

Maasai beadwork has always been modern

An exploration of modernity through artefacts

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Introduction

Artefacts can be approached as materializations or physical condensations of human activities, interactions and relationships, and thus form an expression in which connections between peoples can be read. I will employ a case study of Maasai beadwork as a window into a better understanding of the concept of modernity, in the process refuting widespread assumptions concerning Maasai culture as well as deeply rooted modernist dichotomies. The Eastern African Maasai are one of the most famous ethnic groups of Africa, and often seen as iconic premoderns, for example described as “our primitive ancestors” who have not yet eaten of the tree of knowledge that is “modern civilizations” (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994: 438). Their beadwork is widely recognized as an ethnic marker and commonly approached as a traditional artefact. However, I will show how the very presence of Maasai beadwork as well as its uses and designs are actually the result of modern developments.

This publication is novel on two accounts. Firstly, there are few academic sources concerning the details of the origin of Maasai beadwork and their designs. I contribute to insights on this subject with my data collected in Kenya and Tanzania during fieldwork stays from 2007 till 2018, as I was present for almost two years in a variety of Maasai communities. As a social anthropologist, I have collected not only the artefacts themselves, but also information on Maasai people’s views and understandings with regard to them, and I allow these insights to contribute to my analysis. My research methods were grounded in reflexive ethnography, and supported by video assisted observations, focus group discussions and individual interviews, some in combination with Q method, which is a mind mapping method that provides insight in people’s subjective points of view. The data was collected most importantly from the Meru region in Tanzania, supplemented from a variety of Maasai sections in Arusha (Tanzania) and Narok, Oloitoktok and Kaijado (Kenya).

Secondly, this publication provides new insights to take academics out of the impasse in the debate on how to approach modernity (or modernities). The concept of modernity is of high importance and employed extensively in scientific debates especially in the humanities and social sciences. Nevertheless it continues to be contested, and the re-examination of its Eurocentric definition is ongoing (Bhambra, 2007) as is the determination of its relation with tradition (Argyrou, 2015; Zhiping, 1999). The assumption that modernity somehow stands outside or beyond culture is still common, even in key academic disciplines like sociology (Argyrou, 2015). Argyrou recently criticized sociology’s ‘cosmopolitan turn’ and the paradigm of the second age of modernity (as described by the influential sociologist Beck (2000)), stating that even postcolonial sociology ‘takes for granted and uses as a key analytical category the highly problematic notion of modernity’, because ‘sociology [is] a discipline premised on the idea of modernity and the teleology of progress’ (2015: 342). Specifically, my contribution responds to insights from several case studies that address modernity in non-western societies and point to the continued need for the decolonization of the

historical imagination while problematizing how modernity is approached in relation to non-western realities (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001; Zhiping, 1999).

In my argument I borrow from Bruno Latour (1993). I do not follow his rigorous denial of modernity, but use his insights that no absolute or simple division can be made between modern and pre-modern, and that the binary oppositions that result from modernist theories are insufficient tools to describe and understand the world around us. Based on my research findings, I argue against the portrayal of modernity as a pattern that was produced in Europe and then spread in different forms all over the world, even if this view is still common in social scientific work (Connell, 2007). In the process, I contribute to insights that modernity and tradition cannot be seen as opposites (Lanfant et al., 1995: 36).

Concretely, this article is an answer to ideas concerning multiple modernities now common in scientific thought (Huntington, 2002; Macamo and Neubert, 2008). My historical and ethnographic explorations contribute to discussions regarding whether the idea of multiple modernities is accurate and useful. I elaborate on the insight that modernity comes in a variety of forms. However, I do this in a way that underlines the interconnections between the different varieties of modernity, effectively bringing it back to a singular concept. I argue for an approach of modernity as a stage in the world's developments which has had a different form, impact and meaning for different people. In my approach, modernity includes a combination of material, technological, institutional, societal dynamics as well as a system of knowledge production, which are perpetually adapted and transformed by people involved according to their own ideas and circumstances.

An important limitation of this article is that I will omit to refer to postmodernity. As the distinction between modernity and postmodernity and the definition and usefulness of the concept of the postmodern have been enormous academic discussions in themselves (Bruner, 1994: 397; Kirby, 1993; Lutkehaus and Cool, 1999), I will only focus on clarifying modernity. In this regard, it is important to note that I use the concept 'modern' as the adjective of modernity, whilst speaking of 'modernist' as a discourse. Furthermore, it is important to note that unless indicated otherwise, when I refer to beads, I am speaking of glass beads, which are the type of beads that are used most abundantly by indigenous peoples across Africa and other parts of the world, and form the main component of Maasai beadwork.

I will first describe how the concepts of modernity and pre-modernity developed historically. I will then argue how beads and the use of beadwork by Maasai are the product of modern developments, even if these are generally considered an important facet of their tradition. My contestation of the vision of Maasai and their artefacts as pre-modern will be illustrated lively by describing the dynamics and designs of their beadwork. Based on these insights I will come to a conclusion in which I propose a new approach towards the concept of modernity as a stage in a worldwide cultural dynamic which takes a variety of forms in different places, an emergent and interactive process with semi-permeable boundaries that includes opposing voices.

The invention of moderns and premoderns

There is a lot of ambiguity and discussion in the humanities and social sciences over a clear definition of modernity, maybe because modernity is in fact the womb in which modern science developed itself (Connell, 2007; Connell, 2014; Lutkehaus and Cool, 1999). According to classical modernization

theories such as evolutionist modernity, modernity should be seen as an advanced stage in the teleological development of humanity from primitive to civilized. Scientific thought first presented modernity as singular and essentially western phenomenon. The changes modernity entailed were presented as fundamental and absolute, producing an image of a binary world of moderns, who separated nature and society, and base their reasoning on scientific knowledge that reflects a universal truth, and premoderns who live in a state where nature and society overlap, and who irrationally construct their beliefs relying on myths (Latour, 1993).

Although the assumptions underlying these theories continue to be influential in thinking all over the world, contemporary scientists generally counter this reasoning with more nuanced views. They describe modernity as an era which

is characterised by a qualitatively new relationship among people and between them and nature. This relationship manifests itself in special political and societal projects as well as in the technological mastering of or dominion over nature (Macamo and Neubert, 2008: 270).

Characteristic of modernity is the idea that not only physical nature but also human nature and thus society can be consciously mastered (Eisenstadt, 2000: 5). In addition, a feature of modernity would be that it encompasses a higher degree of reflexivity, as the self-evident truth of transcendental visions and ontological conceptions came to be questioned, opening the way for multiple visions that could also be contested, thus producing a tendency toward constant self-correction (Eisenstadt, 2000: 4, 25), making modern societies highly dynamic. This new way of being in the world has come with certain innovations such as industrial technology and ideas of freedom and democracy (Macamo and Neubert, 2008: 269),¹ but also resulted in communist, fascist and fundamentalist movements (Eisenstadt, 2000).

Besides the idea that modernity is characterized by a new relationship between people and nature, most scientists agree that modernity has come into being as a result of the unique circumstances and developments that were present within European societies in the eighteenth century (Diamond, 1998; Giddens, 1984). However, I align myself with the views that the material and technological advances as well as the worldviews associated with modernity are deeply connected to the Industrial Revolution and capitalism, which first relied on colonial conquest and finally on global institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. This publication contributes to insights that modernity can only be understood using a global approach including the non-west, as Wallerstein (1979) and Andre Gunder Frank (1970) have argued. I do this by exploring how the famous artefacts and 'traditions' that are central in characterizing people who are considered one of the most important icons of pre-modernity, are in fact modern phenomena.

A variety of scientists have observed that many of the products and ideas that were the result of modern developments have been tempting in the eyes of people from non-modern societies (Macamo and Neubert, 2008: 269). They approach modernity as a cultural program which has spread

¹ Of course these ideas have not always been lived up to. Connell for example argues that 'any realistic view of intellectual history must acknowledge that social science has a broad anti-democratic heritage, from nineteenth-century justifications of imperialism to modern technocratic management science, corporate funded market research and more' (Connell (2007: 230)), producing thoughts like 'there is no alternative'. On a global political scale the lack of democracy has also often been unveiled for instance in the analysis of institutions like the World Bank and IMF (George and Sabelli (1994)).

all over the world, some arguing that as a result multiple modernities developed, which all diverge from the western version, some even strongly and vocally opposing it (Eisenstadt, 2000). Taking to heart the observations of the importance of interactions in the dynamics of modernity, as well as the existence of multiple, sometimes opposing modern voices, I however start from the observation that from its very onset, modernity never existed in a single form, even in 18th century Europe:

There was never one single homogenous conception of modernity.... There was, from the very origins of modern societal institutions, an empirically undeniable and easily observable variety of institutional and cultural forms, even in the context of Western and Central Europe (Wittrock, 2000: 58).

However, modernity *did* provide the context in which scientific thought developed into a more unified and powerful system of knowledge and discourse. These innovations are intertwined with the qualitatively different relationship with nature that was the result of modern developments. Modernists believed that they were discovering the objective laws and language of the universe, expressed in mathematics and in fundamental universal laws. They made the strict distinction between the subjective inner world of people's thoughts and perceptions, and the objective natural outer world which existed independent from their views, and could be known according to mathematical laws which provided absolutely certain knowledge, and would lead people to become fully rational (Scarborough, 1994: 10–12). As a result of this fundamental dichotomy, culture and tradition came to be seen as part of the realm of the pre-modern.

Presumably having access to the only truth, modernists disregarded other types of knowledge systems as false and superstitious, wanting to secularize society from religion and myth. "They view myth as associated with what is primitive, past, subjective and untrue[;] a subjective fantasy projected onto a reality more properly defined by science" (Scarborough, 1994: 30). The modernist views relied on teleological and Eurocentric evolutionist theories inspired by Durkheim, like Rostow's modernization theory (1960), which place societies on a uni-linear scale of development that presupposes the west is a model for the rest of the world. Feeling that they had become fundamentally different from all other people, modernists now divided the world into binary oppositions of us and them, moderns and premoderns, culture and nature, civilized and primitive, science and myth, fact and value. The modernist teleological theory of social evolution from primitive 'natural man' to 'civilized European' produced the dichotomy between 'the West and the rest' (Hall, 1996), and was used to support and justify colonial policies as well as imperialist postcolonial development initiatives (Kratz and Gordon, 2002; Nederveen Pieterse, 1990; Sobania, 2002).

Beadwork's relation to modernity

Beadwork became popular in the west especially since the 1960s as personal ornaments associated with the 'hippie' scene, for example in the form of 'love beads'. It was often worn to signal disenchantments and criticism towards the western consumer society and imperialism and it was a common ornament in protests against the Vietnam War and for the Equal Rights Movement (Howard, 1996; Sciamia, 1998). The counter movements which developed in reaction to the modern developments and the accompanying modernist discourse, criticized the technological and societal changes as causing estrangement, complication and oppression, arguing that people in modern societies were becoming corrupted and separated from their natural roots. Beads were considered

sensuous reminders of wild natural phenomena and rich cultural practices, which westerners felt they had lost under the influence of modernity. Thus, beads such as the *mporo*, often worn by Samburu and Maasai people, became popular in the United States, especially with various religious and secular spiritual groups, such as Unitarian Universalists and in New Age circles (Straight, 2002). Up till today, beads are often associated with the native, presumably pre-modern realms and non-western places, including African, Indian, South-East Asian and even native American worlds. There, 'exotic' cultures are generally imagined to harbor freer, more happy and harmonious ways of life, without too rigid controls, for example on sexuality (Howard, 1996; Sciama and Eicher, 1998).

Interestingly, in several regards, the glass beads are part of exactly those modern human alienations that the counter movements criticize(d). Firstly, even before Europeans arrived, beads of a variety of materials have been used as objects of payment in Africa and other parts of the world, sometimes resembling currency. Being small and quite easily transported, and being given a symbolic value determined by social consensus, these beads formed a progressive step towards the modern market economy and market society. Their use as tokens of value was facilitating for the progression towards disembodied, impersonal economic exchanges, which are increasingly divorced from their contexts (Dalton, 1961; Sciama, 1998). During colonial times, the use of beads in exchange for other goods was widely enhanced, resulting in practices that clearly preceded the use of money.

Secondly, glass beads are made by the chemical transformation of sand and soda, and have often been deliberately manufactured to imitate natural stones. They can thus be seen as an example of the increasing artificiality of the modern world, in line with synthetics, plastics, artificial insemination and artificial intelligence (Sciama, 1998). In fact, it might be that the unfair competition between scarce natural materials for personal decoration and mass-produced imitations initially made glass beads so precious to non-western peoples. In Africa for example, materials that were considered for ornaments were relatively scarce, or took a lot of effort to compose. Thus, outsiders bringing glass beads were able to trade them for ivory, hides, gold and even slaves, at prices that were very beneficial to them. Some writers characterize the trade of beads in such quantities as 'part of a colonial process that included encouraging indigenous consumption of European goods' (Straight, 2002: 11). Even though in the west beads are clearly associated with intercultural solidarity and the struggle for racial equality, they also have affinity with global inequality and colonialism.

The modernist discourse has often been fed with stories of naïve 'savages' who trade valuable products for simple glass beads. The myth that Dutch settlers bought the island of Manhattan from the native Americans for the equivalent of 24 dollars in beads has been told to schoolchildren in the US until recently, presumably to illustrate how primitive and naïve the original inhabitants were (Sciama, 1998). However, this perspective denies that in the local contexts at the time, glass beads were in fact very valuable, just like salt, pepper, tea, spices and coffee were considered extremely valuable in Europe at certain points in history. Moreover, it is ignored that for example in Africa many Africans have also become very wealthy from the trade in beads. Sciama (1998) suspects that European travelers over-emphasized the asymmetry of the exchanges in order to underline that their risky enterprises were worthwhile economically, thus using the manipulation of imagery to further political and economic goals. Their narratives may have been so successful, because they fitted neatly with the dominant modernist discourse.

Maasai as a symbol of pre-modernity

To illustrate my points about modernity, I have chosen a case study that focuses on Maasai. Well known across the world, 'Maasai have for long been an icon of development's and modernity's other' (Schneider, 2006: 113). **A variety of historical sources, such as travelers' perceptions provided by early administrators, influential settlers and early (amateur) ethnographers, including Hinde and Hinde (1901), Hollis (1905), and Merker (1904), produced narratives and dichotomous taxonomies that set the tone for the stereotypical portrayal of Maasai as 'the antithesis to modern Europeans' (Hodgson, 2001: 124). Contemporary historians, anthropologists as well as Maasai specialists rebuke these views (Bruner, 2002; Hodgson, 2001; Hughes, 2006; Kratz and Gordon, 2002; Spear, 1993a). Nevertheless, in a wide variety of contexts, as Galaty observes, Maasai continue to be considered "'icons" of African traditionalism and unwitting symbols of resistance of modernist values and development and conservation' (Galaty, 2002: 347). Ultimately symbolized by the male warrior, 'Maasai are presented as an idealized "noble savage" (Sobania, 2002: 333), 'a global image of African tribesmen' (Bruner, 2001: 882). Clearly informed by modernist visions of static non-western peoples 'without history' (Wolf, 1990), in tourism and beyond, Maasai are advertised as wild primitives, untouched by civilization, incarnations of an unchanging Edenic Africa. They famously represent 'real African culture', which has remained celebrated, unbroken and uncompromised, in contrast to other contemporary Africans, who have come to be influenced by modernity.**

Everyone 'knows' the Maasai. Men wearing red capes while balancing on one leg and a long spear, gazing out over the semi-arid plains stretching endlessly to the horizon, or women heavily bedecked in beads, stare out at us from countless coffee-table books and tourist's snapshots. Uncowed by their neighbours, colonial conquest or modernization, they stand in proud mute testimony to a vanishing African world (Spear, 1993b: 1).

As other Fourth World peoples, they are imagined to be 'the last remnants of a planet which the capitalist world system had not yet found worth exploiting, [a] last refuge from modernity' (van den Berghe, 1994: 10).

However, most of the characteristics that are described and seen as 'typically' Maasai, such as their Kenyan/Tanzanian savannah heritage, pure pastoralism, red blankets, and beaded ornaments, have largely come about as part of modern engagements (Wijngaarden, 2010: 104). Maasai's timeless pure pastoralism on the Kenyan and Tanzanian savannah is a figment of the imagination: Their Eastern Nilotic language indicates that Maasai migrated to Kenya and Tanzania relatively recently, moving South from Sudan during the first millennium AD (Spear, 1997: 7). **It is correct that they have been one of the few groups of highly specialized pastoralists in East Africa. However these peoples' exclusive focus on pastoral production is likely to only have been facilitated by changes in weather patterns 3000 years ago, and remained in the context of social and economic relationships with hunter-gatherers (Marshall, 1990). Furthermore, over time, Maasai grew sorghum and millet besides keeping livestock, and it has been concluded that overall, the pure pastoral tradition has not been the only or even the most dominant mode of production (Waller, 1993: 292).**

In Kenya and Tanzania, Maasai initially occupied the extensive fertile green hills and highlands, but were expelled by colonial influences, expanding agriculture and the establishment of game reserves, national parks and conservation areas (Hughes, 2006; Lamprey and Reid, 2004; Spear, 1993b). Even the typical savannah vegetation as well as its famous mass migration of wildebeest and

other grazers, globally considered a symbol of the timeless and pristine wilderness in which the Maasai live, have actually developed in this form only several decades ago, after thorough intervention of Maasai livestock grazing, fire, and rinderpest vaccination campaigns by the colonial government (Lamprey and Reid, 2004; Little, 1996). Nowadays, almost all Maasai are sedentary, living in arid areas, and rely on farming and wage labor as well as the tending of livestock, very few living primarily of livestock products at all (Lamprey and Reid, 2004; Spear and Waller, 1993).

The red blankets, which are another essential aspect of the Maasai image, are the product of colonial trade. Although nowadays they are produced in Tanzania too, these cloths used to be imported. The patterns of the Maasai *shuka* are reminiscent of Scottish tartan, and there is a discussion whether the fabric was introduced directly to the Maasai by Scottish missionaries and regiments, or whether it came to them through the Indian P.D. Dodia, and can be traced back to the influence of tartan kilts of the British Army highland regiments on Madras fabric (Laizer, 2018). Likewise, Maasai's colorful beadwork is a relatively recent acquisition, the beads as well as the designs being the result of interactions with Europe.

Maasai and beadwork

Fitting with the western focus on the visual and its tradition for ordered categorization of cultures (Corbey, 1993), beadwork has become one of the strongest symbols of the Maasai ethnic 'character'. It is interesting that livestock, which is such an important aspect of Maasai life, is almost never part of the images of Maasai people (Sobania, 2002), but Maasai are almost never shown without beaded ornaments. The beads 'help to create one principal marketed version of Maasai identity... and popular images are instantly recognized from displays of beadwork' (Kratz and Pido, 2000: 61). Beaded ornaments are such an iconic indicator of 'Maasainess' that outsiders often mistakenly identify people from other African ethnic groups who wear beadwork as Maasai (see for example Parkinson, 2006: 46), a situation which can only be partly accounted for as a result of the fluidity of Maasai ethnic boundaries (Kasfir, 2002; Klumpp and Kratz, 1993; Spear, 1993a; Wijngaarden, 2016b).

If taking the west as the norm, Maasai aesthetics accentuate exotic strangeness, with the choice of colors, designs and placements of ornaments stressing contrast, also with western customs and traditions. In line with erroneous modernist views, beadwork is associated with the primitive, perceived as accentuating the relative nakedness of the body, and often considered a childlike or poor-people's fashion, in contrast to jewelry made of gold and silver. Manufacturing the ornaments is clearly laborious and toilsome, and in modernist eyes symbolizes a simple but harmonious life, with little possessions and lots of free time. Thus, beads are considered significant tokens of the traditional culture and mystical world of the premodern African, where deep symbolic meanings and ancient ceremonies are part of daily life.

However, glass beads do not come from Africa at all. There are only two West-African societies (in Nigeria and Ghana) that have produced glass beads themselves, but only by making use of recycled glass (Carey, 1998). The beads used by Maasai have always come through overseas trade. Today, they are mainly imported from Czech Republic, even though some lower quality imports from China have become available in addition to European beads.

Glass beads first arrived in Africa around the first millennium AD through the trans-Saharan and coastal trade, at that time coming from India and the Near East. Being imported, they were very

costly and only used by royalties and the courts, for example playing a role in the development of Nilotic kingship (Carey, 1998; Sciama, 1998). From 1480 onwards, the mass import of beads from Europe started, most notably from Italy (Murano in Venice), Czech Republic (Bohemia), parts of Germany (Bayern) and the Netherlands (Karklins et al., 2016; Sciama, 1998). In 1893 for example, 79,426 pounds of Venetian beads and hundred thousands of pounds of beads from other sources were imported in to East Africa alone (Kratz and Pido, 2000: 45). This flooding of the African continent with European trade beads happened to coincide with a hardening of ethnic boundaries at the end of the 19th century (Carey, 1998), and led to a 'revolution in East African art' (Kratz and Pido, 2000: 45), with 'African fashions [being] notably affected' (Straight, 2002: 11). The beads' colors and designs were used to construct a highly visible idiom of ethnic identities on the continent.

In the case of Maasai, members of the different age-sets and sections painted their shields and bodies in order to distinguish themselves (Ole Saitoti and Beckwith, 1980: 108, 114-115). Even though good quality glass beads had been available in Maasailand in considerable quantities for over two centuries (Vierke, 2008), Maasai did not use them in any significant way, until the *litalala* age-set (warriors from the end of the 19th until the start of the 20th century) started to employ large numbers of beads for their decoration. This was set off as a result of colonial pacification measures, which included prohibitions for warriors to wear their weapons (including shields) in public. As a result, Maasai started to explore the brightly colored beads as a means to adorn themselves and express their identity. The entire repertoire of Maasai beaded ornaments was developed within a short period of twenty years at the end of the 19th century (Vierke, 2008), a powerful case in line with insights regarding the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

Maasai beadwork designs

Essentially, the designs of Maasai beadwork reflect the contrasting light and dark patterns that can be found in nature, with names of the patterns reminiscent of those found on animals (cows, leopards, zebras) and in the landscape (mountains, rolling grasslands dotted with acacia trees) (Somjee, 1993). As is the case with other ethnic groups (Kratz and Pido, 2000; Rozani and Goduka, 2017), the designs and color combinations of the beadwork make public statements about the ethnicity of the wearer (Kratz and Pido, 2000; Rozani and Goduka, 2017). Maasai additionally use specific ornaments and patterns to define gender and clan or section (*iloshon*) affiliations within Maasai social structures, and reflect a person's position in life, for example indicating age-set, marital status, or motherhood (Klumpp and Kratz, 1993; Kratz and Pido, 2000; Somjee, 1977). Despite these strict cultural rules, the designs of the beadworks are highly dynamic and the result of interactions with the outside world. The youngsters of each new generation adapt to the circumstances at hand, and are determined to outshine previous age-sets with ever more eye catching designs.

Not only the very use of beads, but also the designs of the beadwork have been thoroughly influenced by modern developments. Many of the changes in designs were initially the result of supply circumstances, such as a shortage of beads of certain types or colors due to changes in global networks of trade. For example, in the 1960s the *lilmakaa* age-set made small tablet beads and olive-shaped beads their trademark. This was because the until then very popular large tablet bead *intepei*, which was produced in the German village of Weidenberg, had become unavailable due to the blocking of the Suez Canal as a result of the third Arabian Israeli War (Vierke, 2008).

The extreme popularity of white beads in Tanzanian Maasai ornaments today, is the result of the color's local association with cleanliness, modernity, and especially wealth. As white beads are slightly more heavy and thus more expensive. As they are used often to provide contrast with the other colors, they became scarce quickest when during the early 1980s the newly independent East African governments imposed taxes, severe import restrictions and import bans to diminish global influences in the region. The governments targeted beads too, because they qualified them as European luxury goods. Inspired by the shortage of white seed beads, the color set red-yellow-black was developed, based on blanket patterns and the color of the Kenyan national flag (Kratz and Pido, 2000). When in 1982 the white beads were completely out of stock, the purchase of other colors also halted temporarily, because without white beads for contrast, no ornaments could be made at all. After some time, yellow beads started to be used instead of white ones, but as soon as white beads became available again this was reversed. Since this time, white beads have become extremely popular, with ornaments in Tanzania becoming almost completely white (Vierke, 2008; Wijngaarden, 2016b).

It has happened more than once that 'an innovation directed at tourists has eventually been adopted as a Maasai form, though reinterpreted and redefined in terms of its position, structure and meaning' (Kratz and Pido, 2000: 69). For example, colors that were initially only used in objects sold to tourists, have come to be incorporated in ornaments Maasai make for their own use. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Maasai for instance started to use the color sky blue, which is actually associated with the Kalenjin speaking Kipsigis, in beadwork they produced to sell. Although not part of earlier Masaai color sets, it worked its way into certain age-set specific ornaments, and the *Imiruesi* age-set, which was formed in the mid-1990s, can be recognized from the single cable of sky blue their members wear across the chest among similar cables of different colors (Kratz and Pido, 2000).

The designs of Maasai beadwork today have been influenced thoroughly by the innovations made possible through the use of new materials. My fieldwork participants for example cut up old aluminium cooking pots in order to create metal decorations; use metal wire to strengthen or close their designs; and often favor plastic instead of leather, especially for creating beadwork for their own use. In contrast, in beadwork for tourists - which is not designed to be as strong - leather is preferred, because it is less laborious to shape and to pierce. The plastic materials employed come from sources as varied as canisters of cooking oil, bottles of poison used to dip the cattle, broken buckets and jerry cans. Sometimes synthetic materials replace natural materials that have become increasingly hard to find, such as the hollow stems of African alpine bamboo (*arundinaria alpina*) which was formerly used to create tobacco holders (Wijngaarden, 2016b). The preferred strings used for beading today are fishing lines, although most women use the more economical option of creating string by rolling together the synthetic fibres of old foodbags. The needles used for beading are also fabricated at home, by using the metal spokes of old bicycle wheels or umbrella skeletons. Both these processes can be observed in short films recorded at my fieldwork site (Wijngaarden, 2015a, 2015b)

The progressive nature of Maasai beadwork can be seen in its most extreme form when observing the use of symbols in the designs. Symbols reflect the dynamics in the spheres of life that are of importance. Popular are symbolic representations of parts of cows, the human body, nature and household objects (Klumpp and Kratz, 1993). However, many symbols refer to modern technological and societal developments. I will give several examples **that have been photographed**

and described in more detail elsewhere (Wijngaarden, 2016b: 23-24, 29-32). The *Iseuri* age set (whose warriors were circumcised from the early 1950s until the 1960s) created wristbands out of beads that resembled watches, complete with a face and buttons, because when going to the market to sell cattle, they saw affluent people who constantly looked at such wristbands. These days, especially during elections times, lots of the ornaments of the Tanzanian Maasai include the flags of the different political parties. As most Maasai are Christians these days, beaded crosses are popular, and often form a prerequisite in the ceremonies surrounding baptism (Wijngaarden, 2016b: 31-32). The chokers (*ingotoomi*) that are worn by Maasai girls from the *Kisongo* section these days, are almost always designed to include a cross sticking out at the throat region, which is a reference to their 'born again' status.

Technological advancements and modern novelties have especially been a source of inspiration in the creative competitions between the age-sets. The *Iseuri* age-set for example chose the telegraph pole as its symbol. It was meant to signify the speed of communication warriors of this age-set had with their girlfriends. In the 1970s the next major age-set *Ilkitoip* elaborated on this theme by extending the telegraph pole and adding a large button eye on top. This was representing the swirling blue light of a police car. In addition, this age-set chose the 999 police emergency number as its symbol. The next age-set's design was not only influenced by western technology, but also directly based on beadwork that was initially produced to sell to tourists: Already in the late 1950s a beaded bow tie was developed as a gimmick for the tourism market. Several decades later, the shape of the bow tie was redefined into a helicopter rotor blade, which the age-sets *Ilmirisho* and *Ilmajeshi* used as their symbol, because a helicopter obviously gets lovers together faster than any police car. Its construction was elaborated and extended throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The helicopters were made of beads, wire and leather or plastic, with several eyes dangling from them, and sometimes so complex and heavy that wire buttresses had to be built from the base of the chokers to support all wings and eyes (Kratz and Pido, 2000).

Some writers have expressed the fear that tourism would lead Maasai beadwork to become alienated and polluted or 'watered down', and not be as authentically Maasai as it used to be (Somjee, 1977), with increased commodification reducing it to the realm of fashion (Vierke, 2008). Similar concerns have been expressed with regard to indigenous and ethnic handicrafts worldwide. However, in many societies there is a distinction between 'ethnic arts' for internal consumption, and 'tourist arts' for external sale (Wherry, 2006), and this insight is confirmed for Maasai by Strøm. She has pointed out that only the 'Maasainess' of items put on the souvenir market is affected, which 'is not "damaging" the handicraft and importance of beadwork in the Maasai villages in the community' (Strøm, 2008a, 2008b: 3). My own research, qualifies and specifies these insights. Although Maasai beadwork created for the tourism market is different from the beadwork that Maasai wear themselves, the two realms are semi-permeable and in interplay with each other. Influences of the tourism market on Maasai ornaments should however not be seen as a recent phenomenon of contamination of an otherwise pure, pre-modern tradition. Instead, these are the next steps in the ongoing process of interaction between peoples of different societies and continents which gave rise to Maasai beadwork all along.

Modernity as a cultural dynamic

There is no consensus over a definition of culture, but over time understandings have shifted their focus from a definition that highlights behavioral criteria, towards a more ideational, Geertzian inspired conceptualization. This is illustrated by comparing Benedict's famous description of culture as 'that complex whole which includes all the habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Benedict, 1931: 806) (for a reprint see (Benedict, 2005)), towards definitions that highlight culture 'as a system of meanings ... largely shared by a population' (Eriksen, 2001: 3). I think it is fair to include both ideas and perspectives as well as customs and actions as part of culture, and I approach culture as 'those abilities, notions and forms of behaviour persons have acquired as members of society' (Eriksen, 2001: 3).

This provides parallels with how the concept of modernity can be employed, as it is often used to refer to a pattern of shared symbols and meanings as well as shared behaviors. A simple example is that the access to certain technological objects inspires behaviors and concepts which are shared at least partly across people. I find the action of taking 'selfies' and the concept of 'data' not only among my European colleagues, but also among Maasai in rural Tanzania, Bedouins living in the Arab deserts, and youngsters in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. There may be different uses, appropriations and meanings attached in different contexts, but there are definitely considerable parallels with regard to the behaviors and ideas involved. This example illustrates another parallel, namely that both culture and modernity are connected to the material world, which is made clear by the concepts of 'material culture' (in the case of culture) and technology (in the case of modernity).

If modernity should be approached as a cultural dynamic, then how exactly does it relate to culture(s) itself? The answer becomes clear when we try to unravel the confusing distinction between nature and culture, which is a fundamental part of the wider series of modernist binaries like moderns and premoderns, civilized and primitive, us and them, fact and value. The modernist rationale of binary oppositions does not hold well, even to describe the modernists' own views: Supposedly, moderns have found access to the fundamental laws of Nature through scientific and mathematical laws, but it is the premoderns who are deemed natural, and said to live (still) in a natural way. This contrasts them from moderns, who have Culture (high culture). Nevertheless, it is the premodern 'other' who still lives in culture (with the small c), because moderns have shaken off all cultural biases and superstitions, realizing the objective truth. Does this make any sense?

This confusion is illustrated well in the accounts produced by European tourists in Tanzanian Maasailand. They simultaneously argue that Maasai are quintessentially natural, even referring to them as 'nature people', but at the same time argue they are powerful representatives of African culture, as they 'live according to their culture *really* very strictly' (Wijngaarden, 2016a: 213). The distinction between culture and nature is often extremely blurred, and even vanishes, such as in this Dutch tourist's statement: 'Indeed they do live in the midst of the ... of the culture ... ehm ... or of the nature [correcting herself]' (Wijngaarden, 2016a: 212). Time and again, tourists struggle to choose between the words 'nature' and 'culture' when describing Maasai, the concepts seemingly referring to the same presumed quality of the premodern 'other'. In tourism as well as in modernist thinking, it has been imagined that cultures were static, unified and localized aspects of societies, which can be considered pure, unless influences from modernity pollute them. Part of the confusion about how to define either culture or modernity, is the assumption that suddenly in history, something has changed, when actually, throughout history, things were already always changing.

As Latour has argued, there is no logical absolute distinction which can be made between nature and culture, only relative distinctions (Latour, 1993). All the cultures we know are part of the dynamics of humankind, and modernity can be seen as a cultural dynamic which is partly shared by many cultures, giving rise to a variety of modernities. According to the relative measure one wishes to use, these can be observed to be diverse as well as sharing important commonalities. It thus makes sense sometimes to speak of modernity (for example when comparing English urbanization in the 12th century with the 20th century) and sometimes to speak of different modernities (for example when comparing the influence of global institutions on African and European societies).

A parallel which helps to explain this frame of thought comes from basic anthropological theory in which it is established that every human in the world has culture (in the sense that we are all cultural beings). However, there is a diversity of cultures across the globe (Eriksen, 2001). In the same way, all contemporary human beings are living in the modern world, but they have been affected by the cultural dynamic we call modernity in different ways. The changes implied by a state of modernity cannot automatically be assumed universal, and their inquiry should be guided by for example ethnographic research (Davies, 2000). Nevertheless, even if there are people on this globe who have not had their lives directly affected by for example money and (the products of) modern technology, it is very unlikely that their natural environment has not been affected by it, even if it is just due to changes in weather and climate.

Thus, the cultural dynamic of modernity has come to each population in a variety of ways, and people have reacted to it with diverse reactions, resulting in a myriad of modernities having come into existence. If modernity were a narrative, it would be a story that takes different forms all over the world, and continues to be reinvented by every speaker, with patterns of similarity that can be observed in people from a comparable (sub)culture. However, the motif can be so different among people from different societies, that direct similarities are sometimes hard to find. Nevertheless, if all narratives are taken together, it becomes clear that finally all do connect to each other, and thus are part of one larger story (process), which is told (lived) in a myriad of different ways.

Conclusion

Both modernists as well as most of the movements that supposedly counter them have generally accepted the division of the world into moderns and premoderns, nature and culture, fact and value, primitive and civilized. Maasai are one of the most famous icons of pre-modernity, their beadwork symbolizing this position. However, the idea that Maasai have been living an isolated and timeless existence and that their beadwork came about in isolation is a misconception that has its basis in modernist assumptions. Anthropologists widely, and Maasai scholars specifically, have argued that Maasai livelihoods and cultural traditions have been dynamic and evolved in constant interaction with the surrounding world and peoples. In modern times, Maasai have continued to engage with the increasing flows of commodities and ideas to add to their already perpetually evolving cultural archives.

The materials and incentives for Maasai beadwork are largely the result of interactions with Europeans. The designs are the product of national and international dynamics, including wars on other continents, global missionary efforts and worldwide technological advancements. Modernity is thus a fundamental prerequisite for Maasai beadwork. In fact, the material as well as the designs are

rooted in modern developments. Maasai cannot be seen as premodern people, because who they are today is the result of centuries of life in a modern world. This means not simply that they have been influenced by modernity, but that they are in conversation with it: By creating a specific form of modernity, Maasai practices have also influenced what modernity entails, and this should be taken into account in modernity's conceptualisation.

The idea of multiple modernities counters the problem of speaking of one modernity in a Eurocentric sense. In the same way as modernity, also culture, in its singular form, was once seen as something only Europeans possessed, while the rest of humanity was reduced to being subject to their natural instincts. As culture, modernity has wrongfully been approached as a stage of evolution, lifting up part of mankind above others. Speaking of modernities in plural can thus expose persistent remnants of ethnocentric thinking patterns, as it underlines that there has never been an original, homogenous modernity, just like there is no original of culture: Both are open ended, dynamic processes. If understood in the right way, conceptualizing them however is useful. Even though they have been misused in the past, I would not want to do away with the singular form of the concepts of culture or modernity all together, as understanding the events in the world by using these concepts has come to hold so much meaning for people worldwide, in daily life as well as academic discussions. **The central significance that both the European and Maasai people I work with attribute to these concepts when they explain their liveworlds and their relationship with others (Wijngaarden 2016a), obliges me to attempt to grasp and clarify these ideas, as to produce academic knowledge that is not dismissive and judgemental with regard to the views of its subjects, but which is fertilized by their experiences and is significant and useful to them. It is part of the effort to pursue academic sense-making not as a detached or elitist discourse 'about', but as a dialogue 'with'; a crosspollinating exchange of perspectives that heightens understanding.**

Modernity studies can benefit from further incorporating findings from specialized fields that shed light on modern transformations all over the world, in order to better determine what material, technological, institutional and societal dynamics and forms of knowledge production are characterizing the different modernities. This will help it to catch up with other fields that have already achieved a less eurocentric understanding of what the wider concept of modernity entails, and further determine the distinctions and added value of this concept as compared to concepts like colonialism and globalization.

In addition, insights from the disciplines involved with these specialized fields may inspire new theoretical approaches towards modernity. Opposing earlier modernist views, anthropologists are increasingly followed by others in describing culture as emergent (Fischer, 2018). The qualifier 'emergent' underlines something is negotiable and changing (Cohen, 1988), and thus culture has come to be understood not as a singular, closed-off and static attribute of a specific people at a certain location, but as a dynamic and fluid construction (Burns, 1999: 156). Moreover, it is a perpetually contested process, which is neither completely integrated nor sharply bounded (Bruner, 2005). The case of Maasai beadwork shows that it is adequate to approach modernity similarly. It is best understood as an interactive process with semi-permeable boundaries that includes opposing voices, and is most accurately described as an essentially open-ended cultural dynamic.

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