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The Fetish of Order: Anthropology, Colonialism, Mess



Satellite image of ritual settlement, Samburu District, Kenya, 2012, Google.

Desiring to identify what is colonial about anthropology and indeed about the world at large, scholars, activists, and artists, among others, have insistently invoked the idea of order. Order may refer to various social, political, and economic entities and their conditions of cohesion. To confront inequality and domination, we often distinguish order as indigenous, colonial, anti-colonial, capitalist, socialist, or ultra-nationalist, to name only a few examples. But order is not a given. It is rather entailed in concrete efforts to know, represent, and organize people, objects, and ideas so that, from particular vantage points, their conjoining may appear to constitute an orderly totality. To be sure, pursuing different kinds of order—seeking to imagine, name, and craft worlds that appear orderly—may offer us a relative sense of certainty, clarity, and security, especially in times of turbulent political-economic transformations.

Because anthropologists have played a central role in articulating and circulating ideas and imaginaries of indigenous order in settings of colonial modernity, scholars now ask: Are these anthropological depictions of order expressions of colonial frameworks of rule? Or are they liberal critiques of such frameworks, informed by indigenous worldviews? This paper explores a few moments in which, in northern Kenya, past and present, indigenous people, anthropologists, colonial administrators, post-independence elites, and development workers, among others, have sought to pin down indigenous order, whether as customary integrative mechanism, a domain of biopolitics, a locus of cultural alterity, or a commodity brand. New questions thus need to be addressed: What happens when different pursuits of order intersect in particular (post)colonial contexts? When and why is order a necessary condition for imagining different individual and collective futures? And where could, in this case, social and political critique begin?

George Paul Meiu is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Basel. He is author of *Ethno-erotic Economies: Sexuality, Money, and Belonging in Kenya* (University of Chicago Press, 2017) and *Queer Objects to the Rescue: Intimacy and Citizenship in Kenya* (University of Chicago, 2023). He is also host of the video podcast 'Ethnographic Imagination Basel.'

Institutskolloquium Sommersemester 2025 Leitung: Matthias Krings

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