reflect upon the negativity and skepsis with which they, as people from the global North, were taught to approach the outside world. Overall, they react emotionally or touched, but some return to their suspicion, arguing that the Maasai's ideals are pretense, beautiful words that are in fact fueled by economic self-interest, dependency, and a lack of alternatives.

The Maasai involved speak from a relational perspective during (their reflections on) these encounters and consider thinking and living according to the principle of *osotua* as both natural and morally right. From their point of view, relationship is unbreakable, and kinship, sharing, and accountability are common-sensical, even undeniable, in situations where these may be seen as merely idealistic or irrational from the ethico-onto-epistemology of the Dutch involved. Although one cannot understand one ontology through the eyes of another, a thought experiment may tickle the mind: While being in the perspective of the Northern ontology of the Dutch, try to ignore or counteract the first law of thermodynamics. This might be compared to what not practicing or denying *osotua* looks like from a Maasai point of view. With *osotua* as well as with the first law of thermodynamics, you cannot directly, sensually perceive the presence of the principle itself. However, the effects it invokes are often clearly noticeable. Nothing will function without it, and the perceivable

and imperceivable will continue to work according to this principle (and rightly so) whether you believe it or not.

Studying the language and immersing herself into rural and remote Maasai ways of life for over 15 years, Wijngaarden has come to understand that it is not possible to understand the words and actions of these Maasai from her Northern Dutch mindset, as they exist embedded in a fundamentally different ontology. Over time, she learned to access, embody, sense, and enact this ontology to a certain extent. She considers that being in Maasai contexts and being with Maasai has changed her more general understanding of who people are, who she is as a person, what/who the world is, and how people and the world operate. Due to the blindness that comes with one's own position (Nyamnjoh, 2012), it is impossible for her to assess with certainty how much of Maasai ontology she has (not) accessed or understood. However, she feels that her life and personality have profoundly changed due to her becoming with Maasai (Davies, 1999). In her own words, "The greatest turn in my life has been spiritual, triggered by engagements with Christian born-again Maasai (and later supported by African and German colleagues at university), through whom I got to know and live in relationship with Spirit. Other major transformations ensued in my views on poverty and inequality, in my understanding of life in terms of who you are instead of what you achieve, in my experience of health as much less individual, physical, and mechanical, and in a newfound appreciation of consensual above democratic principles. My experiences of life in Maasai also deeply affected my personal hopes and visions for marriage, family, childbearing, old age and a good life."

Wijngaarden acknowledges that she is not Indigenous to Maasailand and will never be. However, she has had intense, long-term connections with communities and individuals since 2007, and has been a continued part of one community since 2010. At this "home" community, members have told her repeatedly and with intimate sincerity how connected they consider their relationship; in some cases, expressing it is closer than with their first degree family members. From her side, she has the experience of knowing and feeling the land, and even when she is not physically in the village, she is still participating in its social life in a variety of ways. Repeatedly, Maasai friends have expressed to her that the transformative effects of their encounter have also taken place on their side. These are examples of how, through a multitude of intensive and sustained interactions, we are co-becoming in partly overlapping worlds. As these worlds emerge through relationships, they are distinctive as well as shared. Such partial sameness allows us to understand, misunderstand, and learn to understand others and their perspectives and experiences.

Sharing knowledge of *osotua*

As Nakata (2002) argues, Indigenous knowledge can and should only be understood embedded in its context. So, is it right to share the knowledge of *osotua* outside Maasai environments, for example, in an academic setting? (see also Tynan, 2021). We consider that it is under certain circumstances. Firstly, with this and other Indigenous knowledges, rules and sensitivities regarding secrecy and sacredness need to be taken into account (Nakata, 2002). The principles of *osotua* we are sharing here are considered open and freely accessible to all, as Maasai use of it is expansive across a variety of boundaries, such as gender and ethnic affiliation. Secondly, we aim and believe that we are able to provide enough of the appropriate context to achieve a fruitful understanding of (parts of) the concept in this academic article and have goals that are supported by the wider community. We believe that our engagement with *osotua* can illuminate that *all* knowledge should be understood and embedded in its context. It unsettles the assumption that specific Northern knowledge is more universal or absolute, supposedly existing independent of its cultural or class contexts, and is suitable as an a priori point of reference for other frames of thought.

For example, the understanding of knowledge as something that can be owned is rooted in an individualist capitalist mindset. The prevalence of such a perspective is the result of dominant worldwide practices that are entangled with colonialism, in which not only materiality and land (understood here to include land/water/air and subterranean earth), but also thought, have become defined and treated as property. To "compete" within this system, Indigenous groups have come to organize themselves to prevent their lands, knowledges, and other "resources" from being appropriated by others. However, when doing so, they come to participate in a system that undermines the ethico-onto-epistemologies of their people (Nakata et al., 2012), because in relational understandings, lands and knowledges as well as other humans and nonhumans are understood and engaged with through a different set of practices and ethics.

In many Indigenous ethico-onto-epistemologies, relationship is centered. There is no dualistic divide between the material and the immaterial, and agency is not restricted to humans alone (Cajete, 2000; Chilisa, 2012; Goduka, 1999; High, 2010; Ingold, 1994 [1988]; Kohn, 2007; Rival, 1993; Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2004; Watts, 2013; Wilson, 2008). The land, water, plants, animals, and minerals are all alive. This means that the word "resources"—which is rooted in Cartesian, Darwinian, and Newtonian principles and capitalist as well as Marxist understandings that humans dominate nature

and should maximize its utility (Grande, 2004)—should be replaced with the word "relations." People do not live "on" the land, as an objective, passive environment that exists outside them, and on which they exert influence. Instead, they live "with" it, as a subjective and active being they are in two-way relationship with. As a result, owning land or having an exclusive right to "use" land is impossible, because land is its own being. However, there can be long-held, very deeply rooted relationships *with* the land. These normally have been established over generations but are also actualized in the ongoing practice and experience of this relationship, through presence (being-with), care, and communication on both sides. Being based on past as well as current thoughts and actions, the relationship with the land is thus often deeply rooted historically and ancestrally, but at the same time lived in the "now." As a result, it is not fixed, but enacted, which allows a certain dynamic openness. These logics are very foreign to laws of ownership defined based on words written on a piece of paper which can be reinforced through (distant) courts or even violence, and can displace others based on "rights" to "use" the land.

Similarly, the concept of "knowledge" as something that can be individually owned, bought, exploited, and sold is a modern capitalist notion. Intellectual property law has roots in ancient Greece and was first implemented in medieval Europe when governments started giving associations of artisans ("guilds") authority to control the regulation and conduct of varied industries (Moore & Himma, 2022). Today, there exist several scholarly critiques on the idea of intellectual property. Some argue that information, being an abstract object, cannot be owned, and that it is non-rivalrous: As it is not typically consumed when using or multiplying it, it can be used by many individuals concurrently. Others argue that intellectual property rights limit the freedom of thought and speech. Barlow (1997) for example poses that information is a form of life with a claim to be free, while other Northern thinkers have underlined the social nature of information, as any individual idea is always building on the shoulders of the knowledge of others (Moore & Himma, 2022). Likewise, from Indigenous points of view, knowledge is often approached as intersubjective. It is per definition shared and comes into being in and through relationships. Moreover, as Dei notes for African contexts more generally, knowledge is seen as cumulative (Dei, 2000, p. 124), and as Landry points out for wider Indigenous contexts, it is considered complementary rather than oppositional (Landry, 2019). So, when Wijngaarden asked her Maasai counterparts' permission to share and teach about the concept of *osotua* to people outside the Maasai community, this was considered a slightly curious question. Within the mind frame of *osotua*, she was told that "It is good to share because no one in the world has his own life. So, sharing life brings us together. If you know people, you are able to live together. So, it is very important to learn about the life of other people, because without sharing life, how can we live? You cannot live alone."[4]

This point of view relates to the idea that life always takes place as a relational effort between (non-)humans. When Wijngaarden discussed the risk of (mis)appropriation, the community pointed her toward their long-term and ongoing relationship, and the continued conversation in which their agreement is secured. Moreover, Maasai expressed that they overall see Wijngaarden's work on *osotua* as useful in Maasai communities as well as for the wider world. They consider that for Maasai, it can help further their exposure and opportunities. Secondly, in the face of a changing cultural context, it will be a valuable record and reference for contemporary and future Maasai generations, especially for those in more urban contexts. Regarding the current article, it was discussed how this is probably mostly geared to help people beyond Maasai society to learn and forge more trust and better relationships. This is also considered important, because there is a long history of discrimination and marginalization (Hodgson, 1999; Schneider, 2006; Spear, 1997; Talle, 1999), which continues in Kenya and Tanzania with a tendency to consider especially more traditionally living Maasai as backward (Wijngaarden, 2016), and has become a matter of discussion again in the face of current displacements of Maasai from their lands in Ngorongoro and other areas (Jeannin, 2022, updated 2022; United Nations, 2022). Showing how Maasai concepts and knowledge are valuable beyond the tourism sector and can be on eye-level and in conversation with academic knowledge is of a huge emancipatory value. Working in cooperation with Maasai people to outline and source this knowledge and its applicability, expanding the boundaries of thought of Maasai and non-Maasai through this co-creative process, is our attempt to care for the Maasai communities we are part of/connected with.

Osotua in academia

A variety of scholars arguing for the decolonization of the academic system have pointed out and criticized the continuities between colonialism and neoliberalism. They outline how both have influenced a university system where knowledge is "produced"; students worldwide are graded based on standards informed by ontologies and epistemologies that are often foreign to them; scholars are judged on the number of publications in certain high-ranking journals that are almost exclusively Euro-American; and universities

[4] *Ilkisongo* Maasai community member, November 25, 2022.

are funded based on the number of students they "process" within a certain period of time (Tomaselli, 2021). This system encompasses an overall quantification, centralizing competition, and exclusion. It prioritizes or selectively includes only certain understandings of knowledge and learning, for example, by favoring specialization, structures, materialism, individualism, and "how" questions above holism, processes, spirituality, communalism and "why" questions (Goduka, 1999; Millar et al., 2006). Although a variety of critiques and transformations have been initiated, the academic process still marginalizes many ways of knowing (Mbembe, 2015; Santos, 2014), which is of great concern, not in the least because academic understandings strongly affect ontological, epistemological, and ethical understandings in societies worldwide (Hoppers, 2001; Visvanathan, 2002, 2009).

In this context, it has been argued that Indigenous knowledge and approaches should be made part of curricula and teaching strategies, in order to transform the teaching and learning experience (Freire, 2000 [1970]; Smith, 2005). This would enhance experiential, holistic, and integrated learning principles and less (standardized) testing that measures the extent to which students have adopted dominant ways of learning and knowing. In this more open model, instead of prescribing what and how to think, teachers would rather act as guides and discussants to encourage students to explore their own experiences and paths of learning (Landry, 2019). Dei has observed how "Indigenous knowledges can be fundamentally experientially based, non-universal, holistic and relational knowledges of 'resistance'" (Dei, 2000, p. 111) when located in Euro-American educational contexts. We argue that these values are also present when they are placed in African and other Southern academic contexts, which often have been strongly influenced by Euro-American traditions surrounding knowledge and education. In order to come to more concrete descriptions of changes that are possible when we take Indigenous concepts and understandings as a framework to reflexively analyze and reimagine realities, below we will approach academia through the lens of *osotua*.

If *osotua* is applied to academia, this would cease the separation between the natural and social sciences/humanities, which is rooted in a modernist Cartesian dichotomy that opposes nature and culture, object, and subject (Hauhs et al., 2018). Instead, as in many Indigenous as well as posthuman approaches and new materialisms, agency and relationship are not limited to the human. Furthermore, the human as observer of nature cannot be detached from the human as part of nature, the lack of an independent observer effectively challenging the bifurcation of nature/culture and scientific/intuitive knowledge (Chilisa, 2012; High, 2010; Rival, 1993; Viveiros de Castro, 2004; Watts, 2013). Ethics, epistemology, and ontology cannot be separated, similar to Barad's (2007, 2010) ethico-onto-epistemology in which thoughts "matter," and relational approaches of posthumanist ecological thinkers in which the stories we tell are of importance (Haraway, 2016; Van Dooren, 2014). Because no absolute distinction can be made between what is known, what is be(com)ing, and what should be, every ethico-onto-epistemology is inescapably political and potentially ideological. This means that a guiding principle like *osotua* is not only an ideal to strive for, but simultaneously a way of understanding how the world is be(com)ing that is entangled with the observer's conscious awareness of it. The universe is approached not as mechanical, but as alive and in interaction, part of us as we are part of it, and due to the interactive interdependent agencies involved, everyone has response-ability (see also Haraway, 2016) in relation to kin that reaches beyond the direct family and even beyond the human (Cajete, 2000; Goduka, 1999; Wilson, 2008). An understanding of (and therefore commitment to) *osotua* places I/we relations above I/you relations and turns away from competitive and parasitic frames of reference, by cultivating affect and favoring symbiotic understandings, acknowledging every action as an interaction in a dynamically interdependent world in which there is no escape from accountability. The evolution of understanding and knowledge means that eyes become more opened to the truth (which reaches beyond the physical), and thus the truth can manifest/become itself more clearly; that is, it is perceived more clearly.

This ethico-onto-epistemological entanglement renders an objective or independent science impossible, and therefore a science that wishes to appeal to the universal can only do so by being multifaceted and dialogical, for example, through radical multivocal and reflexive practices (Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2021). As a relational system and logic, *osotua* can provide (through processes of creation as well as illumination) the connective tissue between all agents that are co-becoming, because as in understandings like *ubuntu*, individual persons as well as humanity are relational achievements. Unity becomes apparent/is achieved, not by subduing, replacing, incorporating, or integrating one type of knowledge (making) with another, but through acknowledging their relationality, being sensitive to and enabling the co-creative dialogical becoming of understandings from a multitude of geographical, cultural, and social environments. This is an approach that is different from attempts to reverse the knowledge hierarchy, only now structurally making (a certain strand of) Indigenous knowledge ontologically prior to other knowledges, thus subsuming or incorporating one set of arguments into another (Le Grange, 2014; Nakata et al., 2012). It also goes beyond the inclusive approach of integrative science and Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall's concept of two-eyed seeing (Bartlett et al., 2012), which claim to incorporate or weave Indigenous knowledge into

the academic method. Both in fact continue to reproduce a certain dichotomization between Indigenous and dominant ways of knowing. Instead, *osotua* has more parallels with other African philosophies such as Asouzu's *ibuanyidanda* philosophy, which also seeks to transcend the particularism-universalism divide through what could be called an ontology of interdependence in becoming (Agada, 2020). In this view, knowledge cannot be final, universal, or independent of context, because it is impossible to know the world without being part of the world (Mbembe, 2015). Thus, by centering the necessary relationships between knowledges, *osotua* enables a radical multivocality with an openness toward multiple ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies, in which ideas have the opportunity to explore, synergize, criticize, contradict, complement, and sharpen each other. This reinforces philosophy of science's vision of academia as "a space where new narratives arise, meta-narratives are challenged, and different narratives are related to each other" (Wijngaarden & Idahosa, 2021, p. 51).

The empathic stance involved in *osotua* enables a reflexive treatment of one's own knowing and contributions, resulting in an attitude of humility, because the limitations of one's own positionality and gaze are brought to awareness. Knowledge is acknowledged as an intersubjective achievement (Haverkort & Rist, 2004) that cannot be owned by any person alone, because not only our thinking but our very being is a result of our co-becoming with others. As a result of the inseparability of being and thinking, academia entails not only the co-creation of knowledge, but also the co-becoming of academics. Reflections of "the self" as part of a dynamic, inter-reliant community of academics results in accountability as well as contextualization of one's own position and ideas. Working in "good relationship" magnifies the opportunity to develop and nourish knowledge production through engagement with difference, providing great transformational potential. The mindset of *osotua* acknowledges and values collaboration as an inevitable aspect of an interconnected universe, and working "with" it, is far more powerful and beneficial than obstructing it through competitive relations in which insecurity, mistrust, fear of sharing, and conflict hamper the scope and productivity of insights and solutions.

This approach seems to clash with the Darwinian and neoliberal logic which have penetrated academia and fuel the view that individualistic competition fuels growth and improvement. However, from a perspective of *osotua*, this logic is actually not opposed, but incorporated as valuable, however not optimally. While competitive relationships may produce a certain growth and improvement due to the merciful nature (*osotua*) that makes up the essence of relationship itself (*osotua*), the expansion achieved by these kinds of relations is necessarily limited, because there are losers as well as winners. Being all related, this means that the highest visions and goals of even the winners can never be achieved. A much fuller potential for growth and improvement can be reached through cooperative and peaceful relations across difference, as mutual upliftment makes it easier for all to rise.

In concrete terms, this could mean that scholars would not primarily be judged by their number of publications in certain outlets, but rather, by their broader contribution to a healthy, nourishing, productive, and inclusive academic community, which includes teachers, students, and the wider human and non-human community as an ecosystem. This not only means to look beyond numbers and short-term gains, and being more concerned with content, quality of outputs, and engagements, but also entails the de-emphasis of scholars' achievements as individuals, because flourishing academics and high-quality science come into existence in community. Academic hierarchies would get a different dynamic if being promoted means being requested to step into deeper service, chosen through a consensus with the highest benefit of the community in mind. In Maasai, leaders are chosen according to communal frameworks, and leadership comes primarily with responsibilities and respect, instead of money or privileges, and is not competed for. Even if Maasai society knows hierarchies and inequalities, the inclusivity of *osotua* secures a system in which it is not the most powerful who rule, or the majority which decides. Instead, it is a much more consensual approach that goes beyond democratic principles, toward an arrangement in which every voice is acknowledged, by noting it being a result of the relationships with all other voices, and thus its integral and undeniable contribution to the whole. With a similar focus on *ubuntu*, Le Grange (2019) outlines how education in such a system would not be geared toward producing rational autonomous beings, but members of a society. And in the case of academia, this would ideally be a global one.

Conclusion

One of the greatest concerns of those who propagate the decolonization of knowledge is that people are systematically excluded and/or subdued to accommodate to a dominant knowledge system (Smith, 2012). The importance of people participating in the development and planning of the pedagogies they learn from has been outlined over fifty years ago by Brazilian educator Freire (2000 [1970]). A lack of such participation produces a variety of consequences, including what some have labeled a "cognitive crisis" (Hoppers, 2015), because speaking, working, and living in an unfamiliar cultural idiom not only causes insecurity and self-doubt, but also impacts community livelihoods, human rights, and democratic citizenship.

Furthermore, as Ampofo outlines, the academic knowledge system has huge epistemic power that reaches into the political corridors. Academics decide what should be known and how to get to this knowledge, teach cohort after cohort of students, and often function as public intellectuals (Ampofo, 2016).

We have tried to overcome the risk of "a falsely dichotomous thinking between 'Indigenous' and 'non-Indigenous' knowledges" (Dei, 2000, p. 120) by acknowledging that all knowledge bodies are dynamic, while underlining that Indigenous knowledge does not exist in pristine fashion, and is affecting as well as being affected by other knowledges. Besides contrasts, also continuities and relationships between different knowledges have been outlined, as our aim is to come to an intrinsic understanding of certain Indigenous insights, instead of defining them by opposing them (Landry, 2019) or hierarchically placing them in relation to anything else. Concretely, we have indicated how relational Indigenous understandings in general, and *osotua* in particular, resonate with a variety of academic theories, concepts, and developments in the context of the ontological and species turns. These parallels further confirm the findings of science and technology studies (STS) scholars and anthropologists who have observed that Euro-Americans do not hold to the dominant, supposedly characteristic Cartesian ontology as fervently as many academic debates suggest (Candea & Alcayna-Stevens, 2012; Ingold 1994 [1988], Latour, 1993). With this work, we hope to turn existing tendencies upside down. Instead of using Euro-American concepts and framings to understand other contexts, we have attempted to access an Indigenous concept through an embedded approach, and subsequently make it productive as a framework and theory to understand the academe, creating an eye-level conversation with other theoretical understandings.

Thus, we showed how *osotua* (as other Indigenous concepts like *ubuntu*) can provide the relational, inclusive, dialogical groundwork to address systematic exclusions in academia. The framework of *osotua* aligns with the proposals of a variety of Indigenous and other critical scholars that knowledge is partial and complementary, and "truth" is a process of intersubjective validation (Haverkort & Rist, 2004; Tynan, 2021). As a relational ethico-onto-epistemology, *osotua* responds to decolonization scholars' calls for approaches that are contextual, cognizant, and responsive to social conditions, taking into consideration the existence of as well as the intersections between multiple knowledges (Nakata et al., 2012). Enabling alternative and dominant epistemic frameworks to stand alongside each other (Almeida & Kumalo, 2018) addresses the problem that many students and lecturers continue to experience the university as alienating, disempowering, and exclusionary (Costandius et al., 2018). *Osotua* not only de-centers the normality of dominant academic discourses and theories of knowledge, but also of dominant practices, worldviews, and ethical frames of reference.

The added value of discussing a concept like *osotua* at a time when new materialist and posthuman approaches also theorize relationality in a way that might be easier to catch for non-Indigenous and Northern readers is threefold. Firstly, it combats the tendency to automatically privilege such readers as the prime audience, which is of utmost importance in broadening the academic conversation and including majority scholars and other people with more relational ethico-onto-epistemologies. Secondly, it outlines the broad historical and contemporary mycorrhizal network of knowledges in which such academic theories have come about, acknowledging the contributions of Indigenous points of view over time. Thirdly, it emphasizes the importance of "community" and "heart" for understanding relationality, which is often (although not always) insufficiently addressed in existing academic approaches.

Osotua acknowledges the diversity and multivocality of knowledge in its process of becoming, while holding a realization of as well as a striving toward a symbiotic relationship between the different be(com)ings and perspectives involved. It provides space for every voice to be present and acknowledged (without the need for agreement), making every person part of the community of knowledge. Thus, it provides not only a vision of how global knowledge production should be, but also an understanding of what global knowledge production already is, even if erasures have prevented this from (always) being acknowledged "officially." When *osotua* is understood and practiced, it constitutes that knowledge is created in the relationship between all, not only propagating this as an idealistic goal, but also as an integral practice.

The acknowledgment of marginal voices in academia cannot only happen by creating more space for them to be heard and exert their influence, being incorporated and "made part of" the academic conversation (a stance often criticized by Indigenous scholars). It needs to go beyond that, by consciously acknowledging that they have never *not* been part of the conversation of knowledge production. The argument of separation is itself the way in which alternative points of view have been muffled: Claiming that these voices and perspectives are not part of knowledge production is veiling their tremendous and continued contribution to all that is known, including in academia. When truth is a matter of intersubjective validation, any argument that attempts to exclude certain voices from the global endeavor to create knowledge and understanding will only be able to exert power, based on how extensively it is believed in.

Ole Murero reminds us that the most important elements in peace and reconciliation are justice and encouraging forgiveness. He calls for people to do away with prejudice and favoritism, with superiority as well as inferiority

complexes, because "when people consider each other as equals, then *osotua* will be a lived reality, and Christianity will be successful." This sentence wonderfully brings together philosophical, religious, and cultural values that in turn represent the entangled academic, spiritual, and ethnic institutions and life experiences through which both of us continue to "co-become."

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