

CONGOLESE COMICS EXPOSE HIDDEN WORLD OF 1990S KINSHASA

DANIEL REBOUSSIN

Before arriving on campus to take a position in the Department of History, Professor Nancy Rose Hunt asked me to work with her to acquire the surviving original comic art of Jasphe-Saphire Mfumu'eto—best known as Papa Mfumu'eto 1er—for the University of Florida. After early discussions, we partnered to assess institutional capacity and scholarly interest, purchasing these popular creative text/image works from their creator in March 2017. It has been an extraordinary journey since then, beginning with hosting an international workshop (*Kongo-Kinshasa meets Gainesville*) with hands-on access to original manuscripts just three weeks after opening the boxes. In February, the manuscripts and original art were the focus of the 2018 Gwendolen M. Carter Conference, *Text Meets Image, Image Meets Text: Sequences and Assemblages Out of Africa and Congo*, organized by Nancy Hunt and Alioune Sow. Our collaborative partnership has been stimulating and useful in the archival work I've undertaken with these fascinating manuscripts.

The *Papa Mfumu'eto Papers* were, to the best of my knowledge, the global first library acquisition of an African street comic artist's original drawings and production materials. They document his fifteen year career, during which he made a living creating and selling comic books in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Items in pencil or pen on paper represent all stages of his production process, from early ideas and sketches, and drafts to storyboards, cut-and-paste montages in various states, camera-ready copies, and trial print runs of pages and covers, with a small number of complete printed comic books. Over twenty full comic books are included, with most materials providing material evidence of the artist's creative, production, and business practices.

The comic texts feature Kinshasa's lingua franca, an urban dialect of Lingala, presenting urban African everyday life as

seen and heard from the street level during the 1990s and early 2000s. In contrast to most other African comic artists, Mfumu'eto revels in presenting his community's creative use of African language through his stories. These are rich sources for investigating Kinshasa culture from many perspectives: religious anthropology, urban slang, and sorcery idioms in Kinshasa households, text/image use in communication, and the history of local critiques of one of Africa's most important post-colonial dictators. Mfumu'eto often refers to himself as a "bio-camera" reporting the visible, everyday world as well as the hidden, parallel, spiritual world. Social issues such as HIV-AIDS prevention and care, spousal abuse and sexual morality in a polygamous society, and aspects of urban poverty in the African context are all recurrent themes. Several comics relate to then-current international events such as the downfall of Mobutu and the First Gulf War (in which he employs more of the DRC's official language, French). Most stories and text-images, however, are set on the streets, or more precisely in the households and domestic courtyard spaces of his own neighborhood.

UF graduate student Daniel Barroca began archival processing of the comics under my supervision during Fall 2017. The collection is currently not open for research, as it is now being archivally processed for long-term preservation and access. During Spring 2019, it will be digitized after Curator of African art Susan Cooksey from the Harn Museum of Art and Phillip Van den Bossche, Director and Curator of the MuZEE in Ostend Belgium, engage in making selections for a planned traveling exhibition between our institutions in 2020. We look forward to these public exhibits, as well as to the opening of the digital collection, which is expected to become available in its entirety on the UF Digital Collections late in 2019.

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