

AEGIS



BIRMINGHAM

KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT  
**LEUVEN**



**Tuning in to African Cities  
Popular Culture and Urban Experience in sub-Saharan Africa**

**Media Interpretation Workshop**

**Birmingham, 4-5 May 2010**

The Centre of West African Studies 10-week residential Cadbury Fellows' Workshop on popular culture and urban experience in sub-Saharan Africa will culminate in a double event: a two-day media interpretation workshop (4-5 May) immediately followed by a three-day international and interdisciplinary conference (6-8 May), bringing together specialists of popular culture and urban studies working on all regions of Africa.

The media interpretation workshop will offer participants an opportunity to explore selected African media texts – whether these are visual images, verbal texts, sound recordings, film or video – in more depth than is possible in a standard conference format. Participants will be invited to screen, play or otherwise make available portions of their chosen media text for detailed group discussion and analysis. Issues to be explored include questions of genre, form, meaning, intertextuality and cultural allusion, and local modes of reception and interpretation. We will be asking: “What does it take to ‘read’ or ‘engage with’ this text? What kinds of knowledge are mobilised, and what kinds of assumptions are being made by producers and consumers of these texts?”

Each presentation will be allowed 1 hour 15 minutes, of which the participants can decide how to divide their time between presentation of the material and discussion. Emphasis is on the collective reception and reflection on the presented audio- and/or visual material.

**1. Participants**

Boehme, Claudia, doctoral researcher, U. of Mainz (Germany)

*The Scandal of Steven Kanumba – Film Stars as vehicles for negotiating popular culture in Tanzania*

Jaji, Tsitsi, PhD, U. of Pennsylvania (US)

*Doing the Poponguine Twist: Moussa Sene Absa's Musical Film as Cultural Critique*

Lamote, Frederik, doctoral researcher, K.U.Leuven (Belgium)

*Regenerating divine sounds or how to translate sound?*

Jedlowski, Alessandro, doctoral researcher, University of Naples "L'Orientale" (Italy)

*Nollywood in and out of Italy*

Pype, Katrien, PhD, U. of Birmingham (UK)

*Lingala Facile and the City: Making News in Kinshasa*

Reuster-Jahn, Uta, PhD, U. of Mainz (Germany)

*Swahili Photo and Film Novels in Tanzania*

Ugor, Paul, PhD, U. of Alberta (Canada)

*African Cities, Youth and the Politics of the Occult: Rereading Popular Nollywood Movies*

## **2. Schedule** (1h15 per talk)

### Tuesday

9.30-10.45: Pype, Katrien, *Lingala Facile and the City: Making News in Kinshasa*

10.45-11.00: break

11.15-12.30: Reuster-Jahn, Uta, *Swahili Photo and Film Novels in Tanzania*

12.30-13.30: lunch

13.30-14.45: Boehme, Claudia, *The Scandal of Steven Kanumba – Film Stars as vehicles for negotiating popular culture in Tanzania*

14.45-15.00: break

15.15-16.30: Ugor, Paul, *African Cities, Youth and the Politics of the Occult: Rereading Popular Nollywood Movies*

16.30-16.45: break

16.45-18.00: Jedlowski, Alessandro, *Nollywood in and out of Italy. Interpreting the production of media popular culture in the diaspora.*

18.30-19.45: Film *The Cemetery State*, Filip De Boeck

### Wednesday

9.30-10.45: Jaji, Tsitsi, *Doing the Poponguine Twist: Moussa Sene Absa's Musical Film as Cultural Critique*

10.45-11.00: break

11.00-12.15: Lamote, Frederik, *Regenerating divine sounds or how to translate sound?*

### **3. Abstracts**

**BOEHME, Claudia**

*The Scandal of Steven Kanumba – Film Stars as vehicles for negotiating popular culture in Tanzania*

In September 2009 the most popular Tanzanian film actor Steven Kanumba was invited with other African artists to South Africa to join the Big Brother Africa Revolution. The invitation was praised as a big success for the video film scene and Steven Kanumba was sent to South Africa as an ambassador of Tanzanian film makers. But as soon as the show was aired in Tanzania, viewers lamented that Kanumba was unable to speak enough English to talk and discuss with the other participants and that his performance in the show was a disgrace for the nation. After his return to Dar es Salaam, while he was afforded a national hero's welcome by his fans and colleagues, the scandal sparked a mediated discourse in newspapers, in TV shows and Internet blogs about Steven Kanumba's public performance.

In giving an outline of the history of the star generating system in the Tanzanian video film industry, this paper wants to discuss how stars are created and received in Tanzanian popular film culture. Using the example of the scandal of Steven Kanumba, I will show how a film star, as a symbol for the nation, became a vehicle for discussing the issue of language and identity in Tanzania.

**JAJI, Tsitsi, *Doing the Poponguine Twist: Moussa Sene Absa's Musical Film as Cultural Critique***

This paper examines the 1994 film by Senegalese director, Moussa Sene Absa, *Ça Twist à Poponguine* to consider how his representations of cosmopolitan cultural consumption complicate the idea of modernity as inextricably linked with urban spaces. The film appears to be a light-hearted romantic comedy, featuring two teen-age boys clubs' efforts to win the attention of the girls in their sea-side village. However, their wooing strategies reveal much about the role of audio and visual technologies in the construction of self and community in post-independence Senegal, and how this period is memorialized in retrospect. I analyze the role that radio, record players, make-shift shadow puppet "pitchoss" (as home-made proto-cinema), pirated electricity and television play in the cross-generational relationships of Poponguine in its 1964 setting, and through the nostalgic patina of Sene Absa's 1994 film. I read the consumption of popular music and fashion from Black America (particularly figures like Otis Redding and James Brown) and France (particularly Johnny Halladay) as a reflection of a popular global imaginary which challenges the négritude and large-scale state-organized celebration of black culture Senghor's World Festival of Negro Arts displayed in April 1966, just two years after the setting of Sene Absa's film. Popular culture becomes a means for youth to imagine participating in essentially urban cultural forms, even in their small-town location. Sene Absa thus critiques the exclusion of "messy" hybrid cultural forms from Senghor's cultural policies, revealing the robust role of the popular in articulating cosmopolitan Senegalese identities that are at once global and local.

Clips from the film will be shown.

**JEDLOWSKI**, Alessandro, *Nollywood in and out of Italy. Interpreting the production of media popular culture in the diaspora.*

In Italy, Nigerian videos are widely consumed within the African diasporic communities, but their impact on the Italian society is not limited to their consumption. Two Nigerian video production companies have emerged in Northern Italy in the past few years, the IGB Film and Music Industry based in Brescia and the GVK (Giving Vividly with Kindness) based in Torino. The two companies took very different marketing choices. On one hand, the IGB has oriented its production mainly toward a Nigerian audience, maintaining an aesthetic and narrative style directly connected to the mainstream Nollywood's tradition. On the other hand the GVK, after its first release in 2005, decided to change strategy, starting a partnership with an Italian director and trying to produce an intercultural product that could work for both Nigerian and Italian audiences. In this presentation I compare the work of the two production companies, questioning the contents, the aesthetics and the marketing strategies applied to the films produced until now. Through the analysis of these documents I will also interrogate the theoretical concepts that might be used to produce an interpretation of popular culture productions in the diaspora.

**LAMOTE**, Frederik, *Regenerating divine sounds or how to translate sound?*

Based on long term anthropological fieldwork in Techiman, a small historical city in central Ghana, this presentation explores the feasibility of an artistic project that intends to regenerate divine soundscapes in a spatially as well as culturally distinct context. It intends to launch a discussion on the feasibility of the project. During religious performance in Techiman, new Western gods take possession of the bodies of their priests and generate new rhythms and new choreographies to display their powers. The project anticipates on the suggestion of a possessed priest to replace the wooden drums by electronic instruments.

In its initial stages, this project wants to work with video montages and replace the original drumming with electronic soundscapes that bear close resemblance with the trancy atmosphere of the divine performances. As such, the project wants to transcend the often pejorative connotations of African Traditional religion, music and dance, and present the performance of the priests with the appropriate 'worlded' (Simone 2001) context. By merging together two seemingly incompatible worlds, a different image may be created. However, how can one regenerate a divine soundscape or how can sound be translated to a different context? Is this possible at all? And which ethical and intellectual obstacles need to be overcome?

**PYPE**, Katrien, *Lingala Facile and the City: Making News in Kinshasa*

Many sub-Saharan African societies have undergone significant political shifts in the last two decades. Changes in political representation and leadership have induced new forms of political mediation and communication. This presentation probes into one of the most visible transformations in Kinshasa's political society: TV news reports about urban misery, often resulting from a malfunctioning state, are now produced in which Kinshasa's inhabitants testify about their difficulties and press fellow citizens as well as local and national leaders to bring about change. Exposing suffering is a strategy to mobilize shame and it thus becomes a political act. The main argument is that this genre of news coverage (locally called *proximité*, the proximity account) constitutes a novel and extremely timely kind of conversation in Kinshasa's political society because the public appeal and significance of the proximity report

are both outcome and catalysts of mass-mediated political experiments, drawing citizens and political leaders into one political community.

The material for this presentation draws on fieldwork with Kinshasa's most popular television journal *Journal Télévisé Lingala Facile*, which excels in the production of this proximity report. While building on the available material about African state-citizen interactions (Mbembe 1992, 2001, Karlström 1996, 2003, Bayart 1989, Chabal 2009), I combine insights of anthropology of texts (Barber 2007) and of symbolic representations (Taussig 2006) in order to examine the "dialogics of power" in Kinshasa anno 2009. Just like Kinshasa's other subtexts, for example paintings (Biaya 1990, Jewsiewicki 2003), TV soap operas (Pype 2009), and popular music (White 2008), TV news broadcasts present a particular view of reality and offer occasions for reflections on unfolding political processes. I will mainly deploy a textual analysis, though this does not remain on the level of content, but, following Barber (2007), the connectedness that texts (be them written, oral, or mass-mediated) shape and also out of which they emerge, will be integrated in the analysis as well. Texts weave ideas, peoples and places; they bring together expectations, intentions and interpretations, Barber reminds us. This entails that significances of texts such as the proximity reports are located at the crossroads of textual form (materiality and composition), the formal and institutional arrangements and the human intentions and strategies (Barber 2007: 28).

#### **REUSTER-JAHN, Uta, *Swahili Photo and Film Novels in Tanzania***

Recently, attention has been drawn to the photo novel as "a genre and format of African popular culture which, despite its wide historical circulation and immense popularity, tends to be largely overlooked in current discussions about African visual media" (Krings 2010: 75). In his article, Krings discusses "African Film", a photo novel of almost pan-African circulation produced in South Africa during the late 1960s. Its protagonist is the private detective "Lance Spearman", an urban crime fighter, something like an African James Bond.

In Tanzania too, "African Film" was distributed and consumed. However, as it was in English, it only reached a limited readership. In 1969, only one year after the first Spearman photo novel had appeared, Faraji Katalambulla, a Tanzanian journalist and writer of novels started to publish a Swahili version of the photo novel. In his monthly magazine "Film Tanzania" he serialized photo novels where the characters not only talked in Swahili, but the setting as well as the stories were familiar to the ordinary people in Tanzania. Soon, Katalambulla's "Film Tanzania" got a rival, a similar magazine called "New Film Azania". Even when the video boom reached Tanzania these magazines kept their fans for a long time, and only in 2008 the last issue of "Film Tanzania" appeared. The video boom, on the other hand, stimulated the production of film novels, which resemble photo novels in some respect. Today, the genre lives on as a tool for education, especially in the context of HIV/AIDS prevention.

The presentation of photo and film novel material from Tanzania aims at giving an overview of the historical development of these genres. Issues to be explored include genre, form, intertextuality, intermediality, and cultural allusion.

#### **Reference:**

Krings, Matthias (2010) 'A prequel to Nollywood: South African photo novels and their pan-African consumption in the late 1960s', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 22,1: 75-89

In 1992, a new and somewhat unconventional popular art in the form of video film production took shape in Nigeria. Initially disparaged by most African film scholars as crude and lacking in any cinematic depth and finesse, the Nigerian video industry, now popularly known as Nollywood, has developed into a veritable form of urban popular culture throughout sub-Saharan Africa, offering a new discursive platform for the social expression of the concerns, anxieties, mentalities, and everyday battles of common people. Although the real beginnings of Nollywood have been traced back as far as the early 1980s, the film that marked the popularization of that new continental cinematic tradition is Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage I & II*. The story of *Living in Bondage* revolves around Andy Okeke, a jobless man in Lagos (Nigeria) who has been forced by the difficult socio-economic circumstances surrounding his life to use his wife (Merit) for ritual murder as a means to quick wealth. The popularity of *Living in Bondage* made the theme of ritual and the occult a recurrent subject matter in most Nigerian video films. But the preponderance of the ritual motif in Nollywood films and other forms of "occult economies" in African urban cultural processes is not in any way peculiar to the post-colony, nor is it a sign of primitivism and/or the irrationality of Africa's supposed backward civilizations (Geschiere 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Moore and Sanders 2001). I would argue that there is something to be said about how the cultural phenomenon of occult in urban Africa is linked to the evanescent and somewhat arcane nature of the late capitalist economy. As Peter Geschiere (1997) has argued, for any productive attempt at apprehending "the resilience of the representations of witchcraft and the occult in many parts of Africa, the challenge is rather to explore the possibilities offered by these discourses for attempts to gain control over the modern changes" (15). It is perhaps for this reason that Onookome Okome (2007) has argued that "[T]he popularity of *Living in Bondage* may well be ascribed to a number of factors, including the fact that Andy Okeke, the quintessential character of the city/occult video film, represents what has become of the local man whose interest is not to stay or remain local but to be part of a world that he describes and sees as "modern" (3-4). Films like *Living in Bondage*, *Rituals*, *Blood Billionaires*, and other such ritual-related narratives in Nollywood privilege new cultural architectures by urban youth that emerge directly from attempts at levelling-up in the midst of a booming but risky global culture of accumulation. According to Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), most young people in postcolonial entities experience post-coloniality in the form of "privation" or lack and "it is the males amongst them [like Andy in *Living in Bondage*], more than anyone else who have to face the apparent impossibility of the contemporary situation" (284). Drawn from my recently completed doctoral dissertation on "Youth Culture and the Struggle for Social Space in Nigerian Video Movies," my proposed presentation argues that the increased gravitation towards ritual and the occult as narrativised in *Living in Bondage* and other such popular culture forms in Africa not only represents the despondency of young people in the face of economic hardships, but also signals the sometimes weird cultural formations evolved by youth in dealing with the insufferable postcolonial conditions of unemployment, poverty, and other forms of social inequities experienced at both the domestic and/or public realm.