Power Inequities in ICT
Observations from an African Place

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Digital Inclusion, Digital Humanism
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Short introduction

• Gertjan van Stam (PhD-culture, MTech-ICT, BSc-Telecoms engineer)
  • Living and working in sub Sahara Africa since 1987, full time since 2000
  • Research focus on the intersection of technology and culture
  • Community deposits from African viewpoints @ http://www.vanstam.net/gertjan-van-stam

• Presentation to give glimpses to context and content of the paper
• Invitation to read and contemplate the paper
  • might be an uneasy read, as reported by those who did during its writing
  • uneasy to write, I can say
Method

• Reflexive paper, taking years to mature and might never finish
  • Attending > 50 conference
  • Observations from Africa, with > 180 academic deposits
• Depending on ‘communal grace’ for persons willing to disclose
• Took lots of ‘unlearning’ and discomforting experiences, over 20 years
  • to be able to access and understand other ways of knowing
  • to withstand respect for, and use of, undeserved privileges
• Possibly obscured when submersed in academic environments
  • explicit and implicit exceptionalism, wherever one goes
  • institutionalised powers in line with cultural and philosophical eurocentrism
Enshrined Injustices hit the mainstream (1/2)

Since writing the paper, social movements heated up

- Complex issues
  - Black Lives Matter focus on institutional racism
  - Climate Movement focus on civil rights
  - National scrutiny of colonial history and questioning of cultural practices, e.g.
    - “Zwarte Piet” (blackface) in the Netherlands
    - King Leopold II in Belgium
    - Cecil Rhodes in United Kingdom

- Sustained struggle for social, historical, political and economic justices
  - Publications in various African fora call for epistemic justice
  - Students in (South) Africa demand decolonisation of learning
Enshrined Injustices hit the mainstream (2/2)

• An overarching issue: the demand to ‘Be Seen’
  • Clouded by remnants of slavery, genocides, and disposessions
  • Subalternisation by oriental, imperial and colonial action (the Terrible Three)
  • Institutional racism and enshrined racist systems

• Matters of injustice in ICT development
  • Ubiquitous computing shown to align with colonial practices
  • Western academia has track record of expropriating ideas from the South
  • Leaders with power (even when well-intentioned) exhibit attitudes that governed relationships between Africa and the rest of the world for centuries
  • Result: hesitance to disclose knowing in the South from the South
Glimpse: on Western values in PhD defense

“... by ‘Western’ academic values ...”
Glimpse: on researchers in rural Zambia

“... I have seen it ...”
Glimpse: online conference in Africa (May 2020)

• WhatsApp conversation ‘in the background’, after the first half hour

66

Again, a conference that start with non-Africans speaking. The talk time of non-Africans must have been 99% so far
Gertjan van Stam, Yesterday at 8:46 AM

Kkkkkk
Glimpse: online conference in Africa (May 2020)

• WhatsApp conversation ‘in the background’, after a presentation

66

Here you go: Europeans providing guidance for Africans. African asks a question to another African, but a European gives the answer... That is shown in my ‘power inequity’ paper...

Gertjan van Stam, Yesterday at 9:19 AM

Kkk

It will take generations to change that 😊

Power inequities, observation from an African place, WebSci’20, Gertjan van Stam, 7 July 2020
Foreign powers, mentioned in paper

At conferences and elsewhere

• Power to categories
• Power to fund
• Power to travel
• Power to demand entitlements
• Power to speak first
• Power to set the agenda

• Power to survey
• Power to make visible
• Power to represent
• Power to apprehend and build
• Power to socially control

“Some [foreigners] are quite conscious of their privileges and actively avoid using their power, others wield a selection of them; there is also a limited – but quite visible – group that actively use them, whether consciously or not.”
Effect, using Burawoy’s power categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Mediation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domination</td>
<td>Effect of prolonged and surreptitious power struggles</td>
<td>Rhetoric of the struggles between centres and peripheries</td>
<td>Being inert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silencing</td>
<td>Ideology in the interest of dominant elites</td>
<td>Orations by persons from non-local authorities</td>
<td>Restricting or refraining from speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectification</td>
<td>Assessment informed by oriental/external, natural and social categorising</td>
<td>Enforcing norms in situations where there are dynamic and integrative epistemologies</td>
<td>Using long-term, oral means of data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalisation</td>
<td>Reducing the world to categories</td>
<td>Judging activities using extraneous categorisations</td>
<td>Using trans-disciplinary approaches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Effect, using Appiah’s identity categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power base</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Mediation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief system</td>
<td>Essentialistic views of the benefits of ICTs</td>
<td>Body-of-knowledge framed by experience and beliefs valorised in Euramerica</td>
<td>Orthopraxis (acting right)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sovereignty</td>
<td>Institutions, procedures and precepts that govern sovereignty</td>
<td>Echo chambers of normative knowledge at international conferences</td>
<td>Value epistemologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour</td>
<td>Segregation based on observable distinctions</td>
<td>Race and location-affiliated negation and affirmation, dominance and resistance</td>
<td>Conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Created social hierarchies sustaining in-groups and out-groups</td>
<td>Orientalistic generalities about them and us enmeshed in social fabric</td>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Community building to live life with others</td>
<td>Exchange, adoption and assimilation of practices</td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Assessment using interrogative questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interrogation</th>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Aim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why</strong></td>
<td>Agenda setting, front seat, speak first</td>
<td>Fits Eurocentric agendas that yield benefits for the already powerful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where</strong></td>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>Priorities actions where powerful can travel; action where the powerful decide ‘a certain lack’ should be alleviated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What</strong></td>
<td>Categorisation, surveying, funding</td>
<td>What fits a universalised scheme gets done, what does not is made invisible; where money flows, things get done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When</strong></td>
<td>Funding, agenda setting</td>
<td>Activities are set by funding patterns, fitting foreign conceptualised agendas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who</strong></td>
<td>Make visible, represent</td>
<td>Those recognised as suppliers of information and data for foreign experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How</strong></td>
<td>Social control, make visible</td>
<td>In line with Eurocentric valorised methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>With what</strong></td>
<td>Build</td>
<td>Using methods and activities that can be controlled and done outside of Africa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Issues, mentioned in paper

• The lopsided accrual of benefits
• Witnessed self-denial and stigma
• Omnipresence of coloniality
• Unaligned context projections
• Countering disempowering and apprehended powers
• Issues of ethical conflict mediation

Quote: “Why did I come here? I have seen no recognition of the works by non-Western ancestors. I have seen Western professors joggling for access to areas where they were not born nor do live. I have seen professors using the event to jostle for position among themselves. I have seen disrespect for non-Western contributions. In the meantime, contributions from Southerners seem to speak to Eurocentric audiences only, not to the context where I am living in. I have found little to bring home to justify the investment of my community to bring me here, unfortunately.”
(International ICT conference with Southern focus, participant from East Asia, 2019)
Conclusion

• ICT developments appear mostly framed in a system that promotes and protects Eurocentric power by denying, and at best bracketing, the abilities of Africans to think through, reason about, and solve problems.

• It appears that non-Western ICT professionals have to justify their existence, even during expressions in their own environment.