

## **Panel Q: Social Comments and Critique through Comics and Cartoons (chair: Muddle Suzanne Lilius)**

This panel seeks to investigate comics and cartoons in a selection of African countries and their possibilities for issuing social comments and critique. The dual focus on comics and cartoons as both communicative culture and as artwork will emphasise both thematic and substantial analysis of the matter. Cultural and artistic production can be highly effective in analyzing and commenting on all aspects of life in society, including politics, in Africa as elsewhere. We regard culture and cultural production as an inherent component of daily life – “culture” is not something separate from the rest of society, neither some kind of bonus added on nor something just to pass time, irrelevant for everyday life and the business of work. Nor does “culture” just happen – it is the result of conscious acts. One particularly important role of both the artist and the cultural expression is to challenge preconceptions people have, of themselves, of their lives and their society. Art and cultural expressions are thus not merely the icing on the cake. They are significant and indeed necessary for people's self-reflection, analysis, and interpretation, and as such constitute an indispensable and integral part of social commentary and critique. In this panel, we choose to concentrate particularly on the format of comics and cartoons. The researchers each present original research into both form and content of the chosen comics and cartoons, combined with theoretical and historical approaches to the question. The panel is a follow-up of the conference entitled “What’s Culture got to do with it?”, which was organized at the Nordic Africa Institute in June 2009. It also continues the work of the Nordic Researcher Network on Media and Popular Culture in Africa, which was funded by the Nordic Africa Institute from 2005 to 2007, and which arranged panels during the Nordic Africa Days in 2007 and 2009.

### **1) Véronique Simon (Uppsala University, Sweden): Aya and the Western Reader: Paths from Graphic Novel to Real Africa**

Aya de Yopougon (I-V, 2005-2009, Paris, Gallimard), a “graphic novel” that takes place in the 70's, displays the life of some teenage girls, their friends and families in Abidjan. Marguerite Abouët places this story in Yopougon, where she grew up. Clément Oubrerie illustrates the girls' efforts to find love and a wealthy life, or in Aya's case even to get an education. Despite economic troubles, life in Yopougon is described as fairly easy. In the two last volumes a friend of Aya's, Innocent, a homosexual rejected by his family, seeks his luck in Paris. The Aya books show some kind of realism. The characters speak their dialect and at the end of each volume there is a “bonus ivoirien”: a glossary, recipes and customary topics, or, in the last volume, a dialogue between the author, Marguerite, and Aya. The didactic tone that permeates the text and the pictures reinforces this realism: everyday objects in “close up”, signs depicting “real” places, not to mention “real music” as Alpha Blondy's and, in the fourth volume, photographs. The reception of the books, both in media and on the Internet (blogs, Youtube, for example), shows that some readers, though not coming from Yopougon, Ivory coast nor Africa, seem to identify with the characters and the plots. Michelle Bumatay explains how depictions of the private and public room – even when it depicts a caricature of Western culture and ideology – help in that process. In addition, the Aya books are considered by many as being more credible than other media in their depiction of life in postcolonial Abidjan. They would show a “real” Africa. Which are the real mechanisms through which the books' depiction of Africa creates an everyday life, “common” space in which today's Western or “global” readers may feel at home? The blogs that continuously comment on Aya witness on a complex reception of the books both in and outside Africa, which we intend to study.

## **2) Mai Palmberg (former researcher at NAI, Sweden): Binaries and Stereotypes in the World of Cartoonists**

In this paper I intend to be really boring and question certain characteristics in a genre I very much like, and on top of that do so with my favourite cartoonist on the African continent as illustration, Zapiro in South Africa. I find an interesting contrast between the prevalent reconsideration of thinking of Africa in terms of binaries, and questioning our own Africa images for their stereotype, while cartoonist get away with both: the cartoons more often than not build on oppositions, binaries, and indulges in stereotypes. Is it the arena of politics, or a substitute politics that cartoonists often engage in, which makes all the difference? Because we do not think twice when it comes to cartoonists' use of binaries and stereotypes. I want to think twice, and see where it takes us.

## **3) Hilde Arntsen (University of Bergen, Norway): Something New and Something Old: Zimbabwean Political Cartoons in Cyberspace**

This paper seeks to investigate aspects of the history of political cartoons in Zimbabwe. Political cartoons have proliferated in several countries in Africa during the past two decades, in particular because they have been able to comment on the goings-on in the governments of the day, and do so for quite some time before catching the wrath of government censors or being stopped by government restrictions (Nyamnjoh 2005). In Zimbabwe, on the other hand, cartons and comic strips that deal with social issues have a long history. This has been carried forward to the Zimbabwean media in the diasporas, and particularly cyberspace communities. A large number of online communities and internet sites regularly publish cartoons that comment on the situation in Zimbabwe in general. Some of these sites are established media publications in their own right; they are continuations of established publications that have had to close down inside Zimbabwe, or they are news sites that have been established outside Zimbabwe by editors and journalists who have left the country. This paper investigates the historical background of political cartoons in Zimbabwean media, paying attention to the form as well as content. Drawing on cartoon studies, the paper seeks to analyse current online political cartoons as well as the historical tradition they build on.

## **4) Ylva Ekström (Malmö University, Sweden): Commercialization, Mediatization and De-Politization? A Discussion about the Changing Role of Cartoons in the Tanzanian Mediascape**

In this paper the changing role of cartoons in the Tanzanian mediascape will be discussed. The paper is based on discussions with the visual artist and cartoonist Fred Halla, who argues that "the future of cartoons and cartoonists is very frightening as I don't see the new generation that as inspired as we were in 1990s". He maintains that cartoons were politically more significant in the more limited media landscape, and that the commercial media and the rapid growth of audiovisual media such as television and the Internet are competing with the media and art form, both over the audience and the artists. The paper will thus, on the one hand, place the cartoon as a media form in the broader media landscape of Tanzania, and it will on the other hand show and discuss concrete and illustrative examples of Tanzanian cartoons from the 1990s and early 2000s.

### **5) Muddle Suzanne Lilius (Artist and independent researcher, Finland): Cartoon Chronicles. The Somali Tragedy through the Pen of Amin Amir.**

Somalis today are more often than not associated with war, famine, piracy, and the interesting fact that Somalia failed as a state some 20 years ago, without having been immediately replaced. These facts hide two things in particular. One, that the state failure has led to multiple responses, with the emergence of Somaliland as a de facto state that has not been recognized by any other state in the world, with Puntland as in part neighbour, in part rival of a portion of the same territory as Somaliland, not claiming independence but organized as a state while waiting for a larger solution. The on-going war is waged mostly in the southern parts of Somalia, with control of the capital Mogadishu as one main focus.

Two, that the Somalis who were, famously, characterized by Richard Burton in the 1800s as a nation of poets still are poets. Word art is paramount in Somali culture, and poetry above all else. In this context, Somali visual artist Amin Amir is a rare bird. He has worked as an artist for some 20 years, doing portraits as well as book illustrations. Most importantly, he has been documenting the political dissolution of his country of origin, through regular, biting comic strips. In my presentation, I concentrate on three aspects. I will look at the production of Amir's cartoons, such as artistic techniques and the use of language. I also relate the cartoons to current events, commenting on his speed and wide range of reaction to unfolding events. Finally, I'll say something of his use of the internet as his forum for publication, thus reaching a world wide audience. With a Somali diaspora in (nearly) all countries in the world, this is particularly important and effective as a means of reaching his intended audience.

### **6) Margareta Wallin Victorin (Linnaeus University, Sweden): West African Tellings with Images and Words - Comic Strips from Senegal**

In Senegal, like in other parts of the world, the so-called 9th art, the sequential art, or comics, has gained interest in recent years. Stories consumed were, until quite recently, Western products such as Astérix, Tintin, Tarzan and Lucky Luke. Nowadays African creators make comic books with an established technical mastery and often with explicit social commentary. The purpose of the project is to investigate what kind of stories are told in Senegal, the subjects treated, messages communicated and in which visual and narrative styles, and place them in relation to exoticizing comics (like "Tintin in Kongo") still printed and distributed in Europe.

### **7) Omanga Duncan Mainye (Bayreuth University, Germany): Molding and Shaping space: Editorial Cartoons, Terrorism and Islamic Space in Kenya**

When French philosopher Henri Lefebvre argued that (Social) space is a (social) product and that the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action, and being a means of production; serves as a means of domination, and of naturalizing ideology, few would have thought the same would apply to editorial cartoons in the print media. With their capacity to condense complex phenomena in near perpetual binaries, editorial cartoons, as representational spaces (borrowing Lefebvre's terminologies), end up constructing, albeit subtly, an otherness and image that naturalizes myth and stereotypes. Expressing weighty issues (political, social or otherwise) as commonplace humor through satire, their capacity to express blunt views remains high, thus providing the congenial social space for expression of 'commentary' more perceived than lived, and mostly without the social consequences. Following the terror attacks in Nairobi on 7th August 1998, the 9/11 Attacks in New York

and the Mombasa hotel bombings in November 2002, editorial cartoons in the Kenyan press have come under close scrutiny for their ability to capture the dominant discourses on terrorism and its war. As expected, Islam, already seeking to assert itself across the country, has found itself at the core of a (spatial) discourse that entails terrorism. Using Lefebvre's concept of the production of space (the three moments of spatial production), complemented by elements of semiotics, this paper interrogates the relationship between (social) space in Kenya on one hand and Islam, the media and terrorism on the other.

**8) Lisbeth Holtedahl (University of Tromsø, Norway): 'Up as a Rabbit – Down as a Lion'. Socio-Economic Determinants of New Idioms of Legitimacy and Power in the Public/Private Space. Visual Case Stories from Urban Adamaoua, Cameroon.**

Through many years of research on expressions of masculinity and femininity in public and domestic domains in Christian and Muslim milieux in Ngaoundéré, Northern Cameroon, I have developed various tentative hypotheses about transformation processes and dominant dynamics of social change. In this paper I want to focus on visual idioms of masculinity and political power in Muslim urban settings. My argument says that richness (i.e. economic dynamics) overrides the current processes aiming at legitimating democratic political power. I have always used photographs and film as my research tool. Our images allow us, my informants and me, to analyze and identify changes in how men have tried and now try to convey, nonverbally, legitimacy of new forms of masculinity and power. The Danish proverb 'op som en løve – ned som en skindfelg' (literally 'up as a lion – down as a piece of skin (cloth)') expresses how persons experiencing success in the public sphere may quickly see their success and ambitions destroyed by not foreseen events and attitudes. In the title of this paper I have turned this proverb upside-down in order to express exactly how difficult it is to cope with the complex processes of globalization and transformation of rules of behavior in public-domestic domains; how difficult it is for people to know the rules that govern the differentiation of public and domestic. This again leads to confusion about what is symbolizing higher and lower positions in social hierarchies, and for some people the construction of legitimization becomes part and parcel of their daily 'job'. What is 'up' and what is 'down'? In the West you may be seen as a rabbit, in Africa as a lion – and vice versa. Many Europeans experience becoming 'lions' when working in Africa: 'you have to go to Africa if you want to build castles'! And – as a modern African industrialist said when he understood that the taxi central understood that an African ordered a limousine: 'In Paris I am seen as a rabbit – at home I am a lion.'! On the background of what has been and is considered idioms of power in Europe, I will look into and compare the practices of a former Muslim sultan and a modern Muslim industrialist in Northern Cameroon. Both are considered representatives of Fulbe societies, and both have had to handle own multi-ethnic identity, traditional local idioms of masculinity and power – and – strongly Westernized idioms of power and compartmentalization of social space, i.e. new notions about public and domestic domains. Playing with Western idioms becomes a tool for them in the construction of a powerful (image of?) self, but in different ways, and new definitions of domestic/private and public are proposed by the sultan as well as by the industrialist. The sultan allowed public screening of images of his four secluded wives in his effort to stay in power as a political leader. The much younger modern industrialist would never allow anybody to see images of his wives. May be one has to look into the different economic positions of the two to understand the differences in strategies? If that is the case, economics and richness may be said to determine the transformation of public/private in modern Muslim societies. The sultan gained power in the eyes of the local population through the presence of white persons in the sofa at his palace – the industrialist's power is constructed through the presence of his white

employees and workers physically constructing his palace – and by his telling them to take off the shoes when they get an appointment ‘on the carpet’. By delving into our images we discover not only more about what is proposed as idioms of power and legitimacy in urban, Muslim Ngaoundéré – we also learn about the state-society interface as it is expressed in the daily life of sultan and industrialist. And, not least, we may learn about how economics, i.e. richness, dominates processes of development and democratization.