Challenging Authorities

Ethnographies of Legitimacy and Power in Eastern and Southern Africa

Edited by
Arne S. Steinforth · Sabine Klocke-Daffa

palgrave
macmillan

Challenging Authorities

Arne S. Steinforth • Sabine Klocke-Daffa
Editors

Challenging Authorities

Ethnographies of Legitimacy and Power
in Eastern and Southern Africa

Editors
Arne S. Steinforth
Department of Anthropology
York University
Toronto, ON, Canada

Sabine Klocke-Daffa
Department of Social and Cultural
Anthropology
Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies
University of Tübingen
Tübingen, Baden-Württemberg
Germany

Dedicated
in love and gratitude
to the memory of
Rotraut Steinforth (1939–2020)
and
Gerhard Klocke (1931–2019)

Acknowledgements

This volume is the result of long-held and shared concern for investigating power and authority through an actor-centred lens that focuses strongly on solid ethnographic information to be analysed in a theoretically and/or conceptually sound fashion. For us as co-editors, the first tentative steps towards engaging with this endeavour were taken at the conference "Mo(u)vement", which was hosted jointly by the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) and the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) in Ottawa, 2017. From that point onwards, many colleagues have contributed, in one way or another, to bringing this project to fruition, and we are grateful for the part they all played in transforming the initially explorative ideas that sparked the discussion into a more substantive, academic argument. The first to be gratefully acknowledged for their role in initiating this publication project are the participants of that Ottawa conference panel "By Whose Authority: Investigating Alternative Modes of Power and the Legitimization of Expertise", namely Walter Callaghan, Yanti M. Hölzchen, Nora Danielson Lanier, and Arnal Maud, and especially panel co-organizer and facilitator Sandra Widmer. We greatly appreciate the conversations their presentations have fostered, and we consider ourselves fortunate to build on the larger questions that they helped to formulate.

Throughout the various stages towards its eventual completion, this book has continued to benefit from many colleagues and their inspired as well as inspiring efforts. Our thanks go to all contributors to this volume for their own fascinating work and the spirit of productive collaboration they established despite the vast geographical distances and unexpected

circumstances of a global pandemic that were part of the shared experience. In addition to them, we further give thanks to Liazzat Bonate, Robert J. Gordon, Steven Robbins, Thomas Widlok, and Olaf Zenker whose contributions, for different but similarly unfortunate reasons, could not be added to this volume.

At Palgrave Macmillan, we are grateful for the support and expertise provided by Mary Al-Sayed and, later, Elizabeth Graber. We also appreciate the nuanced and insightful recommendations provided by the anonymous reviewers whose comments were of great value in further sharpening the profile of our volume during the last stages of its completion.

We also want to give our thanks and our appreciation to Helene Helleckes, Judith Thanner, and Tobias Veeh for their work in copy-editing the manuscript, dotting the proverbial i's and crossing the t's that always tend to escape a writer's own scrutiny.

And finally, one of us (A.S.) would like to once more document his undying and heartfelt gratitude to Christine Durant for her tireless support and loving encouragement during times of ethnographic research, academic labour, pandemic lockdown, and the myriad challenges of daily life.

Our thanks to you all.

CONTENTS

Notes on Contributors

Mulu Getachew Abebe has written her MA thesis on the Mai Ayni refugee camp at Addis Ababa University in 2011–2012, which developed into her PhD research within the joint regional project "Borderland Dynamics in East Africa"—funded by NORHED and including Addis Ababa, Makerere, Khartoum Universities, and University of Bergen, Norway. Since then, she regularly visited her field sites in Mai Ayni, AdiHarush, and Hitsats and established very personal bonds with longstanding camp inmates. She took part in a large interview project among Eritrean refugees in six countries of transit and arrival run by Felsberg Institute in October 2016. Recently, she has been involved in the project "Transnational Figurations of Displacement" (TRAFIG) coordinated by the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), doing further research among Eritrean refugees in the camps and cities in Ethiopia.

Wayne A. Babchuk is Associate Professor of Practice in the Quantitative, Qualitative, and Psychometric Methods (QQPM) programme in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). He serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF), an Executive Board Member of the Central States Anthropological Society (CSAS), Managing Editor for the *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research* (JEQR), and an instructor for the African Doctoral Academy at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. He is co-authoring three texts on qualitative and mixed methods research and one on ecotourism among indigenous groups.

Anastasia A. Banshchikova PhD (History), is a senior research fellow at the Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. Her main research interests are culture and cultural anthropology of ancient Egypt, perception of ancient Egypt in medieval Arab sources, historical memory of the slave trade and colonialism in modern Tanzania, German colonial legacy in modern Tanzania, and history of Bagamoyo. She has done field-work in Nigeria, Tanzania, Benin, and Rwanda.

Dunga Nakuwa Batum (LLB) has worked in various capacities for the Hamar District in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) in Ethiopia. He is the representative of Kara in the South Region Council and the House of Federation in Addis Ababa.

Dmitri M. Bondarenko PhD (World History, Anthropology), is Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is Vice-Director of the Institute for African Studies. Bondarenko's research inter-ests include social, anthropological, and historical theory; political anthropology; culture and history of Africa south of the Sahara; socio-cultural transformations; and intercultural interaction with special focus on Africa and people of African descent worldwide. Bondarenko's more than 500 publications include 7 monographs.

Judith Frost graduated from the University of Chicago and has a mas-ter's degree in Urban Planning from NYU. After retiring from work as a research analyst for the New York City government, she has worked as an editor and writer, and as a volunteer with the Kalahari People's Fund, including work with the Xomani San in the South African Kalahari.

Felix Girke is a postdoctoral researcher in Social/Cultural Anthropology and MA programme coordinator at the HTWG Konstanz - University of Applied Sciences. He has published the monograph *The Wheel of Autonomy* (2018) on intergroup relations and processes of differentiation in south-ern Ethiopia, and (co-)edited four books, most recently *Anthropology as Homage: Festschrift for Ivo Strecker* (2018). He is series editor of the *Studies in Rhetoric and Culture* (Berghahn) and editor-in-chief at Allegra Laboratory (http://allegralaboratory.net/). His recent research focused on the contemporary struggles over cultural heritage in urban Myanmar.

Robert K. Hitchcock obtained his PhD at the University of New Mexico in 1982 and is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico. He is also Adjunct Professor of Geography at

Michigan State University. Much of his work is on the human rights of indigenous people, small-scale farmers, and refugees, particularly those in Africa, the Middle East, and North America. He serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the Kalahari Peoples Fund (KPF), a non-profit 501(c)3 organization that assists disadvantaged people in southern Africa. Much of his ethnographic work is with the San (Bushmen) of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Hitchcock's most recent book is *People, Parks, and Power: The Ethics of Conservation-Related Resettlement* (2020, with Maria Sapignoli).

Fiona Iliff is a Human Rights and Environmental Lawyer practising at Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights. She represents diverse communities and individuals in Zimbabwe advocating for equal protection of human rights. She completed her Bachelor of Laws degree at the University of Edinburgh, then specialized in human rights law completing an LLM in International Human Rights Law at the University of Essex. She qualified as a legal practitioner in England through Nottingham Law School, then returned home to Zimbabwe, where she cross-qualified to Zimbabwean law. Her litigation, advocacy, and academic work cover all aspects of human rights law, with a particular focus on transitional justice and reparations law, anti-impunity claims, and environmental law.

Oxana V. Ivanchenko is a junior research fellow of the Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, a junior research fellow of the Center for Scientific Design, Russian State University for the Humanities, and a junior research fellow of the International Center of Anthropology, National Research University Higher School of Economics. Her research interests include urban anthropology, sub-Saharan Africa, social movements, informal settlements, rotating savings and credit associations, mutual help groups, ethnic identity, socio-cultural processes in Tanzania, *uswahilini*. She has done fieldwork in Tanzania, Zambia, and Russia.

Felix U. Kaputu is Professor of English Literature from the University of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He obtained a joint PhD in Anthropology and Interdisciplinary Studies from Universiteit Gent and Vrije Universiteit Brussel. His research published in several books and articles focuses on religions (shamanism), gender and cultural studies, and identity construction patterns in global perspective. In this scope, he has spent the last years at the Universidade Federal de Minas

Gerais in Brazil conducting research on the survival of central African religious culture in the Congado. As Fulbright Scholar at the University of California Santa Barbara, he is the recipient of awards for research stays among others at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Harvard University (at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute), Christian University of Tokyo, the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, and Fordham University in New York.

Eric Mutisya Kioko is a social anthropologist based at the Department of Environmental Studies and Community Development, Kenyatta University, Kenya. His broad areas of research include peace and conflict, dynamics of ethnic relations, and the anthropology of megaprojects. His latest publications include cooperation in the midst of conflict (in *Africa Journal*), local peace committees and the legitimation of traditional peace-making (in *Journal of African-Centred Solutions in Peace and Security*), and conflict resolution and crime surveillance in Kenya (in *Africa Spectrum*). He is also co-authoring four chapters on politics of aspiration and the transformation of rural Kenya, ungoverned spaces and informalization of violence, commodification and commercial exploitation of East Africa's sandalwood, and environmental crimes in Kenya. Kioko is working as a co-investigator and country coordinator of a German Research Foundation (DFG)-funded Collaborative Research Centre, "Future Rural Africa: Future-Making and Social-Ecological Transformation", which addresses large-scale land use changes and related social-ecological transformations along growth corridors in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Sabine Klocke-Daffa is a senior researcher and PD (Associate Professor) at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Tübingen, Germany. She has been Deputy Professor at various German universities and is member of the Collaborative Research Center "ResourceCultures", funded by the German Research Foundation. She has been working intensively in Southern Africa, focusing mainly on security and exchange relations, welfare grants, formal social insurances, and the cultural dynamics of resources. Key publications include an edited volume *Applied Anthropology* (2019), an article "Contested claims to social welfare – basic income grants in Namibia" (2017, in *Sozialpolitik.ch*), and "Resource Complexes, Networks, and Frames" (2017, in *ResourceCultures*).

Peter Kneitz is a research fellow at the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, Martin Luther University Halle. University of

Leipzig. He is working on "The Dynamics of Solidarity on Madagascar," a research project funded by Horizon 2020 (2014–2020), the European Union's Framework Program for Research and Innovation, under the Marie Sklodowska-Curie Grant. Since 1999, he has been conducting field research on Madagascar, at first with a focus on the west coast, the Boeny kingdom, possession cult, rituals, and Sakalava shrines (*Die Kirche der Sakalava*, 2003). Since 2010, he is working on conflicts and conflict resolution, the impact of the normative notion of solidarity, and the historical turn from war to a preference given to negotiation and consent in public discourse (collective volume *Fihavanana: La vision d'une société pacifique à Madagascar*, 2016).

Julia Koch holds a PhD from Münster University via the graduate school of the Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics in Pre-modern and Modern Cultures". She works at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology and the Ethnographic Collection in Göttingen, Germany, where she teaches media anthropology courses. She studied Communications, Medieval History and Ethnology/Anthropology in Münster and Paris (EHESS). Her research on South African broadcasting grew out of her practical and theoretical interest in audio-visual communication in relation to social order. Recent publications include an ethnographic film on fieldwork methodologies in the setting of Indian-African migration and a paper on fieldwork as performance (in *Anthropology Southern Africa*).

Mario Krämer is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the University of Köln, Germany. His main fields of research are political anthropology (chieftaincy and democratization, violent conflict, and social order) and the anthropology of sports. Since 2001, he has conducted about 30 months of fieldwork in Southern Africa, mainly in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) and Namibia.

Erika Miyake received her training and wrote her master thesis, *Land Use and Its Influence on the Relationship Between San and Ovawambo in North-Central Namibia* (2019) at the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies at Kyoto University, Japan. After obtaining the master's degree, she started her career at Sojitz Corporation, a global trading company based in Tokyo, in search for building win-win relationship between African local people and Japanese companies. Her main academic interests are land use in local areas and its effect on the social relationships

among people living there. She has conducted intensive fieldwork in North-Central Namibia, Southern Vietnam, and small islands in Japan.

Shannon Morreira is a senior lecturer at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. She holds a PhD in Anthropology, and her research centres on the impact of coloniality on knowledge systems, including human rights law and alternative forms of justice, land use, migration, and higher education. She was editor of the *Anthropology Southern Africa Journal* from 2015 to 2019 and is the editor of *Critical African Studies.*

Andrea Nicolas is a social anthropologist with a focus on Africa who holds her PhD at the Free University in Berlin. She worked at the Max Planck Institute for Anthropological Research in Halle and as part of the International MaxNetAging Program for the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock. Later she was a member of the Graduate School "Cultural Contact and Scientific Discourse" at the University of Rostock. She is working at Goethe University Frankfurt/Main, in the African studies section. In recent decades, Nicolas has carried out extensive fieldwork in Northeast Africa among the Oromo and Amhara of Ethiopia. She is the author of the book *From Process to Procedure: Elders' Mediation and Formality in Central Ethiopia* (2011), and co-editor of the volumes *Growing Up, Growing Old: Trajectories of Time and Lives* (2013, with Ian Flaherty) and *Travel, Agency, and the Circulation of Knowledge* (2017, with Gesa Mackenthun and Stephanie Wodianka).

Willis Okumu is a researcher and peacebuilding coordinator at Anglican Development Services Kenya. He holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Cologne. He is implementing an inter-communal Peacebuilding and Institutional Strengthening Project among the Maasai and Kipsigis in Narok County funded by *Brot für die Welt* and is Principal Investigator of "From Hope to Despair: An Ethnography of Youth Experiences of Human Trafficking Networks in Kenya", a collaboration between Anglican Development Services Kenya, Anglican Alliance, and the Antislavery Knowledge Network, University of Liverpool. His research interests include human-environment relations, inter-communal peace-building, and pastoralist livelihoods in the arid and semi-arid lands of Kenya. He previously worked as a Junior Researcher at the Center for Development Research (ZEF) at University of Bonn under the Right Livelihood College (RLC)/DAAD Scholarship. He is Fellow of Africa Good Governance Network (AGGN) of the German Academic Exchange

Service (DAAD) and a Member of UKRI International Development Peer Review College (2018–2021). He is co-author (with Eric Kioko) of *Appeasing the Land: Local Peace Committees and Co-management of Conflicts in Rural Kenya* (2018), and *The Role of Elite Rivalry and Ethnic Politics in Livestock Raids in Northern Kenya* (2017, with Kaderi Bukari, Papa Sow, and Evans Onyiego).

Arne S. Steinforth is a sessional lecturer at the Department of Anthropology at York University, Toronto. He obtained his PhD in social anthropology at the University of Münster, Germany. His recent research focuses on issues of power and religion, political cosmology, and mental disorder and social transformation, in the context of Southern and Eastern Africa. His major publications include the monograph *Troubled Minds: On the Cultural Construction of Mental Disorder and Normality in Southern Malawi* (2009) and the co-edited volumes *Spirits in Politics: Uncertainties of Power and Healing in African Societies* (2013, with Barbara Meier) and *Spirit and Mind: Mental Health at the Intersection of Religion and Psychiatry* (2017, with Helene Basu and Roland Littlewood).

Koen Stroeken is Associate Professor of Africanist Anthropology at Ghent University. Having done most of his ethnographic fieldwork in Eastern Africa, he authored two monographs on local concepts of power and healing, the first a micro-level analysis in a northern Tanzanian community (*Moral Power*, 2010), and the second a meso-level regional comparison (*Medicinal Rule*, 2018). His work continues the analysis at macro-level with an 'entropology' of eco-political transitions. Stroeken co-founded CARAM, the Centre for Anthropological Research on Affect and Materiality, which among others hosts collaborative research on restitution and initiatory objects at the Royal Museum of Central Africa. Since 2012 he coordinates a VLIRUOS-IUS academic exchange with Mzumbe University in Tanzania.

Akira Takada is an associate professor in Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies at Kyoto University, Japan. His academic interests include transformation of ethnicity in the contact zone, the influence of Christianity and Western education on indigenous societies, mutual construction of micro-habitat and habitus, and language socialization in caregiver-child interaction. He has conducted intensive field research in Namibia, Botswana, and Japan. He has published a number of books and articles, including *Narratives on San Ethnicity: The Cultural and Ecological*

Foundations of Lifeworld Among the !Xun of North-Central Namibia (2015) and *The Ecology of Playful Childhood: Caregiver-Child Interactions Among the San of Southern Africa* (2020).

Magnus Treiber is Professor of Anthropology at LMU Munich. Following his PhD research on young urban life in Asmara 2001–2005, he has done extensive research with Eritrean refugees and published his professorial thesis on migration from Eritrea (*Migration aus Eritrea*, 2017). He has taught at Munich, Bayreuth, and Addis Ababa Universities.

LIST OF FIGURES

Bittamo: Authority, Legitimacy, and Duty in Kara, Southern Ethiopia

In Search of Democracy: *Gadaa* as a Political Ideal or the Legitimacy
of Traditional Authority in Times of Turmoil and Unease

Contested Authorities, International Experts, and the Quest for
Social Justice: Negotiating Social Welfare in an African Setting

Challenging Neotraditional Authority in Namibia

Changes in Ethnicity and Land Rights Among the !Xun of North-
Central Namibia

San Traditional Authorities, Communal Conservancies, Conflicts, and Leadership in Namibia

A Magic Momentum: Negotiating Authority in the Bongolava Region, Madagascar

Ungoverned Spaces and Informalization of Violence: The Case of Kenya Police Reservists (KPRs) in Baragoi

List of Tables

Introduction: Investigating Authority and Its Legitimization in Contemporary Africa

Arne S. Steinforth and Sabine Klocke-Daffa

1   AUTHORITY, POWER, AND LEGITIMACY IN A POST-FACTUAL WORLD

When the notion of 'alternative facts' and the alleged dawning of a 'post-factual' world first entered globalized public discourses in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, many social anthropologists found themselves in unexpectedly familiar territory. To them, it may have felt as if their fieldwork had followed them back home. Every anthropologist whose research has confronted them with, for example, local conceptions of religion or witchcraft, allegedly 'traditional' (read: non-scientific) forms of healing, 'traditional' (read here: non-democratic) political structures,

A. S. Steinforth (✉)
Department of Anthropology, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada
e-mail: asteinfo@yorku.ca

S. Klocke-Daffa (✉)
Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Baden-Württemberg, Germany
e-mail: sabine.klocke-daffa@ethno.uni-tuebingen.de

1

or similar local aspects of social life had to straddle the often-quoted cognitive dissonance that comes with apparently incompatible views on reality competing over what is accepted as factual. Fact, as 'true knowledge', derives its explanatory as well as political power from social mechanisms of legitimization, thereby demonstrating the deep and dubious interconnection between knowledge accepted as truth and power structures accepted as legitimate, further highlighting the sometimes troubling, uncomfortable experience of fact as a continually contested, volatile social category. Questions of what is and what ought to be considered as fact are inextricably tied to questions of authority, with any contestation of accepted 'truth' signifying a challenge to the authorities upholding it—and, in turn, upheld by it. With increased popular concerns of clandestine conspiracies pulling the wool over the global public's eyes (see Lagalisse 2019; Rabo 2020; West and Sanders 2003), authorities—representing as well as legitimized by some degree of shared truth—are under intense, even anxious scrutiny. Authority itself, it seems, is in crisis.

With the numerous and obvious challenges—be they social, political, or more epistemological in nature—it entails, this perspective serves as the logical launchpad for taking a fresh, ethnographically informed, and theoretically inclined look at authority. For anthropologists—and especially those working in and on African societies—the juxtaposition, opposition, even outright competition between different postulated authorities is decidedly familiar territory that, at the same time, still warrants further in-depth analysis for these territories to be located on the global roadmaps of larger theoretical discussions.

2   Conceptual Clarifications

Ethnographic investigations into the various dimensions of power and authority clearly demarcate the diverse levels that all need to be addressed in order to establish a deeper understanding of emic perspectives. As a rudimentary starting point, it may be helpful to constitute **power** not merely as the ability of an individual or group to influence or outright control the behaviour of people against all odds, as Max Weber proposes (1922, p. 28). Rather, power can be conceptualized to also include the use and (possible) manipulation of networks which are essential for the implementation of programs, ideas, and political concepts (see Adams 1977). And, as Michel Foucault convincingly demonstrates, power may prove itself equally oppressive as productive—because it is engaged in the

production of reality itself (Foucault 1977). The way power is and can be used therefore depends significantly on the **authority** granted and acknowledged by others. In the broadest sense, authority denotes a social relationship of superiority and subordination—an 'accepted leadership' exercised by individuals, governments, religious institutions, or scientific experts, to name some of the most obvious fields of application. And while **legitimacy** may be defined as the justification and acceptance of authority, not every form of power necessarily goes along with authority, and a claim for authority may well be conceived of as illegitimate. Furthermore, classificatory overlaps such as authoritative power, moral legitimacy without political power, and non-hierarchical authority (see discussion of the terms below) clearly demonstrate that any attempt at scientifically analysing power, authority, and legitimacy is far from a straightforward academic exercise. In order to develop a more ethnographically sound understanding of the specific social mechanisms of leadership and authority, we need to launch more in-depth investigations into the quality of social (and socio-cosmological) relationships and the acceptance as well as rejection of power in context.

Much has already been accomplished. Within the past two decades or so, the literature on legitimacy and authority in African postcolonial settings has proliferated, fuelled by the dynamics of ever-faster processes of globalization. The internationalization of research and the growth of interdisciplinary cooperation have contributed substantially to bridging the divide between social and political sciences. This has enabled researchers to focus on political processes and actors from different scientific perspectives, taking a look at 'traditional' systems and forms of neo-traditional authority as well as the particularities of modern governance, and conducting multi-level research on the micro as well as the macro levels of analysis (see, e.g., Herbst 2014, Oomen 2005, and edited volumes by Adejumbi 2018; Koechlin and Förster 2015; Vaughan 2005).

What has somehow been neglected are the *answers*, *solutions*, and *counter-models* initiated by those we are dealing with: the alternative, resistant, creative, subversive, sometimes oppressive, sometimes liberating, manifest or clandestine *ways of acting* with, within, or against power relations. Whereas the details of institutional settings and processes of doing politics have been intensively studied, the **actors** often remain somehow distant, underexposed, and reduced to bit parts in a larger victim-perpetrator dichotomy that results from binary perspectives on power as a zero-sum game pitting the Powerful against the Powerless. It, therefore,

seems analytically expedient and scientifically productive to focus the investigation on the groundwork processes of **authority-building**, **power-holding**, and **legitimacy-claiming**. Given the fact that globalized news (whether 'true' or 'fake') are increasingly flooding even the most remote places of the world, that equally globalized but often incomprehensible expert knowledges infringe on the bastions of political decision-making, and that nation-states claiming legitimacy often lack the means (or political will) to act as engaged authorities for and with their citizens, the simple and yet ultimately complex question is: how do these dynamics play out and intersect in real human lives? As anthropologists dedicated to taking people seriously, we must look into the options that are tentatively and ostentatiously exercised for better or worse, the **concepts** hidden behind accepted authorities, and the explanations given as to the **sources** of power. To be sure: this exercise runs the risk of crossing the line of what is considered acceptable within Western democracies. It may seem to turn history upside down, proclaim the truth of shady correlations formerly and conveniently dismissed as primitive or superstitious, or invoke secret knowledge to legitimize a demonstrably unjust ideology against the many for the sake of individual profit or a 'just cause'.

To consider all details of ethnographic record as holding equal value is a genuinely anthropological approach. Applying such a holistic perspective allows for a hermeneutical analysis that may lead us to understand the crucial specificities of social context. This epistemological interest thus defines the overall question to this volume as **How are power relations exercised or leveraged according to emic constructions of authority and legitimacy?** Within this overall framework, guiding questions include: How do contested forms of power and authority merge into new regimes of legitimacy? Who are the actors, and what are the resources (e.g. religious, political, economic, media-related) that are appropriated, activated, or transformed? Which are the social institutions actively involved in negotiating legitimization and delegitimization? And what are the specific conceptual frameworks underlying such processes?

The contributions collected in this volume explore the variety of ways in which authority is defined and contested in African societies, particularly with the expansion of global institutions and the rapid spread of universalizing forms of knowledge. Generating heterogeneous realities across different settings, these globalized developments urge questions concerning which institution, what kind of knowledge, or whose expertise is accepted as authoritative—questions indicating complex **processes of**

negotiation that highlight the specificities and pluralities in contemporary societies. The inherent contradictions between what is perceived as local vis-à-vis global forms of knowledge, between different discourses vying for social acceptance and legitimacy, characterize these developments as an open-ended process that questions traditions, creates spaces, transforms hierarchies, and re-prioritizes values.

3   AUTHORITIES IN CONTEXT

Like its numerous neighbouring disciplines, anthropology has a long and colourful history of engaging with notions of authority. From the early to mid-twentieth century onward, anthropological work started to apply the concept to analyse cultural structures of community and kin-group leadership within empirical as well as comparative perspectives (e.g. Asad 1970; Doctorow 1963; Miller 1955; Richards 1964; West 1998; Willis 2001), sometimes qualifying their focus as 'political authority' (e.g. Ember 1962; Freeman 1964; Lindholm 1986) or as explicitly religious in character (e.g. Beidelman 1971; Bloch 1974; Middleton 1960).

The fundamental recognition of authority as always *socially constructed* rather than normatively predefined, as culturally validated and individually more often contested than accepted, is the result of a long and arduous process that required the turnover of cherished analytical models as well as critical self-reflection and painful self-exposure on the part of Eurocentric academia itself. In the early days of social anthropology, modernist paradigms underlying European/North American efforts to chart its global Other led to a categorical and systematic dismissal of local knowledge systems as untrue, as representations of a 'pre-factual' world that had not entered the ostensibly enlightened, rational, disenchanted era of scientific investigation and falsification. Social evolutionist frameworks and their ethnocentric, ideological rationalization of cultural difference as indicative of 'higher' versus 'lower' levels of social development consistently identified non-European knowledge systems (Comte 1853), structures of political organization (Tylor 1871), technologies and social institutions (Morgan 1877), cosmologies (Frazer 1890), and other aspects of life as structurally inferior to their European (and, by global extension, colonist) counterparts.

Even after the long overdue deconstruction of evolutionist metanarratives in social anthropology, a number of theoretical schools within the social sciences continued to entertain broadly neo-evolutionist

perspectives. For a long time, classical modernization theory postulated modernization as a process that—through necessary mechanisms such as industrialization, urbanization, democratization, rationalization, secularization, and individualization—transformed formerly 'traditional' societies into 'modern' ones (see Parsons 1966; Weber 1930). When social sciences finally started questioning these ideological bastions of Western exceptionalism by assessing that "we have never been modern" (Latour 1993) or that "we have always been modern—sometimes" (Stroeken 2010, p. 16), some of the foundational tenets of the Western construction of the world became untenable—including classificatory dichotomies of a First and Third World, of developed and underdeveloped (or developing) countries, of the West and the Rest (Hall 1992; Kahn 2001; Nader 2015).

In its wake, the demystification of modernity further entails dispensing with obsolete notions of **tradition** and the all too colonial ideologies they codify. Whereas many contemporary African idioms continue to argue in terms of 'traditional authorities', 'traditional healers', or 'local tradition', these references reveal themselves as strictly discursive, relative markers that offer insights into local narratives of continuity and discontinuity, of Own and Other—rather than 'true', analytically solid representations of a presumedly stable, ahistorical, primordial status quo. With the axiomatic redefinition of all tradition as 'invented' (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), any analysis of local 'traditions' is transformed into an effort at unravelling the historical boundedness and fluidity that governs strategic allocations of what sets the old and endemic features of society apart from the new and foreign.

This same general consideration also applies to the notion of the **tribe**, that stereotypical, dead yet undying model of African social structure that has featured as a long-time epithet of African 'tradition'. Whether referred to as 'tribes' or, arguably less primitivizing, as 'ethnic groups', these demographic entities should be understood, not unlike nations, as imagined communities (Anderson 1983). As socially constructed and largely colonial institutions, they are grounded not in immovable empirical factualities but in historical contingencies, ideological conventionalities, and political instrumentalities. The notion of tribalism or ethnicity thus continues to inform local articulations of shared identity and difference in many parts of Africa. It needs to be understood within this area of conflict: of its character as 'genuinely African' idiom of social classification with very real impact on political organization and national distribution and negotiation of power on the one hand, and as a historical artifact and remnant of the

colonially expedient 'creation of tribes' (Iliffe 1979, p. 318–341; Vail 1989) that "lay at the heart of indirect rule" (Ranger 1983, p. 250) in many parts of colonized Africa on the other. Nevertheless, the notion of 'tribe' is a blurred category experiencing something of a renaissance in recent decades, proactively brought back to the surface and used for delimitation by those, of all people, who should never have been designated by the seemingly colonial term of 'tribes' in the first place—such as Namibian Nama groups referring to each other as tribes (in Afrikaans: *stamme*) and all those who use the term within the political contexts of tribal councils, tribal communal lands, and tribal authorities. Anthropologists may not be too pleased about this kind of seemingly politically incorrect wording.

Based on these general considerations, authority—as the expression of specific social strategies of allocation and contestation exposed to competing local discourses on 'tradition' and innovation, legitimacy and illegitimacy, conditionality and illimitability—emerges as a category in need of careful investigation. Analytically, academic definitions of the term have been far from unified and, in many cases, far from coherent. While most theoretical contributions define **authority** somewhere in the larger conceptual vicinity of power, there seems to be no general consensus as to the precise relationship between the two. Some consider authority as power legitimized (Weber 1922), as legitimacy and meaning rendered onto power itself (Arendt 1970, 1961; Furedi 2013), or as a specific technique of power in one of its many dimensions (Lukes 1974), yet others regard the two as fundamentally opposed, even mutually exclusive principles (Fried 1967; Skalník 1999, 1996). Other authors use the terms almost interchangeably, insisting that "Authority over others may be acquired by superior force, inherited office, material generosity, or other means; but the power to do or be so is itself deemed that of ancestors, gods, or other external metapersons who are the sources of human vitality and mortality" (Graeber and Sahlins 2017, p. 3). However, the concept of authority remains contested territory when contrasted with notions of legitimacy. While some authors continue to understand authority as society's collective frame of reference by which normativity is defined (Durkheim 1974), others argue that authority is indeed independent from notions of morality and legitimacy (Sennett 1980). That dilemma seems tentatively resolved by J. Michael Williams' (2010) notable contribution that analyses authority entirely through the interplay between the two alternative strategies of moral vis-à-vis performative legitimacy. Overall, however, most scholarly

applications of the term have—implicitly or explicitly—maintained the Weberian understanding that, without being legitimized within society, authority degenerates into sheer, 'brute' power based on oppression and violence.[1]

In an ever-transforming and pluralistic global environment, the analytical distinction between legitimate/consensual versus illegitimate/oppressive power is nowhere near as simple as we might like it to be. According to Stanley Barrett, authority—in the sense of legitimized and institutionalized power—"is essentially ideology which serves the interests of the class or party capable of defining what is legitimate. In other words, authority looks very much like manipulation, because it depends on members of the other classes unwittingly acquiescing to interests that are not their own" (Barrett 2002, p. 68). With classical concepts in the analysis of power—such as cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971), power/knowledge (Foucault 1980, 1977), cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986), or tactical and organizational power (Wolf 1990)—jumping to mind, we find ourselves once again thrown back on the social specificities: on the exact processes by which societies construct their own realities, including their ostensibly preordained power structures and the allegedly primordial truths they represent.

When conceived of not as an apriori, quasi pre-cultural fact—and ontological given of human existence—but as the result of specific and localized processes of social construction (see Berger and Luckmann 1966), power, authority, and legitimacy dissolve into what, for the sake of a meaningful ethnographically centred analysis at the very least, they should be: features of society, grounded in specific historical processes, and increasingly confronted with alternative versions of themselves, global and local, struggling for their share in a truly global marketplace of ideas. It is here that the present volume seeks to latch on to the discussion.

---

[1] Accordingly, those anthropology textbooks that do offer a definition of authority tend to specify it in terms of a "right to make and enforce public policy" (McCurdy et al. 2016, p. 217), a status of being "recognized by a political community to make decisions on their behalf" (Kurtz 2001, pp. 40–41), or the "use of legitimate power" (Muckle and González 2016, p. 269).