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The Politics of Distinction

African Elites from Colonialism to Liberation
 in a Namibian Frontier Town

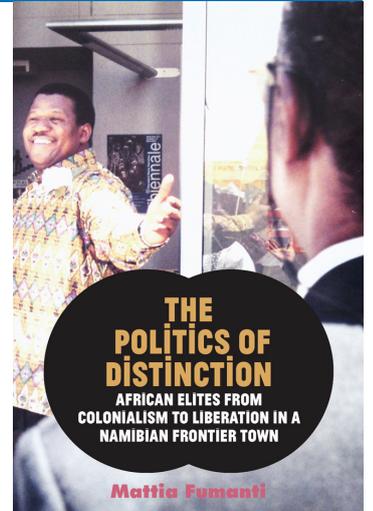
By *Mattia Fumanti*

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Scholarly definitions of elites as those who wield political power and control distribution of resources in their locales consistently leave out their capacity to shape morality, civic ethics and the legitimacy of power relations beyond material domination. In this insightful ethnography of Rundu, a frontier town in Namibia, Mattia Fumanti highlights the fundamental contribution elites make to the public space through their much-praised concept of civility and their promotion of nation-building at the local level. In centring his argument on the moral agency of elites over three generations and their attempts to achieve distinction in public life, this book counters an often found and over-generalized view of postcolonial African states as weak, ruling through authoritarian, greedy and corrupt practices.

By looking at the intricate ways in which the biographies of a middle-range town and its inhabitants are interwoven, this study draws very different conclusions from the grand narratives of pathologies, chaos and crisis that characterize much of the accepted discourse of African urbanization derived from the study of large cities. Focusing on how generational relations between elites have both shaped, and are shaped by, the transitions from apartheid and civil war to independence and post-independence, the book illuminates public debates on the power of education, the aspirations of youth, the role of the state and citizen, delivery of good governance and the place of ethnic and settler minorities in post-apartheid southern Africa.

This book is a vibrant antidote to Afro-pessimism and views that emphasize the spectacle of disaster, kleptomania and corruption of the weak state. By examining the rhetoric of public morality Fumanti challenges this but is, nevertheless, also critical of the ruling elite. This is a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of how small-town elites emerge and how they see the world, a group of people who are potentially vital players in the evolving shape of African cultures and moralities, who have not received the scholarly attention they deserve.

Robert Gordon, University of Vermont and University of the Free State

The Politics of Distinction tackles a perennial anthropological subject with immense brio. Using the most contemporary of social theories and ethnographic methods, Mattia Fumanti addresses the enduring but elusive nexus of inter-generational consciousness and of the ambivalences between generations. That the two generations in this Namibian border town see themselves as the architects and inheritors of liberation imbues their provincial relations with echoes of grand history. Anyone interested in African elite formation, post-colonial governance, and the dividends and distinctions of education, or simply looking for a finely crafted contemporary ethnography, will find Fumanti's a compelling narrative.

Richard Fardon, Professor of West African Anthropology at SOAS

Author

Mattia Fumanti is Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews. He has conducted anthropological research in Namibia, Ghana and the UK. Mattia has research interests in the formation of elites and postcolonial transitions; youth and intergenerational relations; migration, religion and citizenship; mental health and illness narratives.