

Toyin Falola's work has touched upon virtually all areas of African scholarship. The volume under review, *Africans and the Politics of Popular Cultures*, edited with Augustine Agwuele, has many interesting aspects. The introduction does more than it is normally supposed to in the sense that the editors tackle several of the conceptual issues associated with defining what culture really is and the different manifestations it can assume. Accordingly, we are informed that 'culture can be seen as the shared patterns of habitual behaviours, responses, and ideas that people acquire as members of a society. Each generation passes on to the next its tested ways of being and of doing things in the world' (p. 1). In passing cultural values and mores from one generation on the next, the question of documentation and the preservation of knowledge and collective memory come into focus. Falola and Agwuele continually stress that the phenomenon of culture has many intangible dimensions and attributes even as there are also palpable elements such as knowledge, art, morals, and sociopolitical institutions. As such, scholars have defined culture in a multiplicity of ways, some stressing the importance of the more tangible aspects of culture and others emphasising its more abstract features. Recently, culture has been perceived as an integrated system covering political, economic and scientific aspects of contemporary human existence; consequently, a development in, for instance, the political field has profound reverberations in the entirety of society.

In addition, it is crucial to note that, in the definition of culture, there is often permanent contestation between the espousal of culture as a rigid bounded construct and its opposite perception as a more fluid and malleable phenomenon. Falola and Agwuele draw our attention to this when they tell us: 'it is the vitality about culture that motivates these collected essays' (p. 2). Many of the contradictory views on culture have serious conceptual teasers and consequences which Falola and Agwuele attempt to address. Oftentimes, their efforts are satisfactory. However, a few issues require greater clarity. Falola and Agwuele refer a number of times to Johannes Fabian's notion of popular culture but the way they conceptualise it is bound to raise some eyebrows. Going by their understanding of Fabian's classification, there is an opposition between a modern, elitist view of culture and a tribal and mass-oriented notion of culture. This equation immediately brings forth the issue of class in the dynamics of culture. An Enlightenment or perhaps even a Victorian conception of culture would demarcate cultural types into high and low cultures. Within this conception, popular culture would be consigned to a degraded and inferior status. In other words, within those elitist frames of reference, popular culture would be subject to inferiorisation. In class-conscious Britain, such a view of popular culture would make sense.

African Pop Cultures: In Tuxedo, Starched White Shirt and Bow Tie

Sanya Osha

Africans and the Politics of Popular Culture

by Toyin Falola and Augustine Agwuele, eds.
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However, there have also been concerted disavowals of elitist manifestations of culture in favour of more egalitarian forms such as punk rock, which in many respects was a fervent rejection of the hierarchal class structure of postmodern Britain and elitist values in the production of culture. Instead of displaying reverence for age-old British sociopolitical institutions, young punks showed their disgust for a system that they felt kept them in mindless bondage. Falola and Agwuele do not address this important dimension of the debates on popular culture and how it may or may not have affected the politics of popular culture in Africa. Nonetheless, their acceptance of class as a significant conceptual issue is commendable. Also commendable is their appeal that the images of Africa should be disentangled from jaded and stereotypical prejudices of the continent as a place of despair, disease and death. This gesture alone carries tremendous ideological weight.

In the context of Africa, they argue, popular culture is often analysed within frameworks of high and low culture, indigenous and foreign, traditional and nontraditional, original and non-original, etc. In my view, these distinctions are not always helpful as they tend to lead to ideological dead-ends and also tend to draw attention away from what makes the phenomenon of culture truly amazing in the first place.

Another area of Falola and Agwuele's wide-ranging introduction is their treatment of creolization. Here again, they borrow most of their ideas from the work of Johannes Fabian. Fabian equates creolization with 'pidgin culture'. Falola and Agwuele, on their part, remind us that the key concepts of creolization are derived from linguistics. Fabian's understanding of creolisation can definitely be further deepened or at least supplemented by other views. Françoise Vergès has produced instructive work on the complex nature of creolization that sheds another kind of light on the issue. Instead of viewing culture in terms of pure and impure, she cautions that creolization is a fact of the African past and may not necessarily be a negative development. Africa, in her view, offers a generous site to witness the multiple possibilities of creolization. This is especially the case with the islands of the Indian Ocean, which is a site of migration, adventure, symbiosis, metamorphosis and hybridity. According to this understanding, then, creolization, is not a devalued form of culture; rather,

it is a melting-pot of cultures, a stream of transformation with the ultimate aim of attaining an elusive cosmopolitanism. We do not get this kind of understanding from Falola and Agwuele's treatment. Again, this directs us back to the tension between a conception of culture as a fixed construct and one that admits of fluidity and transformation.

This tension reverberates down to the level of sexual politics and the ever-growing concerns regarding homophobia in Africa. In 2006, the Ghanaian minister for information declared that the government had proscribed a gay and lesbian conference from taking place in the country because homosexuality was 'unnatural'. In other African countries, homosexuality is regarded as 'un-African' and this position obviously concludes that culture is a fixed entity that is incapable of transformation and change. Likewise, Jacob Zuma's much-publicised marriages and endorsement of polygamy in a postmodern context is often described (even by Zuma himself) as an index of authentic African culture. African social existence seems perpetually caught up between an often false politics of authenticity and the obvious necessity to evolve a dynamic of cultural progress. In crude terms, it can be described as an opposition between cultural stasis and authoritarianism on the one hand, and the often intoxicating uncertainties of cultural cornucopia on the other.

The stereotypical notions of culture are not restricted to Africans alone. Western scholars usually reduce African cultural productions to ancient African art or sculpture, which is as harmful as ingrained cultural insularity on the part of Africans themselves. Nonetheless, there are trends that attest to African post-modernity and cultural openness. One way of observing this trend is by examining contemporary African cinematography. Four chapters of the volume deal with film and its various cultural implications. Film is a truly global cultural medium that has succeeded in joining the most disparate cultural histories and patterns. In Africa, as in other continents and regions, film is a source of enlightenment, entertainment, the depiction of quotidian experience, debates on sexual health and politics and the production of fresh cultural formations. The various chapters of the volume bear this out. However, there is arguably a colonialist angle to the contributions on film in the volume. Many of the chapters focus on the cultural power of Hollywood in shaping images dealing with Africa and its peoples. Historically, Hollywood has

been unkind in the way it portrays Africa. One-dimensional Hollywood characters such as King Kong and Tarzan play up common racial prejudices in the West regarding Africans. Within the established constellation of Hollywood signs, the figure of the black subject was a symbol of unmistakable cultural degeneracy. And this debased racial order was often a call to arms for black aesthetics and renaissance. This is a stale old tale that should have been confined to the trashiest of dust-bins.

It is unfortunate that in an important volume such as this, it is relayed yet again for the umpteenth time. Sarah Steinbock-Pratt's chapter, 'Lions in the Jungle: Representations of Africa and Africans in American Cinema', fails to move beyond the old colonialist tropes. On the other hand, Celeste A. Fisher's chapter, 'Reclaiming the Past or Assimilationist Rebellion? Transforming the Self in Contemporary American Cinema', attempts to do better. The inclusion of chapters such as these two becomes problematic for the scope of the project. First, it raises serious questions about the meaning of Africanity. Both authors are concerned with how stereotypical ideas regarding perceptions of blackness are packaged and recycled in American cinema. The point, is, what does this have to do with the popular imagination in Africa? This question is hardly addressed, let alone answered.

One finds it curious that, in a volume that boasts four chapters on film, none deals with the popular Nigerian home video. The Nigerian film industry is the third largest in the world after Hollywood and Bollywood; hence the term Nollywood. Nollywood is not only a largely African invention but also one that traces a trajectory every bit as singular and legendary as Hollywood. So, one finds it doubly strange that none of the chapters addresses the singularity of this unique cultural configuration. Instead, a great deal of attention is spent on analysing the consumption of non-African movie cultures by Africans or the portrayals of Africans in Western films. Surely, these are rather oblique angles to adopt and are therefore secondary to the accomplishments of contemporary African cinematography.

A few of the chapters are simply excellent in exploring how collective psyche is shaped by powerful cultural forces. Asonzeh Ukah's 'Reverse Mission or Asylum Christianity: A Nigerian Church in Europe' is an eloquent depiction of transnational Pentecostalism. Asonzeh focuses on the globalisation of the activities and reach of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), whose formative story is as legendary as its global spread. The church was founded by Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi in the early 1950s after he was excommunicated by the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim. When he died in 1980, Enoch Adejare Adeboye, who holds a doctorate in mathematics, was appointed as his successor. Adeboye continues to head the church and, under

his tenure, it has grown from a local Nigerian phenomenon into a truly transnational organisation. Asonzeh traces the history of this amazing transformation, the church's *modus operandi*, its organisational structure, the politics of ethnicity within the fold and its modes of insertion into a host country, in this case the United Kingdom. In attaining its remarkable level of transnationalism, the church has had to adopt the language and image of international marketing. Asonzeh uses 're-branding' to characterise this manoeuvre. In addition, the church continues to support the ordination of well-educated professionals within it and, as such, this has transformed its demographics.

The church's hierarchy truly believes that its central mission is to spread the gospel across all nations. It has accordingly devised a wide variety of means to entrench itself in what would ordinarily have been strange foreign lands. Europe is seen as a 'prodigal son' in the sense that it is believed to have abandoned its historic mission of Christianizing the world, becoming instead a space of spiritual anomie. It is therefore the aim of the church to 're-evangelise' Europe. Thus, a reverse evangelisation is seen to be taking place. In precise terms:

The desired takeover of Europe by the expanding RCCG aims at using religion as a transformative ideology and instrument of occupation to control the society by influencing the social, economic and political conduct of a large section of the society. The RCCG regards Europe as a prodigal son who has squandered the fortune he inherited and is in need of rehabilitation by re-evangelization. The new pastors and recruits to the RCCG family are bearers of this re-evangelization. The re-missionizing rhetoric provides a significant spiritual motive to migrate; it also provides cognitive and affective mechanisms with which to negotiate the hardships and deprivations that individuals encounter in the process of establishing themselves in Europe. This narrative of the reverse mission helps the group contest the meaning(s) of Christianity as well as alternative publics and citizenship in the context of globalization. (p.125)

Denis Amy-Rose Forbes-Erickson's chapter, 'Sexuality in Caribbean Performance: Homoeroticism and the

African Body in Trinidad', is another well-written and quite interesting piece. Forbes-Erickson is concerned with latent homophobia in the Caribbean and explores how the instrumentality of performance is employed to displace it in realistic and often graphic terms.

Once again, Forbes-Erickson's work provides an informative avenue to observe the process of creolization at work. Trinidad and Tobago is a melting pot made up of 'slaves, indentured labourers, free people, Europeans, Africans, Amerindians, East Indians, Chinese and Lebanese' (p. 240). It had been a society with a rigid racial hierarchy in which the black subject was at the bottom rung. But it also developed a vibrant carnival culture in which the racialised hierarchy became a subject of mockery and mimesis. Once the carnival season began, it also became acceptable to reverse supposedly normal sexual roles and identities. In carnivalesque terms *a la* Mikhail Bakhtin, under the guise of hilarity, hereonormativity was deflated. Such a carnivalesque atmosphere also provided a platform on which to probe hidden sexual fears, desires and realities. It provided freedom in multiple senses of the word. As she writes:

[...] the Blue Bells parody the European mimicry of slaves in the pre-emancipation carnival, the pretended rape in performance could represent specific sexual abuses. It also simultaneously protests the sexual politics of violence and asserts bodily freedom through transgressive homoerotic desires. For example, bastinadoing, the beating of slaves' buttocks with a stick, is exaggerated and sexualized in pretended anal penetration with the stick, and also be read as homoerotic as well as sexual assault. References to beatings, sexual violence, and homoerotic desires simultaneously contest the historical and contemporary sexual politics to celebrate emancipation and bodily freedom with homoeroticism (pp. 245-46).

Forbes-Erickson's chapter, unlike those on mainstream American cinema, connects more strongly with preoccupations in Africa. It also explores how repressed collective impulses resonate along broad cultural lines.

In their introductory framework, Falola and Agwuele agree that culture is often defined in terms such as high

and low. It would have been really useful to explore more fully the conceptual connections and disparities between mainstream and marginal cultures. Also, in a discussion such as this, the notion of counterculture is equally important. Alongside dominant cultural patterns, there are often opposing and usually smaller sub-cultures seeking to establish themselves. Sometimes, these countercultural communities manage to infiltrate the mainstream. The case of the countercultural movement of San Francisco in the 1960s easily comes to mind. Oftentimes, the countercultural community is reduced by the mainstream to a handful of symbols and figures, which does a great disservice to the products of that highly experimental era that forever changed music, fashion design, art and politics. The staging of monumental rock festivals, the emergence of intelligent rock journalism and underground radio can all be traced to the fringe artistic communities of San Francisco who picked up from where the Beat generation had left off and took it to another level. That generation was also rebelling against the seemingly mindless conformism of assembly production lines and the ennui and psychosis associated with American suburban existence. In opposition, an alternative lifestyle was created which flourished with splashes of flamboyant colours and, in political terms, took a fervent stance against the Vietnam War. That generation wanted to make love and not war. It also resisted the customary rugged individualism of mainstream society in favour of a search for community. Such a rebellious political stance drew the ire of the American establishment.

This movement of alternative sensibilities and tendencies which flourished between 1965 and 1969 was eventually emasculated through the combined effects of psychedelic drugs, heroin, sheer exhaustion and the stratagems of mainstream politicians. It is also instructive to note that this adventuresome artistic community initially was made up of only about five hundred souls. Today, their impact is felt everywhere across the globe. Nonetheless, the spread of the influence of this alternative countercultural community has gone through the filter of institutional packaging in which a handful of figures and rock combos such as Janis Joplin,

the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane are canonised in an abbreviated manner while equally inventive groups such as Country Joe and the Fish, Notes from the Underground and Quicksilver Messenger Service are only known by diligent students of the era. In essence, mainstream society is perennially suspicious of the 'other'.

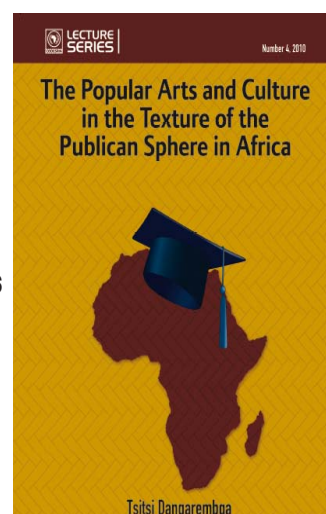
Within the African context, the late Nigerian Afrobeat maestro, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti is an obvious countercultural figure. He was in Los Angeles in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights movement and the surge of the Black Panthers. So, not only was his ideological outlook transformed, his aesthetics principles and sexual politics also became radicalised. In his outspokenness about his unorthodox views, he fell foul of the Nigerian government on countless occasions. It is curious that a treatment of his life and work is absent in a volume dealing with popular African cultures. To some extent, the same omission can be said of the avant-jazz Ethiopian artist, Mulatu Astatke, whose sonic experiments were made alongside departures from conventional form by the likes of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk. These experiments were conducted in search of release from often decadent as well as obsolete mainstream cultural traditions.

The volume would have been more fulfilling than it already is if it had included this significant angle. Falola and Agwuele set a broad template in their introduction to the essays in the volume. They refer to the usual debates concerning culture framed in terms of traditional versus nontraditional, indigenous versus non-indigenous, and so on. This framework immediately imposed a rigid definition of Africanity which is in turn deflected by contributions on the perceptions of Africans in American mainstream cinema and sexualities in the Caribbean. These contributions obviously broaden the scope of Africanity and reveal where Falola and Agwuele's true sympathies lie: beyond the lines of ethnocentric essentialism and upon shores that invite dispersal, openness and constant reinvention.



The Popular Arts and Culture in the Texture of the Public Sphere in Africa

Tsitsi Dangarembga
ISBN: 978-2-86978-312-6
18 pages



This lecture plots the African experience in a projectory that rejects binarism and seeks to construct a unitary socio-psychological map of that experience, thereby positing what has been seen to be fragmented in past theorising as a functional whole. It refers to liberal theories of the public space and posits these with emerging continental thought to construct the notion of the 'African not I' as a psychological entity that functions in the mainstream to discount African experience.



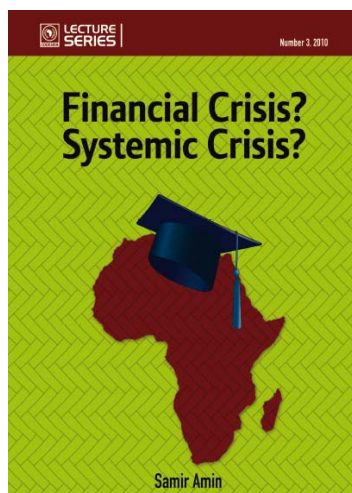
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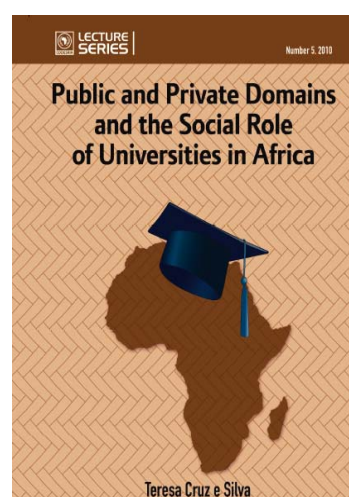
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the Social Role of
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Theresa Cruz e Silva
ISBN: 978-2-86978-313-3
28 pages

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