

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAYS

CONGOLESE ANIMATOR JEAN-MICHEL KIBUSHI: SUBVERTING THE WESTERN GAZE

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Jean-Michel Kibushi Ndjate Wooto. *Palabres Animées du Griot*. 2017. Democratic Republic of the Congo. French with English subtitles. Studio Malembe Maa. 72 min. \$320.00

The Five Films of *Palabres Animées du Griot*:

Le Crapaud chez ses beaux-parents (The Toad Visits His In-Laws)
L'orange blanche (The White Orange)
Kinshasa, Septembre Noir (Kinshasa, Black September)
Prince Loseno
Muana-Mboka

Central African stop-motion animator Jean-Michel Kibushi Ndajte Wooto (1957–) was born in 1957 in Lubefu and grew up in Tshumbe in the Republic of the Congo just before the country's independence from Belgium. A year after the 1960 "independence," Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, charismatic leader of the Congo's largest nationalist faction, was assassinated with the complicity of the United States and Belgium. The neo-colonial government was subsequently taken over by military dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. It was in the midst of this atmosphere of oppression, which permeates his earlier films, that Kibushi developed into a young Congolese animator.

Jean-Michel Kibushi attended Kinshasa's National Institute of the Arts and was introduced to animation by the visiting Belgian production company *Atelier Graphaoui* (Chirol, 2017). Inspired by the possibilities of animation over live-action and documentary film as "a means to add value, promote and preserve our traditional culture," the thirty-year old Kibushi founded the Studio Malembe Maa (Lingala: "Slowly but surely") in 1988.

As the only studio providing training in animated films in the Congo, Studio Malembe Maa used drawings, cutouts, models, and claymation to construct the past and the present, and to suggest a way forward for the Congolese. In “Animating the DRC: Interview with Congolese Animator Jean-Michel Kibushi,” Kibushi told animation expert Paula Callus in April of this year that he saw the way forward as his struggle “to train artists in the region so that we can tell our stories and share them with the rest of the world.”

Kibushi uses a Bolex camera for the technique of cut-out “under the camera” animation, which provides greater flexibility for the artist compared to cel animation. Using stop-motion, frame-by-frame shooting, Kibushi endeavors to retain absolute control of every component of the 16mm film: character, scenery, dialogue, music, sound effects, etc. He argues that since it is free of realist representation, animation can better express the felt reality of humanity. Animation dominates the celluloid, one click at a time, as compared to live-action film, which struggles to develop options through techniques such as blue screen and freeze frames in an attempt to control the 24-frames-per-second monster (“Animating the DRC: Interview with Congolese Animator Jean-Michel Kibushi,” 2017, der.org/community).

Back in 1991, Kibushi made his first stop-motion film based on a local Tetela folktale, *Le Crapaud chez ses beaux-parents* (The Toad Visits His In-Laws). At his Studio Malembe Maa, he continued to lead creative workshops to develop new collaborative animations with young people through local storytelling and theatre. In 2004, he expanded Studio Malembe Maa to include the *Caravane de Cinema Mobile* (mobile cinema caravan) to bring African cinema to the hinterlands of the Congo’s Sankuru region. Four years later, the European Commission funded Studio Malembe Maa and Kibushi’s work to train young African animators. One of the funded projects culminated in the collection (*Afriqu’Anim’Action*) of eight animated films created under the supervision of Kibushi by animators from the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo Brazzaville (Jean-Michel Kibushi www.youtube.com/watch?v=ithhSMhGn-U). The collection was distributed internationally in 2016 as part of the 8th Annual Congo in Harlem film festival. While Jean-Michel Kibushi is an animator, he is additionally much more: a teacher, artist, and social commentator.

The filmography of Kibushi is likewise much more than a catalogue of animation stop-motion films. *Palabres Animées du Griot*, a new compilation of five of his animation shorts made between 1991 and 2004, represents Kibushi’s growth over a decade as an animator, as a mentor to a new generation of African animators, and as a spokesman for the Congolese. His oeuvre is the history of the Congolese people, before, during, and after colonialism, when neo-colonialism reared its greedy head. The five animated shorts that make up the *Palabres Animées du Griot* compilation follow the chronological development of Kibushi from 1991 to 2004, both as an artist and as a mentor. This review begins with his earliest film in the compilation, then compares it with the succeeding shorts, leaving for the last an analysis of Kibushi’s 1999 animated film *Muana-Mboka*, which is the most developed thematically of the five animations.

The Toad Visits His In-Laws (*Le Crapaud Chez Ses Beaux-Parents*) (1991, 8 min.), Kibushi's first stop-motion animation, is a provocative, unsophisticated, low production value film. The story concerns a Congolese folktale about Toad, who visits his in-laws accompanied by his many hungry friends: Snake, Stick, White Ant, Hen, Civet Cat, Fire, Rain, and Sunlight. Local dialogue, singing, and drumming enhance the crude cutouts to help draw the viewer into the story's location and the journey of the characters. Upon the arrival of Toad and friends at his in-laws' home, a riot arises when the mother-in-law brings out a huge dish of maize with only one spoon. It is here that the childlike tale takes a ghoulish turn, as Fox eats Chicken, Chicken eats Termite, and so on, finally ending with Stick eating Toad. In this dismembering and devouring of "friends" this viewer thought of Congolese President Kasavubu's betrayal of his friend Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, who was consequently assassinated, dismembered, and dissolved in acid. While this reading into the folktale may be a stretch, the film's moral is that for development to occur, individual greed must be replaced by the sharing of wealth, one of Lumumba's tenets for the independent Congo.

The White Orange (Part Two of *The Toad Visits His In-Laws*) (1992, 14 min.) was created on a meager budget while Kibushi continued to struggle as an independent artist, with simple sets constructed of paper and cardboard. In this sequel to *The Toad Visits His In-Laws*, we meet Toad's widow, the grieving Mrs. Toad. With the help of Sun, a directive from Sangoma (traditional healer), and a host of serendipitous characters, Mrs. Toad goes on a quest to find the famous white orange that will return her husband and his comrades to their former life and form. Through her love, compassion, and wisdom, Mrs. Toad restores order, which can be read as a political commentary. The 1991 pillaging of Kinshasa by marauding soldiers, which was likewise the theme of his next film, occurred during the film's production and was a destabilizing influence in the area.

Kinshasa, Black September (1992, 7 min.) is a documentary animation that shows the impact on one community of the lootings and killings that occurred in Kinshasa in September 1991. Probably initiated by the soldiers of the about-to-be-ousted Congolese President Mobutu, the pillaging caused closures of many businesses, prompting some 20,000 Europeans to leave the country. An example of one of Kibushi's collaborative works, *Kinshasa, Black September* recounts the military's September 1991 massacre of a Congolese village as experienced by the community and as told to Kibushi. The scenes are drawn with white chalk on a black background and animated by the children who witnessed the tragic events in their village. This short film uses limited animated techniques, interspersing the children's drawings with drawings by Kibushi. Unlike Kibushi's prior animations, which only allude to the crisis in the Congo, this film is a direct commentary on events in the Congo (September 1991 Kinshasa Pillage <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkdTKWZCuM>).

Prince Loseno (2004, 29 min.) tells the story of King Ngolo, a ruler who lacks a male heir despite having three wives. Prompted by incessant infighting

between Ngolo's women, the first wife insists that her niece be brought to wed the king to provide an heir. The jealous female court sangoma agrees to the proposal when King Ngolo promises that he will appoint her to be the one to raise his successor. Music and two court buffoons accompany the viewer on the journey and the successful birth of Prince Loseno. The film ends with the coronation of Prince Loseno, followed by the demise of King Ngolo. Birth and death are twins in the destiny of [wo]man, concludes the narrator.

With *Prince Loseno*, Studio Malembe Maa produced the most child-friendly, the longest and most sophisticated clay animation in its collection. Lavish and beautiful scenes evoke Africa, and clay figures move and flow across the screen, compared to the crude movements of Kibushi's jointed cut-out figures of *Muana Mboka* and his other earlier animations. Something is lost, raw emotion, while something is gained, watchability. As in all of these productions, the translation into English lacks nuance.

Produced five years prior to *Prince Loseno*, *Muana Mboka* ("Country Child") (1999, 15 min.) has arguably the most developed narrative and technique of the five animated films in the compilation and best illustrates Kibushi's filmic style. For this reason, I place *Muana Mboka* at the end of this film review and provide a more detailed synopsis.

Muana Mboka's opening sequence captures Tortoise, dodging bullets as he passes in front of a mat wall which bears a picture of a country boy up in a tree with a hungry crocodile and a roaring lion below. The boy is the poor orphan of the film's title, Muana Mboka. He rummages through a trash heap, pushing aside a crucifix and a dismembered body, and reaches for a glass bottle. As he stuffs the bottle in his pocket, chirping birds signal morning. Muana wakes up and tells his dream to Jojo, another orphan boy, who asks what happened to the turtle. "Fortunately, the turtle managed to escape," answers Muana.

On their way to work in the city of Kinshasa, the friends pass by a school. As the students enter the yard, the gate closes on the two friends, emphasizing the lack of opportunity afforded to street urchins like Muana. At the market, Muana's pulls a heavy cart filled with barrels as Muziki, his "step-mom," screams at him to move faster. Across the congested street corner, Jojo and another orphan, also working for Muziki, hawk their wares to the passing cars. A siren blares as an ambulance passes by, carrying the dying Minister of Transportation and his wife. When the front tire gets stuck in a pothole, Muana slowly but surely wedges a board under the wheel amid the pandemonium then directs the driver to move forward. As the ambulance drives past him, the grateful wife hands Muana a wad of cash. Muana stuffs the bills into the glass bottle, which he then gives to Jojo for safekeeping. That night Muana is visited in his sleep by his deceased grandfather, who presents him with a tortoise medallion.

On the way to market the next day, Muana struggles with the heavy cart as he passes by a church. Embracing a wealthy man, the greedy Pastor pleads for a contribution, admonishing him, "Don't forget God's Poor."

Overhearing this Muana yells, “Ah, God’s Poor. And me? Whose Poor am I?” At the market, Muziki discovers the bottle on Jojo with the “millions” inside. As she grabs for the bottle, demanding that it is hers for taking the orphans in, a crash ensues. Muana has run off, leaving the cart to be demolished by the car. The policeman concludes, “One less scumbag [i.e., Muana] to deal with in the city.” That night in their sleeping place behind the dumpster, Muana cries, telling Jojo he has had enough of the city. In the morning as the sun comes up, the friends follow the slow, sure-footed Tortoise on their journey to the country. Kibushi ends his urban tale with a cautionary note. “If the tortoise plans to make a long journey, he will do it gently, slowly,” a reference to the persistent spirit of his Studio Malembe Maa.

Muana Mboka is the most developed of the five films for the following reasons: The dense richness of the montage consists of numerous short discontinuous shots that are stitched together into a coherent sequence, allowing for several actions to occur simultaneously to evoke a bustling city. Kibushi’s use of sound, both indigenous music and wild sound, along with sound effects, draws the viewer into the raw environment of the marketplace and marks the beginning of each new sequence. Despite the crude set designs and cardboard characters, the *mise en scène* of *Muana Mboka* achieves a higher degree of realism than the sophisticated clay animations of *Prince Loseno*. Embodying the local culture through the use of commonplace materials, jarring contrasting colors, and a cacophony of deafening, dissonant sounds, centered around the workday of the orphans, Kibushi brings the city to life, while at the same time highlighting the inconsequentiality of its inhabitants. In creating this heartless space, Kibushi allows the viewer to viscerally understand Muana and Jojo’s decision to leave the city and return to the country.

Communication scholar Eric Herhuth contends that animation studios often overlook subversion and reflexivity in favor of the aesthetic experience for their animation projects. It is refreshing to find a director like Jean-Michel Kibushi, who in his development over the past thirty years as a stop-motion animator has managed to combine all three elements. Kibushi incorporates subversion and reflexivity in an aesthetic experience, without allowing one aspect to take precedence over the other in his projects.

Is Kibushi’s work a form of art or popular culture? Can he be pegged as social commentator? Or is Kibushi simply a charismatic craftsman who is able to gather learners (students) at his studio in Kinshasa? I conclude he is a bit of both. While the viewer can read the rich secondary source material on the Congolese independence, Kibushi’s animations ease the journey by contextualizing the global view within the events as experienced by locals on the ground.

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