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appropriations of the White Star liner***

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Black Titanic. African-American and African appropriations of the White Star liner

This chapter introduces a series of black symbolic encounters with a single event in Atlantic history: the disaster of the Titanic in the North Atlantic on April 15th 1912. The White Star liner's demise has marked the history of western mass media in several ways. It was the first major news event primarily relayed through electronic means, coverage of the disaster was the foundation for the New York Times' rise as the leading US daily, and several film adaptations of it were considered both technical and financial hallmarks of film production (Heyer). Therefore it must come as no surprise that it also left its traces in black popular genres which grew, if not apart from, at least alongside the dominant "white" mass media. Early traces can be seen in Blues songs, spirituals, and toasts on the American shores of the Atlantic triangle. More recently, they can also be found – stimulated by James Cameron's Oscar prize winning 1997 adaptation – in songs, video films, music video clips, and graphic novels on the African continent. With reference to William Boelhower (33), who opts for seeing "the ship (...) as part of an elemental grammar in a generative semiotic" of both the historical Atlantic and the study of it, I attempt to look at the entangled histories of the Atlantic triangle through black "narratives" of a *single* ship or rather the demise of that ship. The fact that Africans and people of African descent were almost entirely absent from the maiden voyage of the Titanic – the only exception being Joseph Philippe Lemercier Laroche, a Haitian gentlemen travelling together with his French wife and their two children¹ – raises the question as to why African-Americans have

¹ <http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/biography/486/>

introduced black characters into their versions of the historical event, or, as recent African adaptations have done, portrayed the entire crew and all passengers as Africans. As we will see, black versions of the Titanic can be understood as comments on a historical situation in which black people faced social exclusion, whereby the ship and its unhappy journey serve as metaphors for American society and its historical social conditions.

Some of the versions discussed below seem to symbolically claim a part of history for the black race from which black people were excluded (due to social and economic conditions prevalent in the Atlantic world around 1900). In this sense, it would be possible to understand these versions as forms of “appropriation” – of making one’s own from that which has been hitherto withheld. Despite recent attempts to sharpen the concept of appropriation as theoretical tool (Schneider), however, the term appropriation still has connotations of “stealing”, “copying”, or disregarding someone else’s rights of ownership, which of course are all rooted in the western cult of the original and the concept of intellectual property (Coombe). Although, admittedly, some of the black interpretations literally (or rather materially) steal from preceding versions, a certain uneasiness with the term remains. I will therefore flank the concept of appropriation with a more neutral concept which is borrowed from media studies, i.e. transcription.

Appropriation and transcription

In an attempt to overcome the legal connotations of the term, Arnd Schneider characterizes appropriation as a hermeneutical procedure and an individual practice of mediation between cultures. He suggests that one should

conceptualise appropriation as one of the principal practices underlying any culture contact or exchange, and therefore underlying any dialogical situation of ‘understanding’ each ‘other’ (Schneider 223).

Incorporating artefacts, symbols and products of others into the context of one’s own culture can be understood as practices which foster a “coming to terms” with the other, or, at best, as attempts at understanding. Referring both to art practices and anthropological

encounters, Schneider makes the important point that appropriation frequently occurs – at least historically – in situations of real power difference, where those in power appropriate from those who lack power. Ethnography and ethnographical collections are apt examples of these situations. Cases of appropriation of styles, forms and objects associated with the hegemonic by the dominated, however, also exist and, in many instances, have served to subvert and deconstruct the ideology of the powerful.² Popular performative arts and every day genres, such as rumour, gossip, jokes and songs, may contain what James C. Scott has termed “hidden transcripts” of real power relations. Some of these may include mimetic appropriations of the antics of the powerful, verging on parody, which is always based on some sort of understanding, and critique. The toast “Shine and the Titanic”, discussed below, which is amongst the earliest black transcripts dealing with the disaster, falls into this category.

Calling “Shine” a transcript implies, of course, that there is a script. But what constitutes the script? According to Scott’s coinage, it is the power relations between the subordinate and the dominant which serves as the underlying script. This is then transferred into action and discourse, either as official, public transcript or as unofficial, hidden transcript. Although the metaphor of script/transcript calls upon operational processes inherent to media, reflections upon the media employed in the articulation of the so-called hidden transcripts are missing in Scott’s brilliant account. As shall later be discussed, black transcripts of the Titanic disaster are transcripts in a double sense – transcripts of power relations and of previous accounts of the disaster (both white and black).

According to Ludwig Jäger, transcription is a basic operational media logic which serves to render already existing semantics meaningful for different audiences (i.e. audiences other than those targeted by the script) by re-mediating them through different media. Around 1912, the dominant American newspapers constituted a public sphere which was almost exclusively white. It

² Schneider (224) explicitly refers to West African mimetic interpretations of European colonial personnel and white colonial culture as depicted in Jean Rouch’s documentary “Les maitres fous” (see also Krings 1999).

is therefore not surprising that early black transcriptions of the Titanic have come down to us through oral genres – that is, through genres which, for a long time, had constituted an African-American counter culture, rooted in centuries of slavery. It is likely that it was printed news which served as scripts for early black oral transcripts which emerged in the form of Blues songs, toasts and spirituals. Transcripts can open up new, hitherto hidden, perspectives on their scripts, play with the differences between “copy” and “original” and thus comment on scripts (Jäger). Since transcripts may again serve as scripts for new transcriptions, whole chains of transcriptions are possible. Such has been the case with the story of the Titanic’s demise, where each transcription developed new perspectives on previous transcripts, each structured by ideological, cultural, and economical considerations, as well as by the framework of the very medium employed. Cameron’s Titanic, too, is merely a transcript based on a chain of earlier transcriptions, both between different media and different cultures. These begin with a wireless message in 1912, followed by press reports, several transcriptions within different genres of silent cinema, an early British talkie in 1929, a German anti-British Nazi-version in 1943, several live television dramas broadcast by American TV stations in the 1950s, Walter Lord’s seminal book “A night to remember” (1955) which again served as script for a British film by the same title (1958), many more films, TV serials, radio plays, musicals, web pages, etc. (Heyer 103–38). That James Cameron’s “Titanic” is by far not the latest nor last transcript will become clear below with the discussion of recent African Titanic transcripts.

Early African-American transcripts

Early African-American transcripts turn the Titanic into a symbol of white arrogance and affluence, a symbol for a world in which black people had participated in creating, but from which they were largely excluded. Blues musician Huddie Ledbetter (also known as Leadbelly) composed his song “Titanic” as early as 1912, the very year the ship went down (Silverman 149). In this song

Leadbelly refers to the exclusion of African-Americans from many spheres of American society of the time. He does this by highlighting the absence of black people on the maiden voyage of the Titanic. He introduces a famous black sports celebrity of the day, the heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson, who, according to the song, was refused boarding of the ship by Captain Edward John Smith.

Jack Johnson wanted to get on boa'd
 Captain Smith hollered, "I ain' haulin' no coal."
 Cryin', "Fare thee, Titanic, fare thee well!"³

For contemporaries, Jack Johnson was one of the first black heroes to literally fight white racism. When Johnson won the world champion heavyweight title as first black boxer in 1908, the media and the white boxing world counted on former champion, Jim Jeffries, as "great white hope" to regain the title (Gilmore 42). This "hope", however, was battered to its knees in the epoch-making boxing match on July 4, 1910, in Reno, when Jack Johnson successfully defended his title and thus was seen as "the symbolic black man taking out revenge on all whites for a lifetime of indignities" (Blassingame 5). As opposed to his boxing career, Johnson, in Leadbelly's Titanic song, does not have to suffer from white arrogance for long: in one of the last lines of the song, Johnson receives news of the disaster, thus discovering that not being allowed on board was, in fact, a blessing in disguise. Happy still to be alive, while many of those who were allowed to board found their wet grave in the North Atlantic, he dances in celebration ("doing the Eagle Rock", as Leadbelly calls it). This line – already an illustration of Scott's statement, that "fantasy life among dominated groups" may take the form "of *schadenfreude*: joy at the misfortunes of others" (41) – is topped by the explicit last line of the song:

Black man oughta shout for joy
 Never lost a girl or either a boy
 Cryin', "Fare thee, Titanic, fare thee well."

³ For a full transcript of the song text see Lomax (1936: 182). An edited podcast-version of this song, as well as any other of the following audiovisual sources, can be found at www.youtube.com (enter "Black_Titanic" into the search engine).

Unlike Leadbelly's Titanic song, in which a black character is denied passage on the Titanic, the toast "Shine and the Titanic" smuggles a black character on board the ship. Toasts are an African-American oral genre, which contain narratives performed in a rap-like manner. Although most popular toasts have been fixed in written form, their original style was purely oral (Jackson 3–12). "Shine" is a trickster figure; his name, derived from a derogatory white nick-name for black men, is an early instance of positive affirmation. Shine survives the sinking due to his cunningness and physical strength. Working below deck, he is the first to notice that the ship will surely sink and reports to the captain who arrogantly treats him with disdain, choosing instead to put his faith in the technical equipment of the ship.

Up popped Shine from the deck below,
 says, "Captain, captain," says "you don't know."
 Says, "There's about forty feet of water on the boiler-room floor."
 He said, "Never mind, Shine, you go on back, and keep stacking them
 sacks,
 I got forty-eight pumps to keep the water back."
 Shine said, "Well, that seems damned funny, it may be damned fine,
 but I'm gonna try to save this black ass of mine."
 So Shine jumped overboard and begin to swim,
 and all the people standin' on deck watchin' him.
 Captain's daughter ran on the deck with her dress above her head and
 her teddies below her knees
 and said, "Shine, Shine, won't you save poor me?"
 Say, "I'll make you as rich as any Shine can be."
 Shine said, "Miss, I know you is pretty and that is true,
 but there is women on shore can make a ass out a you."
 Captain said, "Shine, Shine, you save poor me,
 I make you as rich as a shine can be."
 Shine say, "There is fish in the ocean, whales in the sea,
 captain, get your ass in the water and swim like me" (Jackson 185–86).⁴

In all versions, Shine swims so fast that he reaches dry land even before the news of the disaster has been reported there. Finally he enjoys the good life, with lots of drink and women, in a Harlem tavern.

⁴ An audiovisual example of this toast, performed by Rudy Ray Moore, can be found in "Dolemite" (dir. D'Urville Martin, 1975). Although part of a feature film (of the Blaxploitation genre), this might come close to live performances.

If the Titanic symbolically represents the United States, where black people were denied “first-class passage” and relegated to menial positions (Dance 372), then the sinking of the ship leads to an inversion of the power relations between black and white. The Master implores his servant to help. But Shine rejects the pleas and, despite the seductive offer of money and sex, simply turns his back and leaves the sinking ship. If white America with all her luxury and ill gotten wealth founders, why should he care? Shine’s turning of his back is then “something of a declaration of independence” (Abrahams 81).

African transcripts

With a big leap in time and space we now cross the Atlantic and turn to Africa, or – in afrocentric parlance – return to the motherland of the African diaspora. Unlike the African-American transcripts presented so far, which were largely based on printed and oral scripts, African transcripts are all based on a single filmic script – James Cameron’s “Titanic”, released in 1997. As with other Hollywood blockbusters, Cameron’s film circulated in African countries soon after its release as pirated VHS copy. This was viewed in private homes or in video parlours, thus reaching a wide audience across all sections of society.

Similar to the early African-American transcripts, recent African transcriptions try to render a script meaningful for audiences other than those intended by the producers of the “original”. Those who produced the transcripts in Africa may well be called cultural brokers – in the sense that they appropriate Cameron’s film and mediate between different cultures through cultural translation. Unlike their African-American forerunners, however, recent African transcriptions also seem to have been motivated by commercial considerations. Since several African countries have experienced the growth of local “culture industries” in the past ten years – all related to the advance of audiovisual technology – it is a logical consequence that these “industries”, despite all the differences to western (or eastern) culture industries, also adopt the economic logic of commercial media production. The success of

Cameron's *Titanic*, not only in the West but the world over, spread the message that *Titanic* sells. African producers of *Titanic*-related cultural products tried to cash in on the popularity of Cameron's film in order to sell both their products and their messages.

The Nigerian video industry gave birth to a video film titled "Masoyiyata/Titanic" (dir. Farouk Ashu Brown) which was produced in 2003. This video can be interpreted as an afrocentric remake of Cameron's "Titanic" (Behrend 259). The *Titanic*, historically owned by the White Star line, is turned into a Black Star liner. There is no longer just a single black worker below deck – like famous *Shine* – who is re-inscribed into the history of the *Titanic*, but the whole ship itself which is Africanized. The ship no longer starts its journey in Southampton, England, but in Lagos, Nigeria – the one shore of the Atlantic which did not feature in the historical event and had been missing from its mediatized aftermath. In *Masoyiyata/Titanic* – the first part of the title is Hausa and means "my beloved"⁵ – it is not only the lovers who are black, but the whole crew, the captain and the owner (see illustration 1).

In Africanizing *Titanic*, young Nigerian filmmakers claim an episode of world history for the black race. What at first seems rather odd – the claiming of a disaster – on the other hand makes sense, since the film radically claims what black people purportedly have been denied: participation in a historical journey across the Atlantic, which not only would make history because of its dramatic ending, but even at its outset was considered history in the making, as it represented the beginning of a new era of fast travelling and technological progress. While *Leadbelly's* Jack Johnson could still be happy that he was denied passage, and *Shine* the trickster survived due to his cunning, *Masoyiyata/Titanic's* African passengers have to drown, and follow the fate of the passengers aboard the historical *Titanic*. The video even goes so far as to dedicate the film to "all the Africans who drowned in the Atlantic during the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1927". Although the filmmakers are twice wrong – except for the single Haitian of African descent there were no blacks on the *Titanic* and the ship sank in 1912, not 1927 – their symbolical appropriation still remains very powerful. As a result, the Nigerian transcript of

⁵ The language of the film is Hausa. "Masoyiyata" refers to a female lover.

Cameron's *Titanic* allows its viewers a critical inquiry into the script (why is it an all-white narrative?) and – beyond this particular script – into the historical context of the ship. It reminds us to ask ourselves why, amongst crew and passengers, there were almost no black people on the historical journey of the *Titanic*, and has us thus recalling an era within the history of the Atlantic triangle which saw societies deeply divided along racial lines.

The Nigerian film makers appropriated Cameron's *Titanic* also in a more literal sense: for it is not only the historical narrative and Cameron's melodramatic version of it which, by and large, are retold, but parts of the film are hard-copied into the transcript. Director Farouk Ashu Brown used many sequences from the "original" and combined these with his own material which was shot in northern Nigeria. Sequences which he appropriated from Cameron are almost all wide shots showing the ship on the ocean. These are combined with medium or medium close shots which he shot with his team in Nigeria. This montage technique made it possible to delete all white personnel on the ship and replace them with the remake's black characters (Behrend 258).

Africanizing Cameron's *Titanic* also meant transcription according to the established filmic conventions of the Nigerian video industry. The remake was shot and released in Muslim northern Nigeria, where the local video film style is deeply inspired by Indian films (cf. Larkin, Krings). This means that every video must have a fair number of song-and-dance sequences. These are spectacular interruptions to the narrative which visualize the characters' inner feelings and translate them onto the screen. *Masoyiyata/Titanic* has three such sequences, the most spectacular of which is a hybrid between Bollywood-Cinema and an MTV-Clip – a Hausa Version of Celine Dion's *Titanic* theme "My heart will go on". The sequence shows the female lead (Binta – the Nigerian transcript of Rose) in various costumes, ranging from American college dress to Indian *sari*, against changing backdrops – a waterfall, a beach, a cloudy sky. To the melody of Dion's song, Binta sings about her love for Abdul (the Nigerian Jack). The refrain, however, turns the song into an elegy about her being caught up between her own desire and the husband her parents have chosen for her:

Iyayena sun ce, sam, ba zan aure wanda na ke so ba
 My parents said, no way, I won't marry the one I love

Although this conflict is already important for the script's narrative, it is even more pivotal within the transcript since it coincides perfectly with *the* most common theme of Hausa videos – a love triangle along with a conflict between parents and their children about the choice of a future husband or wife. It seems that the congruence of Cameron's story-line with those well established in northern Nigerian video culture – besides the hope to participate in the "original's" fame – was the trigger of Farouk Ashu Brown's decision to remake "Titanic". Apart from that he probably also sought a possibility to symbolically "inscribe" himself and his girlfriend into a myth that has attained global circulation, for it is his girlfriend Sadiya Abdu Rano who plays Binta and the director himself who appears as Binta's fiancé.

Similar to the Nigerian video *Masoyiyata/Titanic*, albeit in the form of a different medium, is the Kiswahili-language graphic novel "Mkasa wa Mapenzi ndani ya Titanic" (An unlikely love affair on the Titanic) by Tanzanian comic artist Joshua Amandus Mtani, part one of which was released in 1998 in Dar es Salaam (see illustration no. 2).⁶ For this kind of inter-medial transcription Amandus Mtani developed what he calls "a pause and sketch technique", whereby he copied many video stills from the TV-screen to his sketch book. As he had never heard of the Titanic story prior to having watched Cameron's film, he intended to "educate" his fellow Tanzanians about the history of the Titanic. His graphic novel therefore also contains historical background information. According to Mtani, the Africanization of Cameron's characters was intended to foster the likelihood of identification for his Tanzanian readership. The Hollywood film and its localized transcript both held a special appeal for Tanzanians, since Tanzania had experienced a similar disaster on Lake Victoria in 1996 when the ferry MV Bukoba foundered leaving more than one thousand passengers dead. Apart from his didactic intention, Mtani – like the director of the Nigerian video film – also secured a place for

⁶ This graphic novel was brought to my attention by Jigal Beez, who interviewed the artist in June 2006 in Dar es Salaam, and on whose insights the following paragraph is based.

himself in his own version of the global myth: his Jack remarkably resembles himself.

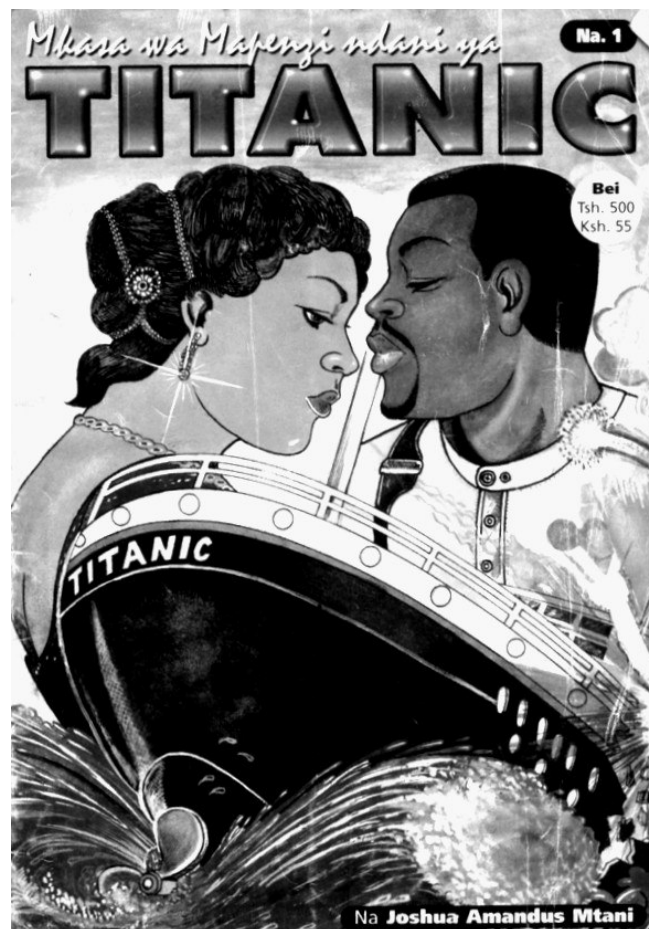
The Nigerian video film and the Tanzanian graphic novel, although both based on intercultural and inter-medial transcriptions, still stick remarkably close to their American script. Apart from a few minor alterations of the storyline, it is largely the African cast that is novel. In the following, two further African appropriations of Cameron's Titanic will be discussed which differ from those above, insofar as their relationship to the film is one governed by metaphorical associations. As we will see, the sinking of the Titanic stands for something else, either for the splitting up of a Congolese pop group, or for the imminent ending of the world.

In 1998 the Congolese Band, Wenge BCBG⁷, released a song and an accompanying video-clip called "Titanic". The clip consists of two parts, a supporting intro and the music video itself. The intro begins with the credits which are copied on top of translucent whitish negative images showing a running film projector, inter-cut with images of a spectator sitting in front of a movie screen. In combination with the underlying sound – a wind-like roaring which comes and goes, accompanied by female screams – these images signify cinema as an enchanted technology, somehow associated with the spiritual realm. The prelude ends by cutting to a running film projector in full colour, and we are shown an African audience watching Cameron's Titanic. Footage from Cameron's film is physically appropriated in a similar fashion to the Nigerian remake. Here, however, it is combined with images of a young boy who first sits among the audience and then leaves the cinema at the dramatic climax of the film – when the ship breaks apart. As if in a trance, he goes to a mansion with a swimming pool. Film images keep coming back to haunt him in flashbacks – again inter-cuttings of footage from Cameron's film are used. He folds a paper boat, puts it afloat in the pool, and then unexpectedly dives into the pool – as if to pursue his boat. A last flashback of the drowning Leonardo DiCaprio seems to evocate the boy's fate. The intro ends with a hard cut on a roaring steam pipe which leads us into the music video itself.

⁷ BCBG is an abbreviation of the French "Bon chic, bon genre" – neat, swish, stylish.



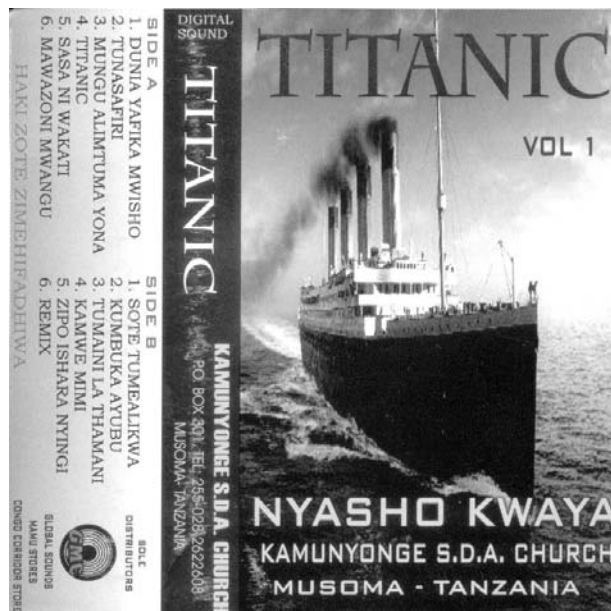
1. Magazine advert of Nigerian video film



2. Cover of Tanzanian graphic novel



3. CD cover of Congolese Band Wenge BCBG



4. Audio cassette cover of Tanzanian choir

The intro and its prelude serve as paratext to the music video insofar as they reflect upon both the medium of film in general and James Cameron's movie watched by an African audience. Global media may have unexpected effects on local audiences, and the story of the drowning boy may, at first glance, appear as part of a discourse on over-identification of young cinema goers with movie characters, and the "dangers", moral and otherwise, of cinema. In combination with the music video itself, however, I suggest that the intro's allusion to film as a spiritual technology and to water as the substance that constitutes the aquatic boundary, separating the realm of the living from that of the dead in Congolese cosmology (MacGaffey 1983, 126-27), are key to an understanding of the intro. In this sense, the projection of Cameron's film could be interpreted as a calling by spiritual forces that belong to a parallel "other" world. The access to this world is through water, and the boy who is drawn into the pool's water enters that world through the pool, which opens up into an infinite depth, via cross-fading, on a submarine shot of drowning Leonardo DiCaprio. The music video is then an illustration of the boy's dreamlike vision of the spiritual realm. What is the local background and the metaphorical meaning of the song?

The ship Titanic symbolizes a band called Wenge Musica that split up and "sank". Like the Titanic this band broke into two pieces – i.e. two new bands, each headed by a prominent member of the original group. While Wenge BCBG is lead by Jean-Bedel Mpiana, his former companion, Ngiamu Werrason, leads Wenge Musica Maison Mere. According to Kinshasa urban lore, the split-up occurred in 1997 when J.B. Mpiana and some other band members went on tour in Europe and left Werrason behind. Congolese Music has a strong tradition of rivalry and competition pursued through its songs. After having founded his own band, Werrason drew on this tradition and composed a song called "Intervention rapide" in which he complained about the treachery of his friend J.B. Mpiana. "Titanic", then, was J.B. Mpiana's answer to Werrason's lyrical challenge. Here are the opening lines of the song "Titanic":

Botala ndenge Titanic eza' koinda
Boluka basauvetage, ah

See how the Titanic is sinking
Look for the lifebelts

Bakadia bazinda
 baange babika
 Tita ... Titanic

The devils shall drown,
 the angels shall be saved
 Tita...Titanic⁸

Who the devils are, and who the angels, becomes obvious when looking at the cover of the “Titanic”-CD. It shows an image of J.B. Mpiana and his colleagues, represented as survivors in lifebuoys, with the sinking ship in the background (see illustration no. 3). An epithet, printed under the band’s name, reads “Les anges adorables” (The adorable angels).

The music video suggests survival as spiritual resurrection. At the beginning we see footage from Cameron’s film – the Titanic about to sink and submarine shots of sinking bodies. In front of these images dances a blue screen-copied band member who addresses us, the viewers, saying: “Look how the Titanic is sinking”. While listening to the next few lines of the song, we see an image of a rough sea (in fact the one that shows the swirl after the ship disappeared). Synchronized with the song lyrics, “the angels shall be saved”, three translucent, whitish columns protrude from the sea, symbolising the surviving spirits of the three musicians that constitute Wenge BCBG. Next we see female dancers, all dressed in white – an allusion to sailor suits or diving suits and to the spirits of the dead which, in Congo cosmology, are associated with the colour white. We also see translucent images of the three musicians. All are superimposed onto images of the Titanic or its wreck under water. The video thus suggests an analogy of “survival and resurrection” between those who drowned during the Titanic disaster and the three band members. Both return in a different form – the dead, according to Congo cosmology, after their journey through the waters, as newborns of future generations, and the three members of the old band as the newly formed Wenge BCBG. Wyatt MacGaffey summarizes Congolese beliefs as follows:

⁸ The language of the song is Lingala, interspersed with Kikongo. I wish to thank Jean-Baptiste Ndeke for his translation, Gracieux Mbuzukongira for introducing me to the story behind the song, and Anna-Maria Brandstetter for discussing Congo cosmologies and the video-clip with me.

This world is the realm of the living, who are black. The spirits of the other world are white. They are the dead, but also the generations to come; the fathers, but also the children (MacGaffey 1968, 173).

It also seems significant that the video clip was released after a successful European tour of the new band. In traditional Congolese beliefs, Europe (*mputu* in Kikongo), as the land that lies beyond the ocean, is sometimes associated with the spiritual realm of the dead (174). At the same time, Europe is a place from where migrants may eventually return as rich and as powerful as the spirits of the ancestors who return from the world of the dead. Now Wenge BCBG had returned from Europe with aspirations for wealth and success. During the celebration of “*la descente*” – a ritualized form of arrival from Paris or Brussels which constitutes an important part of the Congolese “cult of elegance” (*la sape*) (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa) – J.B. Mpiana and his colleagues were enthusiastically acclaimed by their fans who welcomed them in Kinshasa on 18th November 1999 with a boat mounted on a lorry – an obvious reference to the Titanic.⁹

The final example of an African transcription comes from Tanzania again. It consists of an audio tape album which includes a song entitled “Titanic”, recorded by “Nyasho Kwaya” – a choir of “Kamunyonge Seventh-Day Adventist Church” from Musoma, located at the shores of Lake Victoria (see illustration no. 4). Seventh-Day Adventism developed as a Protestant movement in the United States in the middle of the 19th century. Adventists believe in the impending end of the world and in the second coming (or the Second Advent) of Jesus Christ, who will save those who have accepted him. Initial beliefs, based on a reading of Daniel 9:14, where the Prophet Daniel is told that after a 2300-day period the “sanctuary” will be resurrected again, calculated the end of the world for October 22nd 1844. Since that day passed without the world being turned up side down – or purified by fire as many contemporaries believed – followers of the Adventist faith have somewhat altered their doctrine but still believe in the imminent

⁹ For this information I have to thank Jennifer Shamalla, Nairobi, who was an eye-witness of the band’s return home. There is also a song “Titanic” by Tanzanian Band Mshike Mshike (also called Double M) which uses the Titanic disaster as a metaphor quite similar to Wenge BCBG.

end of the world and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Since the Adventist church has sent out missionaries to most parts of the world, and is also active in development and health work, the Adventist presence in Africa is not surprising. *Nyasho Kwaya* uses the tragic journey of the Titanic as a metaphor for the present condition of the world, which is believed to end very soon. We are all passengers in this world and, like the captain and the passengers of the Titanic who could have seen the dangers ahead if they had not been blinded by their trust in man-made machinery, present day mankind also ignores the signs that point to an imminent ending of the world. The last lines of the song read as follows:

<i>Walipoona ya kwamba mbele yao kuna hatari Nahodha na wasafiri hawakujaji hilo Walisema Titanic – haizami</i>	Despite having seen the great danger ahead The captain and the passengers didn't care And said: Titanic – will never sink
<i>Waligonga mwamba, bum! na meli ilizama</i>	They hit a rock, bum!, and the ship went down
<i>Titanic kweli ilizama ohoo na watu pia waliangamia</i>	Titanic sank for real and the passengers drowned
<i>Na sasa dunia yetu ndio Titanic inakaribia kuzama</i>	And now the world is just like the Titanic – about to sink
<i>Ni ya (...) mwenzangu hata kama watu ni wagumukukubali kwamba dunia yaisha Mwisho wake ni hakika</i>	And even if it is difficult to believe that the world is coming to its end – that is the truth
<i>Dunia yaenda kuzama na watu waenda kuangamia</i>	The world will sink and men will perish ¹⁰

This song is intertextually related to the other eleven songs of the cassette. The combined songs develop the basic beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists and turn them into a powerful missionary message, or rather a warning: the end is near, repent, it is still not too late! Similar to preaching, the songs use the rhetoric of biblical parables – so revealing another instance of transcription from one genre and medium to another. Apart from the Titanic song, which figures as a parable as well, two songs are directly related to the

¹⁰ I am grateful for the translation provided by Claudia Böhme and Aggrey Nganyi Wetaba.

scripture of the Old Testament. One of these immediately precedes the Titanic song, and is about the prophet Jona and the whale, so leading the listener, in anticipation for the next song, towards an imagery of the sea, and a ship that is about to sink.

The tapping of the potential spiritual aspects of the disaster takes us back to early appropriations within the African-American community, where a spiritual entitled “God moves on the water” was widely circulated in the 1920’s. This song refers to the Titanic as a symbol of men’s technological prowess and interprets the disaster as divine intervention (Hull). This kind of religious interpretation, however, was widely shared amongst contemporaries irrespective of the colour of their skin. The popular song “Down with the old canoe”, recorded by folk musicians Howard and Dorsey Dixon in 1938, is an apt illustration of this belief. It interprets the Titanic as a symbol of man’s hubris and combines this interpretation with an analogy between the ship’s journey and man’s journey through life, life which can only be saved if guided by Jesus Christ – a moral analogy which is remarkably close to that developed by the Tanzanian choir.¹¹

Open end

Black versions of the Titanic disaster display a number of different moments of symbolical appropriation. These moments, however, surface in the various black transcripts of the Titanic disaster to differing degrees. By way of including black characters into their narratives of the Titanic, African-American and African appropriations of the Titanic have served to comment on, and to symbolically overcome the social exclusion that members of the black race had to experience during the larger part of Atlantic history. This holds true not only for Leadbelly’s Jack Johnson episode and for Shine, both of which have worked as “hidden transcripts” of American race relations for several decades, but also for all-black transcripts like the Nigerian video film and the

¹¹ The full song text and an audio sample can be accessed at: http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/down_canoe.html.

Tanzanian graphic novel. The latter two also contain a second moment, which does not surface in early African-American transcripts. That is – an attempt at understanding through mimetic appropriation. How would it have felt if it had happened to us? – seems to be the question for which these transcripts develop an answer. In resettling the narrative with an all-black cast, these transcripts transcend the boundaries of ethnicity and race, addressing the historical event as a moral lesson for all mankind in so far as it highlights central aspects of the *conditio humana*. The Tanzanian Adventist choir takes this moment a step further as it makes no attempt at localization apart from the language employed. Its religious message pertains to all mankind. In this regard the Congolese video clip is a significant exception. Like the Adventist hymn, it uses the Titanic disaster by way of analogy, but, at the same time, it also radically localizes its script – Cameron’s Titanic – by translating it against the backdrop of local cosmology. Like the two other African (audio-)visual transcripts, it appropriates footage from the Cameron film physically. This can be interpreted as a moment of symbolic appropriation of a prize-winning multi-million Dollar production and an attempt to participate in that film’s popularity and fame. Hand in hand with such symbolic aspects go mundane economic considerations. African producers of Titanic transcripts surely thought to benefit from the hype about Cameron’s film and hoped to raise the sale of their products and messages.

Early African-American Titanic transcripts are still rooted in an era during which trans-Atlantic transportation relied on ships. Their use of the ship as a “minimal discursive unit” (Boelhower 33) to think about American, and also circum-Atlantic, race relations, makes perfect sense. Shine’s cunning survival of the disaster and the foundering of his white fellow travellers marks a telling counter-point to the horrific experience of the Middle Passage which many of his enslaved ancestors did not survive. Recent African transcripts, in contrast, are firmly rooted in an era in which the ship has long since lost its role as primary means of trans-Atlantic transportation. Through the spread of digital information and communication technologies, much of today’s travelling can even take the shape of travel without movement. This, however, at

least for the majority of Africans, is only as satisfying as “impotent window shopping” (*lechér les fenêtres* – as Achille Mbembe has called it, cf. Van Binsbergen et al. 21), namely seeing what is out there without ever having the chance of getting there, at least not through any legal or comfortable means of transportation such as planes which involve visas and customs and immigration officers. This brings us back to the ship, or rather its smaller sister, the boat. Given the rising number of boats packed with African migrants that capsize every year during their attempts to traverse the Atlantic and the Mediterranean in search of a better future in Europe, the “ship” as a “minimal discursive unit” (Boelhower 33) still resonates with the social and economic conditions of at least some parts of the present Atlantic world, despite having lost its role as primary means of transportation. The biggest boat ever built on a Senegalese wharf, a wooden vessel of 24 meters in length and 4 meters wide, was constructed in the town of Rufisque in June 2006 (Sagna).¹² Purportedly it was meant to take African emigrants across the Atlantic to America. By November 2006, its builder had already earned a small fortune, equivalent to 40.000 Euros, by selling tickets to about 100 people desperate enough to leave the continent at high risk; the boat’s name was “Titanic”.

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¹² I wish to thank Jan Beek for bringing this episode to my attention.

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