

Chair in the Anthropology of Politics and Governance in Africa

Summary statement

The domain and themes of research - Power and knowledge revisited

Against the backdrop of broader and larger processes of environmental and societal transformation, including climate change, population growth, urbanisation, technological innovation, and changing global connections, this chair seeks to ask questions about power and governance in Africa. It does so by the study of political dynamics, political arenas, and the practice of power over time. This means a perspective on power as taking shape in the interaction and interplay between actors, and to be negotiated and constantly worked upon; power is always contested and in need of support of some sort for being sustained, even in highly hierarchical and/or seemingly hegemonic circumstances (Lukes 2005; Scott 1985; Giddens 1985). Political arenas are the locus in which these negotiations, struggles and alliance-making take place. These arenas are not strictly confined entities but may be overlapping in terms of geographical reach, societal level, and social domain (i.a. economic, cultural, religious, military).

Over the last decades, political dynamics have changed globally including in Africa. On to earlier transformations, such as the global spread of neoliberalism and the so-called third wave of democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall, more recent developments have been grafted that appear crucial for political dynamics in Africa. Firstly, over the last two decades, the increased global interest in Africa's economic and political possibilities have led to intensified (political) struggles for control over Africa's natural resources, access to its consumer markets, and support from its elites in global political fora. Secondly, technological innovation and its diffusion, such as in the field of social media and biometrics, have had a pervasive influence on the voicing of popular protest and civil action especially in the urban areas, but also enlarged the means of control for governments, and possibilities for political manipulation of the population by local, national, and international actors (including states, religious movements, and multinational businesses) (Nyabola 2018; Dwyer and Molony 2019). The confluence of Africa's intensifying and shifting global connections and the information revolution invites a reconsidering of, and renewed interest in the relationship between power and knowledge on the continent (and beyond). As Foucault (1980) already put it, power produces knowledge, while knowledge makes power possible. In the current shifting constellations of power, what knowledge is disseminated, by whom, through what means? How are claims of truth and legitimacy pursued (Kaag 2022)? What publics and counter-publics are being constructed in the process (Lamoureaux and Sureau 2019)? How does this shape current power dynamics and longer term political processes? These and related issues will be taken up in this Chair under the headings of political agency; the political workings of law; legitimacy and trust-making; processes of inclusion and exclusion; and change and continuity.

Programmatic focus and outline of research

As has been outlined in the foregoing, the chair's programmatic focus will be on the combined effects of the current information revolution and Africa's changing global connections on political dynamics in Africa, with the power/knowledge nexus as its central domain of enquiry (Mbembe 2000a, 2000b; Nyabola 2018; Fourie et al 2019; Sarr 2016). Analytically, particular attention will be paid to questions of political agency and configurations, the political workings of law, legitimacy and trust-making, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and change and continuity.

While this programmatic focus will be generally leading for research collaboration and education, including PhD and (RES)MA student supervision, in the coming years, the proposed chair will particularly study the foregoing questions in the following specific research domains, which appear as particularly promising fields of observation for the dynamics and processes that this chair aims to unravel.

1. Power and Knowledge: The (geo-) political aspects of education in Africa

Though the recent increased global interest in Africa has mainly been studied in its directly economic and political aspects, it has also led to a significant diversification of Africa's educational landscape. The proposed chair will study how this diversification of the education landscape in Africa is the result of, reflects, and may further shape (geo-)political dynamics in Africa. It is based on the premise that these investments do not only allow Africans to improve their educational levels, but that these diverse forms of education also impact on (political) connections and orientations in African societies (Kaag 2018). This is because (1) educational programmes reflect and foster specific worldviews. (2) In addition, people develop their social networks through educational trajectories. (3) Both orientations and connections influence people's choices and opportunities in their further lives, and thus individual and societal development. Interestingly, often investments in education by external parties are not isolated endeavours, but also used as a means to get linked-in in local societies (Thaver 2008) for such diverse purposes as religion or business interests, which both most often also have a geo-political dimension. Furthermore, it is essential to also look at local (counter-)initiatives that aim to root education more firmly in African histories and cultures. The research importantly builds on the ideas the proposed chair developed over the past years through her research on Islamic charities from the Gulf countries in Africa (Kaag 2008, 2012, 2016, 2017) and her work on Africa's global connections more in general (Dietz, Havnevik, Kaag & Oestigaard 2011; Kaag 2013; Kaag and Zoomers 2014; Kaag, Khan-Mohammad and Schmid 2021) that she partly developed as convenor of the ASCL and AEGIS collaborative research groups 'Africa in the World – Rethinking Africa's Global Connections'.

The chair aims to provide an in depth analysis of education as a political arena, in which (external and internal) education providers may compete for influence and where state actors and elite groups may try to control, influence, capture, and profit from education initiatives, while pupils and parents may use education for social mobility and claiming voice. Information and media are both a means in, and a target of, struggles over power in education, while education trajectories may also influence power over information and knowledge, and trust in certain strands of knowledge later on. Such an approach to education allows to ask important questions related to politics, such as on elite formation, societal cohesion and polarization, 'a decolonization of the mind' (Wa-Thiongo 1993; Taiwó 2022), and inclusive development (Gupta et al 2015).

2. Truth and Trust making in African Politics

This research line builds on former and ongoing research by the proposed Chair holder that has allowed her to develop reflections on the workings of trust and distrust in diverse societal domains in which Africa's global connections play a role (Kaag and Sahla 2020; Kaag 2022; Kaag et al in preparation). The theme of the relationship between truth and trust seems particularly promising for studying (African) politics and governance in the current era. People are looking for truth to hold on to, but how to do this in an era in which received wisdoms no longer do, traditional holders of authority over knowledge have become contested, and intense clashes take place between different truths that are built on alternative facts? People are looking for a community to be part of. But how to achieve this, in an era in which one is increasingly confronted with unknown others and fast changes in our physical world as

well as in cyberspace? Truth and trust seem ever more important but at the same time less readily available and more difficult to establish (Kaag 2022).

Taking this observation as a point of departure, the proposed research will especially focus on the ways in which trust and distrust impact political processes and governance in Africa. How do trust and distrust influence voting behaviour and citizens' participation? How do personal and institutional (dis)trust relate and interfere with one another?¹ The Chair will especially be interested in active strategies of claiming truth and installing trust by politicians, political and governmental bodies, and civil actors, including the means used (backing by international actors, mass and social media, local intermediaries etc) and on what basis legitimacy and authority are being claimed (seniority, traditional values, modern competencies, law, popularity on social media, a combinations of those...).

The empirical focus will mainly be on francophone West-Africa, where the proposed chair holder has long term research experience. This region is especially interesting in terms of the foregoing questions as old power structures, in which the West and France in particular were pivotal forces, are increasingly becoming contested, and new global alliances are being sought and established. An important question is how these geo-political shifts and national and local power dynamics mutually influence each other. To better understand this, it is vital to investigate how the various actors at the international, national and local level try to build trust and show themselves trustworthy to the diverse audiences that are relevant to their success, and/or on the other hand, try to create distrust towards their enemies. Categories of the population, in their turn, importantly basing themselves on whether, and to what degree, they trust and/or distrust those claiming authority and legitimacy, will devise their own strategies of support, participation, protest, or retreat.

The foregoing research lines are thought of as constituting the central cornerstone of the Chair in the coming years. Building on, and radiating from this, other research questions can progressively be taken up, such as research topics and questions that present themselves in the process of the execution of the programme, or that present themselves in adjacent fields, or that emerge in interaction and collaboration with colleagues in Leiden and beyond. As can be deduced from the foregoing, the specific topics of the research programme have their overflow in other areas that are pertinent to the theme of the Chair, such as geo-political shifts, elite formation, political networks, political strategies for control over knowledge, the reach and agency of the African state, and the role of legislation in this.

The chair's approach is based in political², legal³, and processual⁴ anthropology. Methodologically, there will be a focus on political micro-processes on the ground but related to larger (shifting) power-knowledge constellations, (historical) patterns and processes of doing politics, elite formation, and transformations in the political realm (Kaag 2001; see also Berry 1993; Boone 2003, Getachew 2019, Hébié 2016). This also includes a sensitivity to how (local) political dynamics, structures, struggles and foci of political attention are co-shaped by/often have a global dimension (see also Tsing 2004), or are linked directly or indirectly to processes and actors at higher societal levels, ranging from the subnational, national, to the regional and the global.

¹ 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.

² See for instance work by Ferguson, Anders, Blundo, and others.

³ See for instance Griffiths 2014; Hesseling 1994; Starr and Collier 1989.

⁴ See for instance Moore 1987, 1994; Berry 1993; Kaag 2001.

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