COMIC IN SWAHILI OR SWAHILI COMIC?

ROSE MARIE BECK

Introduction

As a subject of scientific interest „Western“ comics (i.e. the European, American, Japanese comics) have after all achieved some recognition. From its beginnings in the 1890s the comic has been an economic success, and gradually gained importance in the contemporary cultural production of „Western“ societies. However, only with a development that finally met the tastes of a „Western“ intellectual readership, scientific treatment of comics became academically acceptable. Albeit still somewhat marginal and looked down upon a bit, studies on comics gain in quality, and do no longer waste time and energy in self-defensive preambles.\(^1\) Compared to the Western market, the production of comics in Africa is negligible, and therefore its scientific reception almost nonexistent.\(^2\) This article, however preliminary,\(^3\) for the first time takes interest in an African comic, specifically the comics in Swahili, as a subject of its own right.\(^4\) Under the guise of discussing the question given in the title on two levels, I intend to present as much material as possible (without stretching copyrights too far),\(^5\) to give a short introduction to the theory of the comic, and to raise the reader’s interest for the Swahili comic.

---

\(^1\) Probably this is a specifically German discourse, e.g. Krafft 1978, Hünig 1974 (both: introduction), Kagelmann 1991:47ff. The difficulties to accept the comic as an aesthetic expression, leave alone an art form is often expressed, and discussed until today (see for example Grünewald 1991, Strobel 1993, in the Anglosaxon context e.g Faust 1971, critically discussed in Abbott 1986:155) The main arguments that are put forth in defense of one’s interests are pedagogical (how bad/good the comics are for kids), sociological (who reads comics and why, imposing a „view from below“), rarely personal (how much I am interested in comics). I find problematic that scientific legitimation becomes unnecessary only with the aesthetic recognition of the comic by a „Western“ intellectual readership (that I consider to be at the core of cultural discourses).

\(^2\) Lent’s bibliography, one of the most renowned reference works, contains - albeit incomplete - 16 pages on Africa, including Northern and Subsaharan Africa (1996:1-16). Andreas Knigge, one of Germany’s best informed comic-lecturer (at Hamburg: Carlsen) is able to fill exactly half a page (~one column) in his last book on comics (1996:238). For titles not contained in Lent (1996) see my bibliographic appendix.

\(^3\) I did not have the opportunity to conduct research in East Africa (Dar es Salaam, Nairobi) on the topic of comics. However, my bookshelf contains about half a meter of Swahili comics, which I take as material basis for this article, plus some scattered discussions and interviews with artists and readers. Earlier versions of this paper were held at a workshop in Naples, 1 April 1998, and at the Afrikanistentag in Cologne, 19-21 Sept 1994 (Beck 1994). This article is further influenced by the many enlightening discussions on the topic with Fritz Serzisko and the students of the course we held at the Institut für Sprachwissenschaft at the University of Cologne in 1997. Many thanks also to Werner Graebner and Thomas Geider for friendship, encouragement and practical help.

\(^4\) Most articles that feature comics, are interested in historical, narratological, linguist, popular-culture, mass-media etc aspects, but not in the comic as a comic. An exception may be Mbembe 1996, 1997. The Swahili comic has been mentioned very rarely, e.g. Graebner 1994, Gikonyo 1986

\(^5\) All copyrights remain with the artists/authors.
The first level of discussion focuses on a global perspective. Here I take a more theoretical stance, concentrating on the comic as a narrative medium, reflecting its inventory of representation and questions of reading. The Swahili comic is considered before the background of a “Western” comic. My main question is: What does the Swahili comic do that other comics do as well? The second level focuses on the local perspective. I look at the setting in which the comic occurs, i.e., Swahili-speaking, urban East Africa, and take into consideration the cultural embedding of the medium: What can the comic do in East Africa that other media or genres of cultural expression (music, TV, literature, painting, theatre, etc.) do not or can not do? What is new about the comic in East Africa?

A very short and rather incomplete history

The comic must have reached East Africa quite early. Around 1907 the comic strip had conquered a fixed space in the European and American newspapers, scarcely a decade after its “invention”. In East Africa the first colonial newspaper - The Standard - was started in Mombasa in 1902 (Gikonyo 1986: 186). However, for a long time, the strips were imported from the big newspaper syndicates and were not locally produced. Among the most important strips, that are featured until today, were and are Andy Capp, Eb and Flo, Popeye, Hagar the Terrible, as well as series such as Modesty Blaise, Flash Gordon and Donald Duck. In 1973 one of the first leisure magazines, Joe (a figure invented by Hilary Ng’weno and illustrated by Terry Hirst for the Daily Nation, cf. Frederiksen 1991:136), featured the first locally drawn comics by Edward G. Gitau (ibid.:140). Edward Gitau is the creator of Juha Kalulu, for which he is still well known until today (ibid.:140-142). According to Gitau himself, he started drawing comics as early as the 1950s. It is about from the 1980s onwards only that I would speak of an emerging East African comic scene with such prominent artists as the Ugandan James Tumusiime (Bogi Benda, see Fig. 1), Philip Ndunguru (Ndumilakuwili/Kazibure) or David Kyungu (diverse, mostly cartoons).

Gikonyo writes in his survey of Kenyan comics about the first really successful comic figure, Bogi Benda:

---

6 It is generally agreed upon that the „first“ comics - stories told by a sequence of pictures and published in the print media - were introduced around the 1890s. The first comic figure that spoke from within the panel (in contrast to figures that were cited below the picture, as, for instance, with Rudolphe Töpffer or Wilhelm Busch) was „Mickey Dugan“ from the series „At the Circus in Hogan’s Ally“, later and better known as the „Yellow Kid“, drawn by Robert Outcault, printed in the New Yorker Sunday World (Knigge 1993:16f, Zehnder 1996:121/239 Havas & Habarta 1993:28). Other well known early strips were the „Katzenjammer Kids“ by Rudolph Dirks. and „Little Nemo“ by Winsor McCay. Scott McCloud, in accordance with most historians of the comic, counts among the important forerunners of the comic Egyptian hieroglyphs, Pre-Columbian picture manuscripts, the Bayeux tapestry (England 11th century), medieval religious painting like „The Tortures of Saint Erasmus“ (15th century), the paintings of William Hogarth (1697-1764), the „Bildererschichten“ of Rudolph Töpffer (beginning of the 19th century) (McCloud 1992:10-17). Other important forerunners were political-satirical weekly magazines like the „Fliegende Blätter“ or „Le Charivari“. „Punch“ all European products (Knigge 1993:15). From ca 1907 the comic had conquered an institutionalized space in almost all important daily newspapers in Europe and America (Knigge 1993:35).

7 Interview of the author with Edward G. Gitau, Nairobi. 24 May 1996.
"Probably the most exciting local cartoon strip (judging by the reaction of the readers in the letters to the editor), is "Bogi Benda", which featured in the Daily Nation between September 1, 1981, and September 30, 1982. The Nairobi Times then took over "Bogi Benda" in October 1982. This cartoon strip is the creation of a Ugandan agricultural economist turned journalist, James Tumusiime. When it first appeared, "Bogi Benda" became a topic of discussion among the readers in the letters to the editor. Among other things, these discussions probably pointed out the readers' interest in indigenous cartoons and cartoon strips and in the process served to encourage newspapers to feature more local cartoons and cartoon strips. When the Daily Nation discontinued "Flook", the editor had this explanation, "Sorry, but Flook died of a heart attack at the end of August. He could not stand Kenya's climate. 'Andy Capp' has moved to another part of the paper and 'Bogi Benda', a local, took his rightful place on this page." (Gikonyo 1986: 1989-190)

Fig 1 Bogi Benda, Tumusiime n.d.

Although Nairobi today has quite a number of interesting comic artists, for instance the internationally renowned Gado (Godfrey Mwampembwa), a Tanzanian artist who draws the political comments for the Daily Nation, Edward G Gitau (Juha Kalulu), Mado (Tom Kelemba, political cartoons for The Standard), Frank Odoi (from Ghana, Radi for The Standard), or Lawrence Akapa (with Chicken n' Chips for The Standard), most of the comic scene is situated in Dar es Salaam. It is obvious, that the comic scene in Tanzania is more lively, more productive, but also that it is easier to find a publisher in Kenya. Quite a number of Kenyan artists were actually Tanzanian, like Gado, Paul Kelembwa, and Philip Ndunguru.

While in Nairobi the comics are produced in both English and Swahili, in Dar es Salaam three decades of independent language policy and great difficulties to import expensive syndicated materials have given rise to a strong independent comic scene that produces exclusively for the local newspapers and magazines. Especially after 1992 with the political and economic changes, an increasing number of magazines appeared, which feature not only comic strips, but also longer comics, horoscopes, (written) short stories as well as political (cartoon) comments.

The oldest, and until today most renowned magazine is Sani (Amri M. Bawji, having appeared in almost 60 issues since the 1980s). Further Bongo (Sabbi L. Msanja, John Kaduma) and Kingo (James Gayo), others are Msanii (Nathan Lwehabura, Oscar Makoye), Tabasamu
(Daudi Masasi, John Kaduma), *Meka* (Ayoub Rioba), etc. Also, a number of independent artists publish in various magazines: Noah Yongolo (*Kingo, Mzalendo, Burudani*), Robert Mwampembwa (*Kingo*), Mohamed Mussa Kassam (*Bata King*), John Kaduma (*Sani, Bongo*), Chris Katembo (*Sani*).

All these artists, as well as the East African comic artists in general, are, to my knowledge, autodidacts and very inventive. The influence of European, American or Japanese comics other than daily newspaper strips (i.e. internationally syndicated material) seems to be rather small. Several reasons play a role, most importantly that albums and collections of comics are almost inaccessible in Eastern Africa for lack of market, money and means. The situation is changing rapidly, with growing interest from "the West", artists being invited to publish globally or receiving scholarships to go to Europe and the Americas. The interests and possibilities to finally make a living out of one's artwork on the one hand, and the aggressiveness and the normative pressure of international syndicates and publishers on the other make me curious about the future of the East African comic scene.

**A comparative perspective**

A comparative perspective requires a common theoretical framework that is agreed upon to be 'a comic'. While literature on the history and the many genres of comics abound, there have been few attempts at presenting an integrated theory. The greatest difficulty of comic theory is the necessity of an interdisciplinary and intermethodic approach. According to their backgrounds, authors focus on the verbal aspects (e.g. Kraft 1978: linguistics, Barbieri 1995: semiotics, Ludwig 1978: folklorist perspective), or on the visual aspects (e.g. Harvey 1996, Hofmann 1970), or they reduce their interest in the comic to sociological aspects (e.g. Fuchs & Reitberger 1971, Drechsel, Funhoff & Hoffmann 1975, Faust 1971) Interesting theoretical reflections have evolved from comic artists themselves, namely Will Eisner (1985, 1996) and Scott McCloud (1993), or Benoît Peeters (1993), Jan Baetens & Pascal Lefèvre (1993) from the Belgian school. Almost every statement on 'the comic in general' can be disputed with a heavy 'but'. This has not solely to do with a lack of theoretical background, but, in my opinion, with one of the most striking and interesting aspects of the comic: The interplay of the visual and the verbal allows for an immense variability and constant innovation that has lead to a tendency to produce infinite levels of (self-)comment and metadiscourse.

Interestingly, from the diverse points of view we can glean something like a working definition of the comic, on which the authors may generally agree:

*The comic is a medium in which a narrator narrates a story to his readers by using a (more or less) fixed sequence of units that consist of both pictorial and linguistic elements.*

---

8 I take the Francophone theorists only marginally into account. Important names are here Thierry Groensteen (Belgium), Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle (Paris/Lyon) and the publication *Cahiers de la bande dessinée*, appearing in Lyon.
comic represents or constructs a universe that exists solely in the two dimensional space of paper and ink, and compensates this reduction to silence and immobility with the invention of specific structural and expressive means, for instance a synthesis of the visual and the verbal, panels, speechbubbles, soundwords, speedlines and the semi-arbitrary representation of metaphors. As a result we are confronted with a medium that must be read according to its own rules, which should be recognized as a specific form of literacy.

In the following I will illustrate five aspects of the comic: 1) reading the comic, 2) sequence, 3) basic units, 4) soundwords as an example of comic-specific means and 5) narration. I start from a general discussion, and then try to see how the comic from East Africa fits in.

Reading the comic

Probably it is most illustrative to start with the question of reading a comic. From an ontological standpoint it has been said that whatever we perceive, we never perceive it fully. We are therefore forced to complete what is missing, or remains unsaid, unshown on the background of a) what we have perceived and b) our knowledge of ‘the world’. For instance, of a cubus we are only able to perceive visually three sides, but from our experience we know and automatically infer that it has three other sides. This operation has received attention from philosophers, literary theorists (e.g. Iser 1975, ‘Schließung’/‘closure’), and textlinguists (e.g. Dressler & de Beaugrande 1981:9, ‘Inferenzziehung’/inference). It is no doubt plausible that we infer knowledge when reading, for instance, a book. Who has not experienced disappointment at watching the film-adaption of a literary work, where the characters do not look at all how we imagined them in the privacy of our reading?

For the comic Scott McCloud has described this by the means of the comic itself (see Fig.2). He explains, that inference - in his term ‘closure’ - happens between the panels. It is, what he amicably calls the „blood in the gutter“ that is understood to flow even if it is not shown by the artist.

---

9 A semi-arbitrary representation of a metaphor would, for instance, be a light bulb over the head of someone to indicate that he ‘was enlightened’, had an idea. The metaphor here is represented iconically, i.e. the signifier has a relationship to the signified based on resemblance. The metaphor, however, has an indexical relationship to the signified, to have an idea. The light shining in one’s eyes (to exaggerate the metaphor) refers to the internal, usually invisible process of having an idea. In the comic the detour via the verbal metaphor has become superfluous by the establishment of the characteristic code of visual metaphor. With the term, semi-arbitrary representation, I try to reflect the verbal origin of the visual metaphor, of the character of the metaphor, as well as its membership in the visual code. For a short and concise introduction to the semiotic terms of icon, symbol and index see Epskamp 1984.
McCloud (or rather his comic-ego) goes on:

"See that space *between* the panels? That's what comics aficionados have named *"the gutter"*. And despite its *unceremonious* title, the gutter plays host to much of the magic and *mystery* that are at the very *heart of comics*. Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea." (McCloud 1993:67, his emphasis)

McCloud proposes a number of different kinds of *"gutters"*, according to the amount of information that has to be inferred to understand the passage from one panel to the other. He further maintains that Japanese comics differ from European or from American Comics in their use of the gutters. This is a first aspect we would have to consider when comparing Swahili comics with other comics. Unfortunately his gutter-categories are far from clearly discernible. Discussions during a course at the University of Leiden in fall 1996 lead to a first observation that the Swahili comic uses less descriptive but more action-oriented sequences.¹⁰

¹⁰ I gratefully acknowledge the discussions with the participants of the course Maud Devos, Thomas Gesthuizen, Maurice Keane, Bart van Loon, Victoria Nyst, Noor de Rood Hertoge; as well as further valuable suggestions and information on the topic from Prof. Thilo Schadeberg, Dr Maarten Mous and especially Prof. Y M Kihore, at the times visiting Leiden from the Taasisi Dar es Salaam.
Sequence/Seqentiality

This is a basic defining criterion for the comic. The notion of sequence discerns the cartoon from the comic (cf. Eisner 1984, McCloud 1993:5-9). The cartoon tells a story taking the space of one panel, while the comic uses a sequence of at least two panels to do so. All authors agree on this criterion. How to describe, then, the way the sequence is organized? It may be useful here, to draw on textlinguistic notions of cohesion and coherence. In accordance with Dressler/de Beaugrande (1981) I take cohesion as the surface-level interdependence of [linguistic] elements that refer to each other according to rules characteristic of a code. Coherence then, secures the relation of the represented to what it represents. In other words, the comic uses signs that sequentially recur in panels, across a number of panels, allowing for breaks in the chain of recurrence. At the same time these signs must be visually similar in such a way that the relation between the signifier and the signified remains stable.
Illustrative for the topic of cohesion and coherence is the comic shown in Fig 3. It is taken from a story on a domestic dispute by Julius Mhilu (story) and Nathan Mpangalla (illustration) (Kingo 003. Agosti-Septemba 1994: 11-15) illustrates this. The Bili Mkubwa, the main wife, who is neglected by her husband in favor of his mistress, is characterized throughout the story.
with a certain hairstyle, expression of face and dress (*kanga*), a characterization that maintains coherence and cohesion, although she in persona does not appear in every panel. The *Memsapu*, the mistress, in the example appearing only once in the second panel of the first page, has a different hairstyle and way of dressing. I have included here the first and last page of the comic.

Fig. 4 *Haki ifanyike*, Frank Odoi 1996: 20

Interestingly, however, the comic has to establish at first its signs, since not every ‘thing’ represented in the comic can be taken as a sign. In this sense Kraft introduced a hierarchical system of signs, to which he attributed different functions: „Raumzeichen“ (background) and „Handlungszeichen“ (signs attributed to action, foreground). Of importance for the
differentiation between signs and comic-signs is the aspect of internal reference (paralleling the notion of cohesion) Only the signs relevant to the story (i.e. mostly, but not necessarily attributed to action) are seen as comic-signs, because they are crucial for the development of the story. In the example above (Fig. 4) about avenge and self-justice, set into the context of the Biafra-war by Frank Odoi, the gun of the soldier, as well as the soldier himself are constituted as comic-signs, while much of the landscape around them is not. While the gun, formerly used to kill, here used to dig a hole to hide some bars of gold, is finally discarded and thus symbolizes the end of the war for this soldier, the tree and the stone serve solely as background into which this episode is visually set:

In contrast to the „Western“ comic, the East African comic does not play with this fundamental rule of cohesion and coherence.

*The basic units of the comic panel and speech-bubble*

The speech-bubble has no forerunners, but is an original invention of the comic (Krafft 1978:82) It is a sign based on *convention* (whereas other signs are based on resemblance/iconicity) The speech-bubble has no ‘meaning’ by itself, but a twofold *function*: a) it distinguishes a certain part of a panel from the rest and b) it assigns this part to a certain pictorial element within the panel by means of an arrow-like element (Krafft 1978:82) It is not independent, but always occurs in the *context* of a pictorial element Furthermore it cannot form a chain of reference of its own, or, in the sense mentioned above, become a comic-sign based on cohesion (though it might produce cohesion, it exists independently from it) The same features apply to the panel-border.\(^\text{11}\)

It is interesting to note, that generally speech-bubble and panel-border are closely related. It has become part of the comic-code for their functions to overlap, for instance when someone is telling a story in the comic, or someone is dreaming, i.e. opening up another narrative level in the comic altogether. Then the panel has no longer square but round borders, thus it implies someone speaking (Krafft 1978:85ff).

---

\(^{11}\) Here I have to concede that we probably have to speak about the space, the blank, that is assigned to a panel as the element with morphemic features. Comic-lexemes have the features: lexematic (vs functional), motivated (vs conventional), independent (vs dependent) and referencing (vs. not referencing) (Krafft 1971:83)
The comic *Afro A2* (Fig. 5) shows quite an unusual interpretation of the relationship between speech bubble and panel. However, it is perfectly understandable. Note that the audience, to which Blaza tells the story of a mentally disturbed girl and how she got sick, appears from behind the first panel on the page (i.e., the story). The zig-zagged panel border resembles the „tail“ of a speech bubble that points at the speaker. Finally, Blaza reappears in the last panel, speaking with a square speech bubble, that resembles the block-comments usually placed at the top or bottom border of a panel. The story thus is reinstalled again, the storyteller disappears again behind the panels and is restored only in the comments. The levels of the story are not consequently differentiated. The audience reappearing in the first line from behind the first panel are put into a panel in the second line. It is also unclear who the girl is that speaks in the second panel, second line, and why. From the point of view of narration I see no difficulty to consider this as audience-participation. However, from the point of view of
panel-form/speech-bubble-form and the transition between the two levels of the story, it is not. The girl appears in the previous panel (1st panel, 2nd line) as part of the audience. This is, by the way, the only example of a backflash I found in the Swahili comic. Apart from very few examples, the Swahili comic does not fully exploit the possibilities of panel and speech bubble.

The material character of signs with special reference to sound-words

I have mentioned in my definition of the comic, that it takes place in the silent and immobile two-dimensional space of paper and ink. But the reduction to this space has consequences insofar as everything we know of the world outside the comic (and be it in our imagination) reappears in the comic as representation ‘only’. Scott McCloud demonstrates this with an intriguing interpretation of Magritte’s „Ceci n’est pas une pipe“ (McCloud 1993:24-25).

According to McCloud, the painting of a pipe is, indeed, not a pipe. (This insight somehow ruins the joke of the painting).

---

Fig 6 „Ceci n’est pas une pipe“, Scott McCloud 1994: 25.

He goes on to explain that what we see on pgs 24 to 25 are ten printed copies of a drawing of a painting of a pipe. It is tremendously interesting to see how he uses the comic to demonstrate its abilities to represent the ‘world’. In the last two panels he - pardon, the printed copy of a drawing of himself - comments on the fact that when reading a comic, we do not hear anything, but are even able to see sound and movement:

The materiality of the signifier vs the immateriality of the signified is conspicuous especially for the representation of movement and sound, that in ‘real life’ appear to be fleeting and momentaneous. The comic plays on this tension between the fleeting and the material and thus provides the means to compensate the immobility and silence of exclusively visual
representation. I intend to illustrate this with the soundwords. Soundwords are given a graphic space in the panel. This is a unique development for the comic, while we could argue that speedlines are merely "adapted" from the film to the comic.

It is important to note that these soundwords occur in the most cases within the panel, but are not part of a speech-bubble. This probably reflects the impression, that they are not conceived of as 'true' parts of a language, and in fact the linguists tell us, that they are only marginally part of a linguist system. In the universe of the comic sound-words are assigned space within the panel and thus attain both the character of a thing and of sound/language. In the following example (from the Senegal) Mohiss, the artist, has reflected on this. See the sound of the car, as it harmonizes with the vision of dust (Fig. 7):

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 7 Mohiss n.d.

The Swahili comic certainly uses soundwords. Sometimes they are from an international inventory of (mostly English) soundwords, sometimes taken from Swahili ideophones and onomatopoei. Look at the following examples taken from a kick-boxing match between Betina and Zena that uses only soundwords taken from Swahili:

![Image](image2.png)
The comic also plays on orthographic conventions. In the representation of language we find many ways to materialize expressive characteristics of speech, like volume, stress, stuttering, accents etc. In the following Paul Kelemba interprets a Somali-person speaking Swahili. Mpangalla & Mhulu an Indian merchant, and Nathan Mpangalla mocks Jamaican English (Fig. 9). Apart from such materializations the texts in the comics generally only 'pretend' to be spoken, but are in fact strongly oriented toward the respective written standards.
Narration

I have, so far, not said anything about narration, the way sequences are formed to tell a story, time and space management, etc. Different genres require different means of narration. An adventure comic, a comic longer than a few panels, relies more on a balance between foregrounded and backgrounded elements/panels, or needs special effects to dramatize the story. The Swahili comic, for instance, uses mainly camera-movements, changes of perspective, a conscious use of panel organization and panel size, and colour contrast (here: black-and-white). So called funnies or gag-strips rely much more on punch lines or punch panels. allow less variation in panel size or panel arrangement and use no backgrounded panels at all. Story-telling here is straightforward: foregrounded, very little camera movements or contrasting elements. In the case of Swahili funnies they rely on an interplay between the visual and the verbal. The following example features Kazibure, taken from Philip...
Ndunguru’s work 12 He jokes about the linguistic proficiency of coastal Swahili people, much admired - and despised - by people from up-country Kenya. Both, the man from the coast and Kazibure (representing the up-country Kenyan), enjoy each other’s limits: Kazibure’s limits to understand Swahili, and the Muslim-Swahili’s limits to produce anything else than elaborate (but scarcely context-adequate) proverbs. At the same time each of them does not seem to be aware of the enjoyment the other has at his expense (look at their faces!):

Fig. 10. Kazibure. Philip Ndunguru 1986

The next three examples show three different kinds of dramatization of showdowns. The first, taken from a comic on AIDS, by James Gayo, extensively uses camera-movement, and a dramatic change of perspective (from inside the house to the speakers outside, and back) (Fig. 11).

12 My thanks to Werner Graebner for sharing this joke - and Philip Ndunguru’s work - with me.
The second showdown, a true showdown between two soldiers after the Biafra war, the one allegedly killed by the other for greed of gold, but surviving and desperate to avenge the betrayal, shows stark contrasts and extreme camera movements (Fig. 12).
The third example (Fig. 13) uses a lot of culturally specific elements of dramatization. It is taken from *Kula kama vimalika* (see above), from the scene where the main wife provokes a public scandal as a way to call upon the neighborhood to settle their domestic dispute. The climax of the story is preceded by a panel with a completely black background (first line, 3rd panel), where the contents of the platter (2nd line, 2nd panel) are announced by the writing on the *kawa*: *Funua ule* - „open that one (. . and see“). The climax, in my opinion, is not yet reached with the next panel, where the men exclaim in reverse-coloured horror, but when we see the (unprepared) food, unexpectedly and blasphemically staring at the reader. Again we find the use of contrast, in this unusual case reaching as far as the speech-bubbles to express
the horror of the figures within the comic. With the inscription on the food-lid and the ‘staring’ food the artist establishes a level that reflects on the reception of the comic, and makes explicit a level of communication between the comic/the artist and the reader.

Fig. 13. *Kula kama vinalika*, Mpangalla & Mhilu 1994: 14.

The last example I use to illustrate a comic in which the artist elaborates at length on the topic of being blue and getting drunk, making distinct use of language (very little), inking technique (ink and water), varying panel sizes including camera movements, and a frequent transgression of panel borders to establish the specific atmosphere. Look at lovesick Beni:

---

13 Without having proof or the author’s opinion, I suggest that this comic may be stylistically more influenced by Italian and French comics than others. Certainly the comic was an experiment. The story designed as a series was discontinued after two issues.
There are many more aspects of the comic I have not mentioned here; and I have only cursorily covered some principles I consider crucial. From the discussion here I draw that though the comic in Swahili uses all the means the medium has at its disposal, it does not exploit its possibilities. At closer inspection, however, we can discern certain properties of the Swahili comic: Its main interest is to tell a story straightforward; it has tendency to foreground the stories, and it has a specific use of dramatizing elements. It elaborates on word play with a
focus on ideophonic and onomatopoetic soundwords and an interest in accents, dialects and sociolects. The variety of stories increases, as well as the use of the possibilities of the medium. At this stage I cannot say anything conclusive about these comics, except that it is a medium very much alive and changing very fast.

Fig 15. Frontpage of Kingo, No 7. 1996, by James Gayo.
The cultural embedding of the comic

It is absolutely clear to me that the Swahili comic, apart from being funny and entertaining, discusses political and social issues. I can only skim this subject, though (Future research being the keyword here) A non-didactic comic on AIDS (Gayo 1994, see Fig 11), another on domestic problems (Figs. 3, 13), veiled references to the elections (Bawji, Katembo & Kaduma n.d [ca. 1995], Fig. 8), not so veiled references to the behavior of politicians (Gayo 1996 in Kingo 7:4-7) are but the most obvious examples. Look at Fig. 15 above, the front page of Kingo: Nyerere points his regent’s scepter to the right, indicating the direction he wishes the car (the state?) to take. Mkapa, however, has put the turn signal on the car to the left. Kingo, in the back, motioning the car to go on, but where to?

The trickster as an urban survivor

From such a preliminary point of view as mine it is probably easiest to explain the affinity between the trickster of the oral tales and a certain kind of comic-hero from the funny, namely the urban survivor (cf. Beck 1994) He is a scrounger, apparently a lazybone, a drunkard, a womanizer, a sly fox (!), with or without family, mostly lacking money but not thirst, mostly interested to get the former in order to still the latter.

In some of the figures I recognize Andy Capp, visually and storywise. Probably Andy Capp even has to be seen as at the very roots of the Swahili comic. I observe common visual traits of some East and Southeast African urban survivors with Andy Capp, but I believe that Andy Capp himself is as much urban survivor, a British kind of modern trickster, as are his buddies in East Africa. Andy Capp is one of the worldwide best known funnyes (Havas & Havarta 1993: 169), i.e. syndicated all over the world. He was created by Reggie Smythe, a Yorkshireman with a working class background, like his figure. Andy Capp is not very old, it was first published in 1957 in the Daily Mirror (England). In her dictionary Alessandrinhi describes him as follows:

"Casquette rabattue sur les yeux, mégot aux lèvres, Andy Capp est une sorte de bon à rien paresseux, alcoolique et joueur, qui passe son temps sur le terrain de football ou au pub du coin, dont il courtise assidûment la barmaid. Lorsque ses virées le ramènent chez lui, il en profite pour insulter et battrre sa femme, sans doute pour la remercier d’entretenir le chômeur chronique qu’il se plait à être. Flo, l’épouse en question, n’est d’ailleurs pas en reste d’injures et d’horizons, et tous deux ne manquent pas de présenter...

14 I use this term here rather polemically. Didactic in this context refers to comics with a moralist undertone often containing a religious sub-text. Since they are ill adapted from the point of view of story-telling by comic, if not amateurish or outright badly done, they are not attractive to local readers of comics. Examples of such comics are worldwide syndicated Bible stories, locally translated by the respective Bible Society, or a comic on AIDS, "Mtego ya Anasa Ajali ya Bw Pande", story by Dr. K Fleischer (!). Illustration by H. Likonde 1992. Tanzania: Ndanda Mission Press

15 Funny is a technical term used for a specific genre of comic. namely one that is short (usually a three-panel-strip) and contains a pointe.

16 According to Havas & Habarta (1993: 169) the name Andy Capp is a pun, playing on (social) handicap. The comic shows a double pun, one with the ‘handicap’, the other at the characteristic cap of Andy’s
un front uni à l'ennemi commun, policier, perceiver ou importuns divers. (“Alessandrini 1978:207).

The presence of Andy Capp in colonial newspapers and later in newspapers in English language has been confirmed by Waithira Gikonyo (1986:189), as well as by Thomas O. McLoughlin in his article on Zimbabwean comic strips (1989:220). On the level of the stories Bogi Benda could be his buddy: Hanging around in bars, treating his wife badly, but summoning on her when there is a need to defend their common grounds. The similar punch-lies might be both a reference to Andy Capp or owed to the genre (funny, gag-strip). There are also differences. Bogi Benda has a job, for instance, he is not seen on the football-field, and he does not beat his wife.

The type of guy with the cap cast over the eyes, probably also the cigarette respectively the flower in their mouths, links Andy Capp with Hoza from Zimbabwe (by Hassam Musa, McLoughlin 1989:228), Joza from Malawi (by Vic Kasinja, Chimombo 1984:3, 12) and Kazibure/Ndumalakuwili of Kenya/Tanzania (by Philip Ndunguru) (Fig 16a-d)
Hoza and Joza obviously have their roots in the local trickster stories typically featuring the hare as the hero. Chimombo in his article "The trickster and the media" (1984) explicitly draws the parallel between the comic-Joza and the trickster-Joza, comparing the comics to the oral stories and finding striking parallels:

... Joza in form and content is not a new but an old manifestation rooted in folklore and mythology. The medium may have changed but the function, with some modifications, due to the contemporary reality, remains the same as in antiquity." (Chimombo 1984:3)

Now here is what he says about Joza:

"Joza’s appearance might not have inaugurated a fresh national wave of hero-worship, however, it did foster a heightened awareness of a fascination for a (sic!) attraction towards the outlaw, the outrageous, or the unpredictable character in society." (Chimombo 1984:3)

"He is very much part of the newly created or emerging urbanities, living by their wits to survive the realities of domineering bosses, fast women, alcoholism and heartless landlords." (Chimombo 1984:11)

Chimombo’s Joza-comic-strips are based as much as the oral-Joza-stories on duplicity (ibid.:4), but also show a mirror-image of respectable human society, reflecting the opposite of the normally approved or expected character and behaviour. Again, the trickster can be used to represent traits or personalities which people both recognize and fear. Further, by portraying him in stories, people can show the trickster as himself outwitted and over-
reached, often by his own wife. Again by exaggerating and caricaturing him to the point of absurdity, they in a sense ‘tame’ him.“ (Chimombo 1984:7, citing Ruth Finnegan 1976:352-533)

And this is what McLoughlin says about Hassam Musa’s figure Hoza:

“A scrawny young black Zimbabwean in T-shirt, tattered trousers, bare feet, and mushroom-shaped floppy hat down over his eyes, this unemployed working-class figure is Zimbabwe’s longest-serving comic strip character. What he lacks in education, he makes up for in smart talk... He has... become a figure of ridicule more given to evasion of responsibility than criticism. He now looks more like that universal character of comic strips... the farcical anti-hero struggling against the caprices of accident and fate.“ (McLoughlin 1989: 227-228).

The description of Joza and Hoza fits the Swahili-speaking Nдумилкувилу/Kazibure very well, but also other tricksters-turned-urban-survivors of the Swahili comic scene. Look at the following example of Kazibure, complaining about a stomach-ache:

---

The urban survivor, although he might be an invention of the comic, had a famous counterpart in Kenyan muziki wa dansi in the mid and late 1980s. He was called „Baba Otongolo“ (Father Penny), in the following excerpt of the song his name is „Fundi Ugali“ (Sylvester Odhiambo and Ambira Boys Band 1987), with almost an identical story:

---

17 After the death of Philip Ndunguru R R. Oswaggo continued to draw Kazibure-strips. Original and strips continue to appear and reappear in Sani until today.

18 My thanks to Werner Graebner who kindly let me have a copy of this disc

"Kazibure", or as Philip Ndunguru, his creator first called him, "Ndumilakuwili", featured since the 1970s in Tanzanian, later in Kenyan Newspapers. Ndumilakuwili/Kazibure is probably the best known comic-figure. And surely Philip Ndunguru, who died in a car accident around 1985, remains to be one of the most influential artists.

The comic is an important medium that features the urban survivor not only in Eastern Africa, but also, for instance, in Dakar (Goorgoorlou by T T Fons 1992, 1993, 1997, Weex Dunx by several artists, cf. Joop 1996), or more generally commented on in Mohiss' "Petits jobs et grôs boulôts" (1997). However, the urban survivor is not restricted to the comic, as has already been shown by the example of music. Ropo Sekoni (1994) wrote about him in the context of modern oral stories from Lagos and Ibadan, stories of fraud and failure. Also from the Nigerian context are Ken Saro-Wiwa’s short stories and tv-plays (1987, 1988) on "Basi and Company". The urban survivor therefore constitutes a theme in contemporary urban cultural production, of which the comic is one medium of expression among others.

Similarities and differences

The similarities between the trickster and the survivor go further than what Chimombo described above. The invariability of the characters is an instance that has been described for the trickster, and is valid for most characters in serial comics as well (eg Donald Duck, Andy Capp, Garfield, Superman & Co., Asterix and Obelix, etc.).

There are many differences, on the other hand. The story line in the comic often ends abruptly with the 'punch-line', which is not the case in oral trickster stories. This change is certainly owed to the specifics of the medium of the comic or the genre of funny.

Also owed to the specifics of the genre is the relationship between storyteller and audience. While for the oral stories this relationship is direct and based on a balance between the authority of the teller and the interests of the listeners, the artists of comics must rely on letters to the editors or on the market for their stories (see Gikonyo 1986 cited above). There are also differences of social esteem for oral stories and comics and their producers. The comic artists usually are not able to make a living from their art. which exacerbates the difficulties to work on comics while at the same time earning an income elsewhere. In addition the comic is not very renowned in the society, teachers, for instance, disapprove of them.

---

19 Interview, Gado. Nairobi 24th May 1996
20 Personal communication Thomas Geider. Cologne 26 August 1998
21 The funny as a genre of comic is closely related to the (mostly oral) joke
22 Interview Jimmy Irungu. Nairobi 25th May 1996
the magazines and reads the comics (apart from the daily strips appearing in the newspapers) I do not have any information about.

Finally I think it worthy to have a closer look at the figure of the trickster respectively the urban survivor himself, leaving out the stories that are actually told

First, the figures have so called 'speaking names' that sometimes refer to the animal world. Here some examples:

**Pimbi** - the hyrax, **Juha Kalulu** - the slow/stupid fox, **Kingo** - ? the opposer (from - kinga act as a scien/protection, fig. contradict, oppose, obstruct, also help), **Ndumilakuwili** and **Kazibure** - the double-ended snake, the one that bites on both ends\(^{23}\) and futile work, **Lodi Lofa** - Lord Loafet, **Kibaka Tunyu** - Tunyu, the pickpocket, **Njomba Nchumali** - Uncle Nail (note the Makua accent!), **Mzee Kifimbo Cheza** - Mister Hitting Stick, and many many others.

Second, unlike the trickster, the urban survivor usually does not assemble a fixed group of characters around him. He operates on his own and does his tricks on various, often nameless counterparts, men and women. A typical example is **Kazibure** (Philip Ndunguru), who has a wife and later also a son, who play only an occasional and subordinate role. The exception is **Juha Kalulu** (Edward G. Gitau) who operates with his dog **Taska** (a reference to the Kenyan beer brand Tusker)

![HUU NDIO UJANJA WA BWANA JUHA KALULU](image)

Fig. 19 **Juha Kalulu**, his wife (a very rare sight), and **Taska**, the dog. Edward G. Gitau n.d.:(1)

---

\(^{23}\) actually a kind of worm with a mimicry-head at the tail. Personal communication Thomas Geider. Cologne 26 August 1998
Finally, the most conspicuous and surprising difference is the anthropomorphism inherent in the trickster, but not the urban survivor. However typical, all the comic-tricksters, all the urban survivors are human figures. They have no animal features at all, except sometimes in their names. With the exception of Juha Kalulu, with his foxy pointed ears (compare Fig. 18). Nevertheless, the respective authors use caricature and specific features to stress the satirical, tricksterlike character of their figures. One example is the cap of Kazibure mentioned above. Another is the protruding navel on the belly of the figures from the pen of John Kaduma, for example as in Njomba Nchumali, conspicuous hairstyles and dresses etc.

![Image of Njomba Nchumali](image)

Fig. 20 Njomba Nchumali, John Kaduma (n.d.):24

It is worthwhile to have a close look at Njomba Nchumali: His dress and accent reveal his Makua-origins. He is made fun of, at the same time, of being backward and uneducated. His dress, hairstyle and ‘weapon’, the protruding navel, his interpretation of writing a letter (very interesting as a comment on literacy and semi-literacy) contrast sharply with the urban context referred to in the background with the two stylish women passing by. The figures mentioned in the comic have ‘speaking names’: Chumuni (Thumni, 50pence), Chukulubu (Screwdriver), Njomba Chikania (Uncle Sikania?).

---

24 Bw Tandika from the University of Naples suggested that this comic might be a reference to the Renamo-guerilla-fighters who took refuge in Tanzania in the 1980s, but were careful to hide their identity by using nick- and surnames. Naples, 1 April, 1998

25 Note also, as in the example of Kazibure (Fig. 10), the elaborate headline, what I would call the equivalent to the “Western” splash-page. These splash-lines are typical for the urban-survivor-genre and form part of the visual code of the Swahili comic.
The comic *Abunuwasi* (Fig. 18) is an exceptional example in the East African context. It is the first East African album in colour, it features one story (*Hekaya za Abunuwasi*), one figure (*Abunuwasi*), one artist (Gado, 1996). The artist of the album is the cartoonist Gado, the political commentator of the Daily Nation at Nairobi, who with this story shows that he is not only capable of drawing cartoons, but also of working out and especially dramatizing a complete story. Since it is based on a literary version of the stories of *Abunuwasi*, the *Hekaya za Abunuwasi* (1935) the comic also differs with respect to its setting. As a trickster, *Abunuwasi* is an exception to the East African continent since he is a person, not an animal. *Abū Nuwās* was a contemporary of Harun al Rashid, a wine-companion of his son al-Amīn (9th century Baghdad) and one of the best known poets of the times (Kennedy 1997:1). As a mythical figure he lives through erotic adventures in the 1001 Nights, but is in apocryphical form present as a trickster in folklore throughout the Oriental world (cf. Wagner 1977).
Though the intention of the publisher of the comic was to make literature easily accessible for children, its success is certainly not owed to the intended target-group, but to the trickster/urban-survivor context in which the album was understood. However, because of the literary fixation of the stories (by Chiponde 1915) and the hegemony of written over spoken language, Abunuwasi was not much adapted to present Kenyan conditions, but retained much of the Arabizing-Coastal Swahili style in the way the houses, dresses and people are represented. Since the context of Abunuwasi has always been urban, there was no transformation from trickster to urban survivor. Furthermore, the aspect of survivor is completely missing in the comic. Even if the success of the album is due to the modern comic context, it is not a typical example of the genre of East African urban survivor.

Instead of a conclusion

From what I have presented here it is quite obvious that it would be necessary to do thorough research on the Swahili comic - which I think is not simply a comic in Swahili - and write a challenging and breathtaking book about it. I have scarcely been able to scratch the surface, stating more than explaining, presenting and showing more than analyzing.

I await the further development of the East African/Swahili comic scene with personal and scientific interest. And my respect to the readers and artists, who use the medium dynamically, inventing an art form that aesthetically transforms their perception of and experience in contemporary urban Eastern Africa into the medium of comic. This is what the comic is all about: An exploration of the possibilities of the three-dimensional world in the two-dimensional space of ink and paper.

Bibliographical references

a) Comics


26 The editor of Sasa Sema Publications in her speech at the official reception of the comic, Nairobi, 24 May 1996

27 Gado has adapted three stories from the Hekaya: the donkey’s cry betraying Abunuwasi, the pot that bears offspring, and the beggar eating the smell of the rich man’s feast. Interestingly these first two stories are cited by Ewald Wagner, a German orientalist, as the most widely spread stories known to feature Abu Nuwas or in Turkey Hodsha Nasreddin (Wagner 1975:47)

28 Under the patronage of Gado as well as the publishing company Sasa sema, with whom Abunuwasi came out as a great success, a number of other albums, also in colour have appeared, ex. Karani & Kham [Kamawila] 1997, TUF 1998. The style of the drawings is clearly reminiscent of Gado. The stories however are much closer to the theme of urban survivor.


Mohiss 1997 Petits jobs et grôs boulôts Dakar.


Odoi. Frank 1996. „Haki ifanyike“, Kingo 7: 18-23


Paul Ndunguru 1994. „Binti wa usiku“, Kingo 001: 10-15


Tunumaime, James n.d. Bogi Benda [Dar es Salaam]: Tanzania Standard

b) Discography

Fundi Ugali I/II Ambira Boys Band. FWD 1 (Tsavo Records) P 1987 (Sylvester Odhiambo)

c) Literature


Baetens, Jan & Pascal Lefèvre 1993. *Pour une lecture moderne de la bande dessinée*. Brussels: Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée (CBBD)


Epskamp, Kees 1984 „Cross-cultural interpretation of cartoons and drawings“, *Media Asia* 11,4:208-214


Harvey, Robert C. 1996 The art of the comic book An aesthetic history. Jackson: University of Mississippi


Kennedy, Philip F. 1997 The wine song in classical Arabic poetry. Abu Nuwas and the literary tradition Oxford: Clarendon

Knigge, Andreas C 1996 Comics Vom Massenblatt ins multimediale Abenteuer Reinbek: Rowohlt.


**Bibliographic appendix: Addenda to Lent 1996 - Comic art in Africa**


Kihm, Alain & Jean-Louis Rouge 1988 „„Les trois irréparables’ de Fernando Julio Comment et édition critique d’une bande dessinée en kriol (Guinée-Bissau)“, *Cahiers du LACITO* 3: 121-177

Mbargwana, Paul 1993 „Some instances of linguistic and literary resource in certain humorous Cameroonianisms“, *Humor* 6-2: 195-222


