

Oral Literature and Comic Books as a Form of Promotion and Social Commentary: the Response of Kugali to the Global Lockdown

Abstract

We are living in interesting times. Times of plague – the pandemic of Covid 19 – changed the world as we knew it. Its beginning can perhaps be considered the most dire time so far because of the dominant feeling of uncertainty, which had to be tackled on a psychological level. This paper refers mostly to the events of 2020 and concentrates on the ways in which we adapted to the new situation. In this regard, the emphasis here is on the actions of Kugali – a leading African comic book publisher.

Keywords: Times of Plague, Oral Literature, Comic Book, Graphic Novel, Popular Culture.

Introduction

2020 was supposed to be remembered for the numerous events on the international and local stages. Be it the Tokyo Summer Olympics, the European Football Championships, the Expo exhibition in Dubai, the Nigeria Oil & Gas Conference & Exhibition in Lagos or even the National Buffalo Chicken Wing Festival held in Buffalo. It simply had something for everybody, but nothing turned out as planned. 2020, instead of bringing sporting emotions to the masses and business opportunities to global shareholders, brought a surprising lesson and taught the world to always expect the unexpected. COVID-19 – an infectious disease first reported in Wuhan, China as an uncommon type of pneumonia – rapidly spread to all continents. Now, with the global number of cases at 257,490,283 and the death toll surpassing 5 million,² it has become the biggest threat modern society has had to face in many years.

Despite the seriousness of the circumstances, the following paper is not going to evaluate the global pandemic situation, although some details will be mentioned as they are necessary to fully understand the changes in the social and economic environment, but they will not represent the main part of the

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2 This type of data is dynamic. Presented figures refer to November 2021, but will be obviously higher at the time of publication.

study, which will concentrate on one specific case, namely the response of Kugali, one of the leaders of the comic book industry on the African continent³ to the lockdown situation. It will explore various implications of the publisher's actions and show the potential changes in the entertainment industry. The choice of the topic is deliberate. It starts with the statement that comic books, if carefully made, can be treated as a bridge that connects generation gaps and introduces traditional oral literature elements to younger generations. Thus, we will try to elaborate if and how the graphic novel can be used as a tool for informal education. Those elements and how they are presented will also be studied in the paper, as well as the general role of popular culture within the society. However, before we move on to the more detailed section let's shed some light on the key elements of the social transitions triggered by this "irregular pneumonia" or "little flu."⁴

COVID-19 – Crisis, Response, and... Crisis Again?

The pandemic brought many changes in social behaviour as countries had to adapt to the new situation, minimise the number of new cases to keep the health industry running and prevent the spread of the disease to keep the epidemic under control. Some of them learnt from early mistakes, like Italy and Spain, and the others, like Brazil, have paid dire price for their negligence. While living in the middle of the historic event it is hard to say how the situation will unfold as it can change greatly even between the time of writing this paper and the time of the publication of the volume. For now, we can only hope that it will go in the positive direction, but the global tendency to loosen the restrictions, which may be observed in May and June, should raise some legitimate concerns. As for now, we can only refer to the events that have happened already or are happening right now. We can make some predictions, but we should consider the future mostly as a blank book which is yet to be written.

The fact is that the Coronavirus pandemic has made the world stop moving, not literally of course but the results are the same. Almost all international events, including those mentioned in the opening sentence of this paper, have been either cancelled or postponed. From the ones listed above, the Chicken Wings were longest in the fight, but finally lost the battle and its September date

3 More information about the company, its mission statement and goals can be found here: <https://kugali.com/>.

4 As the disease was compared by the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro at a public speech on March 24th 2020. The statement was subsequently quoted by many sources including CNN. See: Flora Charner, 'Bolsonaro Continues to Dismiss Covid-19 Threat as Cases Skyrocket in Brazil,' *CNN*, 8 May 2020: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/08/americas/brazil-coronavirus-bolsonaro-response-intl/index.html> (accessed 31 May 2020).

could not be maintained as the death toll in USA in late May 2020 surpassed 100,000⁵ and the disease's spread was not showing any visible signs of slowing down.

The unrelenting rules of social distancing have a similar face all around the globe and the most common among them is the ban on mass gatherings, which made the organisation of Expo or the Olympics literally impossible. Even without the restrictions, any decision to launch an event on such a global scale would go against common sense, as it can be assumed without a doubt that among the guests will also be also the one who is not invited, but remains invisible and deadly all the same. This personification of the virus is intentional as it is a common feature of the educational or satirical cartoons and comics that are made to teach about virus prevention measures⁶ or to ridicule the lack of proper response from governments or society. It makes sense as COVID-19 is not only a real threat, but it also became an enemy to many people around the globe. Some of them are facing the threat on a daily basis such as healthcare workers or those running services which are essential to the economy and the others were forced to stay at home by the various forms of movement restriction.

Lockdown measures vary from place to place but almost everywhere around the globe a partial or even total limit on movement was imposed. Here, African countries are not the exception. The impact of the postponement or cancellation of a sports event on the life of ordinary people is insignificant at best. We can safely assume that the statistical Kenyan or Ethiopian can live their life without seeing the efforts of the country's world class Olympic runners. Nigerian football fans probably did not even notice the postponement of the event as the Olympic Eagles did not qualify. However, all of them will certainly face difficulties in their everyday life as the social and economic implications of the lockdown are a totally different case. Getting back to the sports example, a person can live a lifetime without seeing a football match, but the same person will not live longer than two weeks if he will be deprived of the basic necessities, which are food, water, shelter and, at the times of plague, also health care. Two weeks is the most drastic scenario, but it doesn't change the fact that the worldwide lockdown will most likely result in economic recession even in strong economies. It is needless to say that most Sub-Saharan African countries are not global leaders as far as the economy and

5 'COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU),' Arc GIS Dashboards website, 2020, <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6> (accessed 31 May 2020, data currently available with daily updates).

6 It is usually presented as a grim, greenish ball with somehow sinister facial features.

social services are concerned and – with low literacy rates⁷ and many people working in the informal sector – they may prove to be more vulnerable if the economic hiatus lasts too long.

Nigeria first introduced the lockdown on 30th March 2020 in three major centres of the epidemic: Lagos, Ogun State and Abuja, which is the Federal Capital Territory.⁸ With the spread of the virus, the regulations were stretched accordingly and soon after movement limitations were introduced nationwide taking very restrictive measures in various places and sparking protests all over the country. One person died and 90 people were arrested in Kusada after riots erupted on 28th March as a response to the Katsina State government decision to ban congregational prayers in the mosques. Property damage included burning down local police headquarters and official residence of the Divisional Police Officer.⁹ At the end of April unrest erupted in Lagos where construction and refinery workers protested against the restrictions of the lockdown. According to the protesters, the limitations of movement deprived them from any source of income. As a result, five police officers were injured, two police posts were devastated and 50 people were arrested¹⁰ These are just two examples, which show different aspects of lockdown-related frustration. This dissent in turn is also spreading to different social groups due to the abuse of power by local officials and police brutality in imposing lockdown restrictions. Also, the imposition of the restrictive lockdown measures can be considered one of the reasons behind the eruption of terrorist-related violence in the northern states of the federation, where a series of attacks in the villages of Katsina, Kaduna, Borno, Zamfara and other places led to the destruction of property and the deaths of hundreds of people in late May and early June.¹¹ It is reasonable to see a connection here as the restriction of movement leads to the restriction of any work-related activity in the labour sector and thus makes desperate, unqualified workers more vulnerable to indoctrination, especially when brainwashing is accompanied by a piece of meat and a bowl of *tuwo*. Growing insecurity in the

7 'Nigeria Literacy Rate 1991–2022,' *Macrotrends*, 2020, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/NGA/nigeria/literacy-rate> (accessed 31 May 2020).

8 Fidelis Mbah, 'Nigeria announces lockdown of major cities to curb coronavirus,' *Al Jazeera*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/nigeria-announces-lockdown-major-cities-curb-coronavirus-200330095100706.html> (accessed 30 March 2020).

9 Abu Maguba, 'COVID-19 Riots: One dead in Katsina as rioters raze police station over restriction on congregational prayers,' *The Sun*, 28 March 2020, <https://www.sunnewsonline.com/covid-19-riots-one-dead-in-katsina-as-rioters-raze-police-station-over-restriction-on-congregational-prayers/> (accessed 30 March 2020).

10 AFP, 'Nigerian workers riot over Covid-19 lockdown,' *New Straits Times*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/world/world/2020/04/588042/nigerian-workers-riot-over-covid-19-lockdown> (accessed 30 April 2020).

11 '#NorthernLivesMatter: See di five recent attacks wey shake northern Nigeria,' *BBC Pidgin*, 11 June 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/media-53012057> (accessed 12 June 2021).

region led to the creation of the hashtag #NorthernLivesMatter¹² used in social media by people demanding action from the federal government.

At the time of writing, it was not possible to see how the situation will unfold but what is certain is the fact that growing tensions accompanied by the heavy social and economic costs of the lockdown were the reason behind the governmental plan to gradually ease the lockdown regulations starting from 5th May 2020. However, with the number of cases still growing at the time of writing and the mortality rate higher than in the neighbouring countries of similar social and economic background, the situation is far from normal.¹³ Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the opening of the economy, especially in the regions with the highest number of cases (like Kano) will go slower than it was initially planned and that some lockdown restrictions might be reintroduced. Then, given the fact that the economic situation of the most vulnerable people didn't change, the ongoing crisis can only escalate unless it's properly addressed by the federal government.

It is needless to say that lockdown restrictions affected the labour sector and this fact is visible in the examples presented above. However, the working class who expressed their righteous anger in Lagos are not the only ones affected by the restrictions. They had an impact on everybody, as even a handful of company workers who were able to perform their duties online were also affected by the curfew that limited the freedom of movement and the possibilities to acquire food and resources. Their struggle was obviously minimal if compared to the most vulnerable but is accompanied by problems of members of the modern "middle class," that is shop and hotel owners, but also traders and other groups whose income is related to services. In the modern economy, if one sector is struggling others will follow, as people will be less likely to spend their money on things that are not considered non-essential. That's why industries like entertainment, publishing or mass media can become indirectly affected even if the service provided by them can be moved to the Internet or already exists mostly online.¹⁴ Also, those three sectors, even in "normal" times, have the highest impact on the social perception of reality and their role increases when people look for a reliable source of information about the disease or the situation in the country or simply when they are trying to find some relief

12 Developed as an obvious reference to the #BlackLivesMatter slogan which became omnipresent in the news media after the killing of George Floyd by the police in Minneapolis.

13 'Coronavirus: what Nigeria can do post lockdown,' *The Conversation*, 2 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-what-nigeria-can-do-post-lockdown-138995> (accessed 4 June 2020).

14 Of the three, the entertainment is definitely hit by the restriction of movement and public gatherings which prevent the organisation of any events, but income can be supplemented by the online sale of the entertainment products.

from everyday struggles. Even if the said people do not have the means to pay for the content. Thus, paradoxically, some media and publishing houses can actually find the situation somehow beneficial.

Apart from economic, the lockdown can also have a significant cultural impact as people who are unable to do physical shopping develop different entertainment habits and transfer their activities online. Firstly, because of lack of choice and, later, because of caution and comfort of internet browsing and online shopping. This means that the people who are somehow “addicted” to cultural content, might transfer their interest from live performances or movie screenings and physical copies of music cd’s, books, comics and magazines to their digital equivalents even if they have been more likely to avoid them before the pandemic. As with all the predictions, this one is yet to be proven, but some moves in the entertainment industry (online exhibitions, online theatre, concerts, cinema etc.) might facilitate the transition. By making some moves to support people during lockdown and quarantine, the publisher or creator can increase recognition and positive perception of the brand. The same means can be used to simply promote products or to raise awareness about the pandemic situation or other social matters.

This leads us to the actions of the main protagonist of this paper – Kugali Media – as it is a publishing house that fits all the categories mentioned above. We can assume that all these reasons were behind the publisher’s decision to release free comics on 5th April, 2nd May 2020 and 10th July 2020. However, in the course of the paper, we will try to answer the question of whether self-promotion was the only motivation behind it.

Kugali Media – Mission and Background

Linking Kugali Media with the problems of the Nigerian lockdown is not obvious but it is valid. The self-proclaimed biggest pan-African comic book publisher¹⁵ has its headquarters in London, UK, but also maintains strong links with the most populous Sub-Saharan Country. It would be enough to check the background of the company’s founders – Fikayo Adeola, Hamid Ibrahim, Ziki Nelson and ToluOlowofoyeku who (apart of Hamid Ibrahim who was born in Uganda) either reside in Nigeria or are members of the Nigerian diaspora in the UK. The leaders share a lot of know-how between themselves with Hamid Ibrahim having experience at the highest level of video design as a former technical director at MPC, an award-winning visual effect production house which contributed to blockbusters like *Dumbo* and *Lion King*. Tolu

15 This statement is as bold as it’s true. In the world dominated by the Western oriented and produced cultural products there’s not much competition for a platform which promotes African themed comic books.

Olowofoyeku before starting Kugali gained experience in the independent video game production sector and started his own studio called Illuminare Game Studios.¹⁶ The experience, together with the passion for comic books and visual arts (video games, cartoons, augmented reality) led to the creation of a platform with the focus on “telling stories inspired by African culture using comic books, art and augmented reality.” According to Kugali, “these are stories that respect history, embrace the present and imagine the future of Africa.”¹⁷ This corresponds with the interests of the particular members of the founding group. As Ziki Nelson stated in an interview with *Riot* in October 2019, one of his favourite modern comic book stories is “*Kayin and Abeni*, which is a Sci-Fi comic that uses traditional African art and aesthetics to create a new take on what the future might look like. All of the weapons, tech and gadgets are inspired by traditional African art and design and what that gives you is a Sci-Fi experience unlike any you’ve seen before.”¹⁸ Here we can see a clear embracement of afrofuturism, deeply soaked in the traditional African juice and the firm belief that an African perspective can greatly enrich current perceptions of the entertainment industry. This in turn is reflected in the publisher’s portfolio as Kugali is clearly doing its best to use the platform for the promotion for artists who come from different parts of the African continent but who share similar views on the importance of tradition and social background of the presented stories.

Despite a rather short time on the market¹⁹ Kugali has already published two comic book anthologies and created a significant database of digital comics, including works from Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Uganda and other Sub-Saharan countries. However, although recognised locally, the company is still waiting for a major breakthrough and the number of 3,886 followers²⁰ of the Kugali’s social media channel is hardly impressive if we consider the publisher’s goals and ambitions. Moreover, the recent influx of fans²¹ is most likely related to the announcement of *Iwájú* – the first, African-themed animation series, which is going to be produced by Kugali in cooperation with Disney and released on the media giant’s streaming service – Disney+ – in 2022.²²

16 All the biographical notes can be found on the publisher’s website: <https://kugali.com>.

17 Mission statement can be found on: <https://kugali.com/pages/about-us>.

18 An interview with Ziki Nelson, *Riot*, (n.d.), available on: <https://timetoriot.com/blog/friday-riot-ziki-nelson> (accessed 12 June 2021).

19 Domain kugali.com was created on 25th November 2015.

20 And 3,703 “Likes”, by November 2021.

21 Just at the end of the promotional campaign it was 2745 followers and 2643 “Likes”, <https://www.facebook.com/kugalimedia/> on 29 June 2020 and 2640 (!) on 29 July 2020.

22 The announcement first appeared on social media on 11 December 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/DisneyAnimation/posts/10158591064476855> (accessed 12 December 2020).

The reality is that online distribution and social media following are significant capital, which can greatly influence sales either by the direct approach of buyers/followers or by increased range of posts and higher recognition of the company's actions. Higher following simply means that the posts have a bigger audience and are more likely to be commented or shared, thus increasing the fan and buyer base. Looking from this perspective, Kugali's decision to release free comics is a very pragmatic, promotional move as by giving people samples of the products in distribution, the company can gain new followers and encourage the current ones, especially those who are quietly following updates on social media, to actually invest in the content by buying a particular product or by supporting the distributor through its *Patreon* channel.

This is a common marketing move in use for almost any type of product, be it a shampoo, perfume, dog food, music, video games and obviously – a comic book. If we locate this action in the context of the global pandemic, we have another potential benefit as any company which releases free content at the time of the forced lockdown can expect such a move to be seen as pro-customer as they are literally supporting the people who are forced to stay at home during quarantine or due to the governmental restriction of movement. They simply aim to make the lockdown more bearable. Moreover, in the comic book industry, the example for this kind of action came from the very top as on 3rd April 2020, just two days before Kugali's announcement, Marvel – one of the world's biggest publishers of the graphic novels and a pop culture giant, released some of its older and most classical series²³. The offer expired in May as the move, apart from pro-customer and covid-related reasons, was most likely aimed at popularising the publisher's service, Marvel Unlimited, a system of subscription-based content access.

It is worth pointing out that Kugali didn't make any direct reference to the action of its much bigger cousin, but regarding the position of Marvel in the industry and the fact that the publishers of African comics are publishing them because of a passion for both Africa and comics, we can safely assume that in this case Marvel was a source of inspiration. To put it simply, it would be barely possible if the people who devote their professional life to publishing comics were not aware of the promotional actions of the global leader in comic book publishing. By making this assumption, it would be easy to skip to the quick conclusion that the small company simply followed the example of the big one and jumped onto the pandemic bandwagon to warm up its image, increase its visibility and increase sales.

23 Jon Porter, 'Marvel is making some of its comics free while we're all stuck inside,' *The Verge*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/3/21206652/marvel-unlimited-free-comics-spider-man-captain-america-x-men-coronavirus> (accessed 29 June 2020).

This conclusion, however, would be as quick as it would be diminishing for Kugali's efforts, given the quality and type of content released. Kugali's portfolio is impressive if we talk about the African comic book and visual novel, which means that within a niche it is a global leader, but the exact number of titles available in the company's distribution could not be even remotely compared with the respective repositories of the big players – Marvel and DC²⁴. Despite this, Kugali released 8 titles in two bundles, which were made available to the public 5th April and 2nd May 2020, respectively. The third bundle, which includes another 4 comics, came out without announcement on 10th July 2020 and all of them are available at the publisher's website – kugali.com.²⁵ Some of them were complete stories within a single issue, while others are part of ongoing series, so the volumes which were made available can be considered an extended teaser. If we consider that one of the company's main goals is to promote African comics as a medium and African storytelling in general, we have to acknowledge the fact that the released books, which are a significant part of the stock, represent various approach towards the content and can serve as a promotional tool for both. After all, what is a better way to promote something than to give people free access?

Lessons from the Times of Plague

The comic book is a pop culture product. This banal statement corresponds with a highly favoured definition of popular culture²⁶ and is unlikely to fit into the standards of so-called "high culture," which is characterised by the significant artistic standard²⁷ and while being mass produced, serves commercial purposes (in contrast to high culture, which is a result of individual creation²⁸). It also corresponds with the common perception of the comic as a product of simple entertainment value, which targets audiences among children and teenagers. As long as the definition is valid, we have to admit that the comic book is also a subject of stereotypes. Storey, while dismantling and deconstructing various definitions of popular culture, underlines the common paradigm of the perception of the cultural product, while pointing out and tackling the idea of opposition between inferior popular culture and widely respected high culture.²⁹ When it comes to comic books, this rather simplistic classification is true in most cases, especially the part about mass-produced

24 DC Entertainment also released some free content and included some significant discount on some of its flagship titles on 21 April 2020.

25 Kugali Media website, <https://kugali.com/> (accessed 10 July 2020).

26 John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, 5th Ed.*, New York: Pearson Longman, 2009, p. 6.

27 Storey, *Cultural Theory...*, p. 7.

28 Storey, *Cultural Theory...*, p. 8.

29 Storey, *Cultural Theory...*, p. 8.

content with disputable artistic value and the purpose of production being clearly commercially oriented. However, 'comics' is a very wide category as it includes short stories or even single strips made for satirical purposes as well as long standing series of many volumes. Thus, it is impossible to impose similar measures to such a wide and developed phenomenon. Here, the quality of the content is a subject to variation, so blind application of the common definition would be inappropriate. It is similar if we use the subjectivity of opinion and just say that music in general lacks any artistic value just because Beyoncé's songs lack quality.

Mila Bongco defines comic books as a "tangle of 'competing languages' comprising both graphic and verbal signs,"³⁰ thus "the key to understand comic art does not lie in the words or pictures alone but in the interaction between them."³¹ As we can see, we have two, equally important, parts of content: graphics and writing. So, if we agree that graphics and painting are art forms, then the same can be said about literature and writing. Why should the product, a combination of these two aspects, by definition be disregarded artistically? Let's be serious and judge each product by its unique value and consider comics as a medium which stands on and even crosses the border between art and literature. We thus have to admit that the definition of art and "high" culture is constantly changing and that the paintings by Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró or Solo Ouedraogo would not have been considered "artistic" enough in the 17th Century when royal courts in Europe were impressed by the highly realistic works of Diego Velázquez. Culture and reception of art changes along with society and the borders between "popular" and "high" are becoming more fluid, with the former potentially being absorbed by the latter. This process is currently visible in many forms of artistic expression which were previously considered as "childish" or "popular" entertainment, be it movies, video games and also comic books or comic art in general. Also, worth mentioning here is that the wide category of "youth" is flexible. There are visible differences between societies as young people have had to adjust to different social and economic environments, which in turn often forcing faster adaptation and, in some areas, hastening inter-generational change.³² As we'll see it later in the paper, African comic books have a tendency to include more mature content and this might be a result of the general, economically forced shift of young people towards social roles more suitable for adults.

30 Mia Bongco, *Reading Comics. Language, Culture and the Concept of Superhero in Comic Books*, New York: Rutledge, 2013, p. XV.

31 Bongco, *Reading Comics...*, p. XV.

32 Catrine Christiansen, Mats Utas and Henrik E. Vigh. (eds), *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood. Social Becoming in an African Continent*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2006, pp. 12–14.

Even if we leave behind the discussion about the artistic value of some pop culture products, we have to agree with the statement of Hall and Whannel, namely that “the culture provided by the commercial entertainment market... plays a crucial role. It mirrors attitudes and sentiments which are already there, and at the same time provides an expressive field and a set of symbols through which these attitudes can be projected.”³³ This means that even purely commercial products are a reflection of society and can provide useful information for the study of the habits, behaviour and values of their target audience.

This long introduction was important as comic books are generally considered a medium that lacks sufficient quality and seriousness to be considered a carrier of values or social commentary. Even *Le Grand Pouvoir du Chninkel* by Rosiński and Van Hamme³⁴ or *Maus*³⁵ by Art Spiegelman were not enough to change this perception. Hopefully, this paper can contribute to a change in the negative stereotype and prove that a graphic novel can be a useful medium to carry cultural values and important messages. Quite surprisingly, such elements can be found in the African comics released by Kugali in the lockdown related “giveaway” and this is certainly one of the lessons from the times of plague.

We can synthesise some key features of the presented content and Kugali, as a leading publisher of comic books made in Africa, can be considered a valid window to peek into the trends which dominate the comic book industry on the continent. Of course, the presented works are made for entertainment and as such follow the definitions of popular culture listed above. They all have more or less dynamic writing, the artwork in general is good and they have some unique, African feeling. The entertainment aspects, despite the obvious value related to graphics and writing, will be less important in this study, but on top of that we can see some added value when the comic book goes beyond its stereotypical niche and tries to contribute to the widely considered idea of cultural and social studies.

On the basis of the presented works we can divide the content into its two most significant trends, namely: cultural values and social commentary. However, as we will see below, the above-mentioned trends are actually only guidelines for allocation of the source material as they can mingle and transpire between themselves within a particular volume. Thus, the tag will be given on the basis of the dominant factor and the explanation for this kind of approach will be given in the next paragraph, namely:

33 Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, London: Hutchinson, 1964, p. 276.

34 Grzegorz Rosiński and Jean Van Hamme, *Le Grand Pouvoir du Chninkel*, Tournai: Casterman, 1988.

35 Art Spiegelman, *Maus*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1991.

Culture, Society and the Entertainment Industry

Culture, especially its material, literary and artistic forms, is a product of society, but at the same time society itself is shaped by the dominant culture. This dual connotation is not surprising as we should consider both culture and society as dynamic. Both society and culture absorb new elements of reality related to religious, economic or social factors present on global and local levels. While being dynamic and adaptive,³⁶ at the same time culture oscillates around some core values and common heritage, which are considered an important part of the identity of the particular group. Be it an ethnic group, nation, local community or even subculture. By acknowledging the existence of the traditional (core) values and common cultural heritage within the group, we will have to assume that those elements are known to most of the members of the particular group as they are introduced and are absorbed naturally in the early stages of upbringing and cultural development. Based on the above statements, it should not be surprising that in many cases an author's work is based or takes direct inspiration from cultural background and tradition. So, a huge repository of traditional cultural content can become an obvious source of inspiration for any modern artistic product, be it a painting, sculpture, music, film or any form of artistic expression related to writing like literature and the comic book. The latter becomes an especially useful medium if we talk about traditional elements. Expression here includes writing and graphical presentation, which can take the form of painting or even a simple drawing. The crucial point here is the imagination of the author as the medium gives the possibility to recreate any mythological or supernatural creature only with the use of pen and paper. The imagination and skills of the author are aimed to inspire the imagination of the reader, so the presentation can be more symbolic than realistic if this style suits the artist's way of presentation of the story. As a result, any tale about spiritual cults, ancient gods or animal spirits can be told with simple means as the presentation is not harmed by the limitations of the budget which, in the case of the movie industry, can turn even the gloomiest horror story into an unwanted comedy. Simply because of the lack of resources required to create realistic special effects.³⁷ So the symbolic presentation of the graphical elements of the story is part of the agreement between the author and the reader and is one of the key features of the comic book which puts

36 Yes, even radicalisation in the context of the spread of cultural values can be considered an adaptive move, as the culture has to adapt to the new reality by applying new measures of control and prevent influences which are considered harmful by cultural radicals.

37 However, lack of resources doesn't seem to stop the creators of Nigerian movies as supernatural themes accompanied by home-made FX are one of the most popular movie genres currently produced. This trend influences also the other markets such as Ghana movie industry which takes direct inspiration from Nollywood.

unimpeded imagination ahead of realism. Also, the graphic novel itself is a medium that traditionally favours stories with supernatural elements. This fact is most likely related with the history of the genre and the initial audience of the mass produced comic book series being children and teenagers.

On the basis of the above statements we can say that cultural values, be they elements of traditional religions, customs or oral literature, are a common feature of the African comic. We can also state, that apart from the place of origin, the rich influences of African culture are what make these graphic novels African. That is why the initial division of the content presented by Kugali has a fluent character and the works chosen to represent the trends analysed in this paper are those where some particular elements prevail over others. This division is important as it will allow us to show the different functions deployed within the modern cultural medium that is the comic book.

The Comic Book as a Guardian of Cultural Values

Among the stories released by Kugali in the lockdown bundles we have many that include traditional elements, but some of them emphasise oral literature and tradition more than others. One of them is *Mumu Juju*³⁸ by Etubi Onucheyo with the participation of Ifesisnachi Ojikwe.³⁹ It is a comedy piece about smashing demons with a club. Simple as that. The comic has two main protagonists – Mortar and Pestle⁴⁰ – fighters with opposing characteristics – fat and lazy/fit and diligent. It is a dynamic story with cartoonish graphics taking some inspiration from Japanese manga (on page 16 for example). Despite its mostly entertaining character it is soaked in Yoruba mythology, as the demons are the emissaries of Shango, the god of thunder, and the warriors are apparently followers of Ogun, the god of war.⁴¹ *Juju* here is the term used to distinguish the demonic presence and *Mumu* is explained as an expression “used mainly as an insult to someone with low intellect or foolish characteristics.”⁴² This explanation is provided by the author himself; he decided to include a small dictionary of Yoruba and pidgin terms at the end of the first episode. Here we have some glimpses into the local culture and tradition, with the names of food, customs and supernatural beings. The comic itself, despite its rather pretextual storyline can serve as an example of the satirical adaptation of local tradition.

38 Etubi Onucheyo and Ifesisnachi Ojikwe, *Mumu Juju*, (pt. 1, pt. 2), Kugali Media, 2020.

39 Ifesisnachi Ojikwe created pages 7–8 in part 1.

40 Their names, however, are revealed only in the second volume released within the third bundle.

41 As far as we can assume this fact from the insult “Ogun’s dustbin” addressed to one of the warriors. Onucheyo and Ojikwe, *Mumu...*, p. 13.

42 Onucheyo and Ojikwe, *Mumu...*, p. 16.

A more serious approach was taken by Adeniyi Adeniji, the creator of *Taboo: A Date with Death*,⁴³ written and drawn with the guest participation of Kayode “Kro” Odimole. Apparently, the comic was previously published in an anthology under the same name, which was a selection of African horror stories.

It’s a short graphic novel with rather basic artwork and an intriguing story. It starts centuries ago somewhere in the western part of modern-day Nigeria (called simply “Western Provinces”), where Amusa, a night-hunter leaves the hut which he inhabits with his wife and an infant child. He is going out to provide for his family. Amusa is a man of principle who never opposes the gods or questions customs, but yet, fate has to test the strength of his character. On the way back he sees fire and immediately knows that something is wrong. He runs to his household, but it’s too late as his wife and child are already dead. His heart is broken, but even in grief he is not insulting the gods, but instead asking them one question – “why he couldn’t have been there with them.”⁴⁴ Then, out of the dark, the Reaper appears. He tells the hunter that because of Amusa’s piety and the fact that he never insulted the heavens nor questions his fate, he and his descendants will be able to obtain foreknowledge of their fate, and that any time they will see Death will mean that their final hour is near. We don’t know how the prophecy worked for Amusa, we can assume however that he lived long enough to sire children with a different woman and hope that he had a long and successful life. Just after his initial meeting with Death, the story moves us to modern times when one of his descendants – Charles – is enjoying a walk in some Western city. He has heard the stories about the forebringer of fate from his grandmother, but he didn’t believe them. This will change, however, and change quite suddenly when, to his shock, he sees a towering figure looming over him. A tall pale man, with a skull-like face and big eyes without eyelids. Hard to be mistaken, right? It’s the anthropomorphic personification of Death present in the European visual arts since early medieval times. Death, however, seems confused by the meeting. He mentions Charles’ name and strays his eyes as the question mark appears over his head. The boy uses this moment to run away and he runs as far as he can. While trying to outrun Death, he takes a plane, then the *danfo* and finally reaches the suburbs of Abeokuta. It’s the former Western Region so we can assume that this is his family house built on land acquired by Amusa. Although no family members are present, the house is not empty and Charles is going to learn this fact as soon as he enters the building. The stories were true: the one who greets him in the house is Death himself! Charles accepts his fate, after all

43 Adeniyi Adeniji, *Taboo – A Date with Death*, Kugali Media, 2020.

44 Adeniji, *Taboo*..., p. 4.

you can't avoid Death if he is standing in front of you wearing a black suit. He has only one question to ask to the one who brings the end, and this is about Death's confusion during the first meeting not long ago, but in a far-away land. Death's answer is simple "I was surprised to see you all the way over there," he says with a pensive expression "because I knew we had an appointment here."⁴⁵

It's a pretty good twist, right? What makes it even more interesting is the fact that it is the most traditional element of the storyline, as *A Date with Death* is an actual adaptation of a centuries old fairy tale. This fact is hardly surprising as the author doesn't hide this influence and actually states on the cover that the comic is based on the story told by Michael Adekunle. However, it was not possible to reach this particular version of the story and one of the key features of the folktale and oral literature is the fact that the content is subject to variation. The story changes slightly as each storyteller usually adds some personal flavour and adapts it to the local social environment. What is important is the message carried by the fable and the educational values which are transferred through its entertaining presentation. As a result folktales, especially the old ones, usually exist in numerous versions and Adeniji's comic adaptation is actually a modernised version of the Hausa story *The Merchant and Death* published by Piłaszewicz⁴⁶ in his compilation of Hausa folktales and further analysed by Kraśniewski.⁴⁷ This particular version was most likely collected in the Katsina area,⁴⁸ but as it is with the oral literature, the exact place of origin of the story is unknown. We can only assume that it migrated from one region to another. However, the name Amusa as a derivation of the common Muslim name gives us some hint about the direction of this migration and further justifies the reference to the Hausa version.

In regard of the comic book adaptation, it is quite surprising that the older version oscillates around the topic of slavery and relations between slaves and their masters. Here, we have a wealthy merchant, owner of many slaves, houses and camels. One day he visits the seer to learn about the date of his departure from this world and the circumstances of his death. The soothsayer is one of the good and reliable ones so he predicts that after many years of a good and prosperous life the merchant will die on Friday and then points out the exact month and year. When the time comes, the merchant is obviously

45 Adeniji, *Taboo...*, p. 16.

46 Stanisław Piłaszewicz, *Egzotyczny świat sawanny. Kultura i cywilizacja ludu Hausa* [Exotic World of the Savannah. Culture and Civilisation of the Hausa People], Warszawa: Dialog, 1995, pp. 211–213.

47 Mariusz Kraśniewski, *Obraz niewolnictwa w piśmiennictwie hausa i w relacjach podróżników*, Warszawa: Askon, 2014, pp. 47–48.

48 As explained in: Kraśniewski, *Obraz niewolnictwa...*, p. 48, footnote 55.

worried, he stays in his house all day and all his business in town is conducted by a trusted slave. Two Fridays pass and suddenly, the slave comes back from the market pale and frightened as if he has seen Death himself. This actually is the case as a dark figure had greeted him and stared straight into his eyes! Now the master is scared as well, only one Friday is left until the month finishes, so he decides to take some drastic measures. He gives the slave his clothes and orders him to conduct normal business and pretend that he's his own master. At the same time, the merchant, dressed in poor *riga*, travels to the village of Tudun Malga where he has one of his houses. Everything works well, but when Friday comes, Death comes again to the market of the merchant's home town. When he sees Death the slave can say only one thing "I'm ready." He whispers. But Death is not looking for him, he's here for a different person. The slave, however, wants to protect his master even now and boldly communicates that he's not in the town. "I know" – Death responds. "I will meet him in the evening and not here, but in Tudun Malga, this appointment was made long time ago."⁴⁹

As we can see, despite changes in setting, in both versions we have the same moral and the same lessons can be learned from the story. Even some stages of the story are similar as the slave's experience on the market is as thrilling as the street encounter which in the future will scare Charles so much that he will run straight to Abeokuta. Thus, we can summarise both the transcription of the old folktale and modern comic book with the final page of the latter. It ends with one single cadre showing an open door and abandoned backpack and the caption says, "in the end we shall all have our <date with death>."⁵⁰ This is a lesson about the inevitability of fate and certainty of death for all those who are alive. It shows that it doesn't make sense to run away when the plan of life was already written. Clearly it is a very pertinent statement during the pandemic.

If compared with the orature's content, the adaptation shows that even while stripped of the theatrical elements characteristic of the presentation of a folktale in the traditional setting, it is possible to translate the fable itself into the new medium and keep the message intact. This means that in this and similar cases, comic books can be used not only to preserve oral literature and introduce it to the wider audience, but can also serve as a way to transmit the educational elements of the orature to new generations.

A similar approach was taken by the creator of another comic released in the bundle, the one created by Senegalese artist Juni Ba. *Ndaw*,⁵¹ is not only

49 Stanisław Piłaszewicz, *Egzotyczny świat sawanny...*, p. 213.

50 Adeniji, *Taboo...*, p. 17.

51 Juni Ba, *Ndaw*, Kugali Media, 2020.

one of the most popular surnames in Senegambia, but also one of the most unique comics presented by Kugali during lockdown. Here, the inspirations from the folklore are more than obvious and although it was not possible to track the folktale itself, the setting, the storyline and the tempo of narration will allow us to consider this comic book as a modern fable.

Ndaw is the name of a small Djinne who is a creator of toy statues. He lives in an abandoned territory and we meet him just when he finishes his last creation – a scrap robot. He is not too satisfied with the final results of his work so he's going to the junkyard to look for the final, decorative piece. He finds a coin, but it's not perfect, then he finds a tear-shaped stone and abandons the coin. When he's finally going to settle for the third finding – the smiley pin – he sees a big baobab tree house towering above the scrapyards. With little hesitation he enters and discovers that the place is full of treasures! Masks, pots, grinders, books, alchemic alembics and other objects fill the place. In the centre is a hanging nest and a scribed scroll is dangling to the floor from the dark entrance. The Djinne ignores the nest and hastily scrutinises the area in search for something useful. A bowl full of cowrie shells catches his eyes. He already has a vision how he can use the cowrie shell to decorate his robot. He throws away the smiley pin and, ignoring the disdained faces of the pottery figures, decides to grab one shell for himself. But the figures are not painted on clay, they are alive and they'll not allow the thievery to happen. "Satche⁵²!" one of them shouts and this shout is the beginning of some serious problems for little Ndaw. He jumps at once, scared of the shouting. The jump moves the cowrie bowl and the bowl in turn moves the drawer. Finally, some vial with orange liquid falls on the ground and smashes into pieces. Now we will learn who is the inhabitant of the house, as a green-skinned witch with claw-like fingers emerges from the nest. She catches Ndaw and puts him in magic chains.

There is no point in totally spoiling the story, especially if the comic is available online and that the initial introduction to the setting along with some clues about the ending will be enough to evaluate the educational value of the fable. We can say that our Djinne learns about the nature of the witch and the importance of the vial. He learns many secrets and finally escapes from his captivity, but the adventure was so thrilling for small Ndaw that although he can take the cowrie at the end, he decides to keep the smiley pin instead and use it as a final decoration for his robot. This fact is signaled by the exclamation mark within Djinni's speech bubble, and the final creation is visible in the last cadre with a caption saying "Babene Ndaw Djinne."⁵³ We, however, are not going to say our goodbyes just yet.

52 "Thief?". All the local terms have translations provided by the Author.

53 "Farewell Ndaw Djinne"

The story has an important and simple meaning, which is even directly expressed on the comic book pages. “Appreciate the things you have,”⁵⁴ be happy with the things you have achieved especially if you are content with them and, obviously, don’t steal as stealing can get you into trouble. The setting of the story is as important as the message and clearly shows the potential of the graphic novel as a medium for storytelling. It is a marriage of new and old. We have a scrapyard which hides a witch’s hut within a baobab tree, we have an afro-futuristic robot,⁵⁵ but also talking animals, spirits trapped in the furniture or decorations and - most of all – witchcraft. This in turn also connects modernity and tradition as the rituals include some modern equipment and the vial itself looks as if it has been taken straight from a contemporary clinic. This setting tells a very universal story where tradition and customs are still alive despite the widespread modernisation. The final choice of the smiley pin over a cowrie shell can, but probably should not, be interpreted as a preference for modernity over tradition. However, it can also mean that modern things require modern solutions, while old things should be treated in an old-fashioned way.

The comics presented above show the potential of the comic book as a tool for the interpretation of traditional material. Be it a comedy approach to a well-known setting, a careful but modernised adaptation of oral material or the creation of new folklore with the use of the new medium. It clearly shows the potential of the graphic novel in telling African stories, but the references to tradition are not the only thing that can make a locally made comic book a unique experience for the reader.

The Comic Book as a Social Commentary

Of this group we will analyse two comics. Because of the presence of supernatural elements which have a direct connotation with local African tradition they can somehow fit into the previous category, however we will refer to the previously included deliberations about the influence of cultural background on the process of creation. We’ll also follow the justifiable assumption that the supernatural elements are one of the key features of the comic book as a medium. That’s why, a part of the presence of tradition-related content, we will concentrate on the social issues as social background is often as equally important as cultural background as far as the creative process is concerned.

*Lake of Tears*⁵⁶ is a Ghanaian comic by Kobe Ofei (story) and Setor Fiadzigbey (art). It’s a part of a series from which only two episodes were

54 Ba, *Ndaw...*, p. 39.

55 Which by the way looks like a scrap version of the robots from the SF movies made in the 50s.

56 Kobe Ofei and Setor Fiadzigbey, *Lake of Tears*, Kugali Media, 2020.

released for free; the first part is called “The Dark Waters” and the second is called “A Ghosts in a Shell.” The title of the latter is a rather obvious reference to one of the most famous anime movies – *Ghost in the Shell* – directed by Mamoru Oshii and based on the manga by Masamune Shirov. However, apart from the similar title there are no similarities in the story, as the Japanese one is a cyberpunk tale about cybernetic police in a dystopian futuristic world and the Ghanaian one is a story about fishing in Lake Volta. However, it doesn’t concentrate on the idyllic image of the sturdy fishermen who sail early morning to provide fish for the market, instead it shows the dark aspects of the industry as it presents a story about child labour and child trafficking.

We meet Kyei, the main protagonist during one of the nights when he jumps into the water to dive and check the nets. He is approximately 10 years old and so are his friends. Soon after diving, he hurts his leg, gasps for air and the pain-related sudden movement makes him tangled in the net he was supposed to check. To make things worse, a police motorboat approaches the fisherman’s dinghy and the supervisor, a bulky albino man called Opanyin, calls the boy back. As the police siren is getting closer he orders the boat to move, leaving Kyei behind. Anyone of the boy’s friends who is planning to help him will be left as well so they obediently follow the supervisor’s orders. Kyei will later be saved by a mysterious force which pushes him from the water and launches high into the air. He’ll wake up in the company of his rescuers - two teenagers who tell them that he can help to end child abuse or come back to his house and forget about the incident. In the meantime, we will see Opanyin as he’s packing the boys in a small shack and gives them scraps of food. He is shaking all the way back from the lake. Abandoning the child was not his choice but the master – a sinister and faceless figure which we will meet in the second episode – is not a person to mess with. For Master Otu, losing one or two boys is nothing, but losing the boat with all its human cargo will be a serious blow and for this Opanyin will be punished for sure. The second episode follows the albino man even closer. It shows him sitting in the house and drinking heavily to calm his sorrows. He is remembering a story from the previous year when Master Otu severely beats a disobedient boy and then ties him to a plank of wood. The construction is placed on the shore and the boy is taken by the tide waters towards certain death. This is an example for all the boys as all of them, including the boy’s brother, are watching the punishment with horror and disbelief. Opanyin initially tries to stop the master, but he knows that he can’t do much. He borrowed the money from Otu and was then given three choices to settle the debt. He can repay the money along with interest or give his 8-year-old son to work for Master Otu. Those two options are impossible to fulfil, he doesn’t have enough money and he obviously doesn’t want to sell his

son into slavery. He agrees to the third option, which is to supervise the boys during their fishing trips.

From the free content we will not learn how the story has finished and the second episode ends with a cliffhanger as Kyei is asking his rescuers about his miraculous escape from peril. We can say, however, that for the purpose of this study the content we have is more than enough to consider the *Lake of Tears* as a comic book with a social message. The story is dark and is supported by an appropriately disturbing artistic style, with lots of shadows and a decayed vibe. It is highly appropriate, as the comic book talks about important issues related to human rights.

According to Ghanaian law, the minimum age for work is 15 and this is clearly specified in Section 89 of the Children's Act, while section 91⁵⁷ sets the minimum age for hazardous work at 18. Ghana has also ratified most of the international conventions enacted to prevent child abuse. Those are ILO Convention 138 on Minimum Age; ILO Convention 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labour; the Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons. However, despite some government efforts to eradicate child trafficking, the abuse of minors is still prevalent and the fishing sector along with cocoa farming are considered the most infected with child slavery.⁵⁸ Children as young as 4 are sold or trafficked to work in the industry and "fishing, including for tilapia; preparing bait, nets, and fishing gear; launching, paddling, and draining canoes; diving for fish; casting and pulling fishing nets and untangling them underwater"⁵⁹ is an especially hazardous form of child labour. According to the CNN Freedom project there are approximately 20,000 children living in slavery conditions in the Lake Volta region.⁶⁰ These figures and the scale of the problem are contested by some scholars, especially Kwame Agyeman, who claim the CNN report is exaggerated and that it "reported on 'child slaves' who were not really enslaved."⁶¹

57 *The Children's Act (Act 560. Enacted: September 24, 1998)*, Government of the Republic of Ghana, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WBTEXT/56216/65194/E98GHA01.html> (accessed 13 June 2021).

58 *2018 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Ghana*, US Department of Labor, https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2018/Ghana.pdf (accessed 13 June 2021).

59 *2018 Findings on the Worst Forms...*

60 Leif Coorlim, 'Child Slaves Risk their Lives on Ghana's Lake Volta,' *CNN*, February 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/africa/ghana-child-slaves-intl/> (accessed 30 March 2021).

61 Betty Mensah and Samuel Okyere, 'How CNN reported on 'child slaves' who were not really enslaved,' *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/cnn-reported-child-slaves-enslaved-190315103733047.html> (accessed 23 July 2021). Although not mentioned directly among the authors, the article claims that Dr Kwame Agyeman is also a co-author of the referred work.

The comic book portrays the everyday life of the children who are forced to work on the fishing boats and the dangers they are facing. There is limited food, the constant threat of drowning and disobedience is mercilessly punished. We can see it in the story as Master Otu sentences the child to a certain death in the water. Opanyin, the supervisor, is an obviously tragic character and we can assume that his persona will develop further in the series. His story shows the difficulties that the people who live in poor economic conditions have to face every day. The choice he makes, although morally dubious, is understandable as he is trying to protect his family and he despises himself for the work he's doing. The comic itself moves far from the point where the graphic novel is served as a form of easily absorbable entertainment pulp. It sheds light on an important problem and while it is not the role of the authors to implement the solution, they are certainly adding their voice to the discussion and calling on the government to take proper action.

Another comic book *Nani*⁶² takes a similar approach but addresses its main problem from a slightly different angle. ZK Nelson (story) and Jason Lamy (art) created a graphic novel which situates itself very close to the superhero sub-genre within the comic book industry. Here, Kugali presented the first volume divided in two parts and released within two bundles. This is a story about two sisters – Mina and Lamin. They are both martial arts adepts and Mina is most likely a survivor of some form of abuse. Initially, it is not specified what kind of trauma she has experienced,⁶³ but as it is generally mentioned at the beginning of the story, we can assume that this is a catalyst which fuels her determination. The story starts as the sisters are going for a ride with Lamin's boyfriend after a martial art practice session. Bash wants to show them his new car so he's taking them along with his friend Bello. As often happens in the stories, things will not go as planned, but danger comes from an unexpected side. Lamin's boyfriend is planning to kidnap the sisters and hold them for ransom and Bello's role is to help him to execute this plan. They have firearms and Bash is trying to be scary. But due to Mina's fighting spirit and Bello's hesitation his plan encounters some serious obstacles. Finally, Bello points his gun at Bash and while the latter shoots a bullet at his former friend, Mina releases a blast of energy which destroys the projectile and teleports the three of them – Mina, Lamin and Bello – to a magical realm. It's already supernatural enough for the comic book but it goes much further. They will soon encounter a group of powerful warriors trying to kidnap a woman and who capture Mina, who is trying to help her. Lamin will try to fight them but they look invincible. Luckily the woman turns out to be a powerful witch

62 ZK Nelson and Jason Lamy, *Nani*, Kugali Media, 2020.

63 It will be revealed in the second part of the first volume.

and uses her magic to liberate all the protagonists. After that the story goes on. Just like in the case of *Ndaw*, there is no reason to spoil the whole narrative as the initial setting will be enough to evaluate the quality of this comic as a form of a social commentary. In the later stages of the adventure packed with action and twists we meet strange cult, hyena shapeshifters, ancient gods and fighters with supernatural abilities or unhuman strength. However, from our point of view the story is not that important; it certainly has quality, and the reader is encouraged to experience it on their own with the use of the link which was previously provided. Here we will concentrate on the choice of characters.

The attempted kidnapping, which is a cornerstone for the whole story, is a direct reference to a common problem many Nigerians are facing. This is a clear reflection of modern reality but the response of the protagonists is most important. Both sisters fight back against their captors, and they will continue to do so throughout the story as they don't hesitate to use their combat skills. The same can be said about their unexpected companion – the sorceress from the magic land. The thing we try to underline here is that apart from its entertainment value, fast-paced action magic powers and superhero vibe, we have a comic book which sends an important message about women's empowerment. All the main protagonists are women. They are strong, independent, brave and ambitious. They don't hesitate to fight evil and they will not bow to the aggressors even if their opponents are in an advantageous position. The fact that both sisters are practicing martial arts and that the sorceress is armed with ancient powers further emphasises the fact that in a society where rape and abuse of women is still a common problem, a woman has to be able to defend herself. This last statement seems to correspond with the intentions of the authors and the point of view of the publisher. Kugali used both the sisters as icons in the fight against injustice and inequality in Nigeria. Following the discussion about women's safety and lack of punishment for abusers which erupted in Nigerian media after reports of the rape and murders on some Nigerian women,⁶⁴ Kugali released a statement accompanied with the hashtags related to this social and media movement. *#JusticeForTiwa* and *#JusticeForUwa* were accompanied by pictures of Lamin and Mina, both of them showing determination on their faces. The company's statement goes as follows: "here are times when silence is betrayal. Men, call out other men

64 There are many reports about such incidents and the best way to follow the discussion would be to browse the media reports using the relevant hashtags. The discussion moved from Nigeria to the international media, where it didn't find the attention it deserved. However we can find the articles like the one on BBC: Princess Igho Williams, 'Justice for Uwa: Rape & Murder Case of Uwavera Omozuwa Lead to Oda Justice Movement for Victims in Nigeria – See wetin we sabi,' *BBC Pidgin*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-52895321> (accessed 6 June 2020).

when you hear or see them so much as joking about abusing women. You are not “one of the good ones” just because you’re not an abuser. Being decent is not a badge of honour. Don’t be satisfied that you’re not one of the bad ones. Take action and speak out. Hold your brothers and friends accountable. We stand with all women. The victim is never at fault. The only cause of rape is rapists.”⁶⁵ It is worth mentioning that a few weeks earlier the publisher’s Facebook profile had become a platform for the fight against racism and race-related violence as one of the posts supported #BlackLivesMatter movement as a response to the events following the killing of George Floyd by police in the US. If it comes to social issues, Kugali certainly had a busy lockdown.

Conclusions

The first question we should ask ourselves while concluding the paper which mentions the pandemic in its title and devotes the first paragraph to the covid-related lockdown is whether the cases presented are actually relevant. They are, of course, as they are a part of the content released by the publisher during the time of the lockdown and in the response to the lockdown. But are the comic books which were promoted by Kugali within the three bundles related to the global health, economic and social situation? The answer is quite simple. Because of the subject and somehow reassuring message, the inclusion of *Taboo: A Date with Death* bears a visible significance and can be considered as a direct reference to the pandemic and the feeling of insecurity connected with the disease, which is potentially terminal for any person affected. As for the others, their relationship with the problem can simply be coincidental and none of the graphics novels which were analysed for the purpose of this paper directly mention the problem. However, we can extract some message about the importance of medicine from the example of Ndaw’s vial or the one about the vulnerability of economically excluded people, which in turn fuels modern slavery and human trafficking. It’s quite easy to provide a plausible explanation for the fact that SARS-CoV-2 is not directly addressed as the pandemic is a new, ongoing event so there are not many cultural products so far which relate to this problem. They will most likely appear soon enough as culture does not accept a void and artistic forms of expression have already started to include the subject of the pandemic. This fact, however, doesn’t diminish the quality and the importance of the content introduced during the lockdown.

The comic books presented and analysed here are just a few examples from the portfolio of the leading publisher of African graphic novels. They don’t even consist of half of the titles released within the “pandemic bundles.”

65 Kugali’s Facebook post from 2 June 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/kugalimedia/photos/rp.p.1447774042212402/2692618384394622/?type=3&theater> (accessed 14 July 2020).

Their inclusion within this study was not an attempt at evaluation of the whole market of African graphic novels, but rather a glimpse at some trends which shape African comic book reality. They come from different countries but share similar approaches towards social issues and the cultural material. The main conclusions were mostly provided at the end of each paragraph but let us briefly summarise what lessons have we learned about culture in the times of plague. Also, let us answer one of the initial questions: was the release of the free comic books a promotional move by Kugali which was meant to increase the sales of their products? Or was it something more? We can probably settle for the assumption that both those questions deserve a positive answer. From the marketing point of view, the release of the free content during the COVID-19 related lockdown was certainly a good step and the content supports this claim. Apart of some short, single-volume stories (like *Ndaw* or *Taboo*... which were analysed in the paper) the content includes some of the first volumes of comics which later continue in the form of series. These volumes can serve as a demonstration of the authors' skills in narration and artistic value which characterise each of the products. The reader who is interested in the story is very welcome to buy the whole product from the publisher's website. Moreover, those who feel a connection to the characters or develop some soft spot for the artwork can buy additional decorative pieces from the same online shop. It's all true and the fact that the promotional move failed to bring a lot of movement to the company's social media profiles is not that relevant as it was impossible to predict this at the beginning of the promotional campaign. We can further assume that this would discourage most publishers from promotional movements of this type in the future as the release of the free content somehow limits the repository of paid content and limits profits. However, Kugali released their third and so far final bundle on 10th July so probably apart from the marketing aspects of any giveaway orchestrated by a business owner, there is much more to it than that. After all, can we consider a comic book as just a product like any other? The content of the graphic novels presented in this paper proves otherwise. We are aware that perception of quality is a subjective matter – one person will like the writing, another will like the artistic style and others will dislike it or like it completely. It's a matter of personal preferences. Thus, we can leave artistic value behind. But if it comes to informative value, we can certainly talk about a cultural creation with deep meaning and an important message and purpose, be it preservation or adaptation of traditional values which are omnipresent in the African oral traditions or a commentary on important social issues or an attempt to draw the attention of the public to human rights abuse. All of these elements are present in the comic books from Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal presented here. This is especially significant if we consider that comic books can have

significant educative functions when they steer the attention of their statistical, young reader towards important social problems or promote traditional values. Thus, in the reality of the coronavirus pandemic, covid-related lockdown and the actions of Kugali, we can say that the culture and the comic books are undoubtedly the winners. The lockdown gave inspiration to customer-related moves to support people obliged to stay at home. But the response of Kugali brought them not only in-house entertainment conveniently available in the comfort of their shelters, it also showed the potential of the comic book as a tool to promote, preserve and translate oral literature and as a useful medium to talk about current social issues. This is a lesson which anyone can learn by trusting Kugali to be a guide during the exploration of culture in the times of plague, even if “the plague” itself is not that present in the storyline of the presented products.