



RESEARCHING POPULAR CULTURE

Notes from the Researcher Network on Studies of Popular Culture in Africa's initial workshop

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The present edition of *Glocal Times* is an indication that funding for a small network of researchers may bring together texts from fields far apart in a setting outside the original. In May 2006, a small selection of researchers and students chiefly based in the Scandinavian countries and southern Africa gathered in Uppsala, Sweden, for the first workshop in the recently established Researcher Network on Media, Communication and Popular Culture in Africa ^[i]. Thanks to funding provided by the Nordic Africa Institute ^[ii] based in Uppsala, we were able to issue a call for papers that attracted the interest of a considerable number of scholars involved with research on popular culture in Africa. Because of limited funding, we were not able to invite all of the interested researchers to Sweden, but all in all the sessions attracted a good number of people. The workshop was arranged according to two broad topics, which are also the two branches of themes on which the network would like to focus the attention. The first rather open topic dealt with the role of mediated communication and mediated popular culture in Africa, with a particular focus on youth. The second cluster of themes concentrated on approaches to HIV/AIDS communication by means of mediated popular culture.

One of the participants in the concluding discussions of the workshop posed a highly pertinent question: "What is this Nordic preoccupation with research in Africa?" There may be historical, political or ideological explanations. However, we will let these issues rest for the time being, and outline here some points in the story of research into media and popular culture in Africa, in which the host institution of the network, the Nordic Africa Institute, played a significant part.

More than ten years ago, the Nordic Africa Institute published an edited collection of texts entitled *Culture in Africa: An Appeal for Pluralism* (Granqvist, 1993). In his introduction to the volume, Granqvist challenges the position that cultures in Africa can only be studied through theoretical and conceptual tools developed in an African context. Such views, he

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argues, lead to cultural closure, parochialism and essentialism (1993: 7).

The Western discourse on Africa has a history of imperialism, of judging African phenomena according to whether it is deemed sufficiently exotic or universal by publics outside of the African continent, and it has a history of outright misrepresentation. But this should not lead to the position argued by some that only scholars of African origin can fruitfully research and make sense of cultural processes and cultural artefacts in this vast continent. These issues tap into a great ongoing debate about what is deemed African, and thereby the question of authenticity ^[iii]. They also point forward to research on cultural phenomena in Africa, in particular popular culture. At the seminar held in the early 1990s on which the Granqvist collection is based, there was some uncertainty about including the mass media in the discussion about “genuine” cultural expressions taking place in Africa. Until then, the focus on the media when discussing cultural expressions in Africa had not been overly enthusiastic or positive. Critics argued that the presence of the media in Africa was an issue of imperialism and colonisation.

Until the early 1990s, the Nordic Africa Institute’s research profile encompassed approaches based in the social sciences, political science, liberation histories and natural geography, but also on the anthropologies of “genuine” African cultures. To put it a bit disrespectfully and for the sake of the argument, research on the media in Africa had been viewed with a curious attitude, and often (but not always) termed as not serious or genuine enough to deserve scholarly attention. In addition, more pressing concerns with independence movements, state formation, nation building, infrastructures or gender issues were argued to be more important than cultural aspects as such and indirectly found more worthy of academic study than those of mediated popular culture. In the early 1990s, when media studies was still a relatively young academic field, one could often encounter attitudes that signalled that research on media in Africa was not studying what was claimed to be “really” or “authentically” African. Was it not better, some argued, to focus on other aspects of cultural practices or traditions, and not bother with the media?

Luckily, not everyone adopted such positions. The Granqvist collection marked the start for the Nordic Africa Institute in focussing on diverse aspects of cultural issues, including the media. A few years later, a researcher with the Nordic Africa Institute, Mai Palmberg, launched the research project “Cultural images in and of Africa”. Her seminars, edited collections and mailing lists are among the efforts that aimed at bringing together scholars interested in media and popular culture in Africa. In the introduction to the book *Encounter Images in the Meetings between Africa and Europe*, Palmberg outlines the project’s research objectives. What do the images about Africa, in a wide selection of cultural products

on or from Africa, indicate? What do these images “really mean”, and “how were the images formed, when and why”? (Palmberg, 2001: 7).

Aspects of media and popular culture can be found in various contributions in the project’s publications, but the project as such encompasses cultural representations in a wider sense. Travel literature, missionary literature and writings, historical studies of stereotyped images of Africans in medieval Europe, stereotypes in images of Africans in 19th century’s Britain and in current works of art are among the themes addressed. Popular music, images in development assistance organisations and in novels are other aspects of cultural images addressed. Some contributions in *Encounter Images...* seek to challenge the conception that Europe has always viewed Africa with suspicion, fear and as the generalised other of Europeans. Although the negative stereotyped images of Africans and African cultures have been massive throughout the centuries, contributions that have taken Africa as positive influences, as something worthwhile and to be learned from, can also be found. Now, the critical perspectives on former cultural and political exchanges and interactions between Europe and Africa dominate research (Kirkegaard, 2001). The Palmberg collection is here taken to illustrate a wide variety of works that discuss the representations of various cultural outputs, products and implications ^[iv]. In the coming months, Mai Palmberg will be drawing up yet another network. This time the topic will be “The Nordic Colonial Mind”, acknowledging that Scandinavian countries were very much a part of the colonial enterprise and shared colonial views on Africa. Scandinavia has mostly chosen to overlook these aspects of our past, and it is now high time they are put on the research agenda. By the same token, one of the criticisms voiced against the discussions in the Uppsala 2006 workshop was that there was not sufficient attention to theoretical concepts found within postcolonial theory, identity and hybridity, to name a few. Contested aspects of race and gender may be other issues. Let us hope that future workshops may make up for this discrepancy and place such themes at the centre of attention.

We must acknowledge the fact that several of the initial key studies on media and popular culture in Africa did not come out of media studies, in which this network is based. One of the participants in our Uppsala 2006 workshop, anthropologist Minou Fuglesang, authored an early study of young women in Lamu, Kenya, regarding how they use fictional media content to find their own feet while growing up (Fuglesang, 1994). Fuglesang argued that the media provided opportunities for people to gain cultural impulses from places and issues otherwise restricted to them, and opened up new avenues for individual behaviour and negotiation. Such a position of giving the media a positive role in the lives of young people proved to be a significant point in the history of media studies on popular cultures in Africa. Fuglesang now chairs a successful media initiative in

Tanzania, seeking to provide exactly that kind of popular cultural material for youth grappling with the troubles of growing up and finding answers to life's great questions in a world where HIV/AIDS is a part of reality. Several papers in the Uppsala 2006 workshop also emphasised the potentially positive and constructive role of the media in the everyday lives of youth in Africa. Nkosi Ndlela, Thomas Tufte, Wendy Willems, Ylva Ekström and Hilde Arntsen elaborated on various aspects of popular culture and on how this intertwined with people's imaginations. However, this is not always a process devoid of conflicts. Caught in the middle of other people's expectations and the fascinations of mediated popular culture, the negotiation may sometimes resemble an emotional battle zone rather than an armchair venture into the fantasies of characters in stories on the screen. Occasionally, this battle may even be physical. We must not forget the institutional, political and global limitations in this picture amid the documentations of positive and creative elements in mediated popular culture, however. Cultural anthropologist Siri Lange discussed questions of censorship and freedom of expression in her paper, demonstrating how government co-opts local artists in Tanzanian popular culture, with the artists' self-censorship as a result. Siri Lange's earlier study of the travelling theatre troupes and dramas broadcast on Tanzanian television is a key analysis of the appropriation of forms of mediated popular culture by popular drama troupes travelling around the country (Lange, 2002). Two contributions analysing the Senegalese film *Karmen* and South African murals added a much sought after visual element to the workshop discussions of popular culture, and brought us to questions of the emerging global popular.

The second main nexus of papers and topics in the workshop belonged to the issue of HIV/AIDS and creative use of popular culture towards information transfer and changes in behaviour. There is a wide variety of terms connected to the role of the media in the HIV/AIDS information efforts -or interventions, as they are sometimes called. For many of the authors, the preferred term seemed to be Entertainment-Education. Danish media scholar Thomas Tufte outlines the history of the Entertainment-Education within the field of communication for development. According to Tufte, there have been three phases or generations in the efforts, ranging from social marketing to "liberating and citizen-driven articulation of social change agendas" (Tufte, 2005: 16).

Some papers concentrated on the communication process, while others analysed the popular cultural texts themselves. Norbert Wildermuth discussed the representation of HIV/AIDS in the South African soap *Isindigo*, and asked whether the viewers are able to make out the HIV/AIDS agenda in the soap when the issues are couched in an entertaining format? Other scholars were preparing for large-scale surveys into HIV/AIDS communication campaigns, while a very hands-on and innovative approach to the issue was presented in the form of a board

game intended for possible inclusion in the South African *Soul Buddyz* concept. Thomas Tufte outlined how young South Africans living with HIV elaborate on their everyday lives. Truly, popular culture ties into the concept of culture as everyday life.

SOME NOTES ON POPULAR CULTURE

Regrettably, some discussions did not take place during the workshop. The most obvious discussion we missed was that of the underlying concept: popular culture. What is it exactly? How do we define it, and how are current definitions suited to the study of popular culture in Africa? Everyone seems to know what popular culture is. Yet, when attempting to define the concept, we soon run into troublesome waters. Popular culture is often so loosely defined that it sometimes lacks the explanatory powers needed when conducting research into social and cultural phenomena. One of the founding fathers in Cultural Studies, Raymond Williams, wrote in his *Keywords* (1983) that there are at least four ways of conceptualising the 'popular'. First, one meaning of the popular is what is well liked by a lot of people. Second, some imply that the popular is what is left when the elite or high culture has been defined. Third, products made in order to be well liked by a large number of people, that is, culture which is produced in order to be consumed. Fourth, popular implies that which is made by people themselves (Williams, 1983: 237).

When defining the popular today -and in particular when defining popular culture, these four understandings remain, often at the same time and without causing trouble. Work carried out at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, UK, proved to be defining the emerging field of Cultural Studies. Research carried out at the Centre, and within what has later been termed 'the critical paradigm', conceptualised the media as "socially transforming, capitalist-driven, modernist vehicles that inform about culture and its processes through symbols and visual representations" (Jackson II and Brown Givens, 2006: 161).

Throughout the years, however, Cultural Studies focused on the negotiation of popular cultural texts, following the once groundbreaking assertion that people are not empty "black boxes" that uncritically accept the media messages and embedded ideologies therein, but rather actively constructing meaning and making sense of popular culture in ways that resist and rewrite the dominant ideological traits of media texts or aspects of popular culture. Cultural Studies' emphasis on studying the working classes of Europe, women and certain immigrant groups challenged the former elitist perspectives on culture, and opened up entirely new avenues of investigation. However, not all may be well within the field. Jim McCuigan, for instance, has voiced concern that Cultural Studies'

emphasis on popular culture has led to an uncritical and unconditional emphasis on the popular, without adequate attention to the material relations of power (McGuigan, 1992). Research focus on pleasure, empowerment, resistance and popular discrimination must continue to be addressed, as well as issues such as racism and sexism, among others.

Popular culture, then, can be a great variety of processes, artefacts, texts, and the use and appropriation of these by people. Aspects of popular culture are now studied in a multiplicity of fields and disciplines; it is studied by means of a multiplicity of theoretical approaches and from a wide variety of institutional bases in terms of the scholars involved. The same applies to the study of media and popular culture in Africa. We find studies of media and popular culture in Africa within Cultural Studies, media studies, anthropology and film studies, and further afield, such as in sociology or political science.

It is hard to avoid one of the early edited collections on popular culture in Africa, *Readings in African Popular Culture* (Barber, 1997). One of her points in this collection is to widen the concept of what is termed popular culture. Thereby, cloth, posters, songs and oral literature are analysed. Discussions of creolization, local and global cultural elements, are analysed alongside television programmes. Importantly for our purposes here, Barber notes that cultural research in Africa has tended to focus on two concepts juxtaposed in opposition to one another: the traditional and the modern. The predominance of these two concepts in a number of studies implies that they are not only seen as opposite ends of a continuum. What might be more troublesome is that they tend to solidify the notions of popular culture in Africa. Barber elaborates on this point, observing that: “The African cultural universe is often represented as being divided into two halves: made up of *egúngún* masquerades on the one hand (‘traditional’ art), Soyinka’s *The Road* on the other (‘elite’/‘modern’/‘Westernized’ art): the griot on the one hand, *Ouologuem* on the other” (Barber, 1997: 1, italics in the original.)

One example of research which resists such dichotomies is Mano (2004) who discusses how tradition is being renegotiated in popular radio programmes in Zimbabwe, where talk on issues such as sex and relationships that used to be handled by close relations now can be talked about with radio programme hosts.

The research literature on media and popular culture in Africa contains significant contributions by scholars in the North and the South. It is not the point here to provide an overview of this research, but to note that this emerging field may challenge the understanding of popular culture developed in the West. Yet, it is worth acknowledging that strong forces for essentialising and setting apart anything African may prove

counterproductive. The philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe reminds us that this dichotomising structure of juxtaposing the traditional and the modern, the oral versus the written and printed, the rural versus the urban, and the developing versus the developed, are all in place largely due to the colonising structure (Mudimbe, 1988: 4). Colonisation was not merely physical exploitation that has been done away with; it was a discursive practice that is alive and well today.

Anthropology has often been criticised for being a discipline “produced by, indeed born of, colonial rule (Mohanty, 1991: 31) ^[v]. It has been criticised for being gendered and racial in its underlying values, for reproducing ideological structures in the researcher’s own culture instead of seeing the structures in the researched communities or cultures at face value. In recent years, discussions have surfaced on the unchallenged position or voice of the anthropologist in published research, and that the voice, worldview or arguments of the researched people are often not sufficiently reflected in the finished works. Such anthropological and ethnographic self-reflection about the *raison d’être* of these fields is useful also outside their immediate boundaries. The literature of self-reflection on the essence of the cultural interpretation of the field of anthropology, about the tools of the trade, i.e. its methodologies, is also of utmost relevance for the field of media studies. A critical discussion of the concepts we use and the ideological implications therein will be required in the years ahead. We will achieve something if this network can help bringing such discussions to the fore.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The Researcher Network on Media, Communication and Popular Culture in Africa was selected by the Nordic Africa Institute as one of five small researcher networks to receive seed money to organize two workshops during a four-year period. The Uppsala workshop was the first of these. The initial call for papers attracted interest from scholars in the North as well as the South. Overnight, the workshop changed from a small and Nordic one to a North – South network. Indeed, this is a most welcome development, and quite pertinent in today’s global world.

The Department of Information Science ^[vi] at the University of Uppsala hosted the workshop in cooperation with the network and the Nordic Africa Institute. Delicious East African homemade cooking prepared by experienced chefs with close ties to the network members welcomed us to the department, and provided quite a literal taste of Africa, which served well to set the tone for the first evening. Uppsala in the spring was an appropriate venue for a gathering of this kind. The city has more to offer

to the researcher interested in Africa than what can be experienced during the course of a couple of workshop days, but the opportunity to socialise was taken by a good number of the participants.

It is the aim of the three organisers of the network, Thomas Tufte (Roskilde, Denmark), Ylva Ekström (Uppsala, Sweden) and Hilde Arntsen (Bergen, Norway), that the network may be used as a tool for a fruitful exchange of ideas. As some participants may be weary of belonging to “yet another mailing list”, it is our intention to use the network sparingly to inform about ongoing research literature, conference calls or the like, and rather prepare for the next workshop. Whether the network will turn out to be a means of North–South communication to twist and bend concepts, to challenge research findings and to rewrite the research agenda for media and popular culture in Africa, will rest, in the final analysis, on the participants. The Uppsala workshop might have opened up some venues, and closed others. Research on media and popular culture in Africa is now a field being consolidated within media studies, cultural studies, and anthropology, to name a few. Scholars from fields such as literature and film also add to the plurality of the research being carried out. Much of this research is, however, not too easily accessible beyond specialised academic circles, and as with many emerging fields, it can still be said to be found in the circuits for the ones who are particularly interested. For a considerable number of us, however, each researcher is relatively alone in his or her institution in conducting research into this field. It is the aim of the network to facilitate the communication between scholars who share an interest in the study of popular culture in Africa, to present and discuss research into the media and popular culture in Africa, and to produce easily accessible documentation about research in the media and popular culture in Africa. To this end, some articles from the Uppsala workshop have been abridged for their publication in *Glocal Times*. Let us hope they will stimulate and provoke discussion, and challenge us all in future research endeavours.

[i] <http://www.nai.uu.se/research/network/media/>

[ii] <http://www.nai.uu.se/>

[iii] For this reason, we do not use the term “African popular culture”, which implies that there is a particular entity called African popular culture, vis-à-vis other kinds of popular culture. Notions of essentialism might be close at hand in such terminology.

[iv] Kivikuru (1990), Kupe (1997), Nyamnjoh and Page (2002), Zilberg (1995) may be others.

[v] The thinking behind such a point is that the colonial administrations were of the opinion that it would be fruitful to know the colonised peoples better in order to govern them more effectively.

[vi] <http://www.dis.uu.se/>

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