

Showing Theory to Know Theory

Understanding social science concepts through illustrative vignettes

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Relationality

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Relationality refers to connectedness, a view of the world that underlines how no person or thing exists in isolation, because existence necessarily means being 'in relationship'.

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Paulo's concept of *osotua*:

A relational (life)world

For over eleven years, my life has been entangled with that of Paulo Ngulupa, a Kisongo Maasai from the North Tanzanian savannah. He has not only been my research assistant, but also my family and point of contrast, as we share food, homes, work, prayers, hardships, jokes, money, ideas, and dreams. Below I address the concept of relationality from his perspective. Of course, I cannot help seeing his worldview through my own eyes. However, I am drawing from an extensive body of written, audio-recorded and video-recorded ethnographic data of our

conversations and interviews. I added references to the academic perspectives that intersect with his views.

A single star and the earth connect us all. The soil links everyone on it, and the sun shines on all of us. The intertwining of earth and light causes the plants to grow, who feed us and the other animals, that is, if there is rain. We live in the rain shadow of Mount Meru, a volcano whose eruption created the fertile soil, but is also diverting the clouds. We have been pushed into this dry corner due to the rise of national parks and agricultural lands, by whites and the neighboring Meru people. Lately, climate change has brought extended droughts. The radio informs us that the weather changes are due to developments in Europe and Asia. Consequently, my generation has replaced cows with goats and sheep, but even those often don't survive the dry spells. Our women have resorted to cutting the trees to produce charcoal to sell, but the European NGOs advise that makes the environmental situation worse, and indeed the rain seems to come less and less.

So, we have started planting maize, which was first domesticated in the Americas, where Indigenous peoples pray to 'all my relations' (Manning 2017), expressing how they are connected not only to the human, but also to the animal, plant, and mineral nations. I see the truth of this, but as Maasai, we pray to *Enkai*—meaning God as well as rain—who we used to worship at Oldonyo Lengai, an active volcano you can see from here when skies are clear. Our language *Maa* was first written down (using an alphabet that has Semitic and Arab roots) by European missionaries who translated God as *Enkai*, and now we worship *Enkai* in the Lutheran church in our village. Our pastor is Meru, because it is only after my generation that our children have started going to school to read and write. When there are wars with the Meru over land and water resources, and houses are set

on fire on both sides, most of our warriors go out to fight, but I go to church to meet other Maasai and Meru to pray. I need to defend my wives and children, but I do not want to harm anyone, and I know that God can do miracles as well as speak into the hearts of people, so we can all have a good life.

We tried to further cooperate with the Meru people by organizing camel safaris together. A long time ago a white man brought some camels here from Somalia. He wanted to set up a tourism business but fled due to taxation issues with the Tanzanian government. We used the camels just to carry water until an Italian NGO set up routes using a GPS and built a tourist camp. Now there are no tourists anymore because of COVID. We used to take the visitors to Oldonyo Lengai and to our mud hut and thorny bush villages, hoping they would buy some beadwork (Wijngaarden, 2016). The glass beads we use are not fabricated in Africa, but imported from Europe, most often from the Czech Republic (Carey, 1998; Kratz & Pido, 2000), and more recently from China, just like the motorcycle tires we use as sandals. We only started using beads for jewelry when the colonial government prohibited our warriors from wearing our weapons in public, and we could not signify messages with colors on our shields anymore. Sometimes the absence of certain beads and colors was influenced by wars far away, for example when the Suez Canal closed during the third Arab-Israeli war, influencing that generation's Maasai fashion (Vierke, 2008). We create new beadwork fashions every generation, our jewelry designs referring to political parties, police sirens and helicopters, but the tourists like our beadwork because it represents traditional culture (Wijngaarden, 2018). If they give money for it, I can go to the little shop in the village. The woman owning it charges her mobile phone with a small solar panel so she can send my money into the account on the phone of my family members, several

days walk away. If the cellular network is working, the money arrives within seconds.

We share like this, as we live by the principle of *osotua*. *Oсотua* means ‘umbilical cord’, but also ‘relative’ (by blood or by marriage), ‘friend’ (especially if gift exchange is involved), and ‘peace’. It is the expression we use for an intimate, loving relationship, as between family; between a person and God; and between Maasai and our livestock (Wijngaarden, 2020). As I shake the trees during the dry season, so they drop their seeds for the goats to eat, who in turn can be milked to feed my young son, *osotua* connects us all. It is not only the relation between me and my child, but also with the goats who I know as personalities. I protect and take care of them, as they take care of me. Even the trees, the sun, and certainly God are involved. Although I live in a very remote area, largely without electricity or water, I can never be alone. Even what I consider to be my own body is made up of uncountable organisms, who co-constitute my aliveness. Everything in this world is dynamic and related, my action is always an *inter-action* that causes my being to be in a constant process of *co-becoming* (Haraway 2008). A commitment to *osotua* makes these relations symbiotic instead of parasitic. Accountability to relationships is of the highest importance, according to our Indigenous point of view, which holds that ‘relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality’ (Wilson, 2008, p. 7).

Discussion Questions

- With what [non-human beings](#) (e.g., animals, plants, bacteria, or spirits) is your life entangled?
- How does Paulo's point of view change your perception of relationality?
- Do you think Indigenous perspectives can have value when thinking about social scientific concepts?

Additional Resources

[Goat Breakfast: Becoming-with God, volcanoes, livestock and trees](#) (Tanzania, 2021, 30 min). (use password: Relationality)

Synopsis: Due to climate change, the lands in the rain shadow of Tanzanian volcano Meru are increasingly affected by drought. Young Maasai Paulo must find creative ways to feed his firstborn son, who has just learned to walk. As his goats lack milk, even for their own babies, he sets out into the dust every morning in search of breakfast. This hopeful, tender film highlights the interspecies relationality and more-than-human entanglements involved, providing an entry into multisensual, multilingual, and multispecies ways of knowing. It illustrates the agencies and co-becomings of geological formations, Spirit, fauna, and flora in an audiovisual geopoetics of Maasailand.

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