

Seminar series

Trust and Trust Making in Africa's Global Connections

When the academic interest in trust gained momentum in the 1990s through works like Fukuyama (1995), Misztal (1996), Giddens (1995) and Elster (1989), most theorizing focused on the (post) industrial world: economists and western sociologists observed that in the modern world, despite the globalization tendencies of capitalist development, more openness, communication and collaboration were not automatically developed between the people thus connected. Instead, it was found that processes of localization, social retreat, and economic stagnation frequently occurred. In this light, it was considered all the more interesting that some societies in south-east Asia appeared to be able to successfully couple aspects of globalization with their local cultures, leading to economic success stories. Trust was welcomed as a concept that eventually could shed light on all of these phenomena. (Kaag 1999)

At that time, Africa hardly emerged as a field of study among scholars of trust, neither was trust taken up as a theoretical notion by Africanists. While in the work of Bayart (1989), for instance, glimpses of trust can be detected, the issue was not explicitly elaborated upon. Scattered scholarship on the working of trust in Africa did however develop on the basis of empirical case studies, with an accent on trust in migrant and trade networks. Hart (1988), for instance, used trust as a core concept in his study of migrants in Accra. He concludes that 'trust is central to social life when neither traditional certainties nor modern probabilities hold' (Hart 1988: 191). Other examples include Von Oppen (1994), Levitt (1999), Zakaria (1999), Bellagamba (2004).

The past few years have seen a renewed interest in issues of trust in Africa, triggered, among other things, by observed changes in the character, shape, and reach of networks, the opening up of different terrains of encounter with the unfamiliar, the expansion of modern communication technologies, and shifting research and policy agendas. Thus, examples of recent empirical studies of the workings of trust in Africa include work on trust within extended families affected by HIV/AIDS (Cooper 2012), elites and democracy in Ghana (Osei 2015), the political strategies of ANC leaders in South-Africa (Shapiro 2012), Kenyan election management (Ehrlich and Kerr 2016), local entrepreneurial strategies in Ghana's oil and gas industry (Dziwornu Ablo and Overa 2015), questions of trust between migrants and migration brokers in Cameroon (Alpes 2017). The workings of trust and distrust also figure in studies of witchcraft in contemporary Africa (Geschiere 2000, 2013) and in Africanist research on entrepreneurship and capital accumulation in the context of globalization (Peraldy 2011).

Also in our own work, which focuses on diverse aspects of Africa's global connections, questions of trust have proved to be of importance, for instance in working relations between Chinese entrepreneurs and their African employees and counterparts (Marfaing and Thiel 2015; Giese and Thiel 2012; Khan-Mohammad 2021), brokerage between transnational migrants and land sellers (Kaag and Steel 2019; Rosenfeld 2017), the interaction between Islamic charities from the Gulf and African populations (Kaag and Sahla 2020) and in global charitable networks like the Lions Clubs (de Hasque 2018); in migration control mechanisms, surveillance and security (Thiel 2020); and communication within African transnational families (Seck, Canut et Ly, 2015).

Interestingly, while in Africa, people have often relied more on personal linkages and less on formal institutions, it seems that currently, globally, there is a converging tendency of relying less on (formal) institutions, and more on one's own (virtual) network and the personal credibility of, for instance, politicians, vloggers and other public figures - making it imperative for those figures to strongly invest in strategies for maintaining/enhancing their trustworthiness.

We feel that this is the right moment to bring the presently rather dispersed observations and analyses together and reflect in a more explicit, thorough, and crosscutting way on questions of trust in Africa's global connections. Critics have argued that trust is too elusive a concept and that, in the analysis of social phenomena, one can easily do without trust. Yet, trust and distrust do inform people's behavior, and people - not in the least in Africa - also frequently motivate their (and others') actions by referring to trust and distrust. For this reason of lived reality alone, a more thorough reflection on the workings of trust in Africa's global connections is worthwhile. In addition, we feel that looking at questions of trust may add an important layer to the analysis of, for instance, collaboration and partnerships, political and economic strategies, and the functioning of networks, as it enables one to go beyond that what is directly visible on the spot and to consider its embeddedness in larger social processes and mechanisms. As Luhmann argued: "Without trust, only very simple forms of human co-operation, which can be transacted on the spot are possible. In more complex situations, people have to cope with events not directly visible, with factors not yet present, and with other people who cannot be fathomed entirely" (1979:88), a complication which certainly applies to transnational contexts. Studying trust is therefore highly relevant for a deeper understanding of the processes by which Africa's global connections are shaped - which also includes a critical reflection on the workings of trust in our research on these connections (Kaag and Sahla 2020; West 2007).

We propose to delve into this subject by a seminar series consisting of four subthemes, the first being Trust and Trust making with a focus on African migration (April 2021). The second will focus on Trust and trust making in global business and charitable networks in and from Africa (June 2021), the third on Trust and trust making in transnational families and kin networks (September 2021), the fourth will finally have a more reflective and synthesizing focus and reflect on conceptual issues like system trust vs interpersonal trust; agency and trust making; practices and processes of trust, distrust and trust making in doing research on Africa's global connections (November 2021).

In this way, the seminar series will explore the nature of trust, mistrust and distrust in the relationships of actors and institutions that circulate across continental boundaries, therewith opening the discussion to move beyond the fragile association of trust and cooperation, to include arrangements of surveillance and control, as well as other encounters with the unfamiliar that might be more prominently shaped by open mistrust. Presentations and discussions in the seminar series revolve around the question how actors in diverse African contexts navigate potentially competing agendas and inscriptions shaped by power relations, cultural differences, and possibly diverging interests and moral perspectives, by actively building or working to maintain fragile trust – or, on the contrary, by fostering distrust and disconnection.

Part I: Reflections on Trust and Trust Making with a focus on African Migration

27 - 29 April 2021

During three sessions of one to 1,5 hour divided over the last week of April 2021, we will reflect on trust, distrust and trust making in the field of African migration. Speakers will address how dynamics of trust and distrust co-shape migrants' mobility trajectories and how trust making between actors is essential in navigating the uncertainty and hope inherent in migrants' journeys (Kleist and Thorsen 2017; see also Turnaturi 2007).

Apart from interpersonal trust, trust and distrust in systems of monitoring and surveillance greatly influence processes of contemporary African transnational migration. As Porter (1995) has famously argued, quantitative forms – as “technologies of distance” – reproduce “cultures of objectivity” by conveying trust, unambiguity, and even notions of justice in decision making in the absence of intimate, local relations otherwise producing certainties. In the field of migration and flight, identification technologies and practices in particular participate in the production of evidence to varying mobilizing and demobilizing effects.

Intimate experiences of migration and associated feelings of trust and mistrust may sometimes be difficult to capture in mere academic language. African films and literature, however, may provide insights in this matter that would otherwise remain hidden but are indispensable for a better grasp of the workings of trust/mistrust in global migration experiences and processes.

27 April 2021, 4pm-6pm (CEST) – Trust and trust making in African migration trajectories

Speaker Dr. Joris Schapendonk (Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands)

Mys-trust: On African mobility and EUropean regimes

This presentation discusses how African mobility trajectories unfold in a Eurospace that is characterized by the promotion of mobility (Schengen) as well as the fight against it (Dublin). I articulate how African movers are subjectified by EU's mobility regimes (that includes borders, asylum regulations, labour rights, labels, stigmas, social control, gazing, and surveillance) as well as the ways they transgress, circumvent, and escape these logics. I thereby relate the issue of trust/mistrust to a condition of, wat I call here ‘mystic unclarity’. For the African movers in question, the mystic relates to the unclear functioning of migration apparatuses, and their power to have sudden and unexpected interventions that may hit people's situation tremendously. In this context, I discuss the moments and confrontation by which trust is negotiated and questioned. In addition, I seek to illustrate how these confrontations and negotiations feed mobilities that create their own mystic unclaritys, in terms of the motivations, directions and people's tactics to cross borders.

28 April 2021, 4pm-6pm (CEST) - Trust and trust making in migration management: Technology and Evidence

Speaker: Dr Anja Simonsen (University of Copenhagen, Denmark)

Biometric ambiguities: Somali refugees and their encounters with biometric fingerprint registration in Europe

The paper presents the stories of Nafiso and Iman. These stories will illustrate the ambiguous consequences of the policies seeking to control and organize bodies on the move. Nafiso and Iman are two young Somali women, who both had their fingerprints registered upon arrival in Italy, but the consequences and their perceptions of this registration differ widely. For Nafiso, the biometric technologies stop her in her tracks. When her information is registered in Italy and stored in European databases, she is unable to move on and seek asylum in other countries. Iman's experiences, on the other hand, illustrate how biometric registration can be used actively in strategies of movement and the pursuit of legal and cultural rights.

29 April 2021, 4-6pm (CEST) - Trust and Trust Making in African migration: A view from the arts

Speaker: Dr Alioune Sow (University of Florida, USA)

“Ce que les Blancs veulent entendre” - What white people want to hear: the migrant and its double in Mali

Theater makers in Mali have consistently engaged with immigration issues. In the last fifteen years, innovative collaborations between playwrights, activists, legal and illegal migrants have produced a protest theatre that centers on disenfranchisement and harrowing experiences of migration, to explore the impact of aggressive migration policies on mobility and movements between Mali and France. Some of the theatre performances have focused on concerns about imaginaries of migration and provided insightful meditations on prevailing local and global discourses on migration to alert on the tensions they generate. This paper focuses on one of the first plays in this tradition, titled *Sud Nord, the kotéba des quartiers*, written by Alioune Ifra Ndiaye and Jean Louis Sagot Duvaux and performed by the Bamako based company BlonBa. The paper examines ways in which the play interrogates the processes that incite in both Mali and France, the construction and reproduction of accommodating narratives about migration to validate departures. It discusses the concept of ‘nyengoya’, a productive term whose meaning encompasses ‘selfishness’, ‘mistrust’, ‘duplicity’, ‘opportunism’ and ‘meanness’, and its deployment in the play as a device to shed light on and raise questions about the equivocal interpretations of mobility in the North and the South and to contest prevailing perceptions of the “migrant”.

The seminar series will be online and take place via Zoom. Please register here:

<https://universiteitleiden.zoom.us/meeting/register/u5cpcOieurTMqHtNyUC5CyBTj7oK3BgqJa6u->

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