African Wave

Specificity and Cosmopolitanism in African Comics

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While most people consider painting, novels, and film to be universal formats of artistic expression, for the combination of graphic image and narrative they commonly use expressions tied to geography, like "Japanese manga," "American comics," "French-Belgian BD"—and now "African comics." Yet "African comics" as a homogenous entity probably does not exist. It is perhaps more accurate to speak of "comics from Africa," interest in which has taken concrete form in various exhibitions and international festivals,[1] as well as in the publication of comics albums and academic research, to which I have personally contributed.

AFRICAN 'LIGNE CLAIRE'

Non-African readers easily make stereotyped assumptions about African comics because too often their storylines and drawings rely on stock characters and recurrent themes, such as witchcraft. In this way, they also contain references that are easy for readers, lay and academic, to identify and store.

These artists are attracted by the language of European comics,[2] and this influence can be seen in their detailed realism and use of all the forms of *ligne claire*, the style of drawing with clear, strong lines of equal thickness and importance pioneered by the Belgian comics artist Hergé. However, there is not always a strict correspondence between an artistic "school" originating in a colonizing nation (Franco-Belgian BD, American comics, British cartooning, Japanese *manga*) and the comics in its former colonies. For example, in *Safari ya anga za juu* (Figs. 1–2), the Kenyan Anthony Mwangi cites the Belgian comics artist Hergé, the creator of Tintin and *On a marché sur la Lune*, and Gado, who was born in Dar-es-Salaam, takes up the line of Frenchman Albert Uderzo, creator of *Astérix*, in his *Abunawasi* (Fig. 3). In Réunion, David Bello looks to the Japanese manga tradition when he deconstructs movement in several consecutive vignettes in *Elize ou les Machins Bleus.*

What we see here is the creolization of comics, a phenomenon in which the mass media have played an essential role. Creolized culture implies mutual exchange and transfer, a flow of meanings in continuous movement, breaking up old relations and setting up new connections (Hannerz 1987, 1996). This exchange has nothing to do with Western colonialism, with unidirectional cultural influence imposed on the colonized subject to the point of provoking either unconditioned adhesion or rejection. It is more a relationship between, on the one hand, the comics created in a large-scale process in industrialized countries (America, Japan, Europe) that tend to be conceived for and read by a "globalized" audience, and on the other hand, African authors who change styles, acquire different knowledge, and make creative contributions to their societies that are richer than the local cultures in which they originated.

More versatile than its European counterpart, the African comic is paradoxically both (in Walter Benjamin's words) art "in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" because it is serialized and printed in newspapers and books, and a cottage industry which exists in the market of large-scale distribution because its horizontal integration (creativity–production–publishing) is very often managed, with great difficulty, by the artists themselves. African comics artists take advantage of international interest in art and Africa to make intrusions into the publishing world of the West and are in turn exploited by cultural operators who are

1 Anthony Mwangi. (Kenya). 1997. *Safari ya anga za juu*. Nairobi: Sasasema

ALL IMAGES FROM THE AUTHOR'S PHOTOS OF PRINT ORIGINALS, WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE ARTISTS/PUBLISHERS.

..'CONTROL ROOM'... ANGA YA MARS IMEJAA CARBON DIOXIDE. TUMEPIGA PICHA ZA KUTISHA JUU YA MARS. SASA TUNAELEKEA AKAI!!

..MMEBAKISHA MAILI 3,500,000 MFIKE SAYARI AKAI!! TUNANGOJA HUU WAKATI KWA HAMU SANA!!

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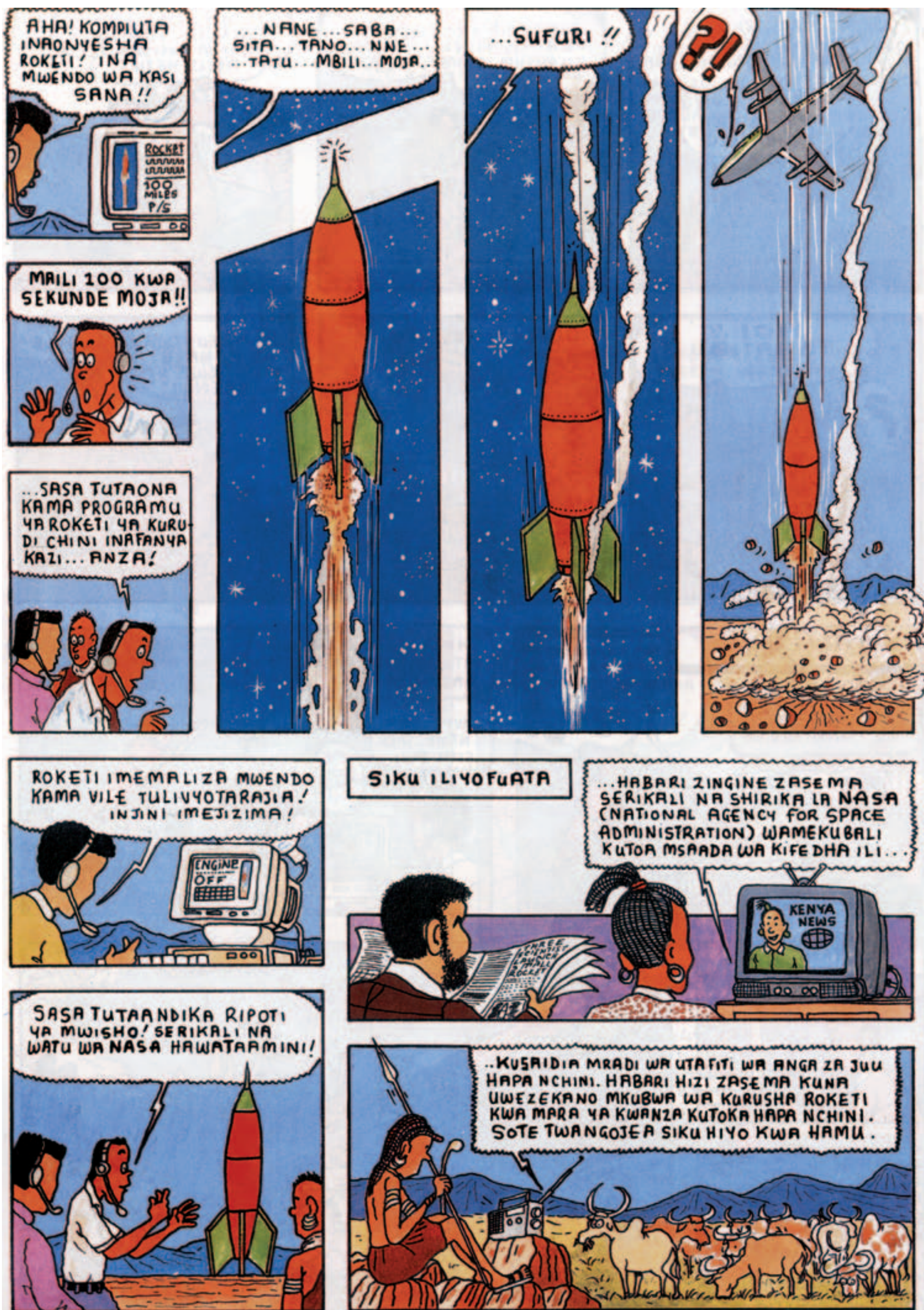

2 Anthony Mwangi. (Kenya). 1997. *Safari ya anga za juu*. Nairobi: Sasasema.

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not African. Their work lives in a difficult context whose hopes and fears it reflects, but the beauty of the drawing precludes excessive aggression toward the reader—which is no surprise.

Like the age in which it lives, the African comic is divided, shattered, and multiple. Although Africa is still very much tied to its own cultural traditions, its comics did not arise out of collectively preserved local memory but are part of the global flux of ideas and images in a world undergoing rapid changes, where new consumer objects come into existence and new cultural debts and credits are contracted, where relations are volatile and voices overlap. For example, the Congolese Barly Baruti sets his *Mandrill* series in 1950s France (Figs. 4–5), while the Frenchman Jean Philippe Stassen depicts the Rwandan genocide in *Deogratias*; Frenchman P'tiluc edits a collective album with the Congolese artists Al'Mata, Pat Mombili, and others; while Congolese Eric Salla sets his stories in France and depicts them with meticulous realism, drawing on cuttings from magazines sent by post to him in Kinshasa. Tanzanian artists Godfrey Mwampembwa has made a animated cartoon for MTV, and the Congolese artist Pat Masioni has published an album in Flemish about the Plains Indians. Mauritius comics author Man Keong Laval NG drew a medieval saga, *La ballade au bout du monde: Les pierres levées*, and Li-An (Réunion) has started *Le Cycle de Tschaï*, a series based on the oeuvre of the fantasy and space opera novelist Jack Vance. Transcontinental exchanges inspire common artistic paths: African cartoonists have collaborated with Euro-

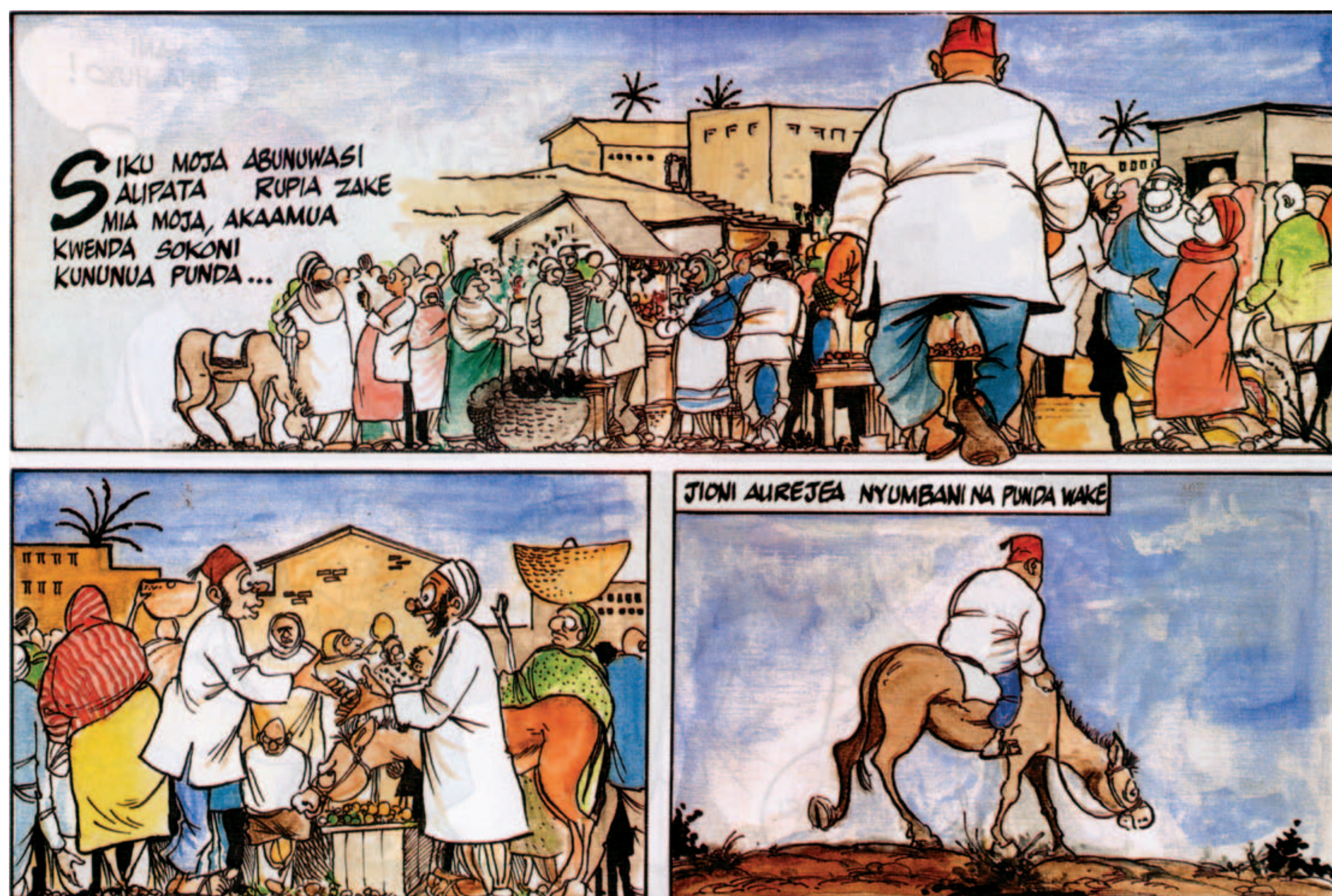
pean scenarists—Baruti with the French writer Franck Giroud; Hissa Nsoli with Patrick de Meersman; Pat Masioni with Cécile Grenier; Hallain Paluku with Benoît Rivière; Li-An with Jean-David Morvan—and African scenarists with European cartoonists—Ngalle Edimo with Sandrine Martin; Marguerite Abouet with Clément Oubrerie; Yvan Algabé with Olivier Bramanti.

Comics seem to know no borders, structures, or regularity. Thus they could lead us to imagine a world similar to the approach proposed by anthropologist Tim Ingold, "where people live in a continuous and unlimited landscape which is infinitely varied in appearance and outlines, and without borders and cracks" (2000). Contemporary African comics are a cosmopolitan cultural form, with no clearly defined territory, no cultural link to their country of origin, conforming to Arjun Appadurai's model for forms of globalized mass culture (1996). For this reason they lend themselves poorly to oppositions between cultural areas. Their authors move consciously in a world marked by a transnational fluidity of people and images and make formal and stylistic choices from a panoply of ideas which are neither localized nor confined, made up as they are of fragments of B-movies, comics, "picture stories" (*fotoromanzi*), Brazilian telenovelas, Japanese manga, Bollywood films, glossy magazines, reproductions of classic works of art, street politics (Radio Trottoir), and orality.

At the end of the 1980s, television became the main mass communication medium in Africa. Later, satellite reception brought with it the global imaginary. It was a foreign invasion, the last in a long list, after easel painting, photography, theatre, cinema, daily papers—and indeed comics themselves. This incoming imaginary was subjected to a complex process of cultural reappropriation. After reworking, the products coming out of the television system opened doors to new narrative and aesthetic worlds, distinct from the continent's search for identity previously carried out by presenting traditional stories in theater (Epskamp 1987), radio (Cancel 1986, Bourgault 1995), and school books, and adopting Senghor's *Négritude* in poetry and literature. A generation of young, urbanized African cartoonists replaced mythological or historical figures with men and women caught in their everyday lives.

Formats and stories seen on satellite TV, such as the soap opera—with settings close to the consumer's own experience,

3 Godfrey Mwampembwa, aka Gado. (Tanzania). 1996. *Abunawasi*. Nairobi: Sasasema.



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plots involving main characters, a cast of secondary characters, multiple story lines, and episodes—began to appear in comics: *Le choix du coeur* by Désiré Atsain, a series centered on a middle-class African family published in the Ivorian weekly *Gbich!*, and *Les K-libres* by Simon Mbumbo, published in *Planète Jeunes*. There was also movement in the other direction, from the page to the screen: the eponymous character of *Goorgoorlou* by Senegalese T.T. Fons (Alphonse Mendy), appeared on Senegalese television from 2002–2003—480 episodes!—played by the actor Habib Diop, and *Cauphy Gombo di Zed'l* by Zohore Lassane became another series, filmed live, for RTI, the Ivorian TV station. The direct relation between different media, disharmonic yet vital and energetic, reflects how today's comics seek to be a medium that enters into the heterogeneous and complex system of communication.

The dynamism of music likewise influences the creativity and the plans of these authors. Baruti is a musician and has made a CD, *Ndungu Yangu*; Mbumbo is working on a project for a graphic novel set in the world of African musical show business (Fig. 6); the satirical magazine *Gbich!* is about to launch a radio station, Gbich! FM. As Dady Gonda declares,

> I feel the influence of the American comix and the Japanese manga, movies and music, the dynamics of editing. I don't think immediately of images but more of an animated sequence with sound. I want to put down strong, significant moments on paper.[3]

This cultural fertilization of the local breeding ground has borne new fruits: "mutant" comics where we as media scholars can witness the mutual influences between mass media, street cultures, and fine arts, and where ordinary readers can see the development of authors who have chosen the graphic novel as a way of meeting the need for supranational, collective communica-

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4 Barly Baruti and Franck Giroud (RD Congo/France). 1997. *Eva K.-Tome 2: Amina*. Toulon: Soleil Productions.

5 Barly Baruti and Franck Giroud (RD Congo/France). 1998. *Eva K.-Tome 3: Traquenard.* Toulon: Soleil Productions.

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6 Simon-Pierre Mbumbo. (Cameroon). 3 Drafts for the project "Music."

tion with a strong local calling in autobiographical form. It is the African counterpart to adjustments which the international production of comics has already undergone in the interaction between film, television, literature, and new media. This orientation also comes out of specific and continental creative and publishing processes, including the emptying of political content and meaning suffered by other comics forms, such as comic strips created purely for entertainment that run in some daily papers and magazines.

AFRICAN SIDE STORY

The comic in Africa has always been a child of its time. In its first period, between 1960 and 1990, comics traditions, from strips to cartoons and more literary productions, came together to provide a graphic mirror of the political reality of nation-building, which in terms of spirit and orientation underpinned the process of Africanizing comics' subject matter and stories.

Under the "Suns of Independence" (to cite Ahmadou Kourouma's classic novel), as the newly independent countries launched literacy programs, conditions were created that fostered comics drawn by African authors for local readers. These comics presented traditional African stories handed down by word of mouth over the years, similar to the popular literature of the folkloric Picadithi series in Kenya, and also made zealous parallels between the struggle against imperialism and the history of colonialism: in Angola the anonymous *A vitória é certa* (1968); in Cameroon *Douala Manga Bell* by Joz (1970); in Senegal *L'homme du réfus* by A.G. Ngom and S.D. Diop (1978); in Mozambique *Akapwitchi Akaporo* by J.P. Borges Coelho (1981); in Madagascar *Ombalahibemaso* by Jean Ramamonjisoa (1961) and later *Nous ne voulons rien de blancs ... nous avons les nécessaires* by Ratsimbazafy (1982). Another genre of this period is the politico-hagiographic comic, which pompously celebrated the lives of leaders of countries freed from colonial domination: Mobutu Sese Seko, Muammar al-Gaddafi, King Hassan II, Gnassingbé Eyadema, Léopold Senghor, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Dailies and periodicals created a certain complicity between local society, the comic, and the artists by publishing strips, cartoons, and the first paper heroes in contexts readers could easily recognize. They took up the tradition of the American "funnies" in which characters appear in papers on a daily basis, a form started at the beginning of the twentieth century. For instance, in Kinshasa, *Sinatra* by Sima Lukombo and *Apolosa* by Boyau ran in *Jeune pour Jeunes*; in Zambia, *Caption Cartoons* by Neftali Sakala in *The National Mirror*; in Gabon, *Bibeng* by Achka and *Tita Abessolo* by Richard Amvame appeared in *L'Union*; in Burkina, *Maître Kanaon* by Anatole Kiba in *Sidiwaya*; in Sudan, *Elsyban* had *Uncle Tungo* by Ahderhman and Ahdelrazig; in Congo Brazzaville, *La Semaine africanine* had *Zoba Moke* by Lokok; in Côte d'Ivoire, *Iviore Dimenche* and *Fraternité Matin* published *Folbay* by Salia; in Madagascar, *Ibonya* by Antsanany ran in the *Faranano Gazety*; and in South Africa, creators such as Newell Goba, Dikobe Mogale "Martins", and Mogorosi Motshumi worked amidst the difficulties of apartheid.

But it was only later, when the introduction (or reintroduction) of multiparty political systems in the 1990s enabled the

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multiplication of newspapers, that a new generation of artists arose who were capable of a lively reappraisal of African society and politics. This second period, between 1990 and 2000, was vital and dynamic, at times even chaotic. Politically, Africa saw a transition from "living a lie" to "living the truth"—to use the expressions adopted by Czech president Vaclav Havel to talk about another political transformation (Havel 1990 [1978]). One of the consequences of the transition from dictatorial regimes to democracies was a liberating voice for a free society. For Gado, a cartoonist on the Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation*, the introduction of a multiparty state "brought greater freedom of expression" and "injected new life into newspapers, magazines and the publishing industry."[4]

In this decade the traditions of the comics, from the popular to the more literary, converged to comment on current affairs or fragments of everyday experience, or took the form of dramatic and fantastic creations, and comics were a vibrant and popular art form. At Kinshasa, low-cost, short-lived, locally distributed comics were started, such as *Fula Ngenge*, *Bulles and Plumes*, and *Nkento*. They were written in the Lingala, Kikongo, and Tshiluba languages and were steeped in *kinoiseries*, the kind of information not to be found in daily newspapers, such as gossip, indiscretions, and reverence for supernatural causation of events in everyday life. These comics authors draw using the Franco-Belgian *ligne claire* narrative style, a choice that is not necessarily a sign of their desire to adapt to the European-oriented mainstream. The rapid rate at which global cultural forms are indigenized by African comics authors prevents us from applying a simple center-periphery model to this artistic form.

Since 1997, the Ivorian satirical weekly *Gbich!*, containing a four-page color supplement, has had a press run of between 37,500 and 50,000 copies a week (the leading Côte d'Ivoire daily newspaper sells 10,000 copies per day). With more than 300 issues published and fifteen comics authors on its staff, *Gbich!* has undeniable economic and cultural clout. Reasons for its success include in-house management (from editorial ideas to printing); the adoption of street language for local and urban discourses about women, the city, wealth, and politics; low price (300 FSFA, or about 25 cents US); and, of course, a successful gallery of comics characters taken from daily life in Africa, such as Cauphy Gombo, a cynical and awkward businessman, by Zed'l; Tommy Lapoasses by Illary Simplice; corrupt policeman Sergent Deux Togo by Bob Kanza; ladies' man Jo Bleck by Karlos Guédè Gou; and tough guy Gnamankoudji ZeKinan by Gnakan (Kovamé Thierry Ghakan).

T.T. Fons (Alphonse Mendy) self-produces his own albums in an artisanal structure (Atelier Fons). Throughout the amusing adventures of Goorgoorlou (Fig. 7), he describes the changes in

7 Alphonse Mendy, aka T.T. Fons. (Senegal). 2002. "Diek au village," in *Goor-mag 2*. Dakar: Atelier Fons.

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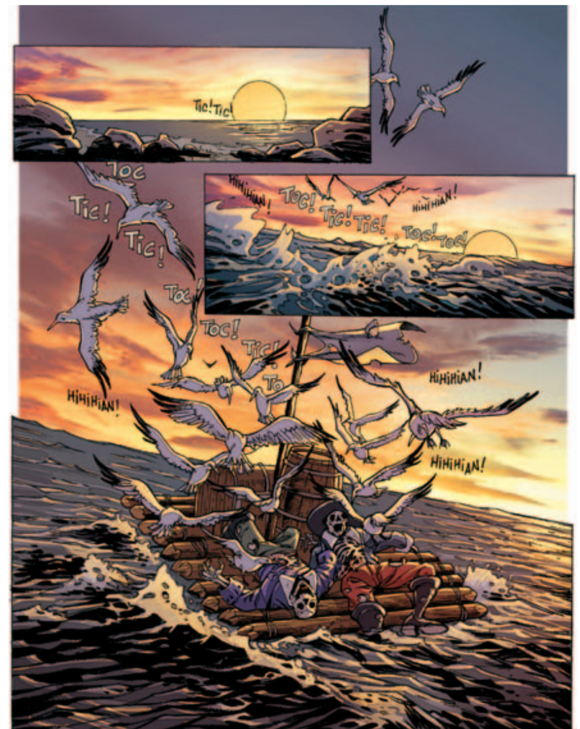
8 Conrad Botes. (South Africa). 2001. "Happy Krismis," in *Bitterkomix 11*. Cape Town: Bitterkomix Pulp.

Senegalese society from ground level. Adopting a rich linguistic range that goes from French to "urban speak" (a vernacular language enriched by mispronunciations in French and a large number of words borrowed from local Wolof), he depicts an average Senegalese man who has lost his job thanks to the World Bank and who walks the streets of Dakar every day trying to make money to get by. Goorgoorlou seem to be responding to Senegal's pervasive economic crises. The protagonists are involved in stories and misfortunes that echo the experience of the readers. The character becomes engaged in the construction of a symbolic economy, converting and transforming real economic relationships into symbolic ones.

Fons introduces us to an artistic representation very different from European artists' creativity, where social relations appear to follow antagonistic strategies. Through these characters the artists become witnesses, testifying, accusing, archiving. The comics mirror a postcolonial world, and they can be read as the representation of a negation, as a tragic exercise in nonexistence. These representations juxtapose "how we are" (daily life) with "how we try, yet fail to be" (due to the irreversible absence of a civil life, revealed by the authors' criticism of corruption and inequality in the postcolonial state). Comics are acts of

9 Albert Tshisuaka, aka Tshishi. (RD,Congo). 2006. *Les joyau du Pacifique*. Bruxelles: Joker Editions.



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moral protest which, by putting popular indignation down on paper, show the impossibility of a different way of life. They represent a complex negation in which the artist recognizes the bare truth that life under a regime of violence is hallucinatory, as in *Happy Krismis* by Conrad Botes (Fig. 8). The artists show what is real (violence, the domination of one person or group over another, the erosion of civil liberties and freedom) through what is imaginary.

Thus the artist assumes the role of witness and judge on an ethical level as he creates a credible "bridge" linking his personal need for truth, victims' thirst for justice, and public space. This is the case of South African Paddy Bouma's *The Invisible People* (1999). The story connects an episode of daily life to the shared values of the conservative community in which he grew up as the child of one of the founders of the National Party, and also reflects the complex situation of denying a black servant his right to identity.

In a dialogue between what is visible (where there are witnesses to the poverty, denial of human rights, etc.) and invisible (an everyday, normal life without violence), these documents reveal the alienation of existence and the existence of demonic forces rooted in suffering. They also elicit insane laughter, laughter mixed with the suffering of Edward Saïd's "undocumented persons" in the bureaucratic and historic sense (Saïd 1993). We are in the heterogeneous zone between testimony and judgment that Jacques Derrida and Bernard Speigler (1997) observed in another modern medium, television.

FROM AFRICA TO EUROPE (AND BACK?)

In writing their stories, African comics artists can draw on recognizable global art forms; but the contents are very often stories of harsh everyday life. As the artist Barly Baruti puts it, "In Africa, readers expect the authors to denounce all truth that is hidden away."[5]

A generation of comics artists has seen this form of violence in ordinary life and the deconstruction of civil life as a political

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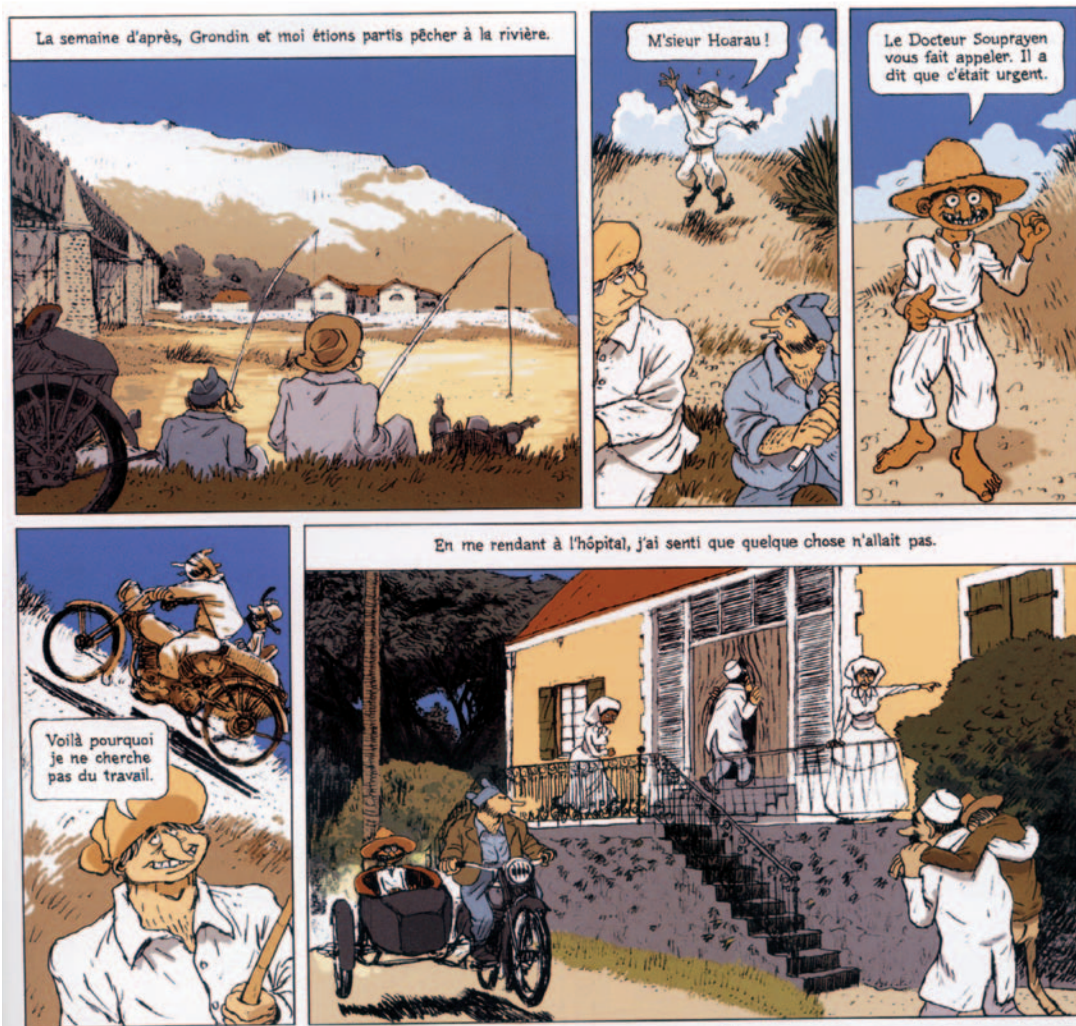
10 Olivier Bramanti and Yvan Alagbé. (France/Togo). 2004. *Qui a connu le feu*. Anderlecht/Montreuil: Fremok.



11 Serge Huo-Chao-Si and Appollo. (Réunion/France). 2003. *La Grippe Coloniale*. Paris: Vents d'Ouest.

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subject and pointed the finger at those bearing political responsibility. They exercise moral and political resistance against manipulated and denied human rights, against the word that is sacrificed in disinformation, propaganda, and invention and turned into rhetorical dust by autocrats who brook no dissent.

Censorship—whether by the government or self-imposed—made it "extremely difficult for artists to be critical and creative towards the dominant élite. The fear of repercussions limited creativity," testifies Al'Mata (Alain Mata Mamengi, Democratic Republic of Congo),[6] who managed to escape arrest by Mobutu Sese Seko's police for his caricature of the politician. Subject to political pressure, some artists are unable to find an outlet for their more "difficult" work. This the case for Timpous (Timpousga Kaboré) from Burkina Faso, who has kept his drawings about the 1998 assassination of journalist Norbert Zongo in a drawer for years. A kind of self-censorship takes hold and becomes "a general rule all over, due to the many government and social taboos, due to terrorism by groups of vigilantes, and the strict relationship between newspapers, the world of business, and the government" (Lent 1997:4).

In these cases, one solution is to work abroad. This is the path taken by Nigerian Tayo Fatunla, who lives and works in London. "Editors were censoring my work many times in the past. One work involved the atrocious acts committed on journalists by the Nigerian government under General Sani Abacha. Fearing reprisals, my editor prohibited publication of the stories, so I sent them to London to be published in a pan-African monthly," he recounts.[7] This is also the case for Eric Salla, who saw his drawings destroyed by the police and has since been granted political asylum in The Netherlands.[8] Recently, many other comics artists, such as Al'Mata, Pat Masioni and Fifi Mukuna, Titi Faustin, Albert Tshitshi (Fig. 9), and Ngumire, tired of the difficult working conditions in their home countries, have asked for political asylum in Europe. For all of them Europe provides opportunities to keep up to date artistically and to publish their work.

Cameroonian storyteller Christophe N'Galle Edimo, who lives in France, has claimed that many African artists end up selling out when they reach the West as they make short-sighted attempts to become marketable: "Some choose to copy the style the Europeans use when they draw Africans, and settle for rosy topics that avoid political or tribal issues."[9] I disagree. The orientation of comics created in the African diaspora does not relate

12 Serge Huo-Chao-Si and Appollo. (Réunion/France). 2003. *La Grippe Coloniale*. Paris: Vents d'Ouest.

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to the cultural tradition of Africa but rather to a long-term strategy for comics in which hybrid style, cultural exchange, and mixing are the modalities that currently define this art—and art in general—as something global and universal.

For some African authors living in the diaspora, Europe becomes a territory to venture across, a place where they can engage with European masters. It also provides a new phase of artistic creativity, where comics productions and individual paths gradually develop in search of previously marginalized and out-of-frame existential dimensions, not visible in the details of the authors' daily lives—family and social ties, political activities, etc.

New contacts with the world of publishing and the ambitious narrative projects of a new artistic phase explain the period of successes that started in 2003. The Internet now allows some of these authors to manage their intellectual property rights directly on an international scale. The model of the traditional comics industry, with its strategic national dimension and low horizontal integration (creativity–production–publishing) has been shattered, and artists gather the fruits of their own activity when they are published for the first time by European publishing houses that support the development of artistic projects with complex narrative frameworks. The trend is away from an age in which comics were confined to daily papers and magazines to one founded on the centrality of the book, and the path chosen

13 Anton Kannemeyer, aka Joe Dog. (South Africa). 1996. "Lag-Lag," in *Lag-Lag*. Pretoria: Bitterkomix Pulp.

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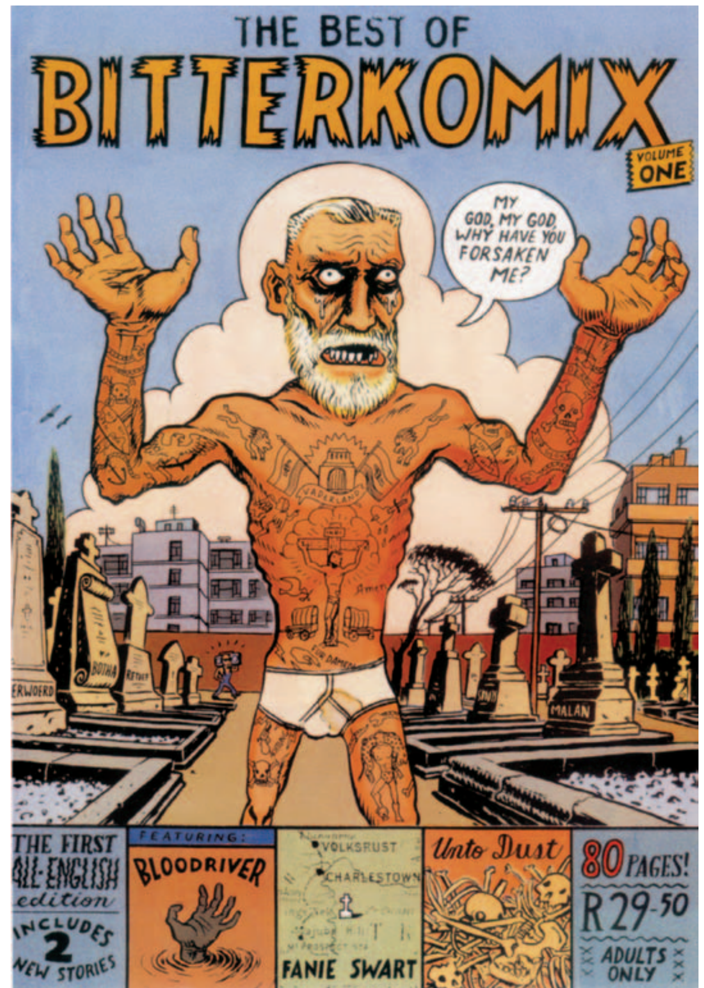
is that of the graphic novel: stories planned as complete novels.

This rising generation of African comic-book artists is gaining a growing fan base. Ivorian Gilbert Groud published *Magie noire* for the leading French publisher Albin Michel (2003), South African Karlien de Villiers published *Meine Mutter war eine schöne Frau* in German for a Swiss publisher (Edition Moderne, 2005), and Ivorian Faustin Titi published *Une éternité à Tanger* for the Italian publisher Lai Momo (2005). Recently, South African Joe Daly published *Scrublands* for the leading American publisher Fantagraphics (2006). Congolese Pat Masioni's history of genocide, *Rwanda 1994: Descente en enfer* (Albin Michel, 2005), Congolese Hallain Paluku's *Missy* (Boîte à bulles, 2006), Cameroonian Biyong Djehouty's *Soundjata, la bataille de Kirina* (Menaibuc, 2004), Ivorian scenarist Marguerite Aboue's *Aya de Yopougon* (Gallimard, 2005), Yvan Alagbé's *Nègres jaunes* (Amok, 2002) and Olivier Bramanti's *Qui a connu le feu* (Amok/Fremok, 2004; Fig. 10) are equally accomplished works. *La ballade au bout du monde: Les pierres levées* (Glénat, 2003), by the Mauritius artist Man Keong Laval NG was one of the best-selling French comic books in 2003.

Their comics have also started to win prizes at prestigious international festivals. A case in point is Marguerite Abouet, the first African comics artist to be awarded a prize at the most important European comics festival, the Festival International de la Bande Dessinée d'Angoulême. *La Grippe Coloniale* by Serge Huo-Chao-Si and Appollo (Vents d'Ouest, 2003; Figs. 11–12) was awarded the 2003 Prix de la Critique by the Association des Critiques et Journalistes de Bande Dessinée. South African cartoonist Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro) received the 2005 Prince Claus Foundation Principal Award. These authors see the graphic novel as an attempt to meet the need for supranational, collective communication between themselves and their readers—both African and European—with a strong local (African) tendency towards comics using the register of the everyday, autobiogra-



14 Conrad Botes. (South Africa). 2001. "Cover," in *The Best of Bitterkomix*. Cape Town: Bitterkomix Pulp.

phy, and the documentary.

A new generation of white South African authors has emerged that works for an idea of the art comic and graphic and narrative experimentation where the boundaries between art, design, comic, and narrative become blurred. Being part of this new generation means developing a self-critical reflection which stages an intimate and personal interior exploration—and expiation—of one's own identity. This interior exploration is not like walking around a garden. Rather, it is like coming and going from a burning home to which, against one's better judgment, one returns again and again to try and save something from the flames: photo albums, people, memories. For these artists the burning house of the fathers—their identity—is contaminated by a past for which they feel no nostalgia, and which they try to come to terms with through a visual account in the form of a story told within a wider historical fable, the story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

In its attempt to found a nation on shared memory, the TRC put forward the idea of a transitional justice (Teitel 2002), a post-modern form of justice through the construction of a narrative. As an unintended outcome of their actions, everything has become "discourse": it is "as if" reconciliation had happened, "as if" the truth had been revealed, and this radically modifies reality. Media coverage of the hearings generated a performance made up of testimony and memory which created an emotionally laden space. In this context, Anton Kannemeyer (Fig. 13) and Conrad Botes (founders of *Bitterkomix* magazine; Fig. 14), Paddy Bouma, Karlien de Villers (Fig. 15), and N.D. Mazin walk a tightrope between the truth of the facts and emotional truth, two worlds which were connected because apartheid touched the lives of everybody and everybody had a story to tell. They do so out of a sense of moral decency, in order to denounce the hypocrisy of an Afrikaner world which allowed the violations of human rights perpetrated by a brutal political system, but for which these artists—like many other South African citizens—do not feel personally responsible. What these artists produce is not only art, it is memory that has been collectively preserved through an artistic language that is capable of creating an interactive social context because they share their personal experiences with their readers, who recognize them both historically and politically. All look backwards, towards the absurdity of "normal" life in apartheid South Africa, in order to look forward. Speaking with Karlien de Villers, one understands that her childhood in the 1980s

> is not a place one can photograph or visit, but which is captured with emotion. I can evoke it like a spirit, and share it … Soon after I started work on the story [the autobiographical graphic novel *Meine Mutter*

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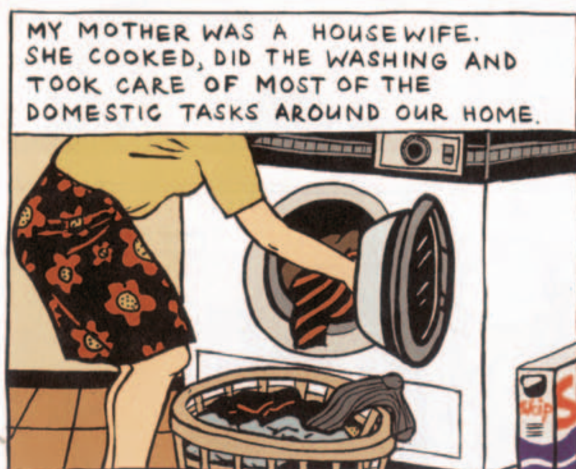

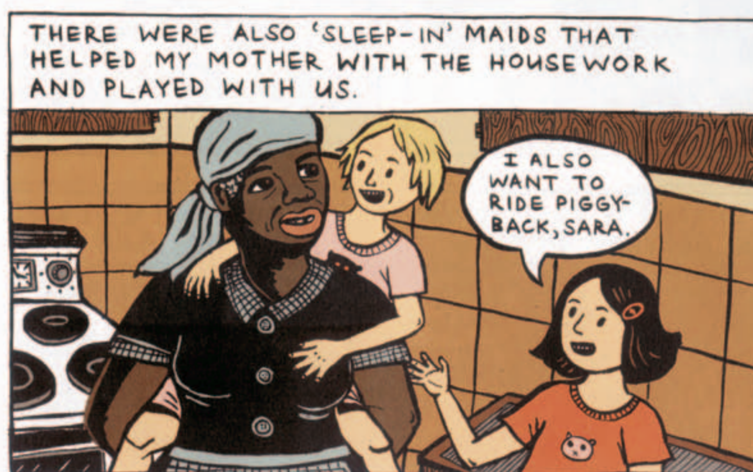

war eine schöne Frau), I realized that delving into the recent South African past was bound to be fraught with more ambivalence than I bargained for. Although my main objective was and still is to make sense of the events surrounding the untimely death of my mother in 1987, it soon became clear to me that salvaging childhood memories from a white South African past not only involved saving my own little story from drowning. During the Apartheid years any private suburban drama took place against the backdrop of a very absurd and grotesque political situation. All memories of personal pain, joy and wonder are entangled with the acceptance of a deeply divided, turbulent society.[10]

AFRICAN WAVE

The African comic is a compact medium whose transformative waves involve the elements which constituted it—authors, language, and consumption—in every geographical area. As with the authors who emigrated to Europe, those who remained in Africa also deal with the new factors that involve the comic as a medium, in other words, the horizontal integration of the industrial dimension determined by the processes of digitalization and the fluidity of the expressive dimension facilitated by globalization. They are forced to reconfigure the relationship between the two dimensions, linking them up or channeling them into pockets of self-production with specific images and forms.

Digitalization transforms some phases of the production cycle. The techniques of digital coloring replace traditional typographical methods and results in spectacular artistic effects, efficiency, and cost-saving. This facilitates self-production and makes it easier to stay on the market, as is the case with *Gbich!*, where 90% of the horizontal process (creativity–production–publishing–printing) is carried out in premises in Marcory. The new technological phase has a different effect on the other side of comics: the planning. The unpublished works by young authors in their twenties that I know of—Mombili, Gonda, Chrisany—express an imaginary connected to the audiovisual world. For them, "Technology is just a support. Using computer graphics to combine graphical expression with motion capture to keep realistic movements is the way to go." Proto-projects of future digital, audiovisual products may be impossible today, "but tomorrow, who knows."[11]

At the other end is self-production. As with African popular fiction analyzed by Stephanie Newell (2002), comics throughout Africa are published on local printing presses and distributed within the locality in a process overseen by the artists themselves. The aim in such small-scale publishing is economy and

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15 Karlien de Villers. (South Africa). 2005. "Sara. A Memory from a Suburban Childhood, circa 1978," in *Bitter-jusi.* Stellenbosh/Capetown: Bitterkomix and i-Jusi.

capillar distribution in city markets. In Kinshasa, Mfumu'Eto (Mfumu'Eto Nkou-Ntoula) sees himself as a painter and for this reason draws comics with a fine pencil. He is also an author with a knack for local storytelling (the *kinoiseires*) and with a good ear for pulp stories. His pamphlets, very often virulent attacks against the political powers-that-be, inspired by cultural traditions and fed by urban culture through an almost dream-like mixture of religion, irony, and popular mythologies, are of immediate interest to the people. His little comic books are written in Lingala, made on low-quality paper, self-produced using stencils and photocopying machines, and distributed informally in Kinshasa's market place (Fig. 19). They circulate within the narrow market defined by the local language and culture. In this way, Mfumo'Eto occupies a tangential position in relation to the world of the comic. In Dakar, *Lamb Ji* by Kabs and in Madagascar, the satirical magazine *Ngah*, edited by the artist Didier Mada BD (Didier Randriamanantena), is published in the local Malagasy language and sells 40,000 copies weekly. These are all expressions of this process of vernacularization of the rhythms, tensions, and narrative conventions which can happen in Africa only in comics, a low-cost medium that is easy to serialize. As the comics artist Barly Baruti explains, "Young people who publish in self-produced reviews can express themselves better and can touch upon many more original subjects."[12] At present the (short-lived and low-cost) "self-produced reviews" make it possible for artists to publish, but the difficulties of independent publishing in Africa should not be minimized. African comic-book artists publish their works in countries where the cost of paper and the poverty of the potential readership can be insurmountable obstacles.

When I realized that among the ten winners of the "Vues d'Afrique" competition held at the 33rd Festival d'Angoulême (France) in January 2006, seven were completely unknown to me despite the fact that I have contributed to staging three exhibitions of African authors and co-edited a series of ten African comic books, I tried to find an explanation for this phenomenon by looking at access to the market by African comics authors.

In fact, the labor market of these artists is unstable and subject to seismic changes. New talent bursts on the scene and then quits the profession equally quickly. The reasons for this lie in the fact that comic art is a field that taps into the broad interface that exists in Africa today between supportive social networks and entrepreneurial practices, which are only partly governed by market relations. In a continent marked by disquieting processes of urbanization, where settlement is disproportionate to the available resources, the African citizen engages in complex relations between labor markets, cultural identity, and sociability, factors that have increasingly turned the towns and cities of Africa into spaces of invention (Repetti 2002). Comics artists belong to this labor market like every other African worker and citizen. Even when an author enjoys popular success, his situation is more characteristic of work with intermittent wages, alternately starting and stopping, subject to unsteadiness, low and irregular production, cash and publication problems, low returns on invested capitals, and uncertain profits.

Although this art form is a long way from a deep crisis, African comics artists still face an uphill battle for survival. Supportive social networks are the first resources necessary for promoting comic books. Many comics artists have joined together in associations whose main objective is the promotion of the art of comics through festivals, publications, and mass media. Some examples are Souimanga in Madagascar, set up under the direction of Alban Ramiandrisoa-Ratsivalaka and Didier Randriamanantena; Emerald Press in Nigeria; Sisma Comics in Angola; PACT, the Popular Association of Cartoonists in Tanzania; BD Boom in Gabon; and Tache d'Enche in Côte d'Ivoire, which set up the pan-African Festival Coco-Bulles.

In 1990 in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Barly Baruti started the Atelier de création, recherche et initiation à l'art (ACRIA), which has now become a school for comics artists. In South Africa, there is Mamba Comics under the direction of ND Mazin (Andy Mason). Two associations have also been set up in Europe by comics artists of the diaspora: L'Afrique Dessinée, run by Christophe N'Galle Edimo in Paris, and Belgium's Afro-Bulles. The associations' activities encourage platforms for artists to exchange ideas, experience, networks, and survival strategies in the face of difficult working conditions. The truth of the matter is, however, that the associations seem to lessen professional solidarity and the readers' appreciation of the talents of their artists and give more priority to the search for partnerships with international institutions such as the UN, UNESCO, and the EU; NGOs; and cultural agencies such as Agence Intergouvernamentale de la Francophonie. They ask for international funding with a growing interest because comics need budget and managerial capacity to survive in the difficult balancing act between cost and sales.

The French aid agency Cooperation Française has given support to festivals and comics production in all the Francophone countries. Examples include collective albums such as *Sary Gasy* and *Les jeux sont faits* in Madagascar; the review *Explose la Capote* and the comic book *Koulou chez les Bantu* (1998) in Gabon. Two editions of the Festival Coco-Bulles (2001, 2003) in Côte d'Ivoire and the Afro-Bulles exhibition at the Festival d'Angoulême 2005 were supported by the Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie. Belgian aid agencies entirely financed the publication of the story *Les Couleurs de la Mémoire* by Hector Sonon (Benin) in Cotonou 's magazine *Interfaces* from November 1996 to July 1997.

Cost is the most significant consideration in determining the success of comics in Africa, where even the salaried elite simply cannot afford to buy comics on a regular basis. But economic factors are only part of the problem. More insidious and more recent is the problem of relations with international cultural operators. Today African comics occupy a more decentralized position with respect to international nongovernmental cultural operators, which are interested in this low-cost medium and pro-

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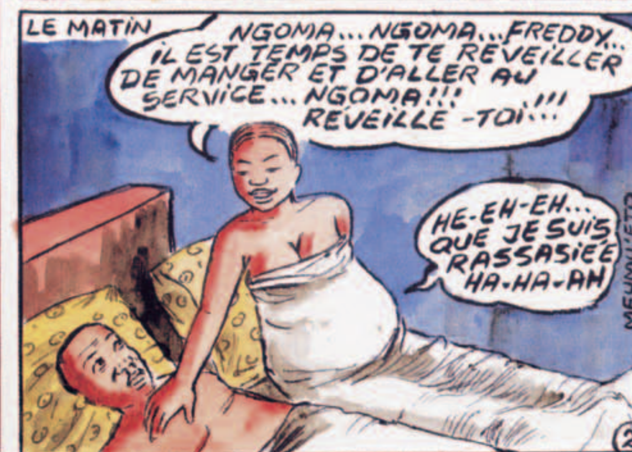

16 Mfumu'Eto. (RD Congo). 1996. *Le bébé misterieux*. Kinshasa: self-production.

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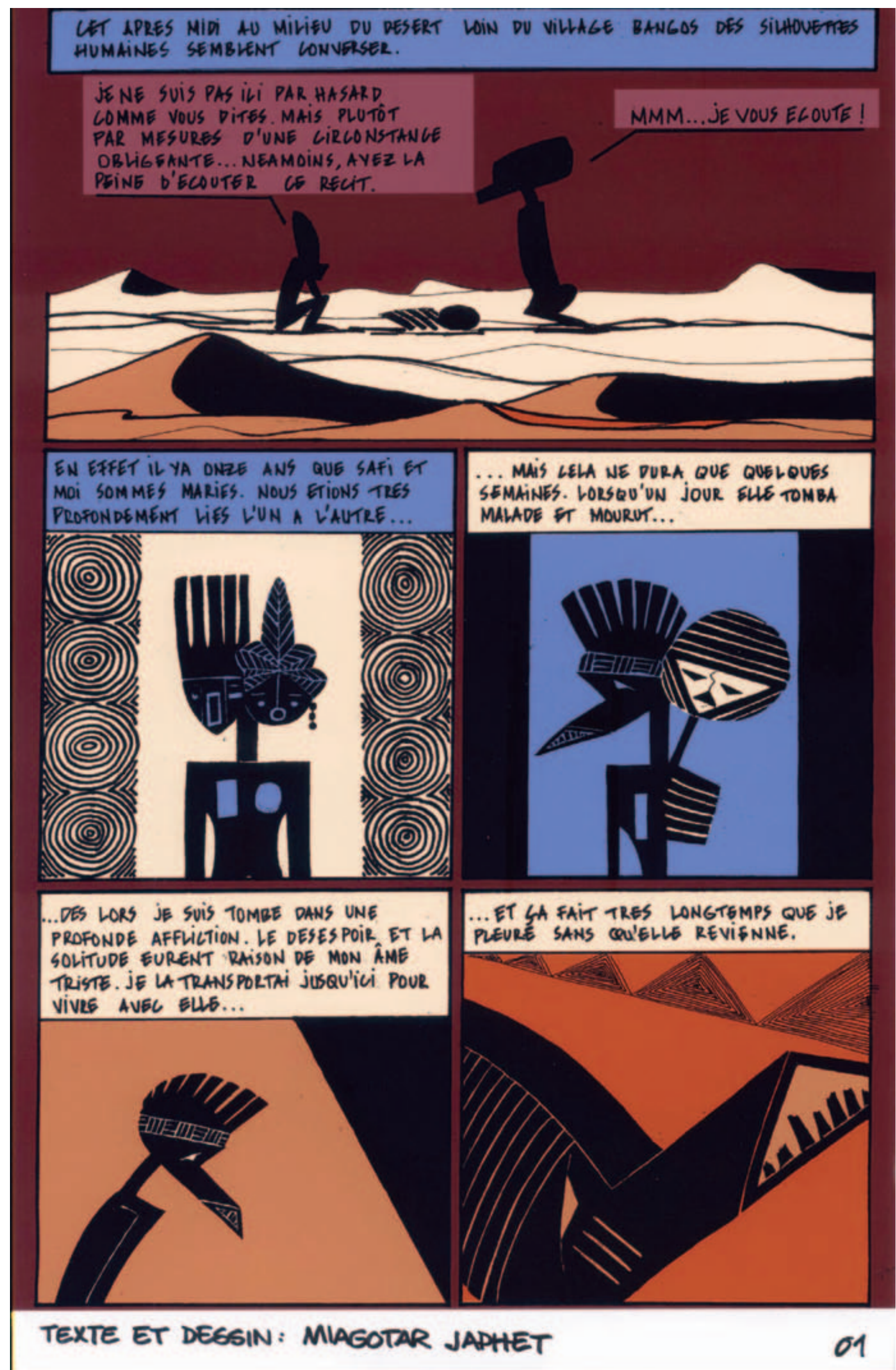
17 Miagotar Japeth (Cameroon). 2004. "L'ingratitude". Unpublished.



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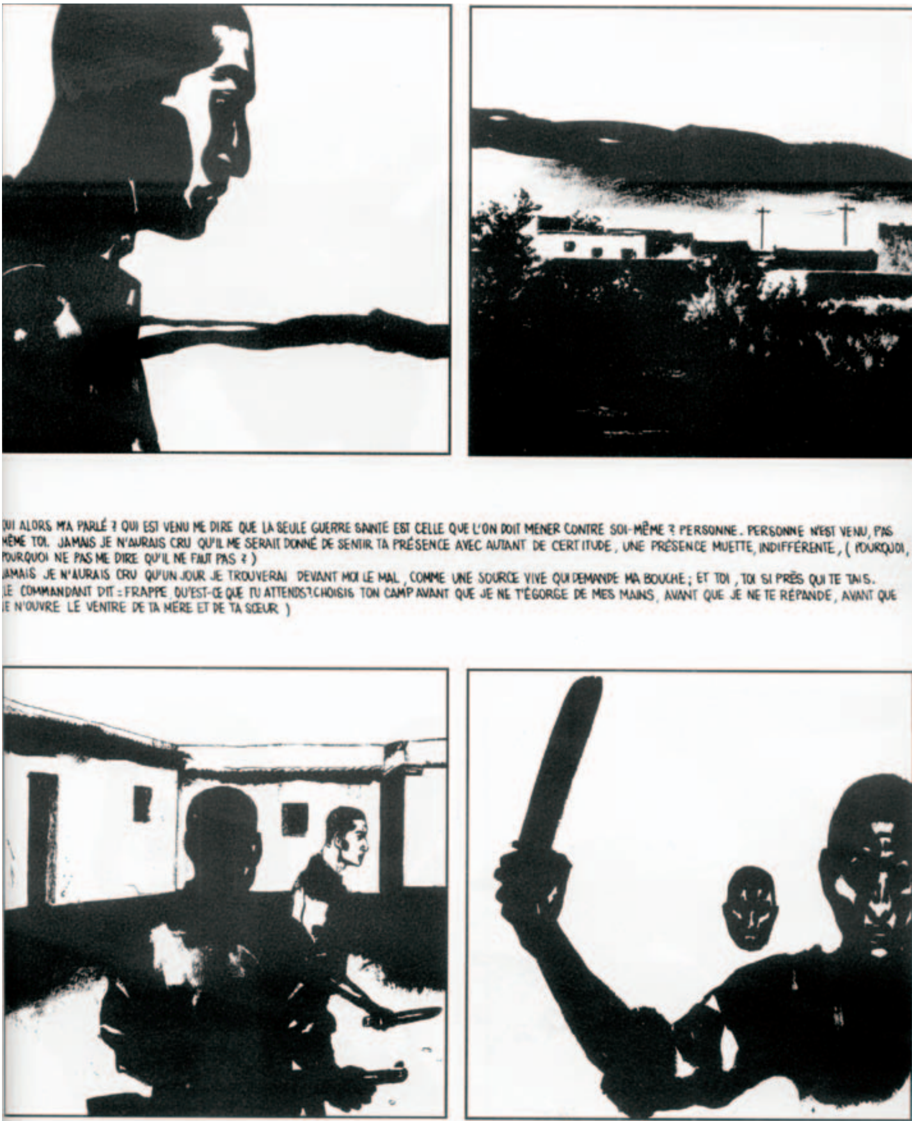
mote activities in favor of African comics. Examples are the Festival International de la Caricature et de l'Humour de Yaoundé (FESCARY), since 1999 in Cameroon, supported by Association ICCNET, and Proculture (a cultural program organized by the European Development Fund); A l'Ombre du Baobab (2001) supported by the French NGO Equilibres et Populations; the Vues d'Afrique competition (2006) sponsored by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Africa Comics competition (2003, 2004, and 2006) and the Manifesta! competition (2006), both supported by the Africa e Mediterraneo Association.

In fact, the most commonly adopted formulas—pan-African or national competitions where entrance is free but only the winners are paid, and the selection of artworks for the creation of traveling exhibitions in Africa and/or Western developed countries—do not resolve the problems faced by comics artists. Indeed, the joint action of comics artists and cultural promoters, despite success with the public and fund-raising using the formula of competition plus traveling exhibition, does not seem to give the artists any direct and lasting advantage. The exhibitions do not give the exhibited artists an economic advantage, nor is artists' information, such as e-mail addresses and web sites, available to encourage the public to enter into direct contact with them. The catalogues are merely adjuncts to exhibitions and are only half-heartedly put on the market, and even so, they provide data about the organizers of the exhibition only, and no royalties are given to the authors. Finally, these competitions do not reflect the state of



18 Yvan Alagbé. (France/Togo).1998. "Djihad" in *Algérie, la douleur et le mal*. Montreuil: Amok.

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the art because they are also open to nonprofessional and student artists; therefore, successful authors hardly ever take part—and if they do, they only exhibit their less important works.

Despite the 15,000 copies of a collective album titled *A l'Ombre du Baobab* and in spite of the financial assistance to Central African countries from the European Development Fund (Cultural Programme "Proculture 2001/2203"), everyday difficulties continue to force many comics artists to abandon their careers.

A POSTCARD FROM AFRICA

Asimba Bathy, who lives in Kinshasa, refutes the African comics label because he belongs to the international *ligne claire* movement in comics. For him, the issue is clear-cut: This equivalence serves to dehistoricize African creativity, and to call the comics "African" simply exemplifies the Western will to keep artists of African origin from participating fully in the contemporary art scene.[13]

This "African Wave" is of great interest to scholars, especially given its primary concern with the emergence of postcolonial states. These narratives are both fiction and cultural artifacts produced against the background of transformations in both African society and the international media. Comics art in Africa demonstrate the inadequacy of center-periphery models of cultural transmission, i.e. the movement from a hegemonic international comic art to local-level African creativity which is naïve, unofficial, and popular.

With the sole exception of the vernacularized comics of Mfumo'Eto and others, all these artists propose an expressive, modern language that is not traditionally African. The "African Wave" is part of the contemporary international comics scene and shows many of the deep transformations that have affected the language and the publishing forms of this medium. In a labor market that is difficult of access and marked by harsh political conditions, in an uncomfortable everyday life, this is no small intellectual endeavor.

We are no longer able to interpret the all the signs contained in these stories but we know they come from both near and far. They bring us into direct contact with the meaning of cultural globalization: traditions that merge together and continue to

exist, a multiethnic market of paradoxically standard objects, and an age which constantly transforms and amalgamates.

There is a question that comics artists themselves pose about the classification of their art as "African" comics: Are they not simply comics? If not only authors but also readers start to ask this question, that will show that a universal dimension of communication has certainly been achieved.

Massimo Repetti is an Italian cultural anthropologist whose research interests include social implications of African artistic expression (including comics) and urban modernity. He has curated three pan-African exhibitions of comics: "Matite Africane" (2001) and "Africa Comics" (2002, 2003), is consultant for the Lambiek Comiclopedia based in the Netherlands, and is co-editor (with Andrea Marchesini Reggiani) of the comic series Africa Comics. *3.14@fastwebnet.it*

Notes

1 The 17th International Comics Festival in Amadora, Portugal, October 20–November 5, 2006; the Africa Comics Exhibition, November 15, 2006–March 18, 2007, at Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; the 16th Salon de la BD de Roumanie, Bucharest, October 19–22, 2006; the 33rd Festival international de la bande dessinée, May 8–June 5, 2006 in Dakar and January 26–29 in Angoulême, France.

2 I should make it clear that I am discussing African comics only, a subset of African cartooning as a whole. My thinking about African comics has benefitted from my reading of Achille Mbembe (1992, 1997) on this broader topic.

3 Dady Gonda, personal communication, Spring 2001.

4 Gado, personal communication, Spring 2001.

5 Barly Baruti, personal communication, Summer 2003.

6 Al'Mata, personal communication, Summer 2004.

7 Tayo Fatunla, personal communication, Spring 2002.

8 Eric Salla, personal communication, Autumn 2006.

9 Christophe N'Galle Edimo, personal communication, Winter 2004.

10 Karlien de Villers, personal communication, Autumn 2005.

11 Dady Gonda, personal communication, Autumn 2006.

12 Barly Baruti, personal communication, Spring 2003.

13 Asimba Bathy, personal communication, Summer 2006.

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