Conclusion

Studying Cryptopolitics

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Cryptopolitics thrives on difference, and the boundaries of information distribution, giving rise to hidden realms of meaning, intention, and action. People build layers of obscurity and opacity in order to avoid the transmission of knowledge. Yet, those who want to expose the workings of cryptopolitical agency do the opposite: they seek to uncover the hidden, decode the ambiguous, and enlarge the group of "those who know."

Conspiracy theories work ambiguously with cryptopolitics. On the one hand, some of their basic aesthetics and ethics are the exposure of hidden truths. Yet, on the other hand, these theories often lead to new cryptopolitics: first and foremost because they fabricate layers of power, action, and intention that are far removed from factual, observable realities; and second, because they stimulate feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, and sometimes disgust, generating new configurations of hiding and exposing.

It is to these cryptopolitics—social, economic, and political—that our contributors have drawn attention. Every interaction between human beings, or between humans and institutions, is characterized by some degree of opacity. In some situations, people manipulate and mobilize that possibility for ambiguity. The rise of digital communicative platforms can be seen as central to contemporary activities of obfuscation and revelation—offering new possibilities for the empowerment of the marginal, but also creating new mechanisms of surveillance and control.

Cryptopolitics are intimately entangled with power and difference. Secrecy and decoding are used to draw and redraw the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. Our focus on cryptopolitics casts light on the emerging dynamics of digital platforms in Africa that are often

characterized by ambivalent implications to power and agency—the ability of individuals to make their own choices and act upon them. Various social media and internet search platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google, increasingly feature as an arena for construction and negotiation of alternative meanings and strategies of resistance, as our case studies demonstrate.

Our anthology reveals the role of the new digital publics that emerge on diverse global and local social media platforms to question and contest the political legitimacy and narratives of the state. For example, among Eritreans, the double meanings and ambiguities of humor both mirror and decode the cryptopolitics in the narratives of the authoritarian state, and expose these to public scrutiny. The chapters also draw attention to important continuities in political cultures, and the ways long-standing cryptopolitical understandings and practices are adapted to digital media. As we saw, social media in Burundi draws on the patterns of selective concealing that are part of the cultural repertoire in Burundian politics, while providing citizens with new avenues to combat the machinations and violence of the state. In post-conflict Somalia, the enduring struggles to reify and strategically manipulate otherwise fluid and contextual clan identities have been transferred to the digital world of algorithmic search engines. Communication on Congolese digital platforms is shaped by a locally specific aesthetic of ambiguity that foregrounds socially conditioned modes of concealment and revelation, forming an important strategy for managing personal relationships. New digital technologies of identification aimed at regulating and surveilling migrants in Kenya give rise to new strategies among Somali and Burundi refugees who evade and manipulate the state authorities, while providing them with informal ways to draw on their customary ties of sociality and mutual security.

The chapters of this book use cryptopolitics as a tool to illuminate the underlying discourses of power and powerlessness that are mediated by the novel technologies. Enabling new strategies of concealing and revealing information and intentions, the digital technologies are shown to disrupt and reconfigure people's communicative practices and lifeworlds. However, the chapters also show that the emerging virtual public sphere that allows people to connect through a variety of new media should not be seen as always enabling free speech and empowerment but is shaped by complex interaction between a variety of actors—individual and collective, public and private. We can therefore see how cryptopolitical practices are anchored in local cultures and social norms, but also interlink online and offline, public and intimate socialities.

Several case studies of this book demonstrate that while the digital media may render participation in political and economic governance more accessible to the masses, the outcomes remain contested and ambiguous. Thus, for example, digital platforms such as Twitter have disrupted the control of the state over the circulation of information in Kenya and introduced new, participatory practices of engaging with institutional politics. However, digital platforms also entail new opportunities for the state to strengthen its repressive information regime. Similarly, the restrictions and freedoms produced by the engagement of the users with Western-owned BigTech platforms that often dominate the digital economy landscape in Africa are also ambivalent and context-dependent. In South Africa and Kenya, for example, WhatsApp-mediated informal savings groups have emerged as an alternative to digital group accounts offered by commercial banks and dedicated FinTech platforms. While they build on vernacular templates of mutuality and allow broader financial access to the masses, they have also given rise to rapidly spreading scams and data capture by technology companies. Fundraising campaigns increasingly combine WhatsApp with offline contribution networks and mobile payment channels, demonstrating the continued importance of integrating existing offline and online modes of livelihood management.

As the chapters show, digital publics in Africa are thus constituted through multiple materialities and communicative forms. These spaces are shaped by a variety of actors that include individual users as well as governments, civil society organizations, diasporas, and increasingly, technology companies and investors. Many of the social media platforms are owned by BigTech companies originating from the Global North, profiting from monopoly power and user data extraction, and expanding foreign-based forms of governance and developmental paradigms (see also Friederici, Wahome, and Graham 2021). Increasing numbers of such platforms integrate various modes of digital payment and credit, becoming part of the FinTech platform political economy with its rapid scaling and multisided value creation while consolidating and transforming existing market infrastructures (see Langley and Leyshon 2020; Langley and Rodima-Taylor 2022). These old and new inequalities and exclusions shape the digital public sphere in many African countries. Our focus on the cryptopolitics of these encounters between the powerless and powerful enables novel and nuanced perspectives on the developing inequalities, digital divides, and opportunities for resistance and empowerment in Africa's rapidly evolving digital landscape—and suggests new trajectories for the study of new media and civil society in Africa.

Studying Cryptopolitics in the Era of New Media and Big Data

One of the biggest challenges for ethnographers, rarely trained in IT (information technology), resides exactly in understanding the imbrications of digital infrastructures in cryptopolitics. New centralized systems for managing information may conceal more than reveal, with transparency featuring as a commodity serving the interests of governments and private capital (Nutall and Mbembe 2015). A considerable expansion in data production and quality has occurred with the advent of software-powered machine learning that mines data, detects patterns, and builds predictive models (Kitchin 2014). Computational data management is increasingly central in consumer credit scoring, predictive policing systems, processing job and immigration applications, organizing social media newsfeeds, and managing search autocomplete features of internet platforms, to name a few. Private information is sold for profit, facilitating new markets and modes of accumulation. Big Data may also reveal more than private information about the users, casting light on their "unconscious secrets" of statistical behavior patterns and preferences (Jones 2014: 58). Digital technologies have fostered new surveillance and security measures used by states and private companies. These stockpiles of data are powerful public secrets that are known yet hidden from citizens, a form of cryptopolitics.

While software-powered information management introduces new areas of invisibility and secrecy, it also has important epistemological implications. It has been often argued that Big Data introduces a "new era of empiricism, wherein the volume of data, accompanied by techniques that can reveal their inherent truth, enables data to speak for themselves free of theory" (Kitchin 2014: 3). However, neither technology design nor research are neutral, and there is an inherently political dimension to the ways data is analyzed and interpreted (Kitchin 2014: 9). Algorithms contain significant areas of the unknowable, due to proprietary secrets of corporations and software companies, but also because of the complexities of machine learning that allow developing new procedures directly from the data, without relying on predetermined procedures or equations. Instead of following the formalized definitions of software experts, Nick Seaver (2017: 10) suggests that social studies of algorithms should approach them as empirically situated and enacted through diverse practices—as "heterogeneous and diffuse sociotechnical systems" constituted by procedures as well as people, institutions, and the intersecting contexts of algorithm use and sensemaking.

The complexities of studying the political dimensions of the hidden and the occult in the current era of neoliberal globalization can be

illustrated with the example of the "occult economies" of post-apartheid South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). As the impoverished masses witness vast wealth passing to the elites through the hidden speculations of the neoliberal market, people resort to the pursuit of novel magical means for the desired ends. Their practices, often parodying the free market, find expression through a variety of contemporary media—including "dial-in-diviners" and multimedia ritual technologies. The proliferation of "mystical arts" in post-independence Africa should not be viewed as a retreat to the traditional past, however, but rather as employing culturally familiar tropes and technologies for producing new ways of coping with contemporary inequalities: a "new magic for new situations" (1999: 284). Populations are disenfranchised or marginalized politically as well as economically and seek sources of power in the occult while also suspecting that elites use such powers to achieve the positions they hold.

Fieldwork and Cryptopolitics

Cryptopolitics is not only a topic to study in the lifeworlds of our research subjects. Collecting ethnographic data and publishing research involves strategies of exposing, concealing, and obscuring as well. As anthropologists, we have sometimes failed to acknowledge the politics of ethnographic research and scholarship, and the local and global power relations that shape our engagement with the people we write about. In the field, we may reflect on how much private information to disclose to various interlocutors, and sometimes we deliberately hide or distort the truth while presenting ourselves to interlocutors, state officials, NGOs, and other people and institutions. Ethnographers may decide that lying about or revealing their sexual orientation or their religion could hamper the fieldwork; while our interlocutors also weigh how far they are open to the researcher, perhaps deciding it is wiser to fabricate stories or only tell partial truths. While performances of hiding and obscuring do not hint at the fact that there is something hidden, sometimes it may be socially significant to allude at the performance of duplicity. Duplicity can become discretion. This may sometimes have socially rewarding consequences. For example, when preparing to record dirges at a funeral on Crete, Michael Herzfeld (2009: 147) was advised by one of his interlocutors not to take a big audio-recorder along but to "use the small cassette recorder—but make sure that it pokes out of your pocket, said he, so that people will realize that you are trying to be discreet."

In academic writing we may feel pressure to omit from our account the various missteps, misunderstandings, and even more serious events

that marked our field experiences. Our usage of pseudonyms or the alterations of various idiosyncratic characteristics are also practices of cryptopolitics, of producing layers of meaning, of hiding and obscuring so that our interlocutors or our relationships with them are not harmed. These processes of anthropological research are well known. Yet, with the ubiquity of social media, practices of data collection, contacting interlocutors, and maintaining relationships with them are constantly being transformed. Our interlocutors themselves and interested others also now have easier access to public and private data about the researcher and their work that is available online (Fabian 2008), as well as other anthropological research done on those topics and locations.

In addition, data protection measures are by now a standard requirement in grant proposals and human subject review protocols. Scholars rightly need to reflect on how digitally stored ethnographic material will be protected from risks such as data hacking, theft of devices carrying data, and unintended publication online. Just as citizens are not always fully in control of the flow of data they consciously produce or inadvertently generate, neither are researchers. This points to a need for new approaches and perspectives in the discipline that would allow for more balanced disclosures in an environment of mutual dialogue and respect, to replace the old, extractive modes of knowledge-making.

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