
[Author bio] Daniel Reboussin (Ph.D., anthropology) is the African Studies Librarian at the University of Florida (UF) George A. Smathers Libraries. As an affiliate of UF’s Title VI National Resource Center for African Area Studies and in support of the university’s academic research and teaching programs, Reboussin selects both special and circulating library materials, improving access to print and online resources by offering advanced reference services. He is responsible for the archival processing of unique manuscripts related to the African continent, facilitating their digitization by interpreting scholarly context and creating descriptive metadata to support online discoverability. Dan taught a graduate course in library research methods for fifteen years. He has received national and international recognition for employing Search Engine Optimization techniques to connect scholars with relevant research collections. He served as Chair of the Cooperative Africana Materials Project, an independently governed project of the Center for Research Libraries that preserves and supports access to African-related research materials. Dan publishes and presents in local, state, national, and international forums on his work, including on the Congolese comic book art in the Papa Mfumu’eto Papers, the history of African Studies collecting at UF, twentieth century African wildlife conservation primary resources, and information literacy.

The Congolese artist Jaspe-Saphir “Papa” Mfumu’eto produced self-published comic books from 1989-2007 and is considered one of the most important comic book artists in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The UF George A. Smathers Libraries purchased the manuscript papers relating to his creative work, production, and business in March 2017. The collection is currently closed for research as it is being archivally processed (arranged and described), conserved, digitized, and curated. It is planned to be opened for research later in 2020. The author would like to thank Aurelie Maketa for
her assistance with metadata work interpreting language, images, and cultural context in
the comic books [Editor’s note]

The manuscript Papa Mfumu’eto Papers accumulated in the artist’s home between the late 1980s and early 2000s where he created some of his art, using it in comic book production and other work, then re-used or stored it. With the owner’s permission in 2001, Nancy Rose Hunt collected the papers from his apartment in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).¹ Hunt describes finding them strewn in the artist’s home, vulnerable to loss in environmental conditions unfavorable to preservation.² For several years, she held the papers on deposit and accepted additional materials from the artist. Later she housed them in Paris, providing access to curators of the 2015 Beauté Congo exhibit.³ Following the exhibit close in March 2017, the Smathers Libraries purchased and shipped the papers to UF with generous support from the Madelyn M. Lockhart African Studies Library Fund. Only about 25 complete comic booklets are included in the collection, the remainder representing original sketches, penciled and partially inked cells, adhesive-taped page montages, and working papers relating to the creation, printing, and sales or other business of producing and selling comic books in difficult political and economic situations. The manuscripts now total about 1,650 items housed in three document cases and a single oversized flat box.⁴

Papa Mfumu’eto began creating comic books in 1989 from his modest apartment in Kinshasa, Congo’s capital.⁵ Life in the DRC was perilous during the reign (1965-1997) of President Mobutu Sese Seko, who White names as “one of the most hated and feared political leaders in modern African history.”⁶ Popular culture groups such as Kinshasa’s rumba bands reproduced the regime’s anxious, fragile, churning hierarchies within their own ranks.⁷ Politicians even used the military to pressure comic book artists’ organizations to support the
regime: “youth consciousness and BD speech underlay…military raids on BD artists and associations in 1991.” Despite Mobutu’s 1990 declaration of “an end to single-party rule and the beginning of a transition to democracy,” anyone speaking openly against the dictator before his 1996 exile risked becoming a target for threats and violence.

While the World Bank projects Kinshasa to “become the largest megacity in Africa by 2030,” the impoverished, underdeveloped, and sometimes violent capital does not appear to offer a market ripe for comic book sales. Military raids against comic book artists are an example of how, for more than a half century, DRC was “engulfed by corruption and by impunity for the political elites…institutionalized and encouraged at the highest state levels.” Because of corruption rooted in colonial history, “the DRC [is] one of the poorest countries in the world.” Even worse, following Mobutu’s exile to Togo and then Morocco, “Africa’s World War” claimed over five million lives. Rebel leader Laurent Kabila’s authoritarian rule, established in 1997 after overthrowing Mobutu’s government, ended with his assassination, after which his son Joseph won two terms as president despite widely discredited elections.

As with seemingly everything in Congo, though, its comics history is more complicated than it may at first appear. Most Americans are unaware of comics produced by Congolese, or perhaps any African comics at all, even if many can name a few global best-selling titles set in or inspired by the country, such as *Black Panther*, *Tarzan*, or *Tintin in the Congo*. Some may also be aware of graphic novels such as *Déogratias*, which engages readers in the violent personal and ethnic complexities of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, one cause of the lingering war centered in Eastern Congo. Recent Francophone literature recognizes contributions of both new and recent generations of Congolese artists to European as well as African comics culture. Few non-specialists, though, are aware that Congolese comics and cartoons have been popular for
nearly one hundred years: Congolese comics began to appear in Belgian colonial newspapers during the late 1920s. An “explosion of comic forms” appeared after independence in 1960 and “ephemeral street comics were fairly common in Mobutu's Zaire.” However, until our accession of the Papa Mfumu’eto Papers in 2017, there was no archive of African vernacular or street comics available anywhere to scholars. These are an important part of the record that is, on the continent, a popular and important medium for communication.

Having arrived from Matadi as the only child of a divorced immigrant mother, Mfumu’eto grew up feeling overprotected, but eager to create and be heard. His name, meaning “our leader” in the Luba language, is fitting; though shy in person and prone to occasional seclusion, Mfumu’eto paradoxically desires acknowledgement, granting himself honorific titles such as Papa, the Great Priest, Ambassador, the “famous unknown,” and Emperor. And why not? Despite hardships including difficult, unreliable access to basic supplies such as pens, ink, and paper, as well as presses and bookstores for distribution, Mfumu’eto estimates that he circulated one hundred thousand copies of his comic books.

In fact, during his fifteen-year career, the artist may have distributed over one million comic books, creating, printing, and distributing them from home. The Revue Mfumu’eto became the best-selling comic in Congo up to that time. However, while writing almost exclusively in Lingala strengthened his ties to the community, it limited growth into wider markets, isolating him from international audiences. A few promotional items and notices in the Revue Mfumu’eto comic provide evidence that he sold comics in the Republic of Congo and perhaps in Angola. He directly addressed Brazzaville readers in print and promoted some of his work in Portuguese. He also included French text in stories where the subject is a global event or location (such as the Iraq War in 2003 or depicting characters traveling abroad), and to reflect
global culture in local usage (song lyrics, advertising, imported products). International attention, largely and unfortunately, only came to recognize the artist after he retired from creating comic books. He began to focus on painting for European art markets in the early 2000s.

With one of his earliest titles, Nguma a meli mwasi na kati ya Kinshasa (“The python that swallowed a woman in Kinshasa”), Mfumu’eto seized readers’ attention in 1990. Only the damaged front cover and a two-page spread of this booklet survive in the Mfumu’eto Papers, illustrating the gory climax of a story in which an affluent playboy seduces a young woman, takes her home against her will, and transforms into a python. The huge snake swallows his victim. In the next issue (for which fans had to wait while the artist produced enough copies to meet demand), he vomits her remains as cash. Kinois (Kinshasan) readers were shocked, though surely many recognized traditional sorcery idioms of “ingestion, power, wealth, and malevolent human agency…implicit in this cartoon.” These represented both “everyday realities” in then-Zaire, as well as Mobutu’s ravenous appetite for its resources, greedily gorging upon ill-gained wealth while ordinary citizens suffered. The meme of a snake vomiting money was broadly familiar to Kinois, who may attribute any business success to sorcery.

Despite censure for this earlier story and temporarily moving production to Inkisi, the artist later produced several more openly political comics of spiritual retribution after the former dictator’s death:

While the foreign press amused itself criticizing the Supreme Leader’s extravagances, none of the local press at the time dared to caricature Mobutu. Only late in the regime did cartoonists take aim against the deposed former Marshal-President. Comic artist Mfumu'Eto, a graduate of the Institut des Beaux-arts de Kinshasa, was chief among them. He won great notoriety among Kinshasa’s poor neighborhoods with his self-published comic books on cheap paper, which he distributed himself in the markets and streets of the capital. One of his most famous series ridiculed the former dictator, who appeared as a satanic figure in Satan Aboyi Mobutu, Mobutu alingi asala Satan coup d’État? and Mobutu a ceinter mwasi na 2e monde.
The audacity to mock Mobutu, even during the dictator’s waning years when he was “forced to allow a degree of freedom of expression,” earned Mfumu’eto wider attention. He found his audience among the ordinary residents of his neighborhood, becoming popular among “the literate, the semi-literate and the illiterate, kids and women, academics and priests...the Congolese masses as a whole.”

Mfumu’eto offered veiled satire against despised politicians, splashed rumored news of supernatural animal transmogrifications, and reported sensational murders graphically across his covers in tabloid style. He cultivated intimacy with readers through stories set in their neighborhoods, reflecting local speech, familiar relationships, rumors, events, beliefs, and gossip particular to Kinshasa. As Geenen notes, “in his comics, the oral is textualized.” He also remained in his community, where he claims the ability to move about invisibly, offering insight to relationships between women and men, children and parents, and society as a whole by always being ready to “shoot” daily events with his “bio-camera” (visual memory, combined with his cartoonist’s skills) without needing special equipment, or ever missing a shot. “He remains true to his readers, captivating them with stories drawn from the reality of their everyday existence.”

Among his most popular, long-running series was Mwan’a Mbanda (literally, the child of a rival, based on domestic conflict in polygamous households). It features two half-sisters in Cinderella-like stories, depicting one as overworked and malnourished while the other is a spoiled, well-fed pre-teen who occupies herself with an abundance of small luxuries. In a personal response to one fan’s letter, the artist offers its origin as personal, based on his daughter’s friend: “I’ll tell you now that this famous story is made of nothing more than the tears shed from my broken heart.” Reaching out to his neighboring Kinois in Lingala and reporting
local, national, and global events as he and fellow residents experienced them, Mfumu'eto “offers a glimpse of the disorderly order that rules the city” to both them and to us.39

Despite his self-aggrandizing honorifics, lurid comic book covers, and a penchant for “mysticism” or supernatural stories,40 the artist’s approach to the business of making comics for a living was strategic and intentional. He produced small, inexpensive booklets on recycled paper, selling them “for the price of a loaf of bread.”41 Employing a lean workflow, he quickly followed up on popular stories and incorporated current events as they unfolded. He personally sold his comics in local streets and markets (where others also sold—and resold—his booklets):

He is also an author with a knack for local storytelling (the kinoiseries) 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,42 and distributed informally in Kinshasa's market place. 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.43

He was accessible and responsive to readers, sharing his personal preferences (much like a dating profile) along with his phone number as well as his home and e-mail addresses in print to encourage fan interaction. “As for customer relations, he has it down to a fine art.”44 In many issues, he crams individual messages in page margins and the gutters between cells to his Mfumu’etophile fan club members, occasionally explaining his absences from publishing and offering personal updates.45 In one letter among his papers, he shares that he reads fan letters before going to sleep and promises a “secret message” to the writer in future issues.46

Counterintuitively, he seems to have turned the diminutive size of his booklets into an advantage: the miniscule size and density of his writing draws readers in close, as do his drawings, making the enjoyment of his booklets an intimate experience. Frequent mention of the
poor quality of his drawings may be due to his use of cheap production materials, or to the likelihood that foreign collectors could find only well-used copies, masking his abundant artistic skill to the less observant, including Geenen. A close look at his original pen and ink text and drawings reveals professional quality, technically skilled work in most cases.  

Langevin notes that “very few [comic] authors in Africa can make a living from their art,” but that Mfumu’eto is different: the artist says he did so without depending on patrons or other work. Nevertheless, one imagines the difficulties he faced, as readership grew, in selling enough of his modestly priced comic books to earn a living and, as a single parent, provide for his daughter. His papers document many examples of his work creating comics, posters, and illustrations (for the covers of school notebooks, for example), some of which included his popular characters. There are original drafts, drawings, and print advertisements, business plans with layouts for advertising, product placements, job quotations, proposals for exclusive character appearances, and several work agreements including lists of materials and pricing for supplies needed, including estimates for print runs and other costs.

Readers found frequent product placements and advertisements for clothing, toothpaste, bottled water, soda, and beer in their comic books. Mfumu’eto leveraged his skills and popularity to promote events at the Halle de la Gombe, the French Embassy’s cultural center in Kinshasa, where popular bands performed and others presented a variety of entertaining and educational events. Less clear is his relationship with public figures. Mfumu’eto included well-known personalities in his comic books, offering readers vicarious participation in their lives through his comics. He illustrated the lyrics of popular songs such as Werrason’s “Chantal Switzerland” [sic] and Frère Mente’s “Tala Tina” with his own stories. He may have produced these to sell to fans
at performances.\textsuperscript{51} Social media postings demonstrate that Mfumu’eto continues to interact with popular culture figures from time to time.\textsuperscript{52}

An important complement to the vernacular perspective of urban life in Kinshasa provided by the papers is abundant physical evidence of the artist’s creative and production materials and processes. There are several sequences showing the development of a creative idea from early pencil sketches, through draft layouts in pencil or ball point pen, to partially inked cells on penciled pages, and finally to the printed page. The creator frequently cut cells or parts of pages and covers to paste into subsequent work. Proof prints, misprints, and overruns offer evidence of the printing process. There are many examples of printer’s spreads, cover design sketches, and production work at all stages of the paste-up and production process. In some cases, draft images in pencil or series of the same image on different papers or formats do not translate well on digital media, but offer profound insight into the production process for researchers who view the original work on site.

Because Mfumu’eto kept his work inexpensive by using cheap materials and modest production, many observers appear to have missed the artist’s remarkable skill with the pen. While most writers consider his printed booklets as “street” comics or fanzines, these terms may underestimate the quality of his work. In a review of the 2015 \textit{Fondation Cartier} exhibit, which included selected examples of his work, two critics saw beyond the recycled paper: “The comics of Papa Mfumu'Eto 1\textsuperscript{er} were certainly among the most fascinating attractions of the exhibition, not only because of the quality of the drawings but also because of the social commentary they provided.”\textsuperscript{53} His skill is most noticeable in original ink drawings, as graphic designer and printer Jan Čumlivský points out: the quality of his pen work places him among the best comic artists.
Despite surface similarities, we should not consider his work only as an example of street comics or zines.\textsuperscript{54}

Scholarly collaboration has been a critical element in contextualizing this global first accession of an African vernacular comic artist’s original papers by any library. In early 2016, Hunt first expressed her intent to collaborate with the Smathers Libraries to bring the Papa Mfumu’eto Papers to UF’s African Studies Collections under my curation. She took interest in them in 2001, developing a trusting relationship with their creator and saving them from the “roaches and mice” in his Kinshasa neighborhood.\textsuperscript{55} In 2017, she fulfilled her promise to find an academic library to house them. Together, we negotiated a collaborative curatorial and scholarly vision for the papers to preserve their materiality and content, make them accessible for research, and to build a scholarly context for their study and interpretation. We are still working to complete our substantial first steps in rectifying the situation, noted by Langevin, that there is no publicly accessible archive for the scholarly examination of African comics. Vernacular or street comics are even less available and more ephemeral to scholars interested in their independent commentary on African urban life:

Across the continent, comics are a medium of communication. They most often sneak into newspapers as cartoons, adding a note of humor or quirky perspective on the news. In rarer places, comic booklets circulate, albums appear, or specialized magazines appear, often as ephemeral publications testifying to a constantly renewed desire to express oneself through comics. Yet the literature on the subject is almost non-existent. A systematic census of publications and publicly accessible archive bringing together examples of this flexible and reactive mode of expression is still lacking. Hence the difficulty of taking stock of the state of comics production in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean. Looking at the map of African comics, we can nevertheless see certain places that mark a real commitment to this tradition, supplied regularly by publications and events.\textsuperscript{56}

Soon after our accession of the collection, the papers became the focus of several small group, hands-on workshops, beginning just three weeks following their purchase, and later with a more
formal encounter as part of UF’s 2018 Gwendolen M. Carter Conference. Both before and since, we hosted a series of individual consultations with a diverse array of local, national and international scholars and practitioners. Together, these collaborative archival encounters have made important contributions to our understanding of the scholarly context of the papers, facilitating their arrangement and description, making them more accessible and valuable to African Studies and comics scholars, artists, graphic designers, and many others. Collaboration has been immensely helpful for curation as we create item descriptions and other metadata to enhance online open access to the digital collection, which will be available at UF Digital Collections (UFDC). We plan to begin digitization during Spring Semester 2020, with public online accessibility expected to be available later in 2020.

1 Formerly Zaire from 1971-1997, prior to independence the DRC was colonial Belgian Congo. These names distinguish it from neighboring Republic of Congo, the former colonial French Congo, also known as Congo-Brazzaville. Informally, many simply call both Congo, but here the term is used only for DRC.
2 Nancy Rose Hunt, email message to author, September 26, 2018.
5 Reboussin, 2019. The artist’s papers include earlier comic books, but his breakout year is rightly reported as 1990 by Christophe Cassiau-Haurie, Histoire de la bande dessinée congolaise: Congo belge, Zaïre, République démocratique du Congo (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), 182.
8 Nancy Rose Hunt, “Tintin and the Interruptions of Congolese Comics,” In Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin, eds., Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 110. Note that, in French, Bandes dessinées (or BDs) are comics. The term also refers to comics drawn in ligne claire (clean line) and other specific styles originally popular in Belgian Wallonia and among other French speakers.

La caricature face à la dictature en RDC


Reboussin. A private collector in Europe owns about 260 complete Mfumu’eto comic books, an important complement to the papers at Smathers Library. We are negotiating to provide online open access.


23 Jan Čumlivski, during consultation with the author, March 26-27, 2019. Items in the manuscript collection include penciled calculations for offset print runs of ten-to-fifteen thousand. The Prague-based printer and graphic designer roughly estimated that if two hundred issues were printed in runs of five thousand, Mfumu’eto might have circulated one million print copies during his career.


26 Examples in the Papa Mfumu'eto Papers include Box 1, Folder 1, Divider 3, Item 11 [Revista Mfumu'eto, Pagina des, Pagina omze]; Box 1, Folder 2, Divider 6, Item 1 [Revista Mfumu'eto, Pagina Sete]; and Box 3, Folder 6, Divider 1, Item 2 [Flyers with “Ler a revista Mfumu'eto” and "lisez Revue Mfumu'eto”].

27 Cassiau-Haurie, Dictionnaire de la bande dessinée d'Afrique francophone, 232.


30 Parisel and Nzuzi, “Kinshasa: Walls that speak,” 51-52.


34 Mfumu'eto, “Beauté Congo Entretien avec Papa Mfumu'eto 1er,” 2015; see also Nancy Rose Hunt, “Papa Mfumu'eto 1er, star de la bande dessinée kinois.” In Magnin, Beauté Congo, 269.
35 Geenen, “‘The much celebrated unknown.’”
36 Mfumu'eto, “Beauté Congo Entretien avec Papa Mfumu'eto 1er.”
39 Geenen, “‘The much celebrated unknown.’”
40 Mfumu'eto, interview in Aghekian and Ntimasiemi, Kinshasa Mboka Te.
41 Ibid.
42 Jan Čumlivski and I found no evidence of photocopied issues among the Papa Mfumu’eto Papers during our consultation, March 26-27, 2019.
44 Geenen, “‘The much celebrated unknown.’”
45 Ibid.
46 Mfumu’eto, Letter to Miss Violette.
49 Mumbu, “Radio-trottoir kinois en BD.”
50 Mfumu'eto Papers, Box 1, Folder 7, Divider 6a, Item 4; Box 2, Folder 5, Divider 4a, Item 1.
52 See Werrason video interview on the “Fa-a Mfumu Eto” page, Facebook, October 20, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/jaspesaphir.mfumueto