
**Slide 1:** I am not a comic nerd, but am in the midst of the archival description and processing of a collection of original comic art. The *Papa Mfumu’eto Papers* are the global first library acquisition of an African comic book artist’s manuscript papers, as far as I know. They are a significant, unique archive of evidence for understanding ordinary Kinshasans’ (or *Kinois*) perspectives on a variety of topics during a key transition in Congolese history (the end of Mobutu’s dictatorship). It’s my pleasure to present some of these perspectives with you today.

**Slide 2:** Vernacular perspectives from African primary sources are exceedingly rare. Mfumu’eto wrote for his local community, in vernacular Lingala, rather than reach for a European audience. His popularity grew from engagement with *Kinois* and a focus on their interests, activities, and conversations on the street and in the domestic spaces of his own neighborhood. He kept costs low, but earned a living from his comics. Interestingly, he claims a unique ability to report on the “unseen world” which may have protected him from the consequences of overt political speech under Mobutu’s regime.

Last year, in partnership with Professor Nancy Rose Hunt, I purchased the surviving papers of the artist. As we work together to give open scholarly access to these unique primary resource materials, Nancy’s deeply collaborative approach provides me important opportunities to engage with an international community of researchers in many fields.

While processing the papers, I have explored their scholarly context with dozens of researchers and now I far better understand their potential for scholarly impact (initial workshop in March 2017, Carter Conference February 2018). An edited book is in preparation, for which I submitted a chapter. I will be working with the curators creating an international travelling exhibit in March, for which an exhibit catalog is planned.
Slide 3: These comics are not about black superheroes, but (like the recent re-imagining of the 52-year old Black Panther character) are rooted in and unapologetically celebrate African cultural uniqueness and innovation (Broadnax 2018).

Slide 4: The collection consists primarily of the artist’s creative and production work, with just a handful of examples of his finished booklets. Much of what survives is fragmentary. Materials were stored haphazardly at his home for at least 10 years, overflowing chaotically from shelf, to chair, to floor. As a result, many items are damaged and every image in this presentation has been edited. They are not digital archive images, but are simply illustrations. Archival digitization is planned for the Spring Semester.

For this talk, I tried to organize these slides with a simple 2-dimensional schema along positive/negative and material/spiritual axes. This simplistic organizational frame was an attempt to present the diversity of Mfumu’eto’s text/images, but it literally explains nothing. Perhaps it helps bring attention to some of the more intriguing stories and images. Let’s start with positive depictions of the material world. Here on the left is an example of the kinds of production materials found in the Papa Mfumu’eto Papers. These young people are talking to reporters about Barly Baruti, the Congolese cartoonist best known outside the DRC. Unfinished pages are not uncommon in the collection, offering additional clues to how the artist worked. On the right, this poster evokes street life in a Kinshasa neighborhood, with Mfumu’eto himself selling his comics at the top-left. Self-references and self-promotions are common throughout these texts and images.

Slide 5: Here, three drawings in different media express the artist’s sensitivity and love for his home and people. On the left is Matadi, the author’s hometown, in one of the earliest drawings in the collection (1985?). At center is a sketch from a workshop he documented in 2002. And on the right is an original pen on tracing paper stencil for printing a comic book cover. These production transparencies are small
to keep printing costs low, but you can see that a great deal of tiny text is packed into each 8 x 5” page.

This size forces a level of intimacy on the reader.

**Slide 6:** Most of the Mfumu’eto covers are either one color of ink or *bichromatic*, but these 3-color images give a sense of excitement that enhances the thematic idea: Congolese youth engaged and participating with global entertainment culture and technology.

**Slide 7:** Architect/urban anthropologist Filip de Boeck pointed out at the Carter Conference in February that these images are not imagined fantasies, but realistically depict homes in an elite neighborhood of Kinshasa. They offer readers vicarious access to exclusive spaces and perhaps give every day *Kinois* a sense of belonging to modern, global culture.

**Slide 8:** As I noted earlier, Mfumu’eto is one of very few African artists who earn a living from comics, which may be due in part to his willingness to incorporate advertising and product placements into his work. He also very commonly promotes himself: *Faaa* is a nickname Mfumu’eto uses as you can see on the left in an advertisement for bottled water. At right is a poster template that features a happy, unified community. The bulk of the collection materials are from the 1990s when Congo was in extreme, violent crisis. I find the image of the child soldier among these community leaders unsettling. It’s hard to miss the strangely dressed European television crew filming the scene.

**Slide 9:** Moving to the negative aspects of material life. This draft pencil drawing, titled “African girls’ education is forfeited” depicts a chronically ill child missing school, with more reasons voiced by her mother in French below.

**Slide 10:** These images are from *Muan’a Mbanda*, a popular series with a Cinderella story that tells mothers to not mistreat the children of “rival” (co-wives). The middle and right images also demonstrate a common production technique employed by the artist: re-using elements of drawings with modification for different projects.
Slide 11: These original inked transparencies depict violence in the Congo war (left) and terrorism related to the Gulf War (right). Saddam Hussein wears a beret at the bottom of the page in the center… comic cells relating to global events often include text in French.

Slide 12: I’d like to show some examples depicting Positive aspects of the unseen world... One of the earliest paintings in the collection, a blue Helowa is a “being of light from the 5th, 6th, and 7th dimensions.” Extra-terrestrials in the collection are depicted in just this single page of sketches and one printed page (on the right). Gipson’s quote is optimistic, as I believe Mfumu’eto intends these images to be as well.

Slide 13: These images of the Mamiwata spirit in a futuristic tale featuring a fantastic domed submarine city and a “Little Mermaid” like transformation story are among his most visually imaginative. However, the quote from Mayer brings a note of gravity to these fantasies, suggesting they signify a retreat from the violence and pressures of real-life Congo in the 1990s.

Slide 14: These images show Mobutu in a state of shock on a comic cover, standing between a white European male angel on his right and a devil on his left… and then in a scene depicting his expulsion (from Heaven?) by an angel. In a related story he is shown negotiating with an angel for better treatment after death.

It may be reasonable to consider this a positive depiction of the unseen world, but my simplistic 2-dimensional schema doesn’t help to represent the full diversity of material in the Papa Mfumu’eto Papers. The complexity of many of the stories, images, and ideas are not so easily contained, which is of course why they will likely attract and hold the interest of a wide variety of researchers for many years.

Slide 15: These sorcery ritual images are the first of my final group, negative aspects of the unseen world. The conceptual sketches demonstrate the caricature skills of the artist, while the completed print page on the right (from an evangelical comic) includes additional context for the artist’s moral perspective. Some
Lingala readers, however, suggest that Mfumu’eto distances himself from supernatural topics to protect himself from criticism).

**Slide 16:** This exceptional sequence shows the visual development of an idea from an initial conceptual sketch on a scrap piece of paper, to a draft page layout, and finally to a printed cover. Together these pieces offer material evidence of how the artist worked and how he developed his ideas.

**Slide 17:** The collection is filled with human-animal transformations. Here is another crocodile, a fruit bat (in a menacing role perhaps better suited to a vampire), and an *Nkisi* or spirit speaking from its statue vessel. The perspectives voiced by Papa Mfumu’eto make his *Papers* that much more exceptional as a vernacular primary resource. The materials themselves provide ample evidence of his production tools and processes, which I expect to be a productive line for researchers to pursue.

**Slide 18:** Bernard Tshilome was one of the artist’s most popular characters, interpreted by readers as representing Mobutu before the end of his dictatorship in 1997. The imagery here seems to borrow a great deal from global comic culture and Hollywood movies.

**Slide 19:** Murder, witchcraft, and deceit are not uncommon in these stories and images, so the “dark and stormy night” is appropriate. Here on the right is the damaged early print cover of the comic book (priced in *Zaires*) that made Mfumu’eto famous in Kinshasa in 1990: “The python who swallowed a woman in Kinshasa” was widely understood to represent Mobutu’s endless appetite for consuming Congo’s resources during his dictatorship. In it the Tshilombe/Mobutu character seduces a woman, transforms into a snake, swallows his victim, and then vomits currency.

**Slide 20:** *Concluding thoughts*… There are many more mysteries among these richly evocative manuscript papers. The stories and images are full of energetic creativity and work on many levels at once. I have no idea how to categorize this page layout sketch using my simple schematic model. It records a plan for 6 pages of a comic book story of “the very first conscious astral voyage,” after the death of a
Zairian/black man. The note I’ve highlighted asserts that sorcery is not exclusive to Africans. An unrelated(?) inked cell depicts some sort of magical racial transformation, leaving me wanting to know more about the story it comes from. Unfortunately, many of the items in this collection are not complete stories, but represent fragments from their creation and material production processes. Paying close attention to the details and themes of Mfumu’eto’s vision and how he created his comic books affords a chance for researchers to learn more about how everyday Kinois view the world and offer a path towards understanding our mutual commonalities.

**Slide 21:** [References cited].

**Slide 22:** [E-mail contact]. I’m happy to share my draft collection finding guide with interested researchers.