



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Competition and mis/trust in Africa and beyond

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## Abstract

Competition has rarely been an explicit theme in ethnographies of African settings, despite being a familiar dynamic to ethnographers in the field. Trust and mistrust, although prominent themes, tend to feature in discussions of their relationship to cooperation. Re-reading ethnographic and historical accounts of diverse competitive practices on the continent invites a closer attention to the subtle ways in which competition – as a specific genre of collective action – shapes and is reshaped by relations of trust and mistrust. This article begins by drawing this lead out from extant literature, before pursuing it in conversation with the ethnographic materials presented across this part issue. We show that competition gives rise to particular acts and dispositions of trust and mistrust. These, in turn, prompt people to reimagine the competitive structures and practices they engage in. Competition, trust and mistrust are thus mutually implicated. This insight demonstrates how ethnographies of African settings can continue to strengthen conceptual understandings of both competition and trust in anthropological and social theory while challenging representations of African societies as historically uncompetitive at a time when assumptions about the relationship between competition and trust continue to inform macro-economic modelling and policymaking that shape millions of lives, in Africa and beyond.

## Résumé

La concurrence a rarement été traitée explicitement dans les ethnographies des contextes africains, bien qu'elle soit une dynamique familière aux ethnographes du domaine. Les thèmes de la confiance et de la méfiance, bien qu'importants, ont tendance à figurer dans les discussions traitant de leur rapport à la concurrence. La relecture des récits ethnographiques et historiques de diverses pratiques concurrentielles sur le continent invite à porter une attention plus particulière aux manières subtiles par lesquelles la concurrence, en tant que genre spécifique d'action collective, est remodelée par les relations de confiance et de méfiance, et les façonne. Cet article commence par tirer cette prémisse de la littérature existante, avant de poursuivre en conversation avec les documents ethnographiques présentés dans cette partie du numéro. Les auteurs montrent que la concurrence donne lieu à des actes et tendances à la confiance et à la méfiance particuliers. Ces derniers, à leur tour, incitent les gens à réimaginer les structures et les pratiques concurrentielles auxquelles ils recourent. La concurrence, la confiance et la méfiance sont donc mutuellement impliquées.

Cette perspective démontre comment les ethnographies des contextes africains peuvent continuer à renforcer les interprétations conceptuelles de la concurrence et de la confiance dans la théorie anthropologique et sociale. Ce faisant, elle remet en question les représentations selon lesquelles les sociétés africaines seraient historiquement non compétitives, à une période où les hypothèses sur la relation entre concurrence et confiance continuent d'informer la modélisation macroéconomique et l'élaboration des politiques qui façonnent la vie de millions, en Afrique et au-delà.

## Resumo

A competição raramente tem sido um tema explícito nas etnografias de contextos africanos, apesar de ser uma dinâmica familiar para os etnógrafos no terreno. A confiança e a desconfiança, apesar de serem temas proeminentes, tendem a aparecer nas discussões sobre a sua relação com a cooperação. A releitura de relatos etnográficos e históricos de diversas práticas competitivas no continente convida a uma maior atenção às formas subtis como a competição – enquanto género específico de ação colectiva – molda e é moldada por relações de confiança e desconfiança. Este artigo começa por extrair esta perspetiva da literatura existente, antes de a prosseguir em diálogo com os materiais etnográficos apresentados nesta edição parcial. Estas, por sua vez, levam as pessoas a reimaginar as estruturas e práticas competitivas em que se envolvem. A competição, a confiança e a desconfiança estão assim mutuamente implicadas. Esta observação demonstra como as etnografias de contextos africanos podem continuar a reforçar a compreensão concetual da competição e da confiança na teoria antropológica e social. Ao fazê-lo, desafia as representações das sociedades africanas como historicamente não competitivas, numa altura em que os pressupostos sobre a relação entre competição e confiança continuam a informar a modelação macroeconómica e a elaboração de políticas que moldam milhões de vidas, em África e mais além.

## Competition and trust: a latent dynamic

How does competition shape dispositions of trust and mistrust? Although ethnographers may rarely ask this question directly, it might feel curiously familiar to many. The interplay between competition and trust struck us, the part issue editors, as well as each of our authors during fieldwork – whether on artisanal fishing boats in Sierra Leone (Baann), among Ethiopian long-distance runners (Crawley), electoral agents in Kenya's Kisii region (Zidaru), aspiring footballers in Cameroon (Kovač) or boxers in Ghana's capital, Accra (Hopkinson). Dynamics of competition and trust have also animated our writing to date. Ethiopian runners (Crawley 2021) and Accra boxers (Hopkinson 2024) must develop fragile relations of trust with their peers and rivals in order to progress their careers. Footballing dreams sow the seeds of mutual suspicion among Cameroonian footballers (Kovač 2022). Similarly, in Kenya, competition over scarce resources precipitates mistrustful feelings and accusations of envy, jealousy and greed among kin and neighbours (Zidaru 2019). Nevertheless, across our earlier work, the relationship between competition and trust remained implicit, a latent but significant presence that animated our interlocutors' lives.

The ethnographic record reveals numerous similar occasions when competition and trust appear entangled in significant ways. Yet, this entanglement is sometimes neglected analytically. Such neglect extends beyond anthropology to political

philosophy, economic theory and elsewhere. This article and part issue buck this trend, asking what we might learn by empirically and analytically foregrounding the relationship between competition and trust. To do so, we build on the extensive Africa-centred scholarship which hints at this formative relationship. Diverse and longstanding competitive practices feature extensively in ethnographic and historical scholarship about life on the continent, cautioning against the assumption that competition is a relatively recent, foreign and (post)colonial import. We thus explore what ethnographic analyses of competition and trust on the continent might offer to theories of competition and trust in social theory writ large.

Before proceeding, it is helpful to clarify our key analytics: trust, mistrust and competition. Normative discourses often represent 'trust' as prosocial and 'mistrust' as the antisocial and destructive 'absence' of trust. Anthropologists, however, agree that both trust and mistrust mark active modes of relational engagement (see Carey 2017; Mühlfried 2018). The former presupposes plausible expectations of favourable outcomes, while the latter involves cautious engagements informed by a sense of unknown and potentially negative outcomes. Moreover, trust and mistrust are also mutually implicated dispositions (Geschiere 2013; Carey 2017; Mühlfried 2018; Humphrey 2018). Trust always implies a degree of doubt, and involves a speculative 'leap of faith' in the face of uncertainty (Simmel 1990 in Möllering 2001). It is a fragile disposition that may give way to suspicion, mistrust, subsequent reinvestments of trust, or the redirection of mistrust along new trajectories (Pelkmans 2018). Trust and mistrust are thus best understood as inseparably intertwined in a dynamic and recursive relationship (Geschiere 2019). In this part issue, we gloss this relationship as 'mis/trust'.

Competition, unlike trust, is only just emerging as an object of sustained ethnographic attention (see Almudéver Chanzà 2022; Alter 2022; Buitron 2022; Long 2022; Rao 2022; Hopkinson and Zidaru 2022; McCarthy 2022; Kovač 2023; Kajanus 2019). Across the part issue, we understand competition to be the agonistic pursuit of a limited end. Despite this agonism, we recognize that competition always involves degrees of collaboration – whether in competitors' adherence to agreed rules and identified values, or insofar as collectives must cooperate to compete against other groups. Our focus on how competition entails and animates mis/trust builds on, but goes beyond, the established idea that competition is always a genre of cooperation.

Our argument is twofold. On the one hand, we show how competition animates particular forms of trust and mistrust. These may be entirely novel and unforeseen, or they may mark subtle changes to existing patterns of mis/trust and ideas about who or what can be trusted. On the other hand, we show that dynamics of mis/trust constitute competition. Acts of entrustment are central to how people compete. Moreover, the relations of mis/trust that competition involves and inspires in turn allow people to reimagine the forms that competition takes in their lives, in a recursive and iterative fashion. The mutual implication of competition and mis/trust thus articulates dynamics of both continuity and change.

Our argument emerges from our re-reading of the ethnographic record, and of the ethnographic materials that the articles in this part issue present. The articles discuss diverse competitive practices among fishermen (Baann), runners (Crawley) and footballers (Kovač), as well as voters and political candidates (Zidaru). In what follows, we first review the coverage of competition and its relationship to mis/trust in Africa-

centred scholarship and in broader anthropological literature and social theory. We then mobilize the ethnographic materials from the articles to unpack and support our analysis of the entanglements between competition and mis/trust.

### Why competition, why now?

The relationship between competition and trust merits attention now not only because it has been neglected, but because assumptions about this relationship animate influential policies and shape many millions of lives. Theories of market competition have profoundly shaped life across the world since the mid-twentieth century, particularly in Africa, largely through economic liberalization agendas. These rest on the promise that dynamics of competition – when carefully introduced to diverse spheres of social life – will distribute resources in a just way, encourage innovation, and foster ‘development’. One might say that these agendas involve a deep trust in competition as a solution to social and political-economic ills. This confidence is informed by specific assumptions about how competition shapes trust, and what must be done to make competition ‘trustworthy’ as a driver of beneficial change. These assumptions have shifted in the wake of late twentieth-century neoliberal reforms. To understand how, consider the new agenda of economic liberalization at the heart of the recently established African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The AfCFTA agreement of 2018 outlined plans for a continental customs union and free market designed to increase intra-African trade, boost the competitiveness of African economies on the global stage, and raise standards of living across the continent (African Union 2018). At its inception, signatory states recognized that economic competition would have to be controlled if AfCFTA was to meet its developmental aims. If competition was not regulated, analysts argued, such a large free trade area would lead to anti-competitive practices because ‘when left on their own ... firms can abuse their dominant market position ... to eliminate local competition, or through forming cartels to fix higher prices’ (Dawar and Lipimile 2020: 242). The AfCFTA member states’ position reflects institutionalist economic thinking – that market competition is liable to undermine trust in competitors, in the economy, and in the principle of market competition itself (e.g. via the accumulation and abuse of market power).<sup>1</sup> For competition to benefit the continent, the thinking went, it must be controlled so as to maintain trust in fair pricing and, ultimately, the market.

Accordingly, in September 2022, AfCFTA member states sought training from a French government agency in the ‘best international standards’ of competition law (AU-AfCFTA 2022: 2). Drawing on institutionalist economic thought, this training naturalized three assumptions about what competition is and does. First, that competition is a singular dynamic that operates across discrete and scalable social

<sup>1</sup> Institutional economists argue that market competition proliferates, leeches onto and subordinates pre-existing hierarchies, moral values and cultural practices (cf. Phillips Sawyer 2017; Boltanski and Chiapello 2018). Market competition is thus always liable to rule-bending, collusion and anti-competitive assertions of power because it represents interests beyond pure ‘market forces’. Hence the need for regulation, control and top-down institutional governance (Salvadori and Signorino 2013; Allensworth 2019).

fields (e.g. national, regional and global economies). Second, that unregulated competition gives rise to anti- or non-competitive situations such as monopolies and oligopolies. Third, following the second assumption, that unregulated competition ultimately erodes trust between actors in markets, and in markets as arbiters of relative value.

These assumptions reflect an awareness of how neoclassical theories of market competition have turned out in practice, following the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s. The neoliberal reforms imposed alongside International Monetary Fund loans involved the opening of sub-Saharan African economies to global trade networks, the shrinking of state structures, and the privatization of public services. Sadly, rather than the promised development, such changes have consistently produced precarity, scarcity and inequality across the continent. The AfCFTA agenda's suspicion of free-running competition reflects an awareness of these outcomes. This marks a revision of Fredrick Hayek's theory that market competition reveals 'facts' about the relative economic value of goods and services, obviating the need for interpersonal trust between those involved in market economies, because markets themselves can be trusted to reveal value accurately (Hayek 2002; 2016).

Ethnographic research conducted in the wake of SAPs on the continent supports this revised understanding of the consequences of market competition for trust. Ethnographers have shown at length how neoliberal economic reforms have intensified competition in other social fields and have undermined trust at both interpersonal and institutional levels. At an interpersonal level, economic liberalization has caused a widespread 'turning away from relational dependency and the gift, to a preoccupation with autonomy' (Piot 2010: 9) across the continent. Of course, prior relations of dependence and patronage were by no means inherently trusting. However, the ethos of entrepreneurial individualism encouraged by neoliberal reforms has led analysts to suggest that mistrust is now the default disposition for interactions with others (Meinert 2015; Jónsson 2019). The well-documented explosion in occult imaginaries since the 1990s (Bonhomme 2012; Englund 1996; Geschiere 1997; 2013; Piot 2010) also suggests high levels of interpersonal mistrust, likewise shaped by economic and social reforms with competition at their heart.

SAPs have also undermined popular trust in state and non-state institutions. Despite their stated developmental aims, SAPs heralded the emergence of islands of relative prosperity against a backdrop of widespread marginalization and dispossession. Ruling elites and the postcolonial bourgeoisie misappropriated and accumulated public resources while stoking inter-ethnic antagonism. Such dynamics 'erode[d] trust' in states, governments and institutions, and undermined the 'very foundation of social life' in Africa (Katumba 2005: 508; see also Bangura *et al.* 1992; Ndulu 2015). The neoliberal expectation that market competition would foster trust in institutions was (spectacularly) incorrect. Instead, proliferate logics of market competition seemingly promoted mistrust as a default disposition.

Despite this, recent literature exploring widespread experiences of uncertainty on the continent, many informed by liberalizing economic reforms, implies a different relationship between market competition and trust. Such uncertainty has a 'positive and productive potential' (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 1) because it compels people to deepen social intertwinements and forge new relations of trust, to live through

uncertain times (Cooper and Pratten 2015; see also Berthomé *et al.* 2012). In other words, market competition appears to hold both corrosive and generative implications for trust.

However, approaching competition only through scholarship on neoliberalization risks reinforcing the misconception that competition is a relatively recent imposition on the continent. This misconception all too easily invites comparative essentialism. Consider how rarely competition features as an explicit theme in research on Africa. Far more common have been tropes such as communalism or collectivism, or the idea – encapsulated in the Bantu concept of *ubuntu* – that the self is defined by relationships with others. Such tropes have served as foils to differentiate ‘African’ cultural values, philosophies and practices from Western understandings of personhood and religion (Mbiti 1969; Ntarangwi 2011) or trust and social capital (Burbidge 2020).

Where ethnographers do mention competition, it is often to convey the distinctiveness of social relations in African *postcolonies*. For example, Harrell-Bond argues that Sierra Leonean professionals’ fears of being poisoned (by one another and by their kin) are a way of rationalizing the radical ‘break with communal values’ (Harrell-Bond 1978: 229) they experience in a postcolonial employment market defined by ‘extreme competition’ (*ibid.*: 230). Similarly, Konings suggests that economic liberalization devastated trade union membership among Cameroonian tea-pickers through ‘competition in the labour process’ that undermined pre-existing solidarity among workers (Konings 2010: 239). By positioning competition as an outcome of postcolonial and neoliberal reforms, but leaving unquestioned the extent to which competition was a feature of precolonial and colonial social life, such accounts risk reproducing contrasts between Africa and the West, cooperation and competition, collectivism and individualism. Yet, competitive forms of sociality have a rich precolonial and pre-neoliberal history on the continent, as the ethnographic record shows.

### Competition in Africa

In her study of urbanization in western Nigeria, Jane Guyer (1997) found precolonial precedents of the competitive dynamics that mediated twentieth-century urban food supply processes.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Western neoclassical economic theory, Yoruba understandings acknowledged that market competition generates disequilibrium rather than equilibrium, uncertainty rather than certainty, and existential rather than strictly material implications (*ibid.*: 19). A further comparison between Euro-American and West African understandings of competition appears in Guyer’s (2004) diachronic analysis of regional transaction systems across Atlantic Africa. She argues that exogenous forms of competition in sport, academic and other ‘formal’ competitions served to establish equivalence across disparate values. In doing so, they helped institute ‘the capacity of numbers to express other values’ as ‘a

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Guyer argued, it is longstanding popular familiarity with market competition – rather than colonial and postcolonial attempts to orchestrate it – that partly explains why the expectations, norms and resources implicated in transactions were fluid and liable to renegotiation well into the twentieth century (*pace* Berry 1993).

hegemonic idea in the modern economy' (*ibid.*: 52). By contrast, African indigenous forms of competition were – and to an extent continued to be – predicated on a logic of non-equivalence in exchange.

Guyer gives the example of *bilaba*, a ritual practice of competitive exchange that moved goods and currencies across southern Cameroon and Gabon during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In *bilaba*, competing parties offered symbolically differentiated gifts and counter-gifts that were 'never equivalent in all respects' (Guyer 2004: 41). Even in the twentieth century, *bilaba* gifts were not commensurate in a way that reduced nominal scales of symbolic classification to scales of numerical valuation. Rather, *bilaba* competitions maintained a conceptual separation between such scales by requiring only 'an honourable level of giving; one's gifts had to qualify' (*ibid.*: 41–2). Through this logic of non-equivalence in exchange, *bilaba* competitions combined 'pride and humility, giving away and acquiring, antagonism and generosity' (*ibid.*: 42), and consequently had capacious economic and political implications. They created possibilities for unequal accumulation as well as distribution; enabled the 'codefinition of resemblance and difference' (*ibid.*: 40); and 'unit[ed] alien social units . . . containing their implicit antagonisms by expressing them in patterned ways' (Fernandez 1980: 138; in Guyer 2004: 42). Indigenous competitive practices, such as *bilaba*, thus enabled diverse dynamics of relational coordination and mutual differentiation.

In a similar vein, much early ethnographic work also accounts for competition as a genre of relational coordination and mutual differentiation. In early structural-functionalist analyses, competition draws lineages and lineage segments together while also pitching them against one another, depending on the circumstances of a given disagreement (e.g. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940). Here, competition fosters social cohesion. By contrast, Marxian theorists problematized competition as primarily centrifugal, not centripetal. They noted that socio-economic competition in precolonial African societies often overrode kinship norms, compelling women to migrate and straddle fluid identities (Wright 1975). They also showed how educational, sporting and dance competitions played a role in the colonial invention of African 'tradition', in imposing small-scale patriarchal gerontocracies, constructing ethnic identities, and organizing inter-ethnic rivalries according to a politics of divide and rule (Ranger 1992). Such arguments about precolonial and colonial forms of competition are quietly foundational to contemporary studies on themes ranging from kinship and economy to religion and politics.

Competition has also been implicitly problematized with respect to its effects on dynamics of trust and mistrust. For example, religious and inter-ethnic competition in Kenyan politics has reduced trust and cooperation between, and within, religious and ethnic polities (cf. Berman 2004; Burbidge and Cheeseman 2017; Ndzovu 2021). Elsewhere, the mutual suspicion and mistrustful cooperation that kinship often entails can be heightened when kin compete with one another (Hopkinson 2024; van der Geest 2013). However, competition might also promote and/or involve trust. In some analyses, these are empirical findings. The violence that rival taxi associations perpetrated in post-apartheid South Africa would not have been possible without mutual trust between their members (Bähre 2014). Similarly, in Kenya, moral negotiations of trust among kin and co-ethnics constitute the flipside of inter-ethnic political competition (Lonsdale 2004). Other analyses treat the idea that competition engenders trust as a discursive claim to be interrogated. For instance, in early

twentieth-century South Sudan, the competitions that Christian missionaries and schoolteachers incorporated into their pedagogy proved divisive. This contradicted their belief that competition would ‘lay the foundations for [inter-ethnic] mutual trust’ (Tounsel 2021: 36).

These accounts display an implicit concern with how competition shapes trust and mistrust, inviting an explicit and empirical attention to how competition precipitates both connection and disconnection, rivalry and cooperation. This invitation stands in contrast to the overwhelming focus on cooperation in extant anthropological theories of both trust and competition.

### Thinking beyond ‘cooperation’

Rather than address the relationship between competition and trust directly, social scientists have tended to theorize the two separately, often understanding each in relation to ‘cooperation’. Two distinct approaches characterize much of the existing literature addressing competition. In the first, competition is understood as distinct from cooperation, because it pits parties against each other over the same limited end. Thus framed, it undermines scope for cooperation or collective coordination in the pursuit of mutually beneficial outcomes. As we have argued elsewhere (Hopkinson and Zidaru 2022), this oppositional understanding is implicit in anthropological analyses old and new. In particular, it underpins much of the extensive literature critiquing the atomizing effects of neoliberal labour reforms, economic restructuring and employment policies. In this literature, as James Ferguson notes (2015: 31, 51), competition is often used as a metonym for self-interested action that undermines collective forms of sociality and action – i.e. cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

In the second approach, competition is understood to always involve degrees of cooperation and to serve collective, as well as individual, ends. This foundational insight is established across early culture and personality (Mead 1937) and sociological studies (Barth 1966), in more contemporary ethnographic (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002) and experimental work (Kajanus 2019), as well as in studies inspired by actor–network theory (Callon 2021). These works remind us that drawing too strong a distinction between competition and cooperation risks essentializing competition as a ‘thing-in-itself’, unmoored from relationality and social interaction. Yet, this literature rarely moves beyond restating the insight that cooperation and competition are always intertwined.

Recognizing that competition is inherently cooperative, however, tells us little about the relational qualities and consequences of competing. Anthropological analyses of other phenomena that evidently involve cooperation – e.g. family firms (Yanagisako 2002), microfinance (Waltz 2023) or mutual aid among neighbours and kin (Zidaru 2019) – do not stop at pointing this out. Instead, they probe the values, desires and emotions that shape the terms, outcomes and subjective experiences of competition. Hopkinson (2024) pursues a similar agenda, showing how Accra boxers navigate the ‘fraught intimacies’ of competitive relationships by using kinship idioms to address the mutuality *and* agonism between competitors. This part issue moves

<sup>3</sup> See Hopkinson (2024: 23–5) for an extensive discussion of this analytical approach to competition, particularly in sub-Saharan African contexts.



beyond the foundational insight that competition involves cooperation by centring dynamics of trust and mistrust. We ask: does competition enable or place limits on possibilities for trust or mistrust? How and why might cooperating in competitive relationships involve trust? What forms of trust and mistrust does competition activate and how? Such questions, we suggest, can revitalize anthropological theories of competition as well as trust.

Like competition, trust is often conceptualized primarily in relation to cooperation. The truism that trust facilitates cooperation; the question of whether trust is a precondition for or a product of cooperation; and the extent to which cooperation can occur without trust – these are all established points of departure in trust research (cf. Gambetta 1988; Cook *et al.* 2005; Elster 2010: 344–71). Distinctions between different kinds of trust (personal or impersonal, interpersonal or institutional, contractual or existential) have helped describe particular forms of cooperation (voluntary or involuntary, egalitarian or hierarchical) and identify the diverse parties involved in trusting relations (e.g. persons, institutions, God).<sup>4</sup> Yet, mentions of competition are few and far between. For instance, only in its conclusion does Gambetta's seminal collection on trust and cooperation briefly attend to competition, noting that it is essentially a form of cooperation that demands a degree of trust (Gambetta 1988: 215). Such passing observation is far from an empirically grounded account of the interplay between competition and mis/trust, and instead reiterates the idea that competition is a sub-category of cooperation.

Ethnographic work in African settings has made important contributions to the study of trust, while also largely steering clear of competition. Early Africanist ethnographers complicated hyper-rationalist conceptions of trust as a choice based on a value-free risk calculus undertaken by self-interested and inward-looking individuals, prior to cooperating with others. They did so by highlighting the way in which trust arises from cooperation, and by showing that normative values and moral obligations can compel cooperation. For example, in the Nima slum of 1960s Accra, trust among Frafra migrants emerged through tentative cooperation, rather than the other way around. Although migrants were beyond the reach of parental and legal sanctions, they cooperated not just as free-floating associates and freely chosen friends; they were also compelled by friendship norms modelled on kinship obligations (Hart 1988). Yet, social norms can also promote mistrust and mistrustful cooperation. For instance, Mayke Kaag's (1999) Wolof interlocutors elected a man who had previously betrayed them to be the president of a development project, despite

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Anthony Giddens (1990) distinguishes between pre-modern and modern forms of trust, arguing that whereas the former were based on ascriptive status categories and mutual familiarity between individuals embedded in small-scale communities, modern forms of interpersonal trust are impersonal and at once dis- and re-embedding. If strangers engage or cooperate with one another, they do so not as whole persons but rather in fleeting and fragmented ways, on account of their trust in abstract systems and third parties such as formal institutions and governance structures informed by scientific expertise. Annette Baier (1996), by contrast, rejects the contract-like logic of theories of trust under conditions of modernity, arguing that they reflect a longstanding male-gendered obsession with trust as a voluntary choice between equals and enforceable by third parties such as God or formal institutions. She introduces the term 'anti-trust' to hint at the typically neglected existential and ethical forms of trust that emerge in hierarchical cooperation and involuntary dependence between infants and mothers.

mistrusting him. They did so because they felt compelled to recognize his status as a descendant of an honourable family, and they would have lost face if they had not. Here, the Wolof value of honour promoted mistrustful cooperation between the villagers and the president.

Neither Hart nor Kaag centre competition as an analytic or object of ethnographic description. Hart dismisses competition as an economic analytic (1988: 191) and does not substantiate why the entrepreneurs he worked with did not regard one another as competitors. Kaag, however, mentions briefly that, historically, 'the [Wolof] code of honour induced . . . competition among [peers], and therewith . . . mistrust amongst one another as potential rivals' (Kaag 1999: 87). This rivalry contributed to social trust and cohesion in a hierarchically structured society. Similar hints that competition and mis/trust are dynamically engaged emerge elsewhere in the literature on trust in Africa. Consider Shipton's (2007) work on socio-economic and spiritual acts of exchange and 'entrustment' that imply or generate trust, or Geschiere's (2013) monograph on the doubts, suspicions, and mistrust that haunt trust in intimate relations. Both authors recognize that 'intimacy means potential rivalry too' (Shipton 2007: 219; see also Geschiere 2013: 25), which can undermine trust. Yet neither turn to competition as an analytic in their theories of trust, intimacy and exchange.

The literature on intimacy and trust these studies inspired also largely eschews acknowledging the dynamic relationship between competition and mis/trust (see Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016). If anything, recent literature has revitalized analyses of cooperation and trust, not least in African settings. For example, mistrust – expressed and enacted through evidentiary scrutiny as well as moralizing argumentation – helps explain why Rwandan mediators and disputing parties remain engaged in dispute resolution (Bognitz 2018). Informal workers in northern Sierra Leone cautiously cooperate with others on account of generalized mistrust and a longing for trust (Bürge 2018). Mutual mistrust keeps friendships in the Moroccan Atlas Mountains alive (Carey 2017). Such arguments complicate earlier assumptions about mistrust as 'block[ing] even the attempt at cooperation' (Hardin 2002: 96). Our part issue builds on, and contributes to, this literature by attending to the hitherto undertheorized relationship between mis/trust and competition, the latter being a distinctive genre of cooperation.

### How competition animates mis/trust

As we have seen, diverse bodies of scholarship hint that competition can foster both mistrust and trust. Our articles corroborate this core insight. People often speak of mistrust, and the breakdown of trust, in competitive contexts. Yet, their actions index the rebuilding and realignment of trust. For instance, Ethiopian runners bemoan their mutual mistrust as competitors, yet seek to cultivate unreflexive, embodied modes of trust through corporeal training practices (Crawley). Sierra Leonean fishermen speak of widespread mistrust following the country's civil war, but simultaneously cultivate novel forms of trust among crews through the competitive payment practice of *handfailure* (Baann). Likewise, Cameroonian footballers' much-stated mistrust of sorcerers, opponents, coaches, brokers and family members leads them to forge new relations of trust through Pentecostal Christianity as they seek spiritual support in realizing their hopes of sporting migration (Kovač). In Kenya, voters discredit one

another's trustworthiness as they compete for brokerage positions in the distribution of electoral patronage, yet simultaneously seek candidates' trust, and ultimately negotiate votes on their behalf (Zidaru). Although competition might initially undermine trust, the resulting attitudes of mistrust compel transitions to reinvestments, reorientations or renegotiations of trust.

Taken together, the articles attend to *how* competition animates mis/trust. This process rests on acts of entrustment that competitive practices necessitate. Competing always involves the abeyance and deferral of agency to others. Kenyan electoral candidates entrust carefully selected agents with money to distribute and sway voters in their favour (Zidaru); crew on Sierra Leonean fishing boats rely on one another to share the labour of hauling heavy nets, in order to compete for the most valuable fish as the net is landed (Baann). In our two articles on sporting contexts, too, agency must be deferred to compete effectively. Elite Ethiopian athletes rely on the labour and efforts of training partners (often also their competitors) and coaches to become individually competitive on the international stage (Crawley); and Cameroonian footballers feel they cannot achieve sporting success solely by investing in their own athletic abilities. Rather, they come to depend on kinship networks, evangelical pastors and God to increase their chances of success in this competitive market (Kovač).

This deferral of agency might be to rivals, as with Sierra Leonean fishermen and among Ethiopian runners, or to non-competitors, as when Cameroonian footballers trust managers, sorcerers and pastors to help them gain a competitive edge, or when Kenyan politicians seek the help of electoral agents to sway voters in their favour. In all cases, delegating agency motivates questions about what can be expected from, and thus entrusted to, others. This entrustment prompts inferences about others' intentions and motivations, and speculation about their role in one's future and (mis)fortune. In other words, deferring agency during competition sparks questions of who can or should be trusted, and with what.

Competing can also change or multiply the terms and perceptions that underpin mis/trust in unexpected ways, ways that may diverge from established patterns of relating. For instance, by competing for payment while hauling their nets, Sierra Leonean fishermen cultivate trust among crews on egalitarian terms. This reduces their dependence on the patronage of wealthy boat owners, a relationship that has traditionally defined economic distribution in the fishing industry and across Sierra Leone more widely (Baann). Even when reproducing pre-existing practices of trust or ideas about who is trustworthy, competition occasions subtle changes that make continuity possible. For example, normative conceptions of shared kinship as a basis for political trust are reaffirmed in Kenya's Kisii region, despite hopes that local competition for devolved power and resources would promote impersonal trust between citizens and state officials. This is partly because rivalries between voters and families for brokerage positions in voter-candidate alliances recreate the conditions of possibility for personalistic kinship-based trust to either remain the only viable option or to be enacted in seemingly more democratic ways (Zidaru). Hence, rather than seeing competition as generating trust and mistrust as singular types, we argue that competition animates the renegotiation and differentiation of mis/trustful relations. Competing troubles certain relations of trust, but because of

this it leads to reinvestments in different objects of trust, and fosters forms of trust on altered and even novel terms.

Since 'trust rests on, but tries to surmount uncertainty' (Parkin 2011: 9), uncertainty is a common feature of how competition animates mis/trust. Indeed, competitive forms in our articles do generate degrees of contingency, which people address through mistrustful cooperation or acts of trust on revised terms. Likewise, they encourage people to anticipate future outcomes and seek predictability by acting in a 'subjunctive mood', 'a doubting, hoping, provisional, cautious, and testing disposition to action' (Whyte 2015: 250–1) that Cooper and Pratten (2015: 3) identify as dominant in uncertain contexts. For example, in the face of uncertainty over the effectiveness of patronage-based political competition, Kenyan electoral candidates ally with potentially untrustworthy local intermediaries to broker votes (Zidaru). Similarly, Cameroonian footballers' newfound trust in God reflects their sense that sporting migration is far from a guaranteed outcome of rigorous training regimes and fierce competition on the pitch (Kovač). In this respect, competition animates dynamics of mis/trust in analogous ways to pervasive uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten 2015).

However, our interlocutors also engage in competitive practices that presuppose and produce feelings of certainty and predictability. Such feelings are features and outcomes of competition in its own right, not merely products of the contingency that competition generates. For instance, Sierra Leonian fishermen (Baann) who compete to grab valuable fish do so knowing that this competition has established rules, arbitrated by the crew and captain. This structured interaction lends a subjective experience of predictability and stability to payment through *handfailure*, alongside a degree of contingency as to who may win. Furthermore, fishermen developed this system precisely because earlier models of payment as a proportion of the catch proved unreliable. Elsewhere, Ethiopian runners (Crawley) feel certain that individual self-interest is runners' primary disposition towards one another. However, competing effectively requires that they work together. To do so, they develop an embodied sense of trust expressed through synchronized bodily movement and highly predictable patterns of energy expenditure and effort in training. These unreflexively embodied movements render self-interested action less of a certainty when competing.

The competitive practices our articles analyse create degrees of contingency and uncertainty. Yet, this contingency is often circumscribed within specific bounds and parameters. Competition can also involve affective experiences of certainty or pursuits of stability and predictability, for example by deepening relations of dependence in unpredictable times. Our part issue thus builds on attention to the productive potentials of uncertainty, and avoids reducing competition to a means of producing uncertainty, or to an epiphenomenon of broader uncertainties.

### **How mis/trust shapes competition**

Each of our articles also shows how dispositions of mis/trust impact the form and process of competing. In some cases, experiences of generalized mistrust inspire individuals to engage in new forms of competition to negotiate interpersonal trust. In others, the mis/trust that competition animates encourages competitors, audiences

and third parties to revise their competitive strategies, and to rethink particular forms of competition. In other words, mis/trust has a bearing on whether and how people compete, and what they imagine competition to be.

Artisanal fishermen in Sierra Leone, for example, reorganize labour relations as a form of competition precisely because they see relations in post-war Sierra Leone as chronically lacking in trust. Competing for payment provides a means to enact a radically untrusting, individualist or atomistic form of relationality. However, competition is also structured in a way that requires fishermen to work collectively in shooting and hauling the net if any are to profit from *handfailure* competitions, and to trust one another in the process. *Handfailure* is also deeply enjoyable both for competitors and for those in the crew who watch as two fishermen compete to grab a fish. By turning remuneration for labour into a competition, fishermen forge trust on new terms and generate an enjoyable form of collective labour in adverse circumstances. Competition is thus reimagined as a pleasurable mode of social support and resource distribution, rather than the ruthless Hobbesian vision of individualistic accumulation at the expense of others.

Similarly, Ethiopian athletes create scope for trust on equitable and caring terms despite their unequal positions in competitive athletic hierarchies. They do so by collectively learning to expend and share energy in training and races so as to benefit the collective at certain times, and individuals at others. In doing so, runners and coaches attempt to manage and control the radical individualism that competition can foster, which many see as harmful and immoral when pursued without restraint. Such moral 'trust work' allows Ethiopian athletes to set boundaries around when they compete, to trust in others to compete only at certain times in races and training, and thus to pursue competitive success in ways that avoid damaging oneself or others. In both cases, mis/trust becomes a matter of concern in the context of neoliberal market competition proliferating on multiple fronts and at multiple scales. Nevertheless, the social consequences of competition and strategies of managing these (at sea, on the track, and in global sporting industries) are dialectically reimagined through dispositions and enactments of mis/trust.

The mis/trust that competition animates also appears to create the possibility for structural changes to competitive fields, including the extension and refashioning of established parameters and fault lines. For instance, aspiring Cameroonian footballers' success both on the pitch and as aspiring migrants is contingent on their trust in brokers, teammates and coaches, but also in local and transnational networks of neighbours and kin. As a result of investing in these diverse relations of trust, competition on the pitch becomes entangled in broader competitive fields including those over migration, family politics, social mobility and competitive tensions between 'traditional' religion and evangelical Christianity. Here, the boundaries and stakes of athletic competition are expanded as athletes invest in these diverse relations of mis/trust. This stands in contrast to the way in which relations of trust serve to circumscribe the limits of competition among Ethiopian athletes and Sierra Leonean fishermen.

Similarly, in Kenya's Kisii region, dynamics of mis/trust involved in electoral competitions are shifting the kinds of alliances that prove to be the most competitive. Candidates have long mobilized the votes of their fellow clanspersons and sub-clanspersons, and even more so since the transition to decentralized governance

structures in 2013. They also typically partner with wealthy men who broker votes within their own families, clans and sub-clans. Such alliances – based on clannist, classist and male-gendered forms of trust – are enduringly salient in local politics. However, the resulting exclusions mean that allying with female voters and involving women as vote brokers and campaigners can give candidates the upper hand, as witnessed in the 2022 elections.

Policy-makers and economists inspired by institutionalist economics emphasize the importance of third parties and institutional arbitrators in regulating competition to avoid breakdowns in trust. By contrast, our cases suggest that formal institutions are not the only parties that have a bearing on competition's forms or on the mis/trust it animates. Rather, people have been doing this from the ground up – reimagining and regulating competition's effects, particularly for trust, as they compete. Kin and neighbours (Kovač), children and spouses (Zidaru), training partners (Crawley) and fellow fishermen (Baann) are third parties who witness and evaluate competitive practices, but who are also active participants in competition at other times. Cameroonian footballers turn to God as a third party witness and arbiter (Kovač). Elsewhere, collectives – constituted on the grounds of kinship, gender, age and class – witness and evaluate competitive practices (Zidaru). Top-down efforts to design, legislate for and control regimes of competition should take inspiration from popular experiences and bottom-up collective attempts of contending with the relationship between competition and mis/trust.

## Conclusion

Together, then, this part issue establishes the relationship between competition and forms of trust or mistrust as an object of popular concern. Diverse competitive practices – including but not reducible to forms of market competition – have long been constitutive features of life on the African continent. They continue to reflect and enable shifting experiences of uncertainty and predictability, as well as dynamics of social coordination and differentiation, connection and disconnection. The generative potential of competition turns on the trust and mistrust it involves and precipitates. Put otherwise, the mis/trust competition animates helps determine who cooperates with whom, how, why, and on what terms. This is a core yet hitherto tacit insight in African Studies and the anthropology of Africa.

By drawing from tacit analyses of competition in African settings, we invite broader and systematic discussions on the relationship between competition and mis/trust. This is particularly pertinent at a time when fresh assumptions about this relationship are being operationalized in new regulatory frameworks and liberalization agendas set to impact millions of lives on the continent. While scholars, policy-makers and bureaucrats alike acknowledge that competition animates mis/trust, the ways in which mis/trust also shapes competitive relations and practices receive less attention. We recommend the mutual implication of competition and mis/trust as a potential starting point for these discussions.

**Acknowledgements.** This article and the part issue it prefaces are outcomes of ESRC grant ES/V009494/1. More friends, mentors and colleagues than we can name here have contributed comments and support. We are grateful to all the participants at a workshop on competition we hosted at the LSE, where the idea for this part issue first emerged. Deborah James provided the initial

encouragement when submitting the proposal for this part issue. Two anonymous reviewers at *Africa* provided incisive criticism and generous support. Thanks to Tarminder Kaur for valuable conversations and feedback, and for inviting the part issue's authors to a conference at the University of the Witwatersrand that stimulated many helpful conversations. We are particularly grateful to the other contributors to this part issue – Cecile Baann, Uroš Kovač and Michael Crawley – for their kind forbearance and indefatigable spirit.

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