

Book Review

Matthias Krings. *African Appropriations: Cultural Difference, Mimesis and Media* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015). 311Pp. ISBN: 978-0-253-01629-4. (Paperback). Price: \$30.00

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A visible feature of the transnational trajectories of cultural productions is their appropriation or adaptation in various dimensions for dissemination through the various media. One notable motivation for this trend in African popular culture is the inherent economic benefit, particularly with the current realities of unemployment and rising poverty on the continent. In an earlier book, co-edited with Onookome Okome, *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (2013), Matthias Krings highlighted the trend of appropriations as a creative response to transnational demands for Nollywood productions.

However, in the present book, *African Appropriations: Cultural Difference, Mimesis and Media*, Krings expands the research scope with greater analytical depth to incorporate other media genres and cultural products. The main thesis of Krings's argument is that appropriation has become a popular trend in the African creative industry and another way of domesticating and localising foreign media subjects and cultural products for greater relevance in local contexts. Using samples drawn from various parts of Africa such as Nigeria and Tanzania with references to Ghana, Niger, South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Congo, the book underscores 'some of the myriad ways a single cultural product may be appropriated – that is, interpreted, reworked and adapted to suit new social contexts, interests, and media environments once it has entered transnational media circuits' (p.2).

The book has eight chapters fore-grounded with an introduction and completed with a conclusive discourse on mimesis and media in Africa.

Each of the eight chapters deals with a different kind of appropriation of a foreign popular cultural product and its dynamic interface in an African creative environment. To illustrate the trends of appropriation and mediation of cultural difference in Africa, Krings analyses a ritual performance in Northern Nigeria involving possession by a malevolent spirit 'Koman-da Mugu' or the 'Wicked Major' and allied spirits believed to be of European descent. The adventures of Lance Spearman, a heroic character modelled after James Bond 007 and thus dubbed 'African James Bond' in the South African popular magazine, *African Film*, reflects another dimension of African mediation and appropriation of cultural production.

Furthermore, 'Black Titanic' represents African appropriations of the classic American film, James Cameron's *Titanic*, as expressed in different production versions in Nigeria, Congo and Tanzania and distributed by cottage culture industries. A similar trend was also observed among local video producers in Kano, Nigeria, who often appropriate popular Indian films. The perennial attraction of Kannywood (Hausa video-film) producers to the Bollywood models is a reflection of 'local Islamic modernity' in contest and contrast with 'individual desire and traditional social norms' (p.23). Another form of appropriation discussed by Krings concerns the remediation of Nigerian Nollywood movies by Tanzanian producers who provide commentaries, translations and explanations in Swahili language for the benefit of local audiences.

The image and persona of Osama bin Laden as disseminated in global media networks also nurtured a unique kind of appropriation among northern Nigeria cultural producers. They used his image as a symbol of radical Islam, defiance and resistance in order to produce popular cultural products including video-films, music and souvenirs. Appropriation is also seen in the mimicry of cyber scams in Nigeria, built on Western or orientalist stereotypes about Africa. Krings discusses this kind of appropriation and observes that the phenomenon reproduces 'copies of news-casts and other genres of global mass media' (p.25).

The book concludes with a chapter on 'Crazy White Men', which interrogates the tropes of difference and sameness in the performances of three white musicians that appropriate African popular music and culture. These white men address their various audiences in Namibia, Nigeria and Tanzania relying on the apparent contrast between their skin colour and command of African languages to gain popularity. Hence, while Krings's book 'begins with a discussion of Africans imitating European conduct and technology in rituals of spirit possession during the colonial era', it interestingly ends with a reversal discourse 'about postcolonial imitations of African performances by white men' who rely

on digital media and the Internet to spread their mimetic appropriation (p.26).

On the whole, Krings's book focuses on what he describes as 'African ways of dealing with cultural difference' (p.2). These manifest through the media of videos, comic books, audiocassettes and live performances as expressed through ritual, song, dance and theatre. These genres also constitute some of the means through which some cultural producers in Africa 'translate and transmit' cultural practices and products from other cultures and worlds that are different from their own.

In essence, appropriation as the author argues, is a form of mediation between the foreign and the familiar. It is, thus, a way of bringing foreign media (and their imagined possibilities) closer or domesticating them for local audiences. By making local meaning out of foreign cultural materials through adapting and reworking them into a local context, the African producers create 'new' texts and cultural forms which are shaped by technology of (re)production and the producers' interpretation of the material.

Indeed, Krings does not actually treat these appropriations as cheap imitation but rather as counter-discourse in which popular cultural products assume new meanings in a context of cultural and spatial difference. Therefore, whether it is Nigerian spirit mediums hosting the spirits of colonial Europeans or South Africans impersonating James Bond 007; or Hausa actors imitating Indians; or Tanzanian video-film stars acting 'Nollywoodish', such mimetic appropriations often illustrate cultural difference and a subversive or counter-reading of global media contents. Nevertheless, the author observes that appropriation of foreign cultural forms by African producers has implications for authorship, copyright, intellectual property and commoditization within the culture economy. Such appropriations are not mere fallouts of Euro-American cultural imperialism but significant practices that engender appreciable agency and creativity that go beyond the debates on authenticity and mimicry. The economic undertone behind African appropriations of popular cultural products (bestsellers) is that by tying 'their own' products to a foreign bestseller, the African producers 'hope that their products thus partake of the popularity and fame of the original, which may also translate into economic gain' (p.23).

However, it can be observed that some of the research work and materials used in the book date back to more than a decade ago. With the characteristic flux and dynamism in the realm of pop culture, it is arguable if the situations in the countries described by Krings are still the same at present and whether the arguments remain valid as at the time of publication. In spite of this, the book remains a significant contribution to the existing literature on African media, film, performance and popular culture.