

Technology as an Unmediated Cultural Broker: Reflections on the Production and Performance of the Humanities and Arts in the Lusophone African Diaspora

**Presented to Panel 144: Africa and African Perspectives in the Global Information Space
At the 4th European Conference on African Studies
(Co-organized by NAI and AEGIS)
June 15th, 2011 – Uppsala, Sweden**

**By Regina Lee Roberts
Stanford University Libraries
& Academic Information Resources
Stanford University**

The smallest thoughts are often the seeds of a great story. Likewise, the background movement and scene activity in user-generated videos that are posted online can become the unintentional story being told by the camera. The rich visual content that distributed broadcast media hosting sites provides, challenges researchers to establish methods for analyzing the seeds of great stories that are often found in the out-of-focus or background scenes of user-generated videos. Media in all formats and distribution channels, tell our stories. Methodologies in visual research in anthropology and sociology combined with media criticism has the potential to engage the scholarly researcher in understanding contexts of lived experience and cultural expressions as they are captured, commented on and promoted in open access and in online avenues for file sharing, networking, and distribution. This gives rise to greater scholarly access and choice.

Documentaries of the past are polemical. This is especially true of documentaries of Africans that portray Africans as primitive or underdeveloped. The relationship of the producer to the object of films has shifted. Access to recording technologies, online file sharing and hosting

technologies allows for greater self-documentation and the expansion of the telling of stories by Africans without the intervention of the “cultural broker” that the colonial documentarian represented. Current access to video capture, production and broadcasting allows for to wider audiences to experience, manage, create and shape their own stories. This also expands the possibilities of broader social critiques of trends in the humanities and the arts.

This new space of access is not free from problems. In the online experience, time is ephemeral and fluid and this sometimes warps our perceptions and understanding. The phenomena of the everydayness and the ubiquity of videos broadcast online makes data collection a challenge. We often do not know the context or intent of the creator of the visual, or the background story to the production. Even when we are conscious of these limitations, as consumers of online content, we are sometime carried by the content, to create new meanings, to grapple with intention, time frames and understanding of the performance of people’s lives and lived experiences as presented in online media forums.

As stated in the abstract, this paper interrogates the role of online social networking applications that are used as platforms for telling a story, such as *Youtube* or *Vimeo*. In a context that relates to the Lusophone African Diaspora, this paper seeks to unpack an analysis of the promotion of user-generated content and their stories. These stories are told through the use of visuals, such as video and photographic postings. To narrow down the field of

research, the topic of *kuduro* (an Angolan popular youth culture form of music and dance) was chosen as a way to look at what patterned relationships can be described from the spread of *kuduro* internationally. Details about the lyrics and the varied lives of the many musicians who have helped this genre to grow are rich and detailed, but won't be discussed in depth in this paper. A detailed analysis of the social and cultural history of *kuduro* is in-progress by Nadine Siegert and she has published preliminary research details in the *Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers* series in 2009. Alisch and Siegert (2011) also recently released an article on the ethnomusicology of *kuduro* in *Norient*, a blog on global music.

Initially other musical and literary forms and genres from the Lusophone African countries were considered as topics for this paper, but the volume of the Angolan *kuduro*-music video genre outweighed the benefits of comparing other forms of self-expression. In Angola, the live poetry readings and comedy of Nástio Mosquito, the photography of Massalo and production pieces and interviews of other writers, artists, musicians were considered but even within the Angolan identity the volume of content is too large for the focus of this paper. The blogosphere is rich with content and connections to broadcast media on contemporary artists and so the selection and narrowing down of focus is part of the research methodology that has to be considered. One reliable source that should be noted here is the online journal, *Buala*. *Buala* is a multidisciplinary portal dedicated to the critique, record and reflection on

contemporary African cultures expressed in Portuguese language (Lança, 2010). As reflected in the articles in *Buala* and many other sources, the terrain of coverage for Lusophone Africa could have included so much from Cabo Verde, SãoTomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau and Moçambique. Certainly the market for cultural expression includes these countries, as well as, the former colonial link of Portugal.

In order to analyze these music videos created by the Angolan youth a framework that is fitting, but which relates to the Nigerian experience of cinema history was chosen as a starting point. It was chosen as a starting point for understanding the projection of a form of spectacle through the use of technology, which in the African context, has a different set of responses. There are different terms of infrastructure fragility and access to tools that Brian Larkin covers in detail in his book, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Larkin describes a history of the film industry in Nigeria and links it to his ethnography of current day producers and consumers of video and film in Nigeria. In his text, Larkin grapples with how media technologies have historically been utilized to incite awe and spectacles representative of power. Access to the film technologies and performance in film is a critical component of power. The filming and production area became controlled by political elites and yet the cinematic events were sites of public gathering and community interaction. The performance of *kuduro* promotion and participation is similar.

Now, the process for entering the international cultural production market has shifted with new open source and online Internet tools. Channels such as *YouTube, Vimeo, Sound Cloud, Audacity* and others populate the technological landscape. This broadens the arena for production opportunities even though the power of production is still a contested area. In this paper, the arguments presented are framed by the theoretical underpinnings from Larkin's study of Nigerian media culture as encoded by the *historical layers* of the rise of cinema and film production during the colonial and post-colonial periods because Larkin's analysis is one that converts the typical teleology of comparisons between the West or Global North and the rest to an analysis of how local people make use of technology how that also informs cultural expressions of modernity locally and abroad. Instead of focusing on the marginality of Africans in the global context, Larkin convincingly suggests that there is much to be learned about the way culture is mediated from the Nigerian example of entrepreneurial self-production and reproduction of film, video and music.

Larkin's case is that Nigerians, and it is possible to argue, that Angolans as well, have experience in dealing with fragile technologies and electrical power infrastructures that are not taken for granted. People who work with computers and in digital media in Africa are prepared for glitches on the grid in a much more flexible fashion than producers in the Global North. Powering up with generators and the use of satellite technology is much more common across urban households than it is for people from the Global North experience.

Infrastructure is always an important factor when piecing together a critique of African media productions. For example, signs that point to local infrastructure are often found in the background images and part of the video representations of Angolan *kududro* performances.

Intertwine the Larkin reading with the transnational performance space that the online experience supports and one is left with a massive task of mapping the geography of shifting access to artistic expression and quasi-participation in the production and reproduction of important cultural moments and trends. Mapping musical and dance trends as evidenced by Rivera, Marshall and Hernandez (2009), in *Reggaeton* and by Niaah (2010) in her book on Jamaican dancehall culture are other complex projects that demonstrate how online tools affect a shift and change contextual meanings depending on how people are transformed by or use the knowledge gained from online exchange and re-exchange.

For this paper, a simple search in *YouTube* for “music from Angola” lead to lead to thousands of links to *kuduro* and *kizomba* music and to the reposting of music videos by longtime mainstream artists like Bonga, Paulo Flores and Yola Semedo and so on. If the researcher follows the trail to find out more about the *kuduro* artists, eventually one sees that the transnational character of *YouTube* channels as a challenge for the investigator. These channels lead to more questions about and “real” filming locations and the

“real” seat of production. This is not as easy as one would expect. Some videos are clearly produced for marketing by paid agents, some are self-produced by amateurs, some are re-mixes and re-used clips that strip the original kurdurists of their creative rights, some are just for fun and represent a folk aspect. In fact, many videos in YouTube are posted as “trailers” that lead researchers (or consumers) to full websites about feature films or documentaries.

In many instances, producers are from the Global North with an interest in promoting Angolan popular music and dance. These “outside” producers benefit from the power of production and access to financial backing, but they also provide a service and an entry point to a wider audience for African performers, that YouTube free hosting service cannot provide. An example of this is the music promotion by French DJ, Frédéric Galliano. Here is the link to a YouTube video posted in 2006, produced by Galliano, performed by Angolans in France. Galiano is credited in the video but the performers are not. However, these performers definitely benefit from the opportunity to tour on a global level. See: http://youtu.be/_MJ9rXpiss4



The attribution problem in YouTube is the most troubling part of trying to use it for research content. Finding out the background story about the production of the video content is at times more telling than the content itself. Galliano has gone on to document and promote *kuduro* on an international scale and has a *YouTube* channel called *Kuduro Sound System*. Other productions are local and there is no doubt that Galliano is informed through YouTube by these local productions himself.

The videos range in their visual quality. The most interesting videos are the ones that show glimpses of everyday life. They are often the amateur style or “folk” productions. This is one area where *YouTube* videos offer a bit of ethnographic detail and some local production power. Like the traveling cinema described by Larkin, *kuduro* has been made popular by the commuter

vans, called candongueiros. The candongueiros blast the music and public performance of dance follow. Sometimes these performances are captured on video. These videos of *kuduro* are literally located in the streets and they are sometime spontaneous. They offer a glimpse of everyday life, of people passing by on their way to work, or of curious children who also take part.

In the following clip, Afonso Quintas, from Rádio Nacional de Angola, talks about the history of *kuduro* and how Tony Amado is the first producer/singer of *kuduro* in Angola. Here is the link to this video in *YouTube*, <http://youtu.be/rUOvgZGit2A> . Quintas remarks on how the form is one that comes from the youth and has lyrics that often critique the social and political life in Angola. In this video as well, what is captured is the spectacle of performance. Just look at this screenshot from the video where a huge crowd can be seen watching on as a dancer performs his moves to Tony Amado's music.



Tony Amado, created and promoted his work from his make-shift studio in the early 1990's and is now internationally well known for this work. By following the social network of links and channel managers, eventually researchers will find the back channels that support a musical genre or focus of the research. As one digs deeper more links are revealed.

Kuduro.tv is one example of the mainstreaming of a “back channel”.

One may wonder how a “back channel” can be mainstream. Online, the temporal boundaries change, as does the meaning of what is local and what is mainstream. When servers that host African content as African are located in

Houston, TX , as is the case for *Kuduro.tv*, then spatial meanings of the production network changes. In order to understand how to use content that is made freely available through a relatively unmediated media system such as *YouTube* it is useful to read Burgess and Green (2009). They write,

“YouTube illustrates the increasingly complex relations among producers and consumers in the creation of meaning, value, and agency. There is no doubt it is a site of cultural and economic disruption. However, these moments of media transition should not be understood as radical historical breaks, but rather as periods of increased turbulence, becoming visible as various established practices, influences, and ideas compete with emerging ones as a part of a long history of culture, media and society.”(Burgess & Green, 2009, p.14)

What is signaled by this comment is that the network of file sharing that is made available through *YouTube* and similar technology is an acceptance of the open transnational cooperation that spreads the dynamic content. The reason for this uptake is not just for the sake of using the technology. It is also reflective of what touches or motivates the human experience and curiosity.

For a history of popular musical production and ethnomusicology of Angola one cannot depend on Internet resources for the whole story. It is more of a starting place, a point of departure. For example in *Intonations: a Social History of Music and Nation in Luanda, Angola, from 1945 to Recent Times*, Moorman, had to spend time doing research in Angola conducting ethnographic interviews and consulting the archives of recorded sound in order to piece together a valid account of the social and

political underpinnings to music and the production of popular music. This music covered in Moorman's book is available to some degree on *YouTube* or other Internet music site now, but the historical context of how the music was created and how the lyrics held meaning is unclear unless you read Moorman or other collateral texts.

Access to video and sound adds depth to historical and textual descriptions of people's lived experiences, so the massive appeal of *YouTube*, *Vimeo*, and other visual hosting sites is real. However, it is like an unmediated cultural broker in that the full context is missing from the story. There is no clear path to who the producers of the content are, unless they are explicit in the videos and often those credits are not part of the clips that get posted. The names of the dancers and vocalists are often absent.

In the *kuduro* example, the dance and music has been commodified in European and American markets to the point that dance instructors are teaching the style in studios and in nightclubs. The pure unedited clips in *YouTube* inform the instruction of style across the borders that are fluid because of the unmediated cultural broker that free broadcasting has become. The cultural broker of the colonial past has been transformed into an unmediated form. Forms of open and free broadcasting formats allow artists to broadcast and market themselves at a low cost, so they are tolerated. However, artists and individuals captured in film must also be willing to give

away a certain amount of their creative content. Some are selective about what gets posted to these Internet broadcasting services and strategize their dissemination.

There is a definite balance to negotiate between what is free and what is marketing and what is content to be guarded as a commodity. One Angolan producer has made a claim in the market and created a stream using YouTube as a marketing location. This is Kelly Stress Produções. See <http://www.kellystresspro.net/> for the full range of artistic and cultural production that is garnered here. Here is a rough-cut link to a street expression of *kuduro*, posted by Kelly Stress,

<http://youtu.be/1JW6MvGj5GA>

This brings the conversation back to Larkin's point about the rise of Nollywood film industry. Larkin states, "My aim is that the resulting analysis be read not simply as a marginal history of a marginal cinema but as having theoretical ramification for how we understand cinema as a whole" (2008, p.84). Larkin asks his reader to consider that Nigerians are equally modern because their films have cosmopolitan appeal. He writes, "Africans do not merely exist in a state of permanent crises, the crises themselves generate modes of cultural production and forms of self-fashioning that address widespread feelings of vulnerability..."(2008, p.170). This is the same cosmopolitanism that we see in the spread of *kuduro* from Luanda to Lisbon, to Rio de Janeiro, to Paris, to London. There is an appeal to the dancehall

youth and youth in general. It is fortified by the easy migration of form via the Internet as well as informed locals in the aforementioned metropolitan regions who promote the real artists.

Certainly, the Lusophone African Diaspora is linked to the uptake as well. The production of CD's and films that include Lusophone African musicians and artists are often sponsored by transnational organization and production companies and this remains true for many artists in the global economy. The example of the French national, Frédéric Galliano who produces and organizes musical tours of African musicians in Europe is just one transnational negotiation. In some ways, a mode of success is linked to being well known internationally and selling your work on the global scale. Ferguson (2006), writes about the problems of this imaginary in *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. A critical view of global imaginaries is always in order.

There are paradoxes to the model of transnational recognition and entry into the world economy. However, the open channel of Internet broadcasting sites allows a two-way flow of information that was not previously there. There is a breaking down of barriers of some degree that comes from being able to instantaneously pull up thousands of links to videos about almost anything you can imagine. Because *YouTube* and similar sites are open to multiple levels of production quality, researchers can find media that has an ethnographic quality to it that allows researchers to view partial glimpses of

everyday life. These are the seeds to great stories. This goes beyond the intentional commodification of some of the music videos of the expression of *kuduro*. In the case of *kuduro*-videos, these views are sometimes just dancers recording their skills at seemingly spontaneous open venue events. Most are located in the streets, some are recorded in clubs and some are clearly refined productions. Depending on the view, a researcher can obtain rich material from these postings and utilize them in the teaching and learning as collateral material to larger social history projects. Care must be taken to follow the trail of links and production or hosting partners in order to fill in the context that is needed for validated analysis.

Bibliography

- Alisch, Stefanie and Nadine Sieger. *Angolanidade Revisited - Kuduro*. Norient: Independent Network for Local and Global Soundscapes. online ed. Lorrainestrasse 19, 3013 Bern, Switzerland: VEREIN NORIENT, 2011.
- Burgess, Jean, Joshua Green, Henry Jenkins, and John Hartley. *YouTube : Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Digital Media and Society Series; Variation: Digital Media and Society Series. Cambridge, England ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2009.
- Downing, Martin J. and Lauren J. Tenney. *Video Vision : Changing the Culture of Social Science Research*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008.
- Ferguson, James. *Global Shadows : Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Hoffmann, Anette and Esther Peeren. *Representation Matters : (Re)Articulating Collective Identities in a Postcolonial World*. Thamyris Intersecting: Place, Sex, and Race;; no. 20; Variation: Thamyris Intersecting ;; no. 20. Amsterdam ; New York: Rodopi, 2010.
- Lança, Marta. *Buala : African Contemporary Culture*. Lisbon, Portugal: Marta Lança; Casa das Áfricas (S. Paulo, Brazil); Fundation Calouste Gulbenkian (Lisbon, Portugal), 2010-.
- Larkin, Brian. *Signal and Noise : Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Pink, Sarah. *The Future of Visual Anthropology : Engaging the Senses*. London ; New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Renó, Denis. "YouTube, o Mediador Da Cultura Popular no Ciberespaço. (Portuguese)." *Revista Latina De Comunicación Social* 10, no. 62 (01, 2007): 1-5.
- Rivera, Raquel Z., Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez. *Reggaeton. Refiguring American Music; Variation: Refiguring American Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Siegert, Nadine. "Kuduru - Musikmachen Ohne Führerschein." Bayreuth Univ.-Bibliothek, <http://d-nb.info/99512812X/34>; <http://d-nb.info/99512812X/34> File size: ca. 3,91 MB http://opus.ub.uni-bayreuth.de/volltexte/2009/567/pdf/Dokument_Siegert.pdf Note:

kostenfrei <http://opus.ub.uni-bayreuth.de/volltexte/2009/567/> File size:
4003 KB Note: kostenfrei Materials specified: Volltext
<http://www.evifa.de/cms/de/suchzugnge/details/index.html?ressid=7637>
Materials specified: Allgemeine Beschreibung.

Stanley-Niaah, Sonjah Nadine. *Dancehall : From Slave Ship to Ghetto*. African and Diasporic Studies; Variation: African and Diasporic Studies. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010.