

FUNERARY COMEDIES IN CONTEMPORARY KINSHASA: SOCIAL DIFFERENCE, URBAN COMMUNITIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF A CULTURAL FORM

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INTRODUCTION

Lemba Foire, Kinshasa. Wednesday, 7 August 2013. It is around 2.30 p.m. when three young men in their early twenties, two of them married, walk away from a *matanga* (the Lingala (Li.) for a mourning gathering). They have just told jokes (Li. *masolo*) to a group of mourners and are looking for another audience. Through death notices (*nécrologies*) broadcast on local television the day before, they know that at least three other groups of bereaved people are mourning in the immediate vicinity. The trio heads towards what they assume to be the most promising *matanga*, since a wealthy family is organizing its funerary wake on the open terrain of the Fikin (mainly known for its funfairs and business fairs). On their way, they encounter two other young boys, who they recognize as *balufia*, funeral party crashers. The artists halt and engage in some banter with the *balufia*, who apparently have spent some time at the Fikin *matanga*, but, as they emphasize, there was hardly any food available. The *balufia* quickly describe the cars and clothes of the bereaved, which leads the three boys to decide to turn around and try their luck elsewhere. After a five-minute walk, they arrive at a mourning crowd that has gathered partly in the compound of another bereaved family; others, who have come to console the bereaved, are sitting on plastic chairs arranged in rows on the street. As the coffin has not yet left the mourning space, the comedians need to wait. Questioning the *bana nguba* (boys selling groundnuts) about whether they have already sold much and also checking the ethnicity of the deceased, the three assess the spending capacities of the mourners. The jeeps and shiny new cars parked along the roads are already very encouraging, and the crowd is substantial as well (about 100 people). Furthermore, as the *bana nguba* are happy with their sales, the three comedians decide to wait until the coffin leaves.

After twenty minutes of waiting, boys related to the deceased finally carry away the coffin. A large group of dancing and chanting people accompanies the deceased to the cemetery. As soon as the minivan taking the coffin to the cemetery has left the mourning space, the tallest of the three comedians puts on his hat,

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which is shaped like a wizard's hat in a children's story, and walks towards the carriage, now empty. As he moves, he shouts to the remaining group of mourners:

Bapapa, bamaman – please, do not pay any attention to those who organize the *matanga*. We have some information for you. Musicians are known to mourn while singing; we, as comedians, we mourn through comedy. We put God before anything. Wherever you are, put your hands in your pocket, be distracted, and watch me. Be distracted, wherever you are. We beg you. Dear God in Heaven, you did not give us pride. We, human beings, have given pride to ourselves. But look at the difference you have given to us. Some use big words, some say everything in French, all those words you have given to people in *Poto* [Europe] ...

The other two boys gradually move into the performance space as well, and join the leader of the group. At times they speak collectively, repeating the *masolo* word for word; at other times one or two of them rest their voices and leave the stage to one of the others, who performs solo.

They continue for twenty minutes, repeating the same *masolo* they have been telling several times a day during the last few months. After their performance, the artists move into the crowd and ask for money from the mourners. As they are happy with their earnings for the day (US\$52 in total) and it is already past 3 p.m., they decide not to visit any further *matanga*. At around 4 p.m., relatives, neighbours and friends usually return from the cemeteries. In these final moments of collective mourning, comedy performed by outsiders is not approved.

This article analyses the social context of the jokes told by the comedians described above. I argue that Kinshasa's funerary jokers perform a new 'cultural form' that has appeared only in the last three years in the city. I use 'cultural form' (instead of 'genre') in Williams' sense (1977), who suggests that 'forms' are particular configurations of stances (narrative, dramatic or lyrical), formal composition and subject matter. In his view, emergent cultural forms relate to changing social relations. It will become clear that this cultural form is intimately tied to changes in the ways in which Kinshasa's rich organize their funerals.

Death and burial rituals, a classic topic in African studies, have gained renewed attention in the last decade, with these liminal events being explored in relation to the transformations African societies are experiencing more widely. As Vansina (2011: ix) states: 'funerals are good to think'. While funerals have often been the space of ludic transgressions (see below), in recent years academic attention has been paid to the professionalization of the funerary business; new forms of organizing the mourning rites; and the social and symbolic meanings of death and mourning in relation to political crisis and societal upheaval (De Boeck 2009; Grootaers 1998; Jewsiewicki and White 2005). What remains understudied, however, is the role of funerary rites as a source of inspiration for African popular culture. Congolese modern dance music, which is probably the flagship of Kinshasa's (Kinshasa's) popular culture, is born out of the *matanga* (Biaya 1994: 88). The recent appearance of stand-up comedy in the mourning rituals is another example of the intimate relationship between *matanga* and popular culture in Kinshasa.

My analysis is inscribed in a long tradition of research into ludic transgressions in rituals on the African continent (see, among others, Douglas 1968; Radcliffe-Brown 1940; Turner 1987; Yoshida 1993). In this body of literature, joking

behaviour (which is not necessarily funny, but can be insulting, scabrous and violent) is understood as one of the many manifestations of the liminal character of the ritual. Around the middle of the twentieth century, Mary Tew (Douglas) and B. Stefaniszyn engaged in interesting discussions about funerary joking partners in central Africa. It became clear that jokes (and other kinds of symbolic transgressive behaviour) performed during funeral rites were not only accepted but at times even necessary. Among the Ambo (Stefaniszyn 1950), the institution of the joking relationship was called a 'funerary relationship', as 'funeral friends' played significant roles in performing the mourning rituals of those with whom they had been in a 'funeral friendship'. These roles ranged from closing the eyes of the deceased and washing the body and anointing it with oil, to going to the grave and disposing of the body, to brewing the beer for the party after the burial. Funeral friends were also expected to engage in transgressive verbal behaviour: they cursed and expressed maledictions, accused relatives of causing the death of the friend, and mocked the deceased. In his analysis of the violence and disorder governing *matanga* in contemporary Kinshasa, De Boeck not only observes an increasing role for youth in the practical organization of funerals and the associated violent behaviour, he also writes that the funerary rites are 'ludic happening[s] as well': '*Matanga* invariably also offer occasions for laughter, amusement, flirting and excitement' (2009: 56).

The new form that I describe is inscribed within this cultural expectation of ludic transgression during funerals. In contemporary Kinshasa, it seems that the positions of those who are allowed to joke have been opened up. Another novelty in the context of Kinshasa's funerary jokers is their overt link with stand-up comedy in the sense that the storytellers are boys telling *masolo* to the bereaved community as an audience, asking the mourners for their attention and addressing them not as mourners but as *their* audience – an audience that will be expected to pay for the performances. Scholars who have observed the ludic performance of youth during funerary rites (De Boeck 2009 for Kinshasa; Van der Geest 1999 in Ghana) do not mention that the jokers try to eke out a living from their performances. The commodification of the jokes is a clear departure from the 'classic' ludic behaviour in rituals.

The analysis is divided into two parts. First, I situate the comedians' performances within the contemporary Kinois social universe. Cultural forms, as Williams (1977) pointed out, do not emerge in a socio-economic vacuum. Rather, economic relations and practices as well as moral values and ideological formations co-construct forms and styles. In addition, cultural forms travel more than ever along transnational channels, generating new vernacular forms coexisting or competing with local variations (Appadurai 2010). My analysis is inspired in particular by Miller (1984) and by Barber's social study of cultural forms (2007). Miller (1984) draws our attention to the social action that genres accomplish. Motives and social purposes underpin the mobilization of cultural forms. In *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, Barber (2007: 65) argues that 'textual forms ... are the "bearers of social relations"'. Based on a close reading of ethnographies of Rwandan elite and popular forms, Barber concludes that cohesiveness is consolidated among people who share access to a particular form, while asymmetrical relations are established between those with and those without access (*ibid.*). In addition, Barber draws our attention to the fact that the differentiation of forms does not

merely reflect relations of hierarchy and solidarity; rather, it is also a mechanism for establishing and maintaining those relations.

I will show that the funerary comedies in Kinshasa stand in a dialectical relationship to social distinction. The performances I describe here are consciously organized around ideas of class belonging and wealth distribution. This plays out on two levels: first, in the performance itself, with regard to the social class of the performers, the selection of the spaces where they will tell their *masolo*, and their imagined audience. Second, and also as far as content is concerned, class distinction is crucial. Laughter and ridicule are very often (though not exclusively) elicited through a description of the contrast between the ways in which rich and poor behave, speak, and are named.

In the second part, I engage with the concepts of ‘public’, ‘audience’ and ‘community’. ‘Emergent forms and emergent constituencies come into being in response to each other,’ Barber states (2007: 138). Emergent cultural forms bring people together in unprecedented ways because new forms of address are used, and the cultural texts themselves become loaded with new kinds of expectations bestowed on them by their audiences. In the funeral comedies, the performers have a peculiar relationship with the spectators: the comedians are not invited to these rituals but they impose themselves on their audiences, who have come together for other reasons (grief, consolation), and the performers solicit money from these audiences after their sketches. The fact that these artists make use of pre-existing constituencies allows us to reflect more deeply on publics and urban social formations in general. The funerary comedies emerge in a context where Kinshasa’s rich display their wealth publicly through the funerals; and this cultural form can exist only in an urban context where anonymity (Simmel 2002), combined with the urgency of creativity and resourcefulness due to increased insecurity (Simone 1998), produces new opportunities for city-dwellers to belong, to make a living, and to enjoy life.

I am particularly inspired by Nyamnjoh and Brudvig’s (2014) characterization of urban social life worlds as inhabited by ‘intimate strangers’. They correctly argue that most people in African cities feel intimately tied to one another because of the collective experience of distress and poverty. This closeness – and also the ‘shared social codes’ that result from this intimacy – constitutes the basis for new patterns of inclusion in African cities (Nyamnjoh and Brudvig 2014: 226). They characterize encounters between ‘intimate strangers’ as convivial, and argue that these bring forth new identities and social paradigms, and unprecedented configurations of urban rights and employment (*ibid.*). I argue that the recent transformations in the organization of the *matanga*, which follow changes in the ways in which the rich mourn and bury their deceased, have allowed for more ‘intimate strangers’ to enter the semi-private space of mourning. Furthermore, the conviviality that urban intimate strangers share provides a breeding ground not only for new identities and social paradigms but also for novel cultural forms, such as the funerary comedies.

The material for this article was gathered through participant observation during four visits to Kinshasa (January–March 2013, July–October 2013, January–February 2014 and July–August 2014) during which I accompanied five comedians to various *matanga* and conducted interviews with them and their audiences. All *masolo* have been transcribed with the help of two of these comedians.

POPULAR CULTURE AND FUNERARY RITES

The funerary comedy brings together the cosmopolitan form of stand-up comedy with local, ritualized humorous behaviour. It is not so much the content of the jokes that sets this cultural form apart from other instances in which jokes circulate, as many of the *masolo* told by the artists are already known throughout the city. Rather, the combination of its spatial, temporal and social organization defines funerary comedy: (1) funeral comedies are performed in the mourning space in front of the (now empty) coffin carriage; (2) they occur in the few hours between the moment when close relatives and friends leave with the coffin to bury it and when they re-join the rest of the mourners to share food and drinks; and (3) the comedians arrive uninvited at these mourning events, and perform for a crowd with whom they have no personal ties, and yet the audience is expected to give money after the performance. The performance usually lasts about twenty minutes and concludes with the performers going round the spectators a few times to collect money.

It is considered inappropriate for strangers to make ‘commercial’ *masolo* when the deceased is still present. The only exception when comedians appear during the night, when the coffin is centre stage, would be when an old person has died. In that context, the funerary rite is considered a celebration of the deceased’s life. Old people are less the focus of affection and loss than younger people, and their funerals have a more joyful ambiance.

Just as in regular stand-up comedy, the funerary comedians use hardly any props other than their own voices. With their arrival, the open space around the carriage which was the scene of tears and sorrow only a few moments earlier, suddenly transforms into an artistic stage promising joy, laughter and entertainment. Due to the set-up of funeral wakes – all chairs face the coffin – the mourners do not need to change their position to watch the performance. The comedians’ address to the mourners (see above) morphs them immediately into spectators of a joyful performance.

The humorous performances in Kinshasa’s contemporary *matanga* build on a tradition of ludic transgressions in mourning spaces. The musicians of ‘folkloric orchestras’, very often, although not exclusively, elderly men, exhibit one type of ludic behaviour during funerary wakes. Bands that specialize in the rhythms and songs of a particular ethnic group usually start performing at night, after the pastor has enacted prayers around the coffin. The same band resumes the music when the coffin is carried away from the mourning space – although sometimes the musicians are replaced by CDs of gospel music. During the night and also immediately after the coffin has left, the musicians not only perform music ‘from the village’ (*ya mboka*), but they usually behave in ludic ways. The humour they trigger often comes from them imitating the contemporary urban dance forms normally only performed by young people in nightclubs or in youth-dominated parties. The musicians also often utter obscenities and insult one another, for example by commenting on the economic value of the other musicians’ clothes, or by questioning their virility.¹ For a few years, some bands that

¹In a recent article on dirges performed at funerals organized by the baKweri in South West Cameroon, Mutia (2003) mentions how the funeral singers also insert humour into their

perform at funerals have been dominated by young people, who also engage in banter and ludic transgression.

Other forms of humorous behaviour are performed by people who had a close connection to the deceased. These can be cousins, neighbours or close friends. Also, joking relationships regulating the relations between generations are customarily enacted during funerals. I witnessed a *matanga* in which the grandchildren of an old deceased muKongo man took away the lid of the coffin during the mourning ritual. They agreed to return the lid only upon payment. Relatives and friends paid a small, symbolic fee (US\$40) so that the coffin could be repaired. Although violent in a sense, as theft was involved, this was totally acceptable behaviour as the grandchildren were in a close, affectionate relationship with their (classificatory) grandparents. This kind of accepted transgressive, ludic behaviour occurring within the kinship realm contributes to the joyful ambiance of a *matanga*.²

One of the main differences between the jokes of the comedians and the playful performance by the grandchildren, uncle or other relative of the deceased is their organization of the space. The former occupy the space in front of the carriage and address the crowd as an audience. Taking advantage of the spatial configuration of the *matanga* area, they symbolically transform the mourning space into a stage and audience. The grandchildren and other relatives never actually address the whole group of mourners in their ludic performances. Rather, their behaviour often occurs to the side and is usually addressed to particular individuals (the head of the family, the sister-in-law, and so on) or even to the deceased. Therefore, their performances do not require a theatrical set-up within the space.

The funerary comedians are closer to the music bands that are hired (and thus invited) by the bereaved family both in their usage of the space and in their humour. Often, the musicians engage in provocative behaviour and language from behind the microphone or in front of the coffin. Bands also address the crowds and occupy a 'stage'.

Upon their arrival at the mourning scene, the funerary comedians need to compete with these other types of jokers, rivalling them for attention and money. At times, this competition itself elicits laughter. It often happens that the orchestras continue playing their music even when the coffin has long departed, thus depriving the funerary comedians from an opportunity to perform, to make money quickly and to move on to another *matanga*. In these instances, the comedians join the elderly musicians and try to make fun of them either by standing behind or next to them and mimicking their dance styles and their body language, or by following them when they walk around the crowd. Sometimes, the comedians challenge the older musicians by imitating the acrobatic dance steps of contemporary dance forms in front of the older men who are also monopolizing the dancing.

performances. By singing out of tune, marching off the beat and rhythm of the music, making obscene gestures while dancing, or deliberately altering particular lines in the dirges, the performers attempt 'to relieve the burden of sorrow that pervades both the audiences and the relatives of the deceased' (Mutia 2003: 402).

²Among the Tanzanian Haya, hilarious behaviour occurs during mortuary practices as well (Weiss 1996). In this context, grandchildren take the coat of their deceased grandfather and either create an effigy or dress up in imitation of him, 'parading around the village and demanding payment for their performance' (*ibid.*: 135).

STAND-UP COMEDY

The insertion of comedians into mourning rituals is also influenced by urban stand-up comedy that circulates outside ethnic and religious spaces. In recent years, the phenomenon of stand-up comedy – in particular one-man shows – has taken off in Kinshasa, as it also has in Nigeria (Obadare 2010: 106, footnote 11; Oloko 2010; Nwankwo 2013) and Ghana (Shipley 2009). Most of these stand-up comedians like SaiSai and Dauphin perform sketches and invite others to compete with them in linguistic humour.³ Some, like SaiSai, provoke laughter by imitating the voices of celebrities, well-known political leaders such as Mobutu and Joseph Kabila, and Congolese musicians including Papa Wemba and Koffi Olomide. Dauphin has become popular through a version of the film *The Lion King*, which he dubbed with imitations of the voices of Congolese celebrities. He also hosted his own music show in which he imitated Michael Jackson. Both SaiSai and Dauphin are known to have been invited by Joseph Kabila to various events (birthday parties for his children and weddings in the presidential family), and stories about Kabila donating luxury jeeps and huge amounts of cash to the performers circulate in the city. The best stand-up comedians are able to move around in the highest political circles, and to benefit materially and financially from their fans and sponsors.

Usually, one-man shows are embedded within larger cultural events: for example, the stand-up comedian might perform before a musical concert the audience is waiting for, or, in the case of events such as contests (beauty pageants, music award shows, and so on), the comedy allows for a break in the proceedings. Stand-up comedians also perform in higher-class hotels, on terraces and in bars, and at *kermesses* (funfairs that last several weeks and are mainly organized during the months of July and August, when the schools are on holiday). Access to the *kermesse* is usually free, although the audience is expected to give some money after the comic performances. The humour at these kinds of events is usually innocent, as children and parents alike should be able to enjoy it. More transgressive humour (referring to sex and defecation and more insulting humour) is out of place here, although it is acceptable in the *matanga*.

Kinois stand-up comedy as performed in upscale cultural and social venues is inspired by both local Kinois theatre and European figures of contemporary stand-up comedy. Mangobo (Dave Peti Mpeya), the late Dieudonné Kabongo, Massumu Debrindet, Lokuli (Maurice Ngabuka) and the late Ngalufar (Ngalula Ependa) are the *têtes* (stars) of Congolese comedy that most contemporary stand-up comedians in Kinshasa mention as their artistic forefathers. These artists became popular in local television soap operas and were very quickly invited by local politicians, Mobutu included, to perform sketches at anniversary parties, wedding parties and other private events. Their humour is concerned with ethnic competition, rivalries between co-wives, physical abnormalities or disabilities, and scabrous humour (farting, defecating and urinating).

³The most important stand-up comedians in contemporary Kinshasa are Neveu National ('National Nephew', the pseudonym of Jean-Claude Dadi Mayuma), SaiSai ('The Joy', Fiston Mafinga) and Dauphin (Dauphin Mbulamatadi). Neveu National and Dauphin produce television shows (*Do Not Zap Your Cousin*, *B-One Show*, etc.).

Another, more recent, line of inspiration for the one-man shows in Kinshasa draws on European performances, which are watched on local television stations, computers and smartphones. The monologue *Un fou noir dans le pays des blancs* ('A crazy black guy in the land of the whites'), with which the Belgian Pie Tshibanda (a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the 1990s) has been touring Belgium⁴ for over a decade and in which he recounts with bitter humour way his experiences with trauma, ethnic conflict in DR Congo, refugee status and racism in his Belgian host society, is shown very regularly on Kinshasa's television stations. In addition, an upcoming generation of performers in the Francophone cultural space, such as Grand Corps Malade (French), Jamel Debbouze (French-Moroccan) and Kader Aoun (French-Algerian), bring in novel themes such as interracial relationships, violence in the post-colony, and the lack of opportunities of youth for the future. Excerpts of these comedy shows, usually performed in Parisian theatres or elsewhere in France and Belgium, are shown via broadcast media and online and are eagerly watched by young Kinois.

The funerary comedians that I describe here all claim to draw inspiration from these local and international artists, who have become figures of success in the city. Most of the young comedians performing in the mourning spaces aspire to join a drama group or have already done so. In January 2013, when I first learned about the funerary comedies in Kinshasa, it was still a rather rare phenomenon; I knew of only five funerary artists. A year and a half later, I counted ten funerary comedians. All of them are in their late teens to mid-twenties. Most of them come from a poor background, and, as has been noted with regard to artists elsewhere in Africa (Neveu Kringelbach 2014), they adopt popular culture as one of the various spaces in which opportunities for making a livelihood and for social mobility are available (Simone 2001).

The bereaved groups allow the comedians to perform their art as most Kinois appreciate their non-violent intervention. The young boys, who display their poverty with their shabby attire (jeans, often only a T-shirt, sometimes dirty clothes), are sometimes confused with *kuluna*, boys who sow violence and terror in Kinshasa's townships (De Boeck 2009). However, once they have begun telling their stories, the audience applauds and laughs at their *masolo*, thus bodily and acoustically accepting the intrusion of these outsiders. *Kuluna* boys, by contrast, are often met with silence, despising looks and condemnatory shouts. These bodily performances signal that the *kuluna* boys are unwelcome strangers in the *matanga*.

DEATH AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

'The role of the audience is vital in creating the conditions for performance,' writes Harding (2002: 4) in her introduction to *The Performance Arts in Africa*. Barber (2007: 138) adds: 'New forms take shape as writers/composers of texts

⁴Pie Tshibanda is not the first Congolese comedian to perform in Belgium: there is a whole line of Congolese cultural performers operating within the Belgian-Congolese diaspora and/or the Belgian multicultural artistic scene. Unlike his predecessors, Tshibanda's shows are recorded in Belgium and France and also screened on Congolese media stations.

convoke new audiences (or old audiences in unprecedented ways).’ Nowhere is a percipient reflection on the audience as clear as it is in the way in which Kinshasa’s funeral comedians evaluate the crowds they expect to encounter and for whom they want to perform. More than any other artist who can orient the composition of his audience by his choice of location, language and form, the funerary jokers choose their audiences themselves. As their explicit objective is to earn money through the performance of jokes, they want to cater only for the wealthy. Mastering social knowledge, the comedians know that, in Kinshasa, funerals constitute a privileged space in which to approach the rich.⁵

Although class relations are fluid in Kinshasa and class boundaries are ambiguous (Schatzberg 1980: 462), Kinois society is emically stratified according to access to wealth and one’s professional status. In general, a division is made between ‘those with money’ (*bato ya mbongo*) and those without money (*bampiaka*). Within both categories, other distinctions are made. Families (and their members) who are known to have been wealthy for a number of generations belong to the first category. These are the politico-commercial bourgeoisie (Schatzberg 1980: 176), the dominant ‘Zairian social class, which has used political access to build economic wealth’ (Schatzberg 1991: 141, footnote 35). Well-known ‘bourgeois families’ (*familles bourgeoises*) are Kisombe, Solana Bemba, Dokolo and the like. These are part of a commercial and mercantile bourgeoisie that has established itself since the first decades of political independence in 1960.

Also, the current political and commercial elite occupies the highest echelons of the Kinois socio-economic universe. Their riches might have a more temporal character (as losing a position in the government or a failed deal inevitably leads to a loss of access to resources); still, they are approached with much respect as they prove that even in these periods of hardship individuals can suddenly become successful.

As in many other African cities, in Kinshasa funerals are privileged spaces in which the social status of the deceased and his or her extended family is made visible. Consumption is intimately tied to social positioning in the ways in which people die and are mourned, buried and commemorated in contemporary Kinshasa. Death, and all the activities surrounding it (becoming ill, attempting a cure, the mourning events, the burial events, and even the forms of commemoration), are intimately tied to social rank and aspirations for social mobility. The concern with enjoying a ‘good funeral’ – which means a mourning ritual displaying grandeur (as embodied in a nice, expensive coffin and the hosting of a large

⁵The singer-songwriter Esperant Kisangani describes in a song how the rich show off their wealth in Kinshasa’s *matanga* (Tchebwa 1996: 274; Grootaers 1998: 30):

The mourning space of a rich family
 Has become the arena of a rude demonstration
 Of external signs of riches.
 There, well-dressed men and women meet in an incomparable competition.
 The street is overcrowded with all kinds of cars
 Thus creating, as we dare to say, the ambiance of
 A parade, of a *kermesse*.
 As such, no passer-by could doubt the high standing of the deceased.
 Here even, strange idylls are woven. (Translated by the author from French.)

group of mourners)⁶ – is important for both the poor and the wealthy in Kinshasa. Yet, despite various attempts by the poor to ‘enjoy’ a lavish funeral,⁷ the differences between those with and those without money are extremely marked in the mourning rituals.

Nowadays, Kinshasa’s rich have begun to distinguish themselves from the poor through the organization of death and burial in the following three modes. The first, and probably the most important, marker of social distinction is the choice of the cemetery where people bury their relatives. A social hierarchy can be read from the places where mourners bury their dead; in contemporary Kinshasa, one’s final resting place is defined not by religious or ethnic identity but rather by the financial capacities of one’s relatives. The most expensive cemetery is in Gombe, the upmarket municipality of the city centre, where the national government pays for a burial ground for the local political, economic and cultural leaders, such as generals, leaders of the independence process, former ministers and musicians. Second in ranking is the cemetery *Nécropole*, where a place costs between US\$1,500 and US\$2,500. This new cemetery (inaugurated in 2010) is currently the place where Kinshasa’s new rich or ‘people with money’ bury their dead; these include the president, ministers, the city governor, wealthy economic entrepreneurs and cultural leaders. At other cemeteries prices are significantly lower, ranging between US\$100 and US\$500.

Second, the site of mourning has also increasingly become a marker of social distinction. In the last three years, a shift has occurred regarding the space where the wealthy mourn their deceased. They now organize *matanga* in larger compounds initially designated for wedding parties, political rallies and major cultural events (for example, Bikapi in Limete, Assanef in Lingwala, and Salle Du Zoo in Gombe). Renting such a place for the three days and two nights – the regular duration of a mourning ritual – can easily cost up to US\$2,000. Families with less money continue to organize the *matanga* in the private compound of the relatives of the deceased – either the parental home or the compound in which a married man or woman lived.⁸

Announcements in the media are a third marker of economic difference apparent in the mourning and burial practices. Poor people are not able to pay for death notices on radio and television, which, depending on the number of times they are broadcast, can cost between US\$30 and US\$180. During these announcements, which can be made for a mother, a niece, an uncle, a son, and so on, the journalist, on behalf of a wealthy person, invites people to ‘greet’ the deceased and to join the bereaved family in the mourning. Families where just one member is wealthy can pay for a broadcast death notice, but the particular social positioning of the family is immediately made clear in the mention of the mourning site and the cemetery.

⁶Some mourners need to be fed and sometimes even sheltered for the whole duration of the *matanga* and sometimes until forty days after the burial.

⁷For example, participating during their lifetime in rotating savings systems in order to contribute to the costs of their own funeral.

⁸For a child or a youth, a communal ground is often rented for about US\$50 because a large group is expected.

INVADING THE MOURNING SPACES

Due to the recent transformations in spatial organization and the increased use of mass media to broadcast invitations, Kinshasa's *matanga* have become more open and are also attracting 'outsiders': that is, individuals without any affective, professional or blood ties to the deceased or the mourning community. Violent intrusions into Kinshasa's *matanga* are usually performed by youth from the neighbourhood, as documented by De Boeck (2009). Now, three categories of 'strangers' in particular are increasingly invading the bourgeois mourning spaces: first, thieves, thugs and *balufia* (in colloquial terms, party crashers or funeral crashers who want to take part in the anticipated obligatory sharing of food and drinks after the burial); second, ambulant vendors (selling groundnuts, oranges, water, handkerchiefs and the like); and third, the funeral comedians.

For these three categories, the *matanga* constitute not only a space of grief and consolation but first and foremost a space of opportunity. The latter two share a common approach towards the mourners, who they see as their clientele. Vendors and comedians expect that there will be money to be earned, and the funeral comedians try to sell their *masolo* to the gathered crowd.

Every day, the comedians follow the broadcast *nécrologies*, selecting interesting spaces in which to perform. The criteria for their selection are: (1) the community in which the mourning takes place; (2) the reputation of the family that has broadcast the *nécrologie*; and (3) the cemetery where the deceased will be buried. Upon arrival at the mourning space, the artists first scrutinize the cars and the crowd. If all is well, they elicit information from petty traders about the spending patterns of the mourners. During participant observation, it was clear that the young men would not perform if they saw that there were no cars or if they learned that the crowd did not spend very much.

Based on stereotypes common in the city, the artists, *balufia* and petty traders have categorized ethnic groups and even municipalities according to their spending habits.⁹ So, the city's social geography also determines the performance of these funerary comedies.¹⁰ The stereotypes about the spending capacities of an area's inhabitants produce a socio-economic geography, which helps the funerary artists to schedule their afternoons. As they travel between *matanga*, either on foot or by public transport, and because they have only a small time window in which

⁹These stereotypes influence the performance of funerary comedy to the extent that the comedians might decide not to perform when people from the Lower Congo are organizing the funeral in an expensive compound. The only occasions at which the group performs despite fearing a *ndiki-ndiki* (the opposite of a lucrative performance) is when they arrive at around 3 p.m.; as already noted, 4 p.m. is usually the time when the bereaved come back from the cemetery, and, at that point, the comedians cannot perform any longer. A *matanga* is occupied by *ndiki-ndiki* if, in the opinion of the performers, the majority of the mourners are from the Lower Congo or the Bandundu provinces. By contrast, the *bazopasuka* (those who give) come from the Luba group in particular. Kinois commonly agree that the baLuba are among the richest people in the country, and that they also like to show off their wealth. People from the Lower Congo and Bandundu province, two neighbouring provinces to Kinshasa, are considered to be *maboko makasi* (hard hands), keeping their hands closed and not sharing.

¹⁰The comedians prefer to operate in municipalities such as Gombe, Ngaliema, Kitambo and Limete, and, to a lesser extent, Barumbu, where they expect money to be circulating.

to perform (between 2 p.m. and 3.30 or 4 p.m. at the most, as noted above), they need to select their audiences wisely.

Apart from influencing the location of the performance, social distinction also produces humour within the audience. Comedians engage with individuals within the gathered crowd and play with the possible similarities between people in the audience and leading Kinshasa figures. Especially after the performance, when they try to get money from the crowd, the comedians will run to individuals whom they have spotted during their performance and whose appearance indicates wealth. Such signs include the brand of shoes, the fact that they are wearing particular scarfs, or whether they have been sitting on their own and have been approached by people whispering or bending down to them.

Often inspired by a physical resemblance between a rich person in the crowd and a well-known figure in the city – such as Wendo (a deceased musician), President Kabila or Maman Tshala Muana (a female musician) – the comedians shout out names of the city's famous, and quickly engage in exaggerated flattery.

Luckily you are a muKongo from Beaumarché. I would have been in trouble if you were from Matadi-Mayo.¹¹

Hey [calling his colleague], have you ever seen this tie? I have heard only politicians belonging to the inner circle of the inner circle of Kabila's friends wear these ties!

Oh my God, people, have you [addressing the crowd] seen this fat lady? I wonder how much money she spends on food daily? I am sure she could feed my own twelve children for a week with what she is eating in a day!

In their cajoling, the artists emphasize the visible markers of riches (expensive shoes and clothes, a shapely body) and physically visualize the '*grand-petit*' relationship by bending their bodies, baseball cap in front of their chest, or even by kneeling. They also minimize themselves verbally: at times, the soliciting artist produces false snippets of his personal biography with the sole intention of amplifying the social distance between himself and the 'big man' (or 'big woman') whose money he is asking for.

By performing exaggerated adulation, the artists draw all the attention to that particular individual, insinuate that this person can never be short of funds, and thus force their victim to give them some money. In an approach that is very similar to what Irvine (1989: 261) documented for griots in Senegal, Kinshasa's funerary comedians loudly praise financial donations from potential 'big men' and elicit handclapping from the rest of the crowd.

During this praise, the recipients usually act as if they were not moved by the performance. Complying with the general preferred composure of *maître de soi* (Pype 2015), these patrons look stern, maintain a calm attitude, and sometimes even avert their gaze from the flatterer as if they were unaware that someone was addressing them. But time and again, when the recipient understands that the flattery is approaching its end, he or she will quickly slip a few thousand

¹¹Matadi-Mayo is an area located on the outskirts of Kinshasa, known for its lack of infrastructure and its rural way of life. Beaumarché, by contrast, is a neighbourhood close to the city centre that is popular among expats and where a vibrant nightlife thrives. Here, people spend large amounts of money.

Congolese francs (FC) into the hat, encouraging the artist and also confirming his or her ascribed position as a ‘big man’ or ‘big woman’.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF HUMOUR

The artists’ verbal activities mirror the economy of words in Kinshasa society. Sycophancy, or the public appraisal of a ‘big’ person, is an important strategy when entering a patron–client relationship, which is itself a crucial social space of belonging, identity and opportunity in urban Africa. Flattery occurs in all social and cultural realms, and is a verbal performance that confirms someone’s leadership and publicly claims familiarity between the speaker and the flattered person. Furthermore, cajolers speculate on the social rule that leaders ‘feed’ (Schatzberg 2001) their children or ‘*petits*’ (‘small ones’: that is, the flatterers) by giving money or commodities.

The appearance of sycophancy and patron–client relationships in these ludic spaces of funerary comedy is not that surprising since these networks constitute the motor of cultural production in Kinshasa. Rich musicians and television comedians, for example, are wealthy because they have been able to enter into lucrative relationships with patrons (the political and economic elite). Words, and especially name dropping – the *mabanga* phenomenon (see White 1999) – allow artists to survive in a precarious economy. Probably the best known flatterers in Kinshasa are the *atalaku* (individuals who shout in the bands playing dance music; see White 1999) and television actors (Pype 2012).

The funerary comedians play with this technology of belonging. First, they create the illusion of entering into a patron–client relationship with the person who they try to convince to give them some money; and second, by naming individuals after well-known urban celebrities, the artists create the illusion of a community connected through their familiarity with such celebrities.

This tricking of mourners into giving money is not a novelty in funerary rites. As mentioned above, grandchildren who had stolen the lid of their grandfather’s coffin gave it back only after they had received some money. The money exchanged in this context, however, had a different intentionality compared with the money donated to the comedians: the gift of money should appease the grandchildren, who are not thieves but rather the owners of the lid, and convince them to return it so that the ritual can proceed. Here, the money is a commodity used to control or even tame those who engage in transgressive behaviour during a dangerous liminal event. No one interprets the gift of money as a reward for the behaviour of the grandchildren. The scenario is different when it involves money being put in the hats or bags of the uninvited jokers. By walking through the crowds immediately after their performance, and holding out their hats to the bereaved, the comedians turn their speech into a commodity that in itself has a monetary value. Despite the current randomness of witchcraft (De Boeck 2005) and the potential spiritual effects of words, especially in a funerary context, refusal to give (or not giving enough) to the comedians does not have any spiritual or social sanctions.

The similarity between these boys’ jokes and the work of griots, as already mentioned, goes further than their mere performance; it also extends to their social positioning. The jokers talk about their performances as ‘work’

(*mosala*), and have an ambition to become either stand-up comedians who can perform in cultural venues or actors in television dramas. Yet, just like praising people for money or engaging in flattery, joking for money is not perceived as a dignified practice. Two of the funerary comedians, who are brothers, come from a relatively wealthy family, but even they are in need of cash. They started telling *masolo* during *matanga* not so much because of artistic aspirations but for quick financial gain. Fearing that their parents would forbid them this activity, the boys hide the source of their money from them. Before entering a mourning space, they quickly scan the crowd checking whether relatives or friends of their parents are in attendance. If they are, they do not perform.¹²

Despite the general disapproval of joking at funerals for money, the crowds usually cheer when the comedians arrive, laugh wholeheartedly, and spend money. Although people disapprove of the commodification of jokes, they still tend to speak about these young boys as *des courageux*, resourceful people who turn to entertainment instead of violence and theft to get by.

MOCKING THE POOR

Societal difference is expressed and confirmed between those present at the mourning site (who the jokers expect to be wealthy) and the poor by mocking the poor linguistic abilities of people living in other areas in the city, or their lack of cosmopolitan knowledge (recognizing European fruit and vegetables, for example), or the popularity of ‘cheap’ first names for children in poor areas (such as Bibiche instead of Joyceline).

In the Africanist literature, humour has often been studied as a mode of subversion, as an ambiguous performance through which the powerless express their frustrations about unjust rule, and as a technology to give meaning to and cope with socio-economic and political degeneration (Mbembe 1997; Stoller 1984; Obadare 2009; 2010). In a Bakhtinian sense, laughter evoked by the powerless or the poor robs the powerful and the wealthy of their higher status (Bakhtin 1981). In the moment of laughter, social hierarchy is denied. Such a perspective is not valid in the context of Kinshasa’s funerary comedies; rather, funerary comedians confirm the upper-class identity of the mourners.

God our father – God our Father, look at the difference between the girls of Gombe and those of Camp Luka in Selembao.¹³ A girl from Gombe visits her boyfriend in the

¹²This observation raises significant questions regarding the gendered dimensions of this cultural form. I speculate that the stigma attached to this kind of performance renders it even more difficult for girls to engage in this kind of activity. In Kinshasa, artistic work such as singing, dancing and acting is usually not deemed suitable for girls or women, unless such activities take place within the secure space of the church (Pype 2012). The ‘classic’ joking behaviour is already to a large extent dominated by men and older women; this new type of joking that I describe here seems to be off limits to girls as it would taint their reputation even more. This explains why I did not encounter, nor hear about, any female funerary jokers.

¹³Here, the comedian erroneously situates Camp Luka in the community of Selembao, while the military camp is located in Ngaliema. An explanation could be that the comedian wants to increase the social opposition by referring to Selembao, a community known to house the poorest in the city.

community of Bandal. He asks her: ‘*Chérie*, what do you want me to buy for you?’ You will hear this girl replying, full of pride: ‘*Chéri*, get me a soda and a biscuit.’ But, if you go to Camp Luka in Selembao, listen to what this girl who visits her boyfriend in Limete will do. Her boyfriend too asks her: ‘*Chérie*, what should I get you?’ You will hear her saying: ‘Eh, eh, papa. I just made this [long] trip; buy me *kwanga na evida* [cheap food – manioc paste and fish, which costs about 200 FC or US\$0.10].’

Selembao, located in the south of the city, is one of the youngest municipalities in Kinshasa, created during the early postcolonial era and known to be one of the poorest parts of the city. A contrast is made with the lifestyle of the inhabitants of Gombe, commonly known as ‘the city centre’, who tend to be expats and the political and commercial elite. The laughter here is elicited through the lack of familiarity with what the young boys perceive as modern style. The *kwanga* and the *evida* are known to be cheap kinds of food that quickly give you a satisfied feeling.

The following joke again laughs at the lifestyle of the poor:

God our Father, eh Lord, look how difference is made between *mabota ya kala* [old families] and *mabota ya sik’oyo* [recent families]. In old families, when father goes out to work, he leaves US\$30 or US\$50 for the market. The mother can go with a lot of joy to the market, and she can buy everything that pleases each of her children. You will hear her saying: ‘Eric, Patrick, Esole, I’m off to the market. Papa has left me US\$50. What do you want to eat?’ You will hear Eric saying: ‘Mama, buy chicken.’ But today, things have changed. When father goes out to work, he leaves 1,500 FC [about US\$1.50] at home. Mother also wants to go to the market, but she will speak badly to her children. You will hear her saying: ‘Eric, Patrick, Esole, I’m off to the market. Your father has left me with 1,500 FC. Those who do not listen will not eat any vegetables. Your father’s corpse.’¹⁴

The concept of ‘old families’ refers mainly to families who have established a more comfortable lifestyle in the city, and thus can enjoy basic food such as meat and chicken. As the comedians suggest, in ‘new families’, by contrast, especially those that are still struggling to make ends meet, parents do not consult their children but insult them, and they do not provide protein but only vegetables, which are hardly considered to be food by Kinois.

Taking up Miller’s (1984) and Barber’s (2007) interpretation of cultural texts as being performative, we can argue that the funeral comedies confirm and consolidate social distinctions that are produced in the mourning event. Usually, the performance of cultural forms that confirm or consolidate the high status of a particular group is solicited by the organizers, who themselves seek confirmation of their higher ranking. In the context of the funeral comedies in Kinshasa, as unsolicited performances that are not paid for by the organizers themselves, the funeral comedians contribute to the performance of higher social standing of the mourners.

A significant part of the *masolo* is not related to social inequality but rather to physical characteristics (disability), stereotypes of ethnicity (‘people from

¹⁴‘Your father’s corpse’ is an insult and denotes the mother’s total lack of respect for her husband/partner/the father of her children. Here, it is used as part of the joke.

Bandundu are short', 'people from Bas-Congo walk with their backs bent', and so on) and urban greed. People laugh at the urban fraud who fails, the poor mother who does not respect her husband, the disabled person who loses money because of her disability, the girls whose priority is to be noticed but who are chased away because of their foolishness, and so on. The *masolo* thus portray a grim picture of life in Kinshasa. By ridiculing those who fail to be streetwise, the weak and the poor, and the disabled, the comedians and their audiences reinforce the *anti-valeurs*. Their jokes celebrate the *yankees* (streetwise, cunning people; see Pype 2007) and mock the *yuma* (people who do not possess the skills to survive in a city). This observation poses some serious questions about urban sociality. In their linguistic analysis of urban morality in contemporary Lubumbashi, which, just like Kinshasa, is governed by the second economy, Petit and Mutambwa (2005: 482) describe how the trickster, the urban fraud or the cunning individual is 'legitimate in the face of the state, the wealthy and legal entities' and note that it is 'immoral to steal from a child, an old person, a handicapped person, or a *criseur* [someone who has to scrape money to get by]' (2005: 483). The *masolo* told in the space of Kinshasa's *matanga*, to a wealthier audience, do not counter this morality; in the grimness of their stories, they also show that even the poor and the disabled need to be cunning and wise. So, in contrast to Ghanaian stand-up comedians (Shipley 2009), the jokers discussed here are not preachers of urban morality; they do not want to transmit an ideology; rather, they merely want to earn quick money by using their own street intelligence, voice and body in a space made available by the city's wealthy.

JOKING WITH STRANGERS

As the anticipated spending capacities of audiences are decisive in the performance of *masolo*, it is clear that this emergent cultural form is totally disconnected from the funeral's role of celebrating an individual's life. Moreover, the same *masolo* are repeated over and over again in the various *matanga* the comedians visit. It is precisely the new, more open infrastructures of mourning among Kinshasa's rich that allow the intrusion of strangers, and they have become the breeding ground for this new cultural form. In the conclusion, I want to characterize the funerary comedies as an *urban* form.

As far as content is concerned, the jokes could be qualified as 'urban' as they address urban sociality; in particular, they deal with the performance of the self in an urban context, and the cohabitation of various social and ethnic groups in the city. Yet, the 'urban' quality of this form goes beyond the level of themes and protagonists. The construction of the audience is typically urban: the public is an anonymous crowd. Mourning collectivities in contemporary Kinshasa are not regular communities in the sense that everybody knows one another. Rather, contemporary urban mourning units are constituted of small groups that unite to console one or more members of the bereaved families. *Matanga* in Kinshasa have become occasions for the construction of open-ended communities; this is why the funerary comedians and the *balufia* can invade the mourning space. Not every mourner or supporter is known by the bereaved family members. As relatives, children, cousins and others can invite their colleagues, neighbours

and school friends to a *matanga*, contemporary funerary wakes in Kinshasa are very busy events in which a small mirror of Kinois society is represented. People usually do not ask who you know, and everybody can just take a seat, chat with others, and sleep there during the night.

As mentioned, the funerary artists do not have any affective ties with the bereaved. Usually they do not even know the name of the deceased whose *matanga* they are enlivening. They address their audience using the anonymous '*bapapa*' ('fathers') and '*bamaman*' ('mothers'). These are the most polite forms of address in Kinshasa. This anonymity is typically urban (Simmel 2002), and the funerary artists count on the possibility of anonymity for their performance as the financial return for their jokes depends on their position as people who are unknown to the deceased and the bereaved. The necessity of anonymity also has an impact on the content of the *masolo* they are telling. The humour they perform is anonymized. Urban protagonists feature in their stories, eliciting laughter based on recognition of ordinary urban behaviour, ethnic types and physical characteristics. Furthermore, there is even a deliberate attempt to depersonalize the humour. Each time the funerary comedians start a performance, they immediately apologize to the members of the crowd, asking forgiveness to anyone who could be offended by the jokes they are going to tell:

I want to tell you a story. Before I start, I want to apologize to everyone who will hear my joke. Maybe you will have similar people in your family, or maybe someone will be around here as well but acts as if he is not. Just wait, and let me tell my story. I am not talking about you. I am talking about a friend of mine. Please accept my apology.

In other instances, the funerary comedian might address a member of the funeral organization, apologizing for not having consulted that person in advance. This kind of discourse is a request to the audience to allow their intrusion as the funerary comedians do not occupy a particular social position that would allow them to engage in transgressive or even offensive language.

The social formation that originates through the presence of the funerary comedians is extremely fragile. Relying on the boredom of the waiting mourning community, the artists take risks. They position themselves in front of a group of unknown individuals, who have gathered because of reasons other than entertainment. As uninvited guests, the funerary comedians thus face limits to their ludic performances. They need to be careful not to offend anyone in the audience because of the risk of being chased away.

While, to some extent, the depersonalization of *masolo* can be seen as a key characteristic of jokes, cultural research on humour shows that this is not the case. The impersonal humour performed during the *matanga* is a clear departure from the humour enacted by the elderly men, relatives, friends or neighbours at funerals and also from forms that have been mentioned in the older literature on funerary humour in central Africa (Stefaniszyn 1950; Tew 1951; Weiss 1996). Here, funerary jokes emphasize the personal connections between the jokers and the deceased. Furthermore, the content of the jokes expressed by the 'funeral friends' is related to the deceased individual. Douglas (1968: 375) writes that the jokes often relate to the personal biographies of the deceased:

[The] central African joking partner is a friend ... and is by definition not a close kinsman [whose] role at a funeral is to cheer the bereaved and to relieve them of the polluting duties of burial ... For it is the kin who are ritually endangered by contact with the dead, the kin who are involved in the social structure of inheritance and succession, and it is the personal friend, the joking partner, who is uninvolved in the social structure and is the person who is immune from pollution of death.

Simultaneous closeness and distance are conditions for the appropriateness of jokes at the funerals described by Douglas (1968). Kinshasa's intruding comedians emphasize distance and difference as well, although in different forms: for example, by mentioning urban celebrities, an intimacy between performers and mourners is expressed, although distance comes to the fore when these same jokers anonymize the protagonists of their jokes. In this way, an urban cultural form can emerge, one that can be repeated by the same performers in the *matanga* of Kinshasa's wealthy families, time and again, day after day, week after week.

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ABSTRACT

The article situates a new type of stand-up comedy, performed in Kinshasa's mourning spaces (*matanga*), within the city's social universe. This type of funerary joking, enacted by comedians unrelated to the bereaved, represents a clear departure from the customary funerary humour in which accepted jokers occupy particular social positions vis-à-vis the deceased. Following recent changes in the organization of mourning rituals within the circles of Kinshasa's wealthy, these rather intimate events are ever more open to 'strangers', who anticipate the spending capacities of the gathered crowd. Comedians constitute one among a wide range of outsider groups who approach the bereaved community as a space of opportunity. It is argued that this emergent cultural form is utterly urban, and could only appear within urban life worlds where conviviality with others, and in particular an understanding of people's need to make a living in precarious circumstances, transforms the mourning community into an audience that pays for a cultural performance. Humour is not only derived from a symbolic difference between the poor and the rich, but also through the performance of exaggerated flattery, producing the illusion of patronage and situating the comedian within a feigned patron-client relationship for the duration of that performance.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article situe un nouveau type de stand-up comique qui se pratique dans les lieux de deuil (*matanga*) de Kinshasa, au sein de l'univers social de la ville. Ce type de plaisanterie funéraire, pratiqué par des comiques sans lien de parenté avec les proches du défunt, représente une nette rupture avec l'humour funéraire coutumier dans lequel des plaisantins acceptés occupent des positions sociales

particulières vis-à-vis du défunt. Suite à une évolution récente de l'organisation des cérémonies de deuil dans les milieux aisés de Kinshasa, ces événements plutôt intimes sont de plus en plus ouverts aux « étrangers », qui anticipent le pouvoir d'achat des personnes rassemblées. Les comiques forment un des nombreux groupes extérieurs qui abordent la communauté en deuil comme un espace d'opportunité. L'auteur soutient que cette forme culturelle émergente est strictement urbaine et qu'elle ne pourrait apparaître que dans des univers de vie urbains où la convivialité avec autrui, et en particulier une compréhension du besoin des personnes en situation précaire de gagner leur vie, transforme la communauté endeuillée en public qui paye pour voir un spectacle culturel. L'humour vient non seulement de la différence symbolique entre les pauvres et les riches, mais aussi de l'interprétation d'une flatterie exagérée qui donne l'illusion d'un patronage et situe le comique, le temps du spectacle, dans une relation patron-client feinte.