Reflections on power, knowledge, and trust political dynamics in Africa and beyond
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Reflections on Power, Knowledge, and Trust Political Dynamics in Africa and Beyond

Universiteit Leiden

Reflections on Power, Knowledge, and Trust
Political Dynamics in Africa and Beyond

Inaugural Lecture by

Prof. Dr. Mayke Kaag

on the acceptance of her position as Professor of

The Anthropology of Politics and Governance in Africa

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Universiteit
Leiden

PROF. DR. MAYKE KAAG

Geachte mevrouw de Rector Magnificus, geacht Faculteitsbestuur, geacht Bestuur van het Afrika-Studie-Centrum,

Dear colleagues, students, friends, and family,

As is common nowadays for theatre performances (and inaugural lectures are of course also a kind of performance), I thought it wise to start with a trigger alert: In this lecture there will be a lot of talk about Donald Trump –I had not wanted it, but it turned out to be like that. So if you have a strong allergic reaction to that name, you still have the opportunity to leave the room…

Introduction

Having said that, I would like to start with the more general observation that beyond the emotional and practical challenges, which come with the world that we are currently experiencing, it is in fact an extremely interesting historical moment to reflect on politics and governance, particularly as many of the basic values that we thought were kind of given – not always adhered to, but still the norm – seem to no longer have that status; the importance of trustworthiness, the value of facts, the worth of institutions. How does this influence the workings of power and politics? How does it affect processes of governance? Or even our very understanding of what governance is or should be?

I propose to reflect on these and related questions taking a view point from Africa. This because I am fully committed to the basic programmatic question that has been asked by Mahmoud Mamdani (2001): What can we learn about the world from Africa? Or as political scientist Adom Getachew and Karuna Mantena (2021) put it, decolonizing political theory lies not so much in a continued critique of Eurocentrism, but in shifting the terrain of theorizing. I could not agree more.

So, I would like to start this reflection from a small village in the interior of Senegal. I visited the village because I was interested in the people over there practicing organic farming, very much inspired by, and embedded in their Muslim faith. The marabout - Islamic scholar - who had founded the village had passed away a couple of months before and one of his sons had taken over the lead of the community. I happened to visit the place last year the day after Donald Trump had been elected as a president for the second time. I must admit that I was still in shock, how could the American voters elect this man (I had been shocked the first time but had thought that it would not happen again..). I talked with the young marabout and his brothers and other companions seated on a mat in the shade, while some women were preparing lunch and the children were playing around. I shared my feelings of shock, but the young marabout shrugged his shoulders and said in a relaxed tone: well, I prefer to deal with Donald Trump, because with him, it is clear what you get. No double agendas wrapped in nice words, like with Macron, you can tell it is just bare interests – .

When scrutinizing my feelings, I realized that 'trust' came in as an important term to understand the difference between the young marabout's and my dealing with the event. I realized that I had such a strong emotional reaction, because, apparently, in Europe we have for a long time considered the USA (still) a 'good' country and its people 'like us'. While it was clear that for the young marabout Trump was just another leader to deal with, while he did not even think about the voters. He seemingly had never had any identifying relationship with America and what it would stand for nor with the American people. In fact, it appeared that my trust (that I even had not realized I had!) had been betrayed, while the young marabout has had no trusting relationship with the Americans whatsoever.

What was particularly insightful to me was that it made me realize how including issues of trust in the analysis of

politics enables to get beyond the purely rational aspects of political perceptions and behaviour and to arrive at the level of emotions, which I think is crucial for a good understanding of people's political choices and for political dynamics more in general. I will come back to this.

Power and Knowledge Revisited

But let me now first go back to the other two concepts that are in the title of my talk: 'power' and 'knowledge'. 'Power' and 'knowledge' have already been with me as a focus of research since I started my PhD in the mid-1990s. Inspired by works of Foucault (1980), Long and Long (1992) and Hobart (1993), among others, I analyzed how the local governance of natural resources in rural Senegal was shaped by shifting power relations and governance architectures, both at local, national and global levels, and related changing perceptions of what relevant knowledge was, who was considered knowledgeable, and thus capable to decide and to act.

At that time, important issues were the Structural Adjustment Programmes with their associated ideologies, political decentralization leading to more tight connections between national and local political networks, and the re-evaluation of local knowledge (see Kaag 2001).

Let us fast forward to the early 2020s.

When I started writing my statement for this chair, I decided to call it 'Power and Knowledge revisited' based on the observation that 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 in the early 1990s more recent developments have been grafted that appear crucial for political dynamics in Africa.

Firstly, since the turn of the century, the increased interest in Africa's economic and political possibilities by emerging global powers like China, India, Brazil, Turkey, the Gulf states, and Russia, has 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 forums (Dietz et al 2011).

Secondly, technological innovation and its diffusion related to the information revolution, 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 in Africa, but have 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) (Dwyer and Molony 2019; Nyabola 2018) .

This confluence of Africa's intensifying and shifting global connections and the information revolution invites a reconsidering of, and a 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.

So the following leading research questions can be asked: In these current shifting constellations of power, what knowledge is disseminated, by whom, through what means? How are claims of truth and legitimacy pursued (Kaag 2022)? Who is targeted in the process (Lamoureaux and Sureau 2019), and what space for, and forms of, agency do these audiences have ? How does this shape current power dynamics and longer term political processes of inclusion and exclusion?

Let us for instance look at how African leaders have recently claimed more independent positions on the world political stage, as is illustrated by their votes in the UN after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or in their pushing against French military presence in the Sahel – using a decolonial discourse that resonates well with the feelings and frustration of large parts of the population. We can analyze how this is partly a consequence of Africa's shifting global connections, reflecting these, and also co-shaping the process. And also how this is helped and fashioned by the emergence and spread

of social media, intensively used both by political parties and leaders, and various categories of the population including the diaspora.

We can also observe how Africa's educational landscape has changed by the arrival of a diversity of global education providers (Kaag 2018). Nowadays, Chinese, Turkish, Korean, Emirati schools, universities and scholarships present themselves alongside Western ones, all coming with their own world views, ways of doing, linguistic offers and opportunities to link up to specific global networks. What educational choices do African pupils and parents make in this diversified field? How do these influence world views and also people's connections? How does it help social mobility and inclusion? In what ways is education used as soft power s part of broader economic and political agendas? (Balci 2014; Kaag 2018). And how are information and media both a means in, and a target of, struggles over power in education?

We can also study the confluence of the emergent multipolar world and the information revolution by looking at the political economy of electricity provision (Wang 2025) and the political stakes around the energy transition (Baker and Sovacool 2017). The possibilities for green energy (such as solar and wind energy) in Africa have attracted a diversity of private and state-led investors from all over the world. What discourses on sustainability and partnerships do they use? How does technological and managerial knowledge circulate? How are contracts negotiated? And also, as electricity is so important for both private and corporate African consumers, how do stakes in electricity provision play out in election campaigns, between politicians and their electorate? How do access to the media and the internet mediate this?

So, I thought that this would already constitute a good research agenda with which I could fill most of my days…

A reshuffling of power, knowledge, and trust?

I feel, however, that already in the brief time that passed since I wrote the statement for this Chair in the early 2020s,

so much has changed. Global reconfigurations have taken new directions since Trump's second term that have not been foreseen by most observers, while the information revolution has seen rapid and profound changes with the recent developments in AI.

In fact, the multipolar world had seemed to take shape in rather predictable ways, with the USA and China emerging as the main poles, and some obvious secondary poles around them (such as Russia, Turkey, the EU) – but in the current Trump era, it gives the impression to be shaken more drastically and is actually flowing in a kind of limbo, in which it is rather difficult to decipher the direction of emerging fault lines and coalitions.

And the developments in AI are of course impressive and mind-boggling. What is of particular importance to me here is that what AI does, is that what 'real' and what 'fake' is, gets increasingly blurred.

I would like to argue, however, that Trump does not come out of the blue but is a manifestation of a larger trend, and that AI in fact only furthers and strengthens developments that have been on the way for some time already. Let us have a look at this from the perspective of power, knowledge and trust (but no worries, I will also come back to Africa).

The first observation is that while we had been used to 'knowledge' still having the aura or the status of 'objective' knowledge, that is, facts out there, in this emerging post-truth society, knowledge increasingly seems to be just an opinion. An opinion that can be claimed as 'truth' by those in power, that is, 'knowledge' and 'power' seem no longer just mutually influence and reinforce one another, as we have seen before, but to increasingly coincide.
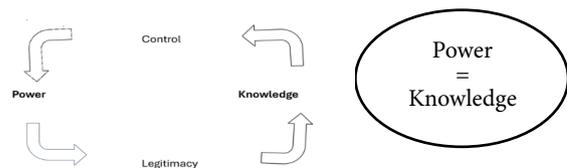
Then, interestingly, over the past years, we have seen a fragmentation of centres from which opinions are framed as truth, very much helped by the working of social media and associated algorithms, creating free-floating bubbles that function as echo-chambers, reinforcing the growth and maintenance of islands of self-contained truth.

Because in such a post-truth society, there is no factual and generally accepted knowledge base available that can be used for calibration (what is true? What is not?), trust and trust-making come in as increasingly important. Which/whose truth/knowledge to trust? How to establish someone's trustworthiness? And on the other side: How to go about that the others accept your truth and not the truth of someone else? How to convince? What are the bases of legitimacy?

In this way the fact-free world also creates a lot of insecurity. And insecurity asks for strong leaders and strong narratives – leaders and narratives that one can trust. The various processes of *fragmentation* in power, knowledge, and power-knowledge that we have seen over the last decades, have contributed to *a strong longing for central power* and a strong narrative.

Enter Trump. In recent analyses, Trump is often considered as an outlier in the populist spectrum[1], but I tend to view him more as the manifestation of a new phase. I would like to argue that Trump's kraterocracy, (deriving from the Greek word 'kratos' – might or strength), that is, his rule by sheer power in which 'might makes right' and the ability to exert power is the sole criterion for legitimacy, is a new phase in an ongoing and larger process of fragmentation and shifts in the relations between power, knowledge, and trust. A phase in

which power and knowledge have increasingly coincided, and trust has become ever so important but is in fact left up in the air without a clear basis to root it in, augmenting feelings of insecurity and thus the call for strong leaders.

Earlier populist leaders have tried to pick up on people's fears and pre-occupations and build their power on that (that is, knowledge about what the people want to hear), while currently, the power to influence people's preoccupations seem to have grown tremendously, not in the least by big tech, while effective counter-power seems to be difficult because of the already mentioned fragmentation of power/knowledge /trust hubs.

Will Shoki, the South-African editor of the platform 'Africa is a Country', in an analysis of Trump's discourse[2], had some important observations in this respect: thus, he contends that in Trump's language, the subtext has become text - in the sense that there is no effort to show moral uprightness; and secondly, there is the total un-importance of facts – expressions are not about truth but are just stagings, performances. (and I would say, performances of power). It shows that power and knowledge have coincided but also that the basis of trust seems to shift: from trust in moral respectability to trust in one's power.

Trump is the ultimate example, but I see it as a wider trend that I propose to be analyzed under 'current developments in populism'. What does this new phase bring? What kind of diversity and similarities can be observed between settings? And also importantly, what is new in all this? And what a continuity from the past? Or may be a repetition or return in certain respects?

I would like to argue that this new phase emerging is also taking place and having its repercussions in Africa, and thus, that these questions can also be studied from Africa. Colleagues who have started working on populism in Africa, such as Sishuwa (2024), Sithole *et al* (2024), and Melber

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1 See for instance Sopel 2018, Faure 2025.

2 Africa Is a Country Weekend Special, Jul 14, 2025: The imperial game.

(2017), among others, have already done interesting work on this. But up till now their research and thinking have mainly been confined to Africa, as far as I know there is no broader analysis linking their insights and observations to phenomena elsewhere in the world.

A connected and comparative approach to the study of politics from Africa

I wish to adopt a more connected and comparative approach, however, and understand how these developments in the field of politics work at various levels of society -global, national, and local - and particularly how they in their interplay produce this shift in the relationship between power and knowledge and the role of trust in this.

In order to show what I mean, let us have a look at the lunch of five African leaders with Trump last July.

On July 9, the presidents of Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania and Senegal had lunch with the American president at the White House. There was quite some coverage of the event, among other things on Trump's remark to the president of Liberia that his English was so good, 'where did you learn this' totally unaware of the fact that Liberia is an Anglophone country, or to put it more accurately, he most probably did not care about facts but only about the staging. There were quite some good meme's and mockeries about his behaviour to be found on the internet.

I was particularly struck however by the discourses of the African presidents, who tried to attract Trump's attention by boasting the natural resources of their countries, ready to be harvested. I was shocked especially because Senegal's president Diomaye Faye, and his companion Ousmane Sonko, the former opposition leader who had become the prime minister, had won the elections importantly because of their decolonial discourse and promises to get rid of French and other external influences in politics and the economy.

I realized that I had put my hopes on Diomaye to change things in Senegal and Africa for the better, and that I was disappointed by this behaviour. It appeared to me that when the stakes are high, one tends to desperately hang on to good examples, those who can change the world -> but if they appear not to be those shining lights in the dark, one's disappointment is all the stronger. In fact, I found my trust again betrayed.

Interestingly, Africa is a Country editor, Will Shoki, appeared to share my feelings. This is what he wrote: "[…] here we must ask: how long will we accept this kind of treatment? Our leaders are wont to speak of colonialism and its enduring legacies. But what does it mean to invoke that history while walking willingly into its modern equivalents? There is no dignity in being treated as an afterthought. No strategy in confusing access with respect. You can't win on Trump's terms. Play his game, and you've already lost."[3]

A strong analysis to which I could relate. But what is interesting here is that Shoki's piece was translated and published on the Senegalese news platform Seneplus[4]. Shoki's message did not get much resonance, however. Most reactions were of the kind: what does this outsider tell us? and 'our president knows what he is doing' . Also talking to some of my Senegalese friends they replied in the sense of: 'this is what the current geo-political game requires'. It made me realize that their trust and belief in their chosen leader and in the larger narrative of change for the better was stronger than just one action could undo.

For outsiders like Shoki, a South-African, and myself, it is relatively easy to take a more critical stance. We are committed to Diomaye's cause of cutting (neo)colonial ties, but our vision of our future is less dependent on Diomaye's behaviour as it is for many Senegalese–

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3   Africa Is a Country Weekend Special, Jul 14, 2025: The imperial game.
4   https://www.seneplus.com/international/le-sommet-de-la-servitude

It is thus not so strange that they wanted to continue supporting their president and to continue trusting his message and leadership as they had voted for him, and had entrusted their future in his and prime minister Sonko's hands.

From this reflection, we may also gain a better understanding for voters for Trump in the US, or for Wilders in the Netherlands. They continue to believe in the narrative, as this is their hope for the future, they need to continue to trust the leader – even if counter-evidence is available that the leader does not work for them but in his own interests, like in the case of Trump.

- This also points to the performative aspect of trust – if we continue to trust and support, our leader will finally do as he has promised.
- It is not simply naïve behaviour, as we may think from the outside, the issue is that the stakes are high. So rather than dismissing people's reactions as illogical, it is important to recognize the larger stakes that people have. People need narratives in times of crisis and uncertainty.

It has been argued by scholars like Luhmann (1968) that trust in persons as mere individuals is relatively fragile and can easily be betrayed – but trust in a vision, a promise for the future appears to stand stronger – until it collapses. Like we have recently seen in Mozambique and Kenya for instance, where people have gone to the streets to express their anger and frustration over unmet promises.

So this is what I aim to do in my chair: linking local and global dynamics in the analysis of political phenomena and develop a better understanding of the current world by taking an empirical approach and building knowledge from Africa.

Besides power and knowledge, trust will be a central focus of the analysis, as I feel that it has been under-explored in the study of politics but is nevertheless very important. In the foregoing, I have mainly talked about trust in leaders and narratives, but it is also important in other ways. It is crucial in settings where people cannot rely on the state for security and the provision of other basic services and depend on networked security, that is security through the building and maintenance of social relations with others around them, which often requires active trust building- such as in many African (post) conflict settings as I have argued in my keynote lecture at the UN earlier this year, but it also holds true more in general in settings where institutional trust in the state is low and people rely on their relationships with community members, leaders and influential others to get access to necessities like electricity, papers, and social protection.

Trust is further important in understanding the politically infused dynamics around Africa's global connections, especially as it often involves encounters with non-familiar others, such as in the case of investment and development collaborations, migration, and diplomacy, as we have explored through various initiatives by our collaborative research group 'Africa in the World'; and as is shown by the excellent work of some of my PhDs students.

The importance of trust-building holds also true in global connections in the field of knowledge production, as we experience and try to practice in our initiative of setting up a Triangular Laboratory of Global Field Work with a small dedicated team of researchers from Africa, China, and OECD countries in an effort of joint knowledge production. – as well as in the activities that I am engaged in with the Global De-Centre, a global network of academics, practitioners, and artists committed to building knowledge from various parts of the world. While we are practicing trust-building we learn a lot about how cultural and political aspects as well as different traditions of knowledge production inform this process of building trust, making it sometimes challenging but also truly enriching.

Trust is further important for understanding people's political behaviour more in general as it enables to better understand the role of people's emotions in shaping their political perceptions and choices, as I have reasoned throughout this talk.

Finally, as I have just argued, it is becoming even more important as a topic of analysis of politics in the global post-truth society.

Trust is certainly important for building counter-power to the kraterocracy and other colonial tendencies more in general, including in the global economy, geo-politics, and knowledge production, as we have also explored in our recently published edited volume 'Trust and Trust-Making in Africa's Global Connections' (Kaag, Thiel and Tarrósy 2025). And I would like to finish with some words on this.

(Re)Claiming Voice

As analyst J. Dorsey remarked earlier this year, President Trump and his techbro's are performing the adagium 'Might is Right' with exceptional fervour[5]. How to deal with the violence that perspires from their gestures, words, and deeds? And of course, the news and images coming from Gaza very much convey the same message that brutal power rules.

It thus seems that the current world is predominantly determined by neo-liberal and neo-colonial structures, or at best, negotiated between the world's elites. In this global outlook, in which the bare right of the might seems to dominate the present and determine our future, it is difficult not to get paralyzed, give in, and defer to (the lack of) notions of morality that come with kraterocracy (political scientist Bonnie Honig even called the Trump government a rape-ocracy, which in my view is telling and to-the-point)[6]. Even in our own academic environment, hegemonic structures and narratives, influencing official positions on Israel and Palestine, seem incredibly difficult to overcome.

Against this tendency of discouragement, historian Ewoud

Kieft in the Dutch newspaper NRC, made a convincing and moving plea for resistance, even if it is in small acts, and to practice an attitude of fearlessness[7]. I would like to support this plea and argue that particularly under the present circumstances, a focus on, and trust in, people's agency and creativity is of utmost importance - in order to make visible how in the interstices of the current global power structures counter forces may grow, that there is the power of creation, of thinking and doing things differently, of agency, our agency (and with our I mean everybody who feels the world deserves a better fate than kraterocracy).

It appears to me that also in this, African contributions and perspectives are extremely valuable, not in the least because people have longstanding experiences with kraterocratic behaviour by colonial and neocolonial powers and the African rulers that they have helped to uphold[8]. Even where the right of the might has seemed unbeatable, people have not given up, have raised their voices, have created alliances, looked for creative solutions, and tried to stand strong. Recent uprisings in Kenya and Senegal are a proof of this, where especially young people have gone into the streets to ask for political change. But counter-action is also to be found on a smaller scale, for instance in the work of local associations and NGOs that are trying to make their neighbourhood a safe and livable place against the grain of national autocratic and kleptocratic regimes and international power- and resource-grabbers; or in parents and educators who try to equip their children with moral values of human dignity. Or in the work of the young marabout whom I introduced in the beginning of this talk who continues the work of his father of organic agriculture, farming in harmony with nature and in so doing, setting an example for other people – a quiet form of environmental activism. I would also like to mention the work my colleague Abdourahmane Seck is doing with his Group GAEC in Senegal, creating a

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5   https://jamesmdorsey.substack.com/p/trump-puts-might-is-right-principle

6   https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2025/02/05/het-bewind-van-trump-is-er-een-van-verkrachters-al-zie-ik-enkele-tekenen-van-hoop-a4882037

7   https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2025/02/28/laat-je-niet-ontmoedigen-we-zijn-niet-gedoemd-om-af-te-glijden-richting-dictatuur-a4884780

8   https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2025/02/28/laat-je-niet-ontmoedigen-we-zijn-niet-gedoemd-om-af-te-glijden-richting-dictatuur-a4884780

safe space for students and local populations to collaborate and build knowledge together. Counter-force is also in more diffuse form to be found in online activist networks like the Africtivistes or creative hubs like The Nest. Evidently, nuanced analysis of successes and failures, challenges and human costs of these kinds of resistance and claiming voice should and have been made, for which this lecture does not offer sufficient space but which will also be part of my research agenda. What these African perspectives and contributions show however: For creating cracks in kraterocracy, creativity, perseverance, and coalitions are key. Let us take that road.

Word of thanks

I would like to thank my colleagues from the African Studies Centre, especially its current director Marleen Dekker as well as former directors Ton Dietz and Jan-Bart Gewald for their continuous support and encouragement, this has really meant a lot to me. I would also like to thank the Board and colleagues from the Department of Anthropology here at Leiden University for welcoming me and my Chair in their midst. I have collaborated with some of you already in the framework of the Sea-ing Africa project, but I am looking forward to developing and strengthening collaborations further, between you and me, and between the Department of Anthropology and the African Studies Centre.

I would further like to thank the colleagues from the Dept of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam where my other Chair is situated, for the discussions and inspiration, and for walking my first professorial steps with me. I am very grateful for having been given this opportunity and I look forward to further collaboration.

Looking back, there are so many colleagues and students who have encouraged and inspired me during my career! First of all my promotors at the VU, Peter Kloos and Bernard Venema. Then my close collaborators in the CRG Africa in the World, here at the African Studies Centre and within the

framework of AEGIS, and other colleagues with whom I have collaborated over the years, among others in the framework of research projects in Chad, Senegal, Ghana, Benin, and South Africa. What a blessing to having been given the opportunity to team up with you, it has been rewarding and has greatly influenced my thinking.

The Master and Research master students whom I supervised over the years, my former and current PhD students. I am really honored to have some of them in the room today. To you and others online: Thank you so much, all of you, for all that you have taught me. You have contributed a lot to the programme of this Chair.

Then my friends, my beautiful friends – longstanding friends and newly found treasures, friends in the vicinity and spread all over the world. Don't they say that friendship is one of the most precious gifts in life? It is definitely true.

I would like to thank my love, Frans, for our laughs and our adventures together; for your mildly-putting-things-in-perspective with those twinkles in your eyes, and of course for your re-assuring and welcoming arms that are there for me to hide in times of stress, anxiety, and not-knowing.

Last but not least, Issa, apple of my eye and Rosa's big brother! From the tiniest baby we had ever seen you have grown into the young adult that you are today, and your father and I are so grateful for our life with you. Well, this is the second time that you are attending an inaugural lecture of mine, so we both are getting somewhat experienced in this job. I hope I have burdened you a little less with preparatory stress than the first time :-) Thank you so much for all the conversations we have had, are having, and hopefully will continue to have in the future, for your critical attitude and independent thinking, for your creativity – in short, for being you. Don't forget: life is a journey, and you can trust the process.

Ik heb gezegd.

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