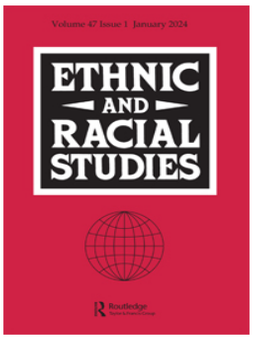

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A call to rethink African scholars beyond "local experts": mobility, race, and gender in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Development discourses have been widely criticized for creating hierarchical dichotomies, such as "developed" (the global North) and "developing" (the global majority), with the former being the ideal standard to which the rest must catch up. The development paradigm has infiltrated academic spaces globally, including international research collaborations, creating various categories such as (non)scientific (local) expertise. We see such hierarchies as mechanisms of legitimation to maintain the ongoing subjugation of African scholars based on the historical and contemporary asymmetries in global knowledge production. Informed by the experiences of five female African doctoral researchers in the Netherlands, this paper problematizes and disrupts the concepts of "Expert" and "local expert". We question the relevance of these concepts in a context where global knowledge production continues to feed from coloniality and also question the old power relations that continue to enable knowledge inequalities between the global North and global South.

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KEYWORDS African scholars; expert; local; development; coloniality; knowledge production

Introduction

They don't call me a "local expert", but it is reflected in the practices. One example is the international consultancies that I have participated in. The call is always clear, that they want Experts and local experts. And of course, local

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experts get less money. But when I looked at my colleagues, the so-called Experts (read European), they were not superior to me in terms of experience and qualification. I was the only one with a PhD on the team, but the Experts got $750, and I got $300 (local expert rate). How do you justify this gap? A colleague explained that there was nothing that we could do – the rates were already specified by the organisation that had put out that call. It was interesting that this particular work was to be conducted in Africa, and that is why they needed Africans on the team. The salary for the calls for scientific researchers in Africa is often small compared to that of European researchers. The justification is that living costs in Africa are lower, but how come when Western experts come to Africa, they get paid way above the locals – the so-called Expert fee?

The current decolonial turn, in academia and elsewhere, is characterized by an increased interest by non-African intellectuals in understanding people of colour's experiences of racism and their stance on decolonial thought. Our concern is that the seemingly current decolonial hype may continue to obscure the continuities (coloniality) between the colonial past and the current global hegemonic hierarchies in knowledge production. The above vignette provides an idea of the kind of debates this article engages with. We aim to build on discussions around and usage of the idea of the Expert and expertise to point out the contradictions and unsettling processes within the decolonization of knowledge. This perspective draws attention simultaneously to different knowledges, histories, and epistemologies, among others.

We do not aim to engage with the pros and cons of a Eurocentric worldview of knowledge production because, first, this has already been exhaustively debated by others (see De Sousa Santos 2015; Diniz De Figueiredo and Martinez 2019; Mignolo 1999; Ndlovu-Gathseni 2013). Furthermore, in doing so we would risk falling prey to the hidden and inherent "power to name a problem" (Fitzpatrick 2021, 10); a power that gives legitimacy to the first party to define a problem, to create and maintain a "frame narrative". Those who join the discussion late are limited to the sole option of complying with the frame and following already-set parameters of how to engage with the issues under discussion (Mignolo 1999; Ndlovu-Gathseni 2013). Of those who may fall prey to this trap in the decolonial discussion, some may take the road of justifying and validating their knowledge or expertise in an attempt to seek recognition from the supposedly legitimate "Eurocentric knowledge" (Mfecane 2018), while others may take the road of resistance – yet in doing so, the latter implicitly endorse the already-established narrative. We therefore desist from any attempts to qualify our expertise or relevance. Be this as it may, we do not deny the adverse impact of such power dynamics on our lived realities.

As the opening vignette demonstrates, through this reflective article we seek to explore some of our experiences, anxieties, insecurities, and challenges associated with being "developing world scholars" (consultants or PhD candidates) trained in the "developed world" (the Netherlands) and

engaged in international research collaborations. We also explore our attempts to navigate and occupy intellectual spaces in Europe, and the uncertainties associated with life after a PhD.

We draw from a critical coloniality perspective, intending to make visible the persistent colonial matrices of power that continue to shape our current everyday experiences as African scholars based in Europe. The goal of this approach, as we make visible such fissures of power, is to add to current discussions on rethinking decolonization. We attempt to "shift the location from which the hegemonic paradigms are enunciated and interpret our experiences, drawing from a critical African and Global South perspective" (Ndlovu-Gathseni 2013, 5). In particular, we examine the notion of "local experts" as an ideological and discursive construction of African scholars as scientifically lagging and hence inferior. We use this argument to show how the organization of knowledge into hierarchies is intrinsically linked to the Eurocentric colonial logic of the hierarchisation of people around the world (Hacking 2005).

In what follows, we situate this paper with a brief description of the context. We then discuss the methodology employed, followed by the conceptual approach that informed our analysis. This is followed by a presentation of our diverse experiences, leading to our central argument, that using the term Expert may perpetuate the subalternisation of knowledge and by extension scholars from the global South, and thus runs the risk of reproducing colonial differences (Mignolo 1999).

Background

The current global economy in knowledge production has long been heavily criticized for its "extractive" characteristics and the over-dominance of the Euro-American worldview. Research collaborations between scholars from the global South and global North have been widely criticized as being fraught with inequalities and exploitations, mostly because of the power, knowledge, and resource differentials inherent in such partnerships (Arowosegbe 2016; Sariola and Simpson 2019). According to Sariola and Simpson (2019, 6), one reason for this is the intricate link between research funding and development discourses: research, in addition to being the systemic production of knowledge, is also inherently intertwined with notions and practices of development.

Development as a concept has been widely criticized for its empiricist positivist methodologies and epistemological injustices in non-Western contexts (Boateng 2016; Escobar 1995; Istratii 2017). As Escobar (1995) espouses, since its global emergence following the end of World War II, the development discourse has colonized reality itself and produced a hierarchized world of the "developed" and the "underdeveloped". The former presents

itself as the global yardstick for modernity, towards which the latter must aspire and strive. The development paradigm also differentiates between forms of expertise, such as "Experts" and "local experts". The former, without an adjective or qualifier, is meant to be the universal standard, while the latter, by contrast, is deemed specific to a locale, implying its limitation in focus.

This distinction of expertise is often seen in international research collaborations, as reflected in the introductory vignette. Local experts are hired at a lower rate because they are seen as limited in focus and/or expertise and in need of being capacitated or empowered, while their Western counterparts are paid more for their supposedly "universal" knowledge. This is a cross-cutting assumption within the development regime in its different facets; in the gender and development discourse, for example, African women are presented as in need of empowerment from harmful traditions and from traditional Black African men (Boateng 2016; Lorist 2020). Within the development paradigm, different types of knowledge are produced and consequently hierarchized, based on assumed cultures and values, with supposedly universally-applicable expert knowledge being favoured over the presumably local and scientifically-lagging knowledge (Ziai 2017).

"Experts" is a Western term for Western researchers and practitioners who often travel to the global South with their supposed expertise, which they are meant to impart to local communities to improve their lives through capacity building. There are gender Experts, HIV Experts, climate Experts, and researchers. Compared to these Experts with a big E, "local experts" are subordinate (see Kalinga 2019). Decolonial scholars have highlighted that the Eurocentric logic functions through polarized dichotomies: people are placed in different hierarchical categories, with the underlying assumption of unequivocal distinctions between the different groups (De Sousa Santos 2015; Ndlovu-Gathseni 2020).

In existing literature, local experts are also often referred to as cultural brokers (Biruk 2011) or facilitating researchers (see also Baaz forthcoming) and times fieldworkers (Kingori and Gerrets 2019). These are often people based in the research setting who "show the way" and link research subjects to the expatriate researcher who is unfamiliar with the cultural and geographic landscape of the context they are studying/researching. The use of such local experts has its roots in the practices of colonial governments that relied on locals to assist them in navigating the colonies (see Biruk 2011). Biruk further argues, however, that following the contestation of the exploitative nature of the use of local experts during colonial times, the rise in international social science research projects in post-colonial Africa witnessed a commodification of local expertise to interested outsiders, also known as "elite experts". As mooted by Odanga (2022, 3):

> I am zeroing in on the practice, so ordinarily an aspect of academia, that situates the 'expert' in certain towers. That practice is not a mistake. It is the result of a conscious, calculated, systemised, decades-long heist within the Western academy to privilege scholarship on Africa by Euro-Americans over that by Africans and African-descended scholars.

In line with current decolonial concerns in research practice, the idea of local researchers or experts has come under scrutiny, with scholars highlighting the power imbalances inherent in such language and categories (Biruk 2011; Kingori and Gerrets 2019). Beyond the monetary value accorded to locals, decolonial scholars are calling for recognition of the knowledge produced by local experts and the rebranding of it as legitimate knowledge (Bhambra 2007). This call has seen research funders embedding local knowledge within international research projects such as reflected in the opening vignette. Based on our experiences, however, we nevertheless see continuities characterized by hierarchies in the value accorded to different forms of knowledge and by extension the researchers not only in development research but academic institutions as well.

Methodology

This article is not based upon a specific study, and therefore we had no specific methodology lined out before we started writing. Nevertheless, in order to advance our arguments, we relied on the anthropological method of critical reflexivity (Bal, Grassiani, and Kirk 2014) and anchored our arguments within decolonial work, particularly the notion of "locus of enunciation" – the epistemic position, or positionality, from which an individual thinks and writes (Mignolo 1999) – and "epistemologies from the South" – the retrieval of new processes of production and valorization of valid knowledge (De Sousa Santos 2015, 51).

We draw from informal conversations, most of which were conducted around the university, in homes, and in our WhatsApp group which was formed in 2018. This group was created immediately after the four of us completed fieldwork to provide moral support to one another as we worked on our PhD theses. We used it to communicate ideas around our research findings, share writing strategies and relevant literature, and plan meetings to read and review each other's work. Over time, the group served other functions beyond writing: it became a space for regular communication and venting, for providing physical and moral support, and for sharing employment opportunities. The group became our "safe space" that would help us navigate the Dutch system as a collective and as individuals.

This research is based on autoethnography and ethnography. Autoethnography has been described as a form of qualitative research in which the author uses self-reflection and writing to explore anecdotal and personal

experience, and then connects this autobiographical story to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (see Reyes 2022).[1] We also draw from stories and experiences shared by other African colleagues in Europe who were not part of our core group, with their consent. Many of the stories of others that we share are from people we have known, followed on social media, and met with over at least three years. For anonymity purposes, we have depersonalized our experiences and use pseudonyms when referring to others.

It is important to highlight that using the pronouns "us", "we", and "our" does not connote a unitary voice and homogeneity in experience. As Mann et al. (2011, 224) expound in reference to their ethnographic experiment on eating with fingers as a group of scholars, we concur that the "composite 'we' is embedded with insolvable differences". Despite not having any phenotypic difference to distinguish us and having Africa as one connecting link and being women as another, we come from different worlds – as defined by the colonial borders between our countries, not to mention our linguistic differences. Although many a time our differences were not so visible to our European colleagues, as evidenced by some who confused our faces or assumed Africa was one country, to us our differences were as obvious as our similarities were undeniable. Not only are we Black African women academics, but we are also mothers, married and unmarried, of different ages, with different religious and cultural beliefs as informed by our different historical and contemporary trajectories. The WhatsApp Group quickly became a platform to help us broaden our understandings and keep us going against the negative stereotypes associated with "people from Africa", while embracing the positive stereotypes, which we took as a badge of honour – a badge that we felt obliged to protect as we subconsciously policed each other.

By sharing some of our unsettling experiences during our PhD research journeys, we aim also to explore how reflexivity can move researchers toward decolonizing research and valuing varied approaches to education and research. Furthermore, we aim to unsettle these experiences by uncovering and critically examining assumptions that may have been (un)consciously entrenched in our journeys (see also Tuck and Yang Wayne 2012). We therefore also reflect on how our experiences and encounters contributed to unsettling our own (un)examined assumptions about research, race, development, and education.

Conceptual considerations: finding a place of resistance?

Several scholars have documented their experiences as early career researchers, foregrounding the precarity associated with learning and working in European universities (Bal, Grassiani, and Kirk 2014; Harris and Ranero-Ramirez 2014) and the broader global labour market. Bal, Grassiani, and

Kirk (2014) reflect on their experiences within academia, situating them within neoliberal technologies, including marketization, performativity, and managerialism, which contribute to making academia a precarious and insecure place. They specifically comment on the overwork that many untenured university employees take up because they do not want to lose their contracts, and also because of "a lack of membership in institutionalized labour collectives" (Bal, Grassiani, and Kirk 2014, 3). The desire to call out and act against injustices within neoliberal spaces is always compromised by the need for caution in order to keep one's job. The Tim-adical Writing Collective (2017, 692) recognizes this and resorts to what they term "*tim-adical* action": timid yet radical forms of resistance. This implies small acts of resistance, such as speaking out against abuse, which at the time do not necessarily change the status quo. The scholars further purport that this type of action recognizes the economic precarity that many early career researchers face within the current neoliberal system. De Sousa Santos (2015, vi) shares similar sentiments, situating his arguments within the global South and positing that "modern ideologies of political contestation have been largely co-opted by neoliberalism".

In our earlier stages of analysis, we had situated our experiences within the neoliberal system and saw ourselves as the "university proletariat" (Bal, Grassiani, and Kirk 2014, 13) earning money for our neoliberal university systems, where universities are economic actors. The neoliberal system frames success as achievable through rational action and hard work. It follows that failure is also framed as an individual problem. We came to find the neoliberal framework as lacking, however, as it failed to account for our historical and geopolitical situatedness. As highlighted by Rajaram (2018), the capitalist mode of production operates with a value system that creates hierarchies between labourers, as mediated by race, class, and gender, among other socially-constructed identity markers. This is to say that as immigrant Black African women in European institutions, our experiences cannot only be explained by neoliberal processes which impact the job stability of early career researchers (Bal, Grassiani, and Kirk 2014; McAlpine, Amundsen, and Turner 2014; Tim-adical Writing Collective 2017). Positioning ourselves as neoliberal subjects erases our collective history as colonial subjects, whose understanding of the world around us and our own experiences cannot be divorced from this history.

We therefore seek to raise an obvious point that the effect and experience of these colonial and neoliberal processes differ based on where one is situated. Diniz De Figueiredo and Martinez (2019, 2) propose that one needs to make explicit the "geographical, historical, bodily, and ideological context from which one is speaking". The two scholars further elucidate that.

> unmasking the locus of enunciation of scholars and knowledge that originate in the global North is crucial for those of us in the global South to engage with

> these theories (and/or question them, or even outright reject them) in critical ways that reflect our realities. (Diniz de Figueiredo and Martinez 2019, 4)

This notion allows us to reflect on our experiences as both researchers and as Black migrant women from Africa, and to situate these experiences within our collective colonial history.

While we may locate our loci of enunciation in Western Eurocentric training, which in some contexts would produce Experts (read European scholars), our experiences nevertheless place us at the margins not only of intellectual spaces but also of broader Dutch society (see also Wekker 2016). We therefore draw on De Sousa Santos' (2015, 16) epistemology from the global South referring to.

> knowledge born in struggles against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. This knowledge is produced wherever such struggles occur, in both the geographical North and the geographical South. The objective of the epistemologies of the South is to allow the oppressed social groups to represent the world as their own and on their terms, for only thus will they be able to change it according to their aspirations.

We use De Sousa Santos' notion to evoke similarities between local experts in colonial and contemporary Africa (Biruk 2011) and our experiences in the diaspora. We problematize the term "local expert", as well as the purported problems associated with much of the research on Africa. This often relates to developing the local expert into a fully-fledged Expert (read European), which is hard for a non-European to achieve. A key point here is that local expert is a term that is itself *local* to the European context; it should not be taken as universal or having transcendental legitimacy. If we – as African scholars – were to accept the dichotomy between Expert and local expert and attempt to work towards becoming the former, we would face huge challenges. We adopt "Chakrabarty's dilemma" as expounded by Mignolo (1999, 240) and conclude that as long as you are an Expert, you cannot be a local expert, because the language of an Expert reflects a way of thinking (Western Eurocentric) whose original aim was to create an epistemic colonial difference.

In what follows, we share various case studies with the aim of foregrounding specific instances where we see coloniality at play, premised on the argument that decoloniality cannot be understood without understanding coloniality. We define coloniality as contemporary forms of power, control, and hegemony whose roots stem from colonization. It is the basis and justification for the exploitation of parts of the world and its resources by European systems of domination.

Findings

In this section, we share some of our experiences as researchers and scholars in Dutch institutions of higher education. We understand that these

experiences are not peculiar to us as Black African migrant women, but what we seek to emphasise is that although our experiences may sound similar to other differently positioned people, how we have experienced and interpreted these experiences is however, specific to us given our own locus of enunciation.

Freebies and the alienation of Black students from academic opportunities

A few of us had found ourselves doing freebie work, while our non-African colleagues were being paid for the same work. Although we were aware of this, it was not something we wanted to talk about. A non-African colleague of ours once came to us to alert us about how we (African scholars) were being taken advantage of, and she advised us to not take on such free work next time. We were aware, for instance, that guest lecturers were mostly unpaid. One particular lecture, however, when done by non-Africans, was in fact often paid. We later reflected on this in the WhatsApp group and explored the options we had; we discovered that we did not have many at our disposal. This unpaid work was an important way of building up our work experience. Many of us were even struggling to be invited to teach, because most of the classes were conducted in Dutch; we were told. And for the classes that were taught in English, our versions of English were "too Ghanaian" or "too Tanzanian", pointing to our "localness".

Another issue is that often, when one is given the opportunity to do a guest lecture, it is offered at the last minute, mostly as a last resort to substitute or replace someone else.

> I can recall being offered to give a lecture within the space of two days because the expected speaker could not make it. The event was to have two speakers, one academic and another policy-oriented. I was invited in my capacity as an academic because the person who was supposed to cover that part had fallen ill and had to cancel due to COVID. I would not have gotten 'this opportunity' or been considered if the speaker had not disappointed them (Sophie, PhD Student at Leiden University).

Another colleague had a similar experience when she was invited to be a discussant for a conference panel focusing on food cultures in Africa. The conveners, who happened to be white non-Africans, had "discovered" at the last minute that there were no Africans on the panel, leading them to invite an African scholar at short notice to give an "African presence" at the event. Reflecting on these examples with other African scholars in the Netherlands, we came to understand that we are mostly used as substitutes or reserves, or we serve as tokens, providing a symbolic buffer against accusations of Eurocentricity (Doharty et al. 2021).

Furthermore, when we do take up such opportunities, our performances are often critically scrutinized. For instance, a non-African colleague expressed the concern to one of us that the students "may not understand you" when you speak. In addition, being given such short notice means that one does not get adequate time to research and present one's best work. It goes without saying that such opportunities are also exploitative in disguise, because to produce quality work, one has to put in extra hours in a short space of time. However, "because you are desperate to get into the labour market you just have to accept and make do" (Sandra, PhD student at Maastricht University). This is particularly difficult for African scholars whose visa and residence permits are dependent on finding a job and who often struggle to get opportunities to build up their work experience for several reasons, such as language, not being invited, or being invited at the last minute.

In what follows, we discuss the tactical and subtle co-optation of different knowledges through exploitative practices and the hierarchisation of expertise.

Finding space within anthropology: coloniality in knowledge production

The fact that we find a point of reference beyond the neoliberal market, namely the colonial project, points to our situatedness within a specific historical and political context that does not apply to some of our colleagues. This was evidenced in our earlier reflections and first impressions of the non-African anthropologists in our respective universities in the Netherlands who are Experts in different countries in Africa. We encountered such comments as: "This one is an Expert of Nigeria", "This one is for Mali", and "You cannot write about Kenya's inequalities without talking to Professor So-and-So". Our first reaction was to relate this experience to the scramble for Africa and the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, which resulted in the partitioning of the continent, with eight countries taking their pick regarding which part of Africa they would go and "civilise". The rest, as they say, is history.

Anthropology has long been criticized for its complicity in colonization and for reinforcing hegemonic ideologies of white supremacy, particularly, white middle-class able-bodied men and later on white women (Mafeje 1998; Mudimbe 1988; Smith 2021). This hegemony is also evidenced in the citation practices within the discipline, with the dominance of Euro-American scholarship (Ahmed 2017).

> Back in 2019, I was lucky enough to be part of a one-day conference for PhD students. A senior scholar, who is an Expert in anthropology, was invited to

> advise or guide us regarding our work, particularly in our writing process. After listening to our presentations, she expressed her surprise regarding our citations. Specifically, only a few of us were citing work by African scholars. She therefore encouraged us to start doing so and/or those who have been doing it to increase the frequency. (Tafi, University of Amsterdam)

In our reflections on this talk by the senior scholar, we had a few questions to ask ourselves. Was it because we did not know many African scholars in our field, or was it an oversight? At times, these old white scholars are obligatory citations, because we are told that we cannot talk about this or that topic without citing this or that (often renowned white) scholar. Biruk (2011, 26), in her research in Malawi, discusses a similar dilemma, where local experts have to align with what the elite Experts require, even when it does not reflect their local realities.

Citation practices is another example of how, as researchers from the global South working with a grant from the West, often have limited agency in terms of knowledge production. Beyond that, by turning our attention to the very emergence of anthropology as a field and its (colonial) logic, we cannot help but ask ourselves what space we occupy within this field. This question has also bothered earlier scholars in other disciplines, for example Chakrabarty (1992) and Ndlovu-Gathseni (2013) in history.

In what follows, we acknowledge a recent trend or turn to decolonize knowledge, yet we argue that it seems as if the train is not moving, because the status quo has yet to be challenged.

Reality check of the decolonial turn

With the recent debates on decolonizing knowledge production, some non-African scholars have been targeted in discussions that question whether it makes sense or if it is even their place to study the intimate lives of Africans. Among the arguments put forward was that such research projects are extractive and reminiscent of the colonial project. One of our group members shared how she responded when approached by a non-African colleague to comment on this topic:

> When I was asked to comment during these discussions, I related my answer to the issue of positionality. To me, both the insider and outsider positions are equally relevant in positive and negative ways. And I continue to note that if we bring the talk back to the decolonial lens, what I don't understand is why people from the South are not afforded the same opportunities of also researching a community that is not theirs. My non-African colleague, as a way of justifying why Western researchers come to study/do research in Africa, stated that it is because they are funded by their own (Western) governments to go and research Africans. This comment, although it was true, disturbed me somehow. (Amaka, University of Amsterdam)

Interesting in the response by the non-African scholar above is the reference to the pivotal role of research funding provided by governments in the global North to their citizens to study Africans. The question is why are they funding research on Africans? These funding projects are often framed to aid development. While indeed the power imbalances created by research funding cannot be disputed, it is important to highlight that even when funded by an African government, as one of us was, we can only wonder how likely it would be for an African to receive funding to study Europeans in Europe. For starters, for an African researcher to study Europeans, even the process of securing a visa or being accepted by a host university or getting a university affiliation would be a challenge, let alone finding willing participants. This imbalance results in one-sided research agendas that do indeed mirror the extractive approach of colonialism.

Scholars from the global North, including anthropologists, have been criticized for leaving their countries to go to the global South to spend extended time in the field collecting data (Smith 2021). This entails getting into their "subjects" intimate spaces, collecting the information they need, returning to their countries, and coming up with theories about these subjects. This is even more tenacious in development research, where the research aims to examine what is or could be wrong, incomplete, or deviant with the lives of the study subjects. In the latter case in particular, the global North is of course used as the reference point or gold standard, as well as the provider of solutions (Chakrabarty 1992; Ndlovu-Gathseni 2021). For development researchers, having discovered the areas that need to be fixed, they design solution templates, ask for money from their governments in the global North, and go back to implement these fixes in the global South (Lorist 2020). This is considered extractive because it resembles the practices of empire and the colonial project, where the colonial masters extracted raw materials from Africa and brought them to their countries, where they were developed into finished consumables and were at times returned to Africa to be consumed. Could we as African researchers also be seen as raw materials polished in Europe only to be expected to go back to our respective countries as consumables?

Below, we further discuss the challenges of claiming expertise considering the inherent power imbalances in knowledge production, and how claiming expertise is to position oneself as the ultimate knower of a given context. We wonder whether this is indeed even possible.

Who can claim (local) expertise?

In the conversation detailed above regarding who conducts what research and where, the non-African scholar further commented:

> The claim is about the extractive nature of our research [Westerners researching Africa], because they [critics] say it is not our communities that we are researching. […] but it is kind of difficult because, *for me*, the community I am researching is *my* community, I am part of that community.

This comment unsettled Amaka, who wondered what being "part of that community" meant. Amaka assumed that the non-African scholar was referring to the number of years that she has been engaged with the community and also the personal, even intimate, relationships she had nurtured within that community as justification for claiming to be part of it. Amaka remembers reacting to this by saying:

> You see, there is white privilege! The fact that you can claim entitlement to a community. Whereas me, with similar experience here in the Netherlands, I have been living here for more than five years, interacting and having Dutch friends, but cannot claim that they are *my* community.

The capacity to seemingly lack or not need to claim an identity is a privilege bestowed upon the dominant ethnic group in a given context. Sara Ahmed (2012) notes that criticisms of inequality and racial privilege in institutional spaces, including academia, remind us of how scholars of colour do not fully belong: "Our talk about whiteness is read as a sign of ingratitude, of failing to be grateful for the hospitality we have received by virtue of our arrival" (43).

Amaka went on to explain the link between the above presented case study from a non-African scholar with whom she interacted and the decolonial claim that she had made earlier. She further commented that even when she wanted, she would always be denied the opportunity or authority to research the practices of Dutch communities in the Netherlands on the basis of lack of language knowledge. Yet we all know that non-African scholars going to or researching Africa do not necessarily speak the language. They at times hire translators. We, African scholars in Europe, could also do the same. Amaka explained that she thinks that what this story points to is the fact that some people are afforded the right to be Experts while others are "mere" locals who could never meaningfully take part in "global" spaces. This, we argue, is also a way of othering Black people.

This conversation led us to ask several other questions: To what extent can Experts claim expertise, local or otherwise in their supposed communities? What does expertise entail? Maria shared her experience of being in-between:

> Returning home in 2020 after getting a PhD made me feel like I can finally be an Expert back home. Isn't it what we are expected to be after getting the Doctor title? Wasn't I supposed to go home, share my knowledge with others, and bring changes in my area of expertise? "I can be an Expert back home", I thought! Upon returning home, it did not take long for me to get a position in the development world, but little did I know that despite being trained in

> Europe and having relevant skills and expertise for the role that I took, I was not seen as local enough. I had been in Europe for 'too long', and apparently, I did not know so much about the local context. Most of the time when I gave ideas during meetings or gave contributions to business development activities, I got comments that my ideas were not 'local' enough. My expertise in the context that I had lived in most of the time was being questioned because of the five years I spent in Europe. (Maria, University of Twente)

We look at the non-African scholar above claiming local expertise, and we juxtapose Maria's experience of failing to be accredited with expertise either in her home country or in Europe where she was trained. This leads us to the conclusion that the terms "local expert" and "(global/international) Expert" are not reflective of the realities on the ground. If anything, the terms seem counterproductive and perpetuate the hierarchisation of both knowledge and people.

One clear observation in our interaction with the label of local expert is that non-African scholars enjoy the status of being the (real) Expert, but they can also slip into local expertise when and where it suits and benefits them. For us African scholars, however, we cannot stake a claim to (real) Expert status, and when local expertise is imputed on us, it is mostly to box us in and remind us of our position. An example of this comes from Chidi, a postdoctoral fellow from Nigeria. When she had finished her studies and was applying for teaching jobs in the Netherlands, she was told by her former supervisor, who was her referee, that she could not give her a reference because she felt she was not qualified enough to teach in Dutch institutions. The same supervisor would nevertheless send her opportunities that were advertised in Nigeria and commented on how she would be a good fit. Upon reflecting on this case, we were all baffled. Does this mean that Nigeria is the right place for a so-called unqualified teacher? In his description of anticolonial work, Ndlovu-Gathseni posits that "You need to unlearn that one geographical space in the world cannot be a teacher of the world. And then relearn, that all human beings are born to valid and legitimate knowledge" (cited in Omanga 2020, n.p.).

In what follows, we use Onye's experience to highlight that the alienation that Black scholars face when it comes to academic opportunities is compounded by a gendered alienation and other subtle factors, all of which lead to a big emotional toll and affect the wellbeing of Black female scholars.

Gendered alienations and microaggressions

Linked to the inherent competitiveness within neoliberal institutes is the idea of being a good and efficient scholar: one who delivers quality research in the shortest time and at the lowest cost. This implies minimizing distractions, such as those that come with being a family woman. In our experiences, it

became evident to us that as African scholars, we were not expected to bring our families or children with us to Europe. Having children was seen as a hindrance to high performance – a notion that was shared with a few of us with bitter humour. For those of us who had left our children behind, while feeling like we were not good mothers, we were constantly reminded that if we wanted to excel we had to leave the affairs and issues of our children with their caregivers. As Onye recounts:

> I had stayed away from my family for one and a half years without visiting because of travel restrictions, and finally the restrictions were lifted. I decided to go back home to visit the family, and I was told I was travelling at my own risk. If I were to get stuck in my home country, I would have to bear the consequences without any support, since I chose to take that step. (Onye, Vrije University Amsterdam)

We interpret Onye's experience as that she was supposed to prioritize her work over her need and desire to see her family. Going back home could interfere with this first priority. She was made to understand, for instance, that if she had problems returning to the Netherlands, she would not receive any support from her institution to continue working, notwithstanding the fact that many people can work virtually now (though possibly not those based in the global South, where internet connectivity is often seen as a big challenge). The irony of Onye's experience is that most of our non-African senior colleagues repeatedly told us about *their* family gatherings and the need for them to take vacations with their families. This raises the issue of hierarchies of privilege in terms of mobility. For African researchers learning and working in European universities, one among other reasons often put forward to discourage them from bringing their families with them is that life in Europe is too expensive – even if the African scholar is willing and able to pay these expenses. Another factor playing into this is the stereotypical idea that African families are large, or at least larger than European families.

Bal, Grassiani, and Kirk (2014, 15) comment on the gendered dimensions of teaching in Dutch universities, highlighting how difficult it is for women with children: "If a woman has young children, the high costs of childcare, coupled with cultural norms emphasising the role of a mother at home, can also be detrimental to an (academic) career". This is particularly the case in the neoliberal setup that favours individual achievements. Although Bal et al's argument relates generally to women, this becomes much more difficult for Black African migrant women, as our experiences show. We find a parallel here to colonial times, when men were recruited and brought to the cities, but were not allowed to bring their families, which were meant to stay in the reserves. This raises the bigger question of who can afford the privilege of fully enjoying their humanness. For many of us, we are made to feel that we should

express contentment and gratitude for even making it to Europe, a privilege not available to many Africans. (We observed this even during the writing of this paper when some of us questioned if this paper would not be seen as a gesture of ungratefulness to our European sponsors, supervisors, mentors etc).

Discussion and conclusion: beyond the Expert

Through this paper, we aim to make visible the complexity of the notion of Experts, be they local, global, or a combination thereof. The shifting power relations in knowledge sharing and production raises questions about decolonizing academia in many ways and forms. Although we are grappling with the need to come up with tangible solutions and practical tips to navigate and, to a certain extent, deal with these issues, in this paper we rather offer more questions and dilemmas. And we call for a rethink of the dichotomy of Experts and local experts.

The neoliberal context, where one has to choose carefully which battles to fight in a precarity that can be compounded by intersecting factors including gender, race, and class, compels us to work twice as hard for half the price or to prove our value. Our intention has been to make visible still-existing forms of coloniality that shape the experiences of PhD scholars and early career researchers and research consultants from the global South studying/working in the global North, in order to contribute to current debates around decolonizing knowledge production. Our experiences have challenged us to think through the multi-layered power relations and dynamics in academic research and development work, and the outputs generated, shared, and cited.

We have drawn attention to institutional and structural issues, whose powers remain invisible and hard to deal with; this includes the power to decide what the "local rate" is and why it must differ from the "international rate". Some structures seem bigger than any solution we could come up with; for example, that life in Europe is too expensive for African scholars with families. This poses a challenge to efforts of decolonization; how can an institution decolonize in a neoliberal society? Or in the words of Omarjee (2018, 15), how can we decolonize "without taking responsibility for unearned privileges that painted the hierarchy of racial domination?" (see also Pailey 2020, 742). We have also highlighted some issues that may pass as everyday racism or race-based ignorance (cf. Guadeloupe 2022), such as when non-African colleagues ignorantly do or say something that the receiver may interpret as discriminatory. Although the intention may not have been malicious, there is still an effect; when pain is felt, memories are evoked and trust is broken. This hinders communication and the building of bridges, especially with efforts to decolonize.

We must also mention that some of the issues we have raised in this article did not seem colonial to us at the time and were even sometimes beneficial, but the current decolonial turn has given us a different lens to analyse our experiences. For instance, being asked to read and cite certain famous white male scholars is not harmful. The issue, however, is not about the harm done or not done but about the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses. This is captured by Paulo Freire (in Omarjee 2018, 15), when he asks: "Who is writing; who is reading; who is setting the agenda?" These are questions that are part of the criticality that defines the decolonial turn.

Ndlovu-Gathseni (cited in Omanga 2020, 21–23) identifies as an impediment to decolonization the fact that "the leading academic voices on decolonization are also products of westernized universities, which taught them to think in a particular way". He calls for scholars to engage in processes of "rethinking thinking" and "self-unlearning"; here we add "re-learning". One of the many effects of colonialism was to prevent the colonized from imagining themselves outside of the framework established by the colonialists. This was necessary, as firearms alone were insufficient to sustain the colonial project. The objective of decolonization should therefore be to rewrite knowledge from the perspective of the colonized. As Diniz De Figueiredo and Martinez (2019, 3) argue:

> [a]s global academic writing practices and publications are replete with 'official objectives', conventions, and regulations, all of which tend to valorise one kind of local knowledge tradition (i.e. white Euro-American knowledge) at the expense of the other kinds of local knowledge (i.e. non-Euro-American knowledge) in an unequal relation of power, it is incumbent upon scholars of colour to devise a resistant tactic to confront the former while at the same time elevating and validating the latter.

As such we have used the locus enunciation notion to try and understand and interpret our experiences. The invitation, therefore, is for supervisors, academic advisors, upcoming PhD students, and other concerned researchers to engage with and continue conversations with colleagues and "critical" friends to unpack these situated issues and debate potential solutions and ways forward together.

This collaborative article is, in part, an outcome of our attempt to think together about these issues; learning from our shared unease, but also about how tensions vary in different contexts. We have specifically drawn from our experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, which may not be objective or compelling enough as evidence. However, we have offered alternative lenses through which to view coloniality in research collaborations in academia and development work. We have drawn from our own experiences to show how PhD researchers from the global South living in the global North deal with certain situations, and we have tried to locate

these within the so-called decolonial turn. We call for the framing of Experts to refocus attention beyond global, local, or *glocal*, and rather onto ongoing negotiated relationships, bearing in mind power dynamics, history, skin colour, contractual issues, etc. As our experiences have shown, we grapple to find the utility of using notions such as, expertise or expert local or otherwise.

We ask who can join the table of Experts, and in what capacity? Accountability in calling diverse people to the table to share critical knowledge. Accountability is interwoven with processes of cultivating situated practices that are in constant dialogue with shifting positionalities, where consideration is given to what is meant by Expert and what counts to make one an Expert beyond the local. Can one simply claim it? Who endorses someone as an expert? How does one become an Expert beyond the local? What kind of research can one do and with what lens? And what do we really mean when we say local expert? By making visible the politics of knowledge co-production and sharing as a continuous process, we invite researchers to sit with us in the discomfort of asking difficult questions of ourselves and others who join us in these decolonial discussions.

Note

1. "Facing Mount Kenya" by Jomo Kenyatta (1938), the first president of independent Kenya, is identified as arguably the first published autoethnography and has been criticised for being too subjective and uncritical.

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