

**Discussant comments on Katrien Pype's paper, "I Do Not Want To Marry My Ngatiul': Mass-Mediated Alliances between Youngsters and Pentecostalism in Kinshasa"**

for the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) Media  
Anthropology Network e-seminar 21-28 February 2006

by Kelly Askew, Department of Anthropology and Center for Afroamerican and  
African Studies, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

In her essay on television and Pentecostalism in Kinshasa, Katrien Pype weaves together analysis of popular Congolese television serials with conflicts over generational cleavages, urban migration, religious transformation, and shifting conceptions of kinship. As such, she contributes to (yet seems largely unaware of) the burgeoning literature on religion and mass media, best exemplified by the work of Birgit Meyer (see also her new volume co-edited with Annelies Moors on Religion, Media and the Public Sphere), recent work by Jacques Derrida, a special issue of *Journal of Religion in Africa* -- vol. 33, no. 2 (2003), and *Religion and Media*, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber. Pype's focus is the dominance in Kinshasa television offerings of what she terms 'Pentecostal melodramas': locally-produced serials about social issues familiar to average viewers (e.g., witchcraft, illicit relationships, competing loyalties) that are depicted as best resolved or understood within the framework of a Pentecostal, born-again Christian, ideology. The genre has become ubiquitous fare found not only on church-owned television stations, but also on the two state-owned stations and on private channels without religious affiliation. Pype presents these teleserials as a privileged space within which young actors/actresses (and, by extension, their audiences?) critique customary practices, reject the authority of consanguineal elders, and celebrate escape from both through conversion to Pentecostalism. They are privileged not only due to their tremendous popularity, but because their casts are dominated by youth who do much of the creative work in developing storylines, often drawing on their own personal experiences. One such plot narrates the story of a young man who wishes to marry a fellow Pentecostal but whose parents insist upon customary practice in which his predetermined marriage partner is his matrilineal second cousin. In the end, the church-based union occurs, custom is portrayed as not only antiquated but demonic, and the power of Jesus as manifested in Pentecostal Pastors or prophets is upheld.

Pype's stated intent is to examine these teleserials as a means of understanding broader shifts in power relations. The power of village elders, the power of the ancestors, and the power of customary practice all fall victim to the rise of Pentecostalism, which seeks to supplant them with new authority figures (Pastors and prophets), new practices (weekly prayer meetings, baptisms), and a new ideology in which the Devil and his worldly temptations figure prominently. While at some points this comes across as generational rebellion (a recurrent theme in African studies, especially in contexts like this of great economic and social change), in fact Pype is quick to point out that one set of elders (those by blood) is replaced by another (those by faith and by high position in television companies), so youth agency can be argued only to a point. Her data speak to the disillusionment found in marginalized sectors of urban populations for whom dreams of 'making it' in the city prove untenable (see also the 1987 film *La Vie Est Belle* set in Kinshasa), and how Pentecostal communities -- as 'evidenced' in these teleserials -- provide alternate social networks for those far from home.

While a rich analysis overall, Pype leaves some crucial issues unexplored. To what extent is economic access and advancement implicated in this meta-drama? It costs no less than US\$25,000 to start up a television channel in Kinshasa, and while not specific on how many Pentecostal stations exist, Pype indicates that it exceeds the numbers of state-owned and non-religious private stations. From where/whom does this large sum of start-up capital come? Are there any ties to global Evangelical organizations, like that of Reinhard Bonnke whose mass-mediated extravaganzas criss-cross the African continent year after year? Additionally, Pype's young informants tell her of their fears about visiting their home villages, fears that a relative will "put something in your food, because she will want you to leave your money over there." Pastors, on the other hand, promise (and provide?) wealth. Questions regarding the means by which Pentecostal communities obtain their wealth are left unanswered, as are questions surrounding the financial returns of performing as an actor on a Pentecostal melodrama.

Another area that merits more attention is youth perceptions of their dual roles as actors and as role models in these teleserials. Pype describes one actress who draws attention to herself for her beautiful clothes and her (presumed) sexual relationship with the president of the acting troupe -- a relationship not sanctioned by formal engagement much less marriage. For someone who plays the role of representative for an ideology that disdains worldly allures and denounces illicit relationships, this seems like a contradiction. It would not necessarily be one, however, if she (and her lover) drew distinctions between her employer's ideology and her own. Thus, another element I find missing in Pype's analysis is discussion of the lived compromises that entail ideology-in-practice. Pentecostalism, no less than any other ideological form, takes multiple forms in everyday life yet in order to survive as an ideology, must continually present itself as consistent. Understanding how youth actors negotiate their roles on and off the set, how they conceptualize those roles, and how they negotiate relationships with their patrons would further Pype's concern with youth agency. Is Pentecostal morality enforced, and if so, how? Are there cases in which actors were asked to leave a show or occasions in which a storyline was vetoed by higher-ups? What roles do the shows' senior producers play?

In her conclusion, Pype states that "Spiritual leaders compete with the ethnic group for the 'souls' of the young." Based on the evidence she presents, it appears that they compete for much more than that: youth loyalties, youth earnings, and the future children of youth marital unions. With her fascinating data, Pype can weigh in on existing debates over media in the service of religion versus media as religion (what Derrida has called the 'sacralization of teletechnologies'). I urge her to do so, and look forward to the ensuing discussion.

Kelly M. Askew, Associate Professor  
 Department of Anthropology, and  
 Center for Afroamerican and African Studies  
 The University of Michigan  
 tel: (734) 764-2337 or 615-4337  
 email: kaskew@umich.edu