

RE-IMAGINING AFRICA: PAST IN THE PRESENT WORKSHOP

20.10.2023 10h – 13h

Imaf, Condorcet, salle 3.122

As noted by several scholars, at least since the 1990s “new religious entrepreneurs” have been proliferating south of Sahara. Fully integrated into the market economy and often active on social media platforms, firmly rooted in (post-)modernity, while transforming and adapting ancient practices to today’s format and expectations, such specialists often advocate for the “back to the roots” move and engage in re-imagining of African identities and traditions. Such re-imagining is also at stake in many artistic productions and practices both within the continent and in its diasporas, where decolonial usages of the past multiply. It often involves an essentialization of certain time-spaces – emblematic “ethnic groups”, such as the Dogons, or moments in history, especially those pertaining to the pre-colonial states such as the kingdom of Congo, for example. It results in the reconfiguration of fragmentary and decontextualized elements intervening in the production of simulacra or complex images of the past created in order to cope with the present and construct a better future. The workshop offers a closer look at three case-studies or examples of such re-appropriations of the past within contemporary contexts, analyzed through a comparative perspective.

SPEAKERS

Heike Becker, University of the Western Cape, Afrique du Sud,

“Ounona’ - Dolls and ancestral voices in the art work of Tuli Mekondjo: Reimagining African gender and spirituality”

Sergio González Varela, University of Warsaw, Pologne

“Representations of Africa in Afro-Brazilian Capoeira: Foundational Mythical Discourses in a Ritual Practice”

Agnès Kedzierska Manzon, EPHE – PSL/ IMAf

“Re-imagining Religion in Africa: the Kemet, ancestors and global New Age.”

Discussion: Andrea Ceriana Mayneri, CNRS IMAf



ABSTRACTS

Heike Becker; Department of Anthropology, University of the Western Cape;
‘Ounona’ - Dolls and ancestral voices in the art work of Tuli Mekondjo: Reimagining African gender and spirituality

I will start with Tuli Mekondjo’s installation *‘Omawi mo va Kwamhungu’ (Ancestral Voices)*, which had a centre space in a recent exhibition of Namibian art in Cape Town. Eleven contemporary Namibian artists were invited to research the Namibian Heritage Trust archive of artworks (which goes back to the colonial period), select one item that speaks to their own context, and create a work that responds to them individually, as well as providing a decolonial, contemporary reading of history.

During the research in the History Trust archive, Tuli had identified an undated leather Himba doll, as the work of art from the NAA collection, to which she wanted to respond. She did so with the installation of what she called a “hybrid doll”. Tuli used a broad range of materials and techniques, including her signature embroidery and stitching, and traditional jewelry/ornaments from different cultural backgrounds. Since then the artist has developed an amazing body of work around dolls, which was inspired by her discovery of *ounona* (as they are known in oshiKwanyama/ oonona in OshiNdonga) – dolls made from makalani palms – associated with, even representing children. She refers to them as ‘fertility dolls’. She was inspired by a number of dolls from different Namibian communities and found in different archives in Namibia, as well as ethnographic museums and private collections in Europe. The artist expressed that her goal was “to make a doll that will embody fragments of the other various dolls”.

In my reading, Tuli’s work with dolls embodies an inspiring new decolonial spiritual-feminist approach of ‘artist meets archive’. The embodiment of women’s important heirloom and re-appropriation of ancestral spirituality come together in a powerful reclamation of autonomy and authority historically held by women, certainly in the Northern Namibian matrilineal societies before the advent of colonization and mission Christianity.

Sergio González Varela, University of Warsaw, Pologne

Representations of Africa in Afro-Brazilian Capoeira: Foundational Mythical Discourses in a Ritual Practice

This presentation aims to analyze the political and cultural reappropriation of African references in the ritual art form of capoeira. Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian practice brought by African slaves to Brazil during the colonial period. Today capoeira is a structured martial art combining fight, dance, religion, music, and playfulness performed globally. Much of what is considered traditional in capoeira references a mythical West African past. This past is not located in a particular geographical place but belongs to an imaginary social construct where capoeira practitioners claim a direct belonging. In this presentation, I describe these mythical discourses and the academic and ritual efforts to link and trace back an African ancestry to capoeira. I argue that the African references in capoeira serve politically as a counterforce to the nationalistic discourse used by the far right in Brazil, which has denigrated and attacked the African heritage of Brazilians in recent years.

Keywords: Africa, capoeira, nationalism, reappropriation, ritual

Agnès Kedzierska Manzon, EPHE – PSL/ IMAf

“Re-imagining Religion in Africa: Kemet, Ancestors and Global New Age.

The neologism “Kemits”, derived from the biblical name for the peoples inhabiting Africa (Kemet), refers to the followers of a religious current that emerged in the United States at the end of the 20th century, whose African representatives - for the most part traditionalists and intellectuals trained in Europe or the Soviet Union - display a desire to “return to their roots”. They call for the replacement of “imported” rituals (Muslim or Christian), which have often been present locally for several centuries, with rituals for weddings, name-dating or funerals, supposedly ancestral but in fact created recently.

Like many other indigenous movements worldwide, the Kamites see “back to the roots” move – to Pharaonic Egypt, for example, highly mythologized and presented as the birthplace of black civilization, or to the no less mythologized kingdom of Kongo – as a means of restoring a depth of history damaged by the colonial encounter. Drawing on the model of a kinship group – a clan, a family, a lineage, an ethnic group – with common (mythical) ancestors, usually presented as the illustrious builders of great – and first! – civilizations, they claim primacy formulated in terms of the “anteriority of black civilizations”, which enables them to define themselves as being at the origin of humanity and all its inventions. Whether they refer to Sunjata Keïta, Chaka Zulu or the Dogon sages, they wish to return to a past that is seen both as glorious and as localized. The feeling of dispossession shared among the members of such movements emerging in reaction to subjugation – whether colonial, postcolonial, or neo-colonial – rhymes with the search for the pre-eminence of yesteryear. The aim is to bring it back to life, thereby hastening the decline of the West, accused of a lack of spiritual vitality. Is this pre-eminence to be restored by means of rituals practices? By a return to the supposedly ancestral religious traditions and “spirituality”?

Re-imagining of traditions inevitably echoes the colonial construction of the fetish and of Africa, it mobilizes classic colonial library and ethnographies, as well as – more surprisingly in the case at stake – writings belonging to the European esoterism and the New Age. Drawing on the ethnographic materials from Mali and South Africa, this paper presents the Kemits movement and some polemics surrounding it.