

Cultural Studies and the African Global South

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Abstract

Cultural studies is not a single discipline with a single derivation from a single paradigm or common epistemological community. The field exhibits multiple derivations from different historical conjunctures and places. This essay examines three instances of cultural studies emanating from within Africa, in relation to the field as it developed in the North Atlantic. What a 'Southern' cultural studies offers the North are different ways of making sense and a transnational framework which enables peer-to-peer conversations that continue to elude much Northern theorizing. This transe/trance quality is explained via a discussion of the scientifically unexplainable, superstition and the noumenal. The immateriality of money and its associated human performances as reified by New York stock exchanges is the prime example through which transnational theoretical hybridity is examined.

Keywords: Southern, noumenal, Africa, surreality, cultural studies, superstition

While cultural studies is transnational, applications of it tend to be narrowly national. As cultural studies' travelled beyond their institutionalized North Atlantic borders from the 1960s, local examples would be sometimes inserted into these North Atlantic theories without assessing whether or not the contexts of transfer were appropriate. Thus was American intercultural studies

during apartheid applied to prove the need for racial separation in South Africa.¹ This is a stark example, but even cultural studies whose *raison d'être* is to unmask beguiling 'insider' codes, often carry Western epistemological traces. These assume the inherited hegemony of the Northern hereditary epistemological centers that relegate African cultural studies to 'area studies', as not therefore being of theoretical interest. For example, at international conferences my presentations tend to be understood as offering 'African' examples rather than also engagements of transnational theory. I am 'fixed' geographically in terms of my place of residence rather than my international trajectories of theoretical mobility. Or, I am categorized as an activist rather than also a theorist.

This article briefly identifies key initiatives within Africa when cultural studies emerged in different places at different times to do the same democratizing work as elsewhere. The first example is from Kenya and the second and third from Southern Africa. My analysis implicitly draws on the circuit of culture model that explains the exercise of power relations within institutions and, overlaid on these, how people make meaning of texts produced from within the circuit.² Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model had earlier opened the door to wider debates about what is cultural studies and how messages and meanings are shaped by social and economic institutions on the one hand and audiences on the other.³ Working in Africa, moreover, requires recognition of meaning making with regard to the non-material, religious and virtual realms, which have been blind spots in much global cultural studies until recently. This is discussed in the final section.

In defining the Global South, this essay draws on Ruth Teer-Tomaselli's statement that brought the 2012 International Association for Media and Communication Research to Durban on South

Africa's east coast. The contours she maps apply equally to cultural studies as she highlights the need to reassess enduring relations, perceptions and conceptual dichotomies:

The theme, 'South-North Conversations', reflects the asymmetry of communication flows but without implying the negatives that accompany discussions of the 'digital divide' ... South-North indicates disparities but not necessarily in negative or passive ways; while 'conversations' indicates peer-to-peer equality; a more optimistic vision of global engagement. Old truths concerning 'developed-underdeveloped' and 'core-periphery' regions and nations are being reassessed ... seen in terms of value and meaning systems, historical trajectories, monetary and technological transfers – can[not] be regarded in the same way as previously.⁴

This reframing of what inter-hemispherical conversational dialogue should be is geospatial, politico-economic and inter-hemispherical. The post millennium world has witnessed the rise of new power blocs, reconfiguring the original North-South linear dichotomy to include China and other parts of Asia. The interpenetration of capital between the blocs replaces dichotomies and divides with multiplicities and questions the previously assumed intrinsic relevance of Northern theory in Southern contexts. The term, "Global South", has replaced earlier categories like the Third World or developing countries, as relations of wealth and inequality transgress national borders and are to be found everywhere. The term also re-articulates the early framing of dependency between First and Third Worlds and invites scholars now to think of the relations of capital as global rather than just being regional and nationally bounded.

This essay thus aims to reveal the geneses of cultural studies within African conditions and to argue why they should be admitted also into the field's origins.

African Variants of Cultural Studies

The initial application of cultural studies within South Africa via the journal *Critical Arts: North-South Cultural and Media Studies* (1980ff) developed an approach that examined the relationship between texts (representations/interpretivism) and contexts (history, political economy, social practices) and how people and audiences make sense of, and cope (reception), within structures not of their own making. The journal was intended as a political intervention within a performing arts school whose head had hooked its *raison d'être* on a technical reading of Arnoldian⁵ conceptions of high art and culture as a civilizing framework. The dissenting *Critical Arts* took the Marxist view that individuals act as active agents within inherited structurations and conditions that they have to ordinarily negotiate, while also often contesting them. The journal thereby opened the way to analysis of black popular performance and cultural resistance strategies by recognizing such theatre for the first time as worthy of academic study.

Activist Cultural Studies

Activist cultural studies operates within an interventionist action research framework that implements theoretically-derived strategies in alliance with communities of struggle such as unions, faith-based and civic, social justice and human rights organizations. An example is the use of popular theatre in conscientizing ordinary people to the nature of oppression and to identify and narrate their daily experiences as means of creating working class solidarity. In South Africa, such theatre produced in conjunction with labor sociologists, for example, explored in metonymic vein

issues of the workplace, apartheid repression and ways of coping with, and resisting, racial capitalist oppression. These plays were enacted at union meetings where the entire community would get involved in call and response in asking and answering questions triggered by the interactive performances. As such, these performances underpinned a process of conscientization from the bottom up experiences of workers of the nature of their imprisoning social chains.⁶

One strand of 1980s activist cultural and media studies drawing also on political economy and labor sociology developed alongside mass movements of resistance to apartheid. The 1990s saw the overthrow of apartheid and cultural studies responded to the ensuing policy moment heralded by the post-apartheid transition to democracy. South African Cultural studies, thus, found itself positioned on the 'right' (liberationist) side of history during the Mandela years (1990-98).

The Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) of the 1980s that integrated academics, some universities, unions, churches and local communities in anti-apartheid struggle generated its own organic cultural and media theories and associated practices. This national multiracial popular movement had anticipated the power of cultural mobilization within the black trade unions and prefigured an action-based cultural studies in analyzing and mobilizing alliances between the unions and academics. The MDM thereby provided the ground that enabled a reconstitution of Northern cultural studies into sometimes unique Southern African political, economic and cultural conditions. From this conjuncture emerged: a) worker theatre that addressed everyday conditions and how to deal with them as discussed above; and b) black consciousness theatre that examined broader questions of identity in the vein of Steve Biko's philosophy of affirmative blackness.⁷

Three African examples of Activist Cultural Studies

Different regions in the world have generated their own organic cultural studies trajectories, sometimes connected to the UK variants. Handel Wright, now in Canada, but originally hailing from Sierra Leone, identified the first instance of cultural studies in Africa.⁸ This was the 1970s Kenyan Kamiriithu theatre project led by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Miiri. This was a short-lived grassroots intervention that eschewed transmission communication models. Dialogical in nature, their theatre drew on popular African performance dramaturgy that elaborated rural villagers' quotidian concerns about the failure of independence to deliver peoples liberation. The plays and theatre group were banned, wa Thiong'o was imprisoned, and the open air theatre was destroyed by the army.⁹ The events that it generated resulted in the exile of the both wa Thiong'o and wa Miiri, with wa Miiri later implementing their popularly mobilizing performative strategies in Zimbabwe and Zambia. It was wa Thiong'o who first posed the question of how to decolonize the mind.¹⁰ In contrast, in apartheid South Africa of the 1980s, worker theatre and Black Consciousness theatre troupes were protected by union and university venues in which to perform, attract audiences and debate pressing issues via storytelling.

Wright's second reference to the genesis of African cultural studies was to the Birmingham-influenced Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCMS, 1985ff) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. CCMS drew on each of the debates mentioned above, including the performative strategies generated by the Ngugis, read through social theories, such as Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy¹¹, African philosophies and visual anthropology¹². This moment of resistance to apartheid was theorized and mobilized via communities-of-struggle that included activist projects with black township cultural groups, media collectives and popular social movements. The

resistance phase was followed by CCMS working with the transitional multiparty political agencies like the Convention for a Democratic South Africa in developing cultural, film and broadcasting policies for the immediate post-apartheid era after 1990.¹³

Third was Wright's challenge to Northern Cultural Studies, 'Dare we De-centre Birmingham?'¹⁴ This intervention, first presented as a keynote address at the inaugural meeting in Finland of what was later to be formalized as the Association for Cultural Studies, was not developed within the pages of the *European Journal of Journal of Cultural Studies* where it appeared, except as an unrequited milestone identifying 'Africa'. On its 20th birthday, this journal's editors the journal's editors did recall Wright's argument for recognition of cultural studies from Africa.¹⁵ However, the ring-fencing by the editors *The European Journal of Cultural Studies* of the field to just three publications produced from the UK but edited by academics spread across the North-Atlantic delimited the preferred geographical terrain of the field to this region. Omitting mention of other journals published and/or edited from other hemispheres occurred in the face of Wright's life's work that has focused on ensuring the recognition of cultural studies' African originations also. *Critical Arts*, established under conditions of political siege 10 years before the first appearance of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and others such as *Continuum* edited from Australia, were absent in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* editorial.

The Birmingham initiative however remains crucial in that it offered strategies for opposing oppression – as in the UK, Zimbabwe and South Africa. CCMS, for example, worked directly with communities of struggle at their invitation in devising strategies to enable alternative media to function as fulcrums of emergent public spheres and democratic organization, and in advising legal

teams in preparing briefs to defend their clients in court cases.¹⁶ The subsequent shift at CCMS from resistance to policy drew on the Australian cultural policy moment that had emerged in the early 1990s in that country. Where UK cultural studies offered critique of both Thatcherism and Stalinism¹⁷, in Australia, this critique was recalibrated through a Foucauldian analysis of ‘governmentality’ into cultural policy studies in this much less class conflicted society¹⁸. This re-articulation from resistance to policy revealed that cultural studies did not just have to remain oppositional as it was and remains in the UK. The Australian re-articulation demonstrated that when cultural studies intersected with less conflictual class relations, that it could be repurposed to affirmatively contribute policy work to, and project implementation within, prevailing governmental institutions in spreading social access via state infrastructures. Where resistance was the principle of cultural studies in the UK and apartheid South Africa, during the 1990s in Australia and South Africa, the field was actually freed up to work with state institutions.

As with the Australian approach, following Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Wright asks the question, “What is cultural studies for?”¹⁹ How can it address social repression through action (such as via cultural policy studies) rather than just critiquing and explaining the relationship between resistance and oppression? As van der Smit observes: “In appropriating the traditional cultural forms in their indigenous languages Ngugi ensured that the whole community participated so that the theatre became a communication ... that grass-roots theatre has power and a significant impact when a community is actively involved.”²⁰ Such was the case also of worker theatre during apartheid, and state policy generation during the transition from apartheid during the 1990s when academics joined with unions, professionals, state bureaucrats and politicians in devising new policies across all cultural and media sectors.

The fourth cultural studies moment impacting Africa has been the indigenization of some trajectories of cultural and media studies as read through Southern African conditions.²¹ These initiatives try to mesh the local with the global, but from the perspectives of the locals themselves. In Zimbabwe, for example, the University of Oslo introduced cultural and media studies to the postgraduate Diploma in Media Studies hosted by the English Department at the University of Zimbabwe. This collaborative trajectory drew on British cultural studies, Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere²² and the approaches informed by CCMS.²³ However, at the time of the Oslo-Zimbabwe collaboration, from the mid-1990s, the autocratic tendencies and genocidal behavior of the Zimbabwe government were becoming evident. Where in South Africa, cultural studies was now being incorporated into post-apartheid policy making in the form of visions and missions and the restructuring of the state and private enterprise into racially inclusive democratically-led operations²⁴, in Zimbabwe, the Norwegians and cultural studies-as-critique framework stood helplessly by as the government engaged in post-colonial dismantling and the destruction of the state, agriculture and even of capital. This process involved the suppression of currency itself as a bartering economy now operated alongside the use of US dollars and South African rands. The departure of many of the first generation of Zimbabwean cultural and media studies scholars after 2000 resulted in their employment in South Africa, the UK and Scandinavia.

Into the Unknown: Beyond the Material

While the above examples deal with the materialities of resistance, popular empowerment and democratization in Africa through cultural studies frames, the hidden transcripts of cosmologies, the realm of the immaterial, are always close to the surface in the ways that people make sense, no

matter their levels of education. This is especially true of places in the Global South such as Africa. Now, let's expand the discussion of cultural studies into the immaterial that the West categorizes as superstition and which is usually associated with uncivilized barbarians inhabiting the Global South. Superstition is often removed from academic analysis in the industrial world as it is unexplainable except as it is observed in patterns of behavior. Working in African conditions involving ordinary people is a constant reminder that they rarely separate Subject from Object, the spiritual from the non-spiritual and the natural from the supernatural. However, when one casts an eye on the North and how its people behave within financial institutions, as one example, it becomes clear that their superstitions are no less evident. But often these superstitions are masked behind rituals that exclude acknowledgment of deeper belief systems that often come across as bizarre to those living in the Global South.

While cultural studies does not necessarily exclude the immaterial, the scientifically unexplainable and unthinkable, and things that exist independently of human senses, it does not explicitly include them either. These "things in themselves", the noumenal experiences, to use Immanuel Kant's term²⁵, occur everywhere. Religion and the paranormal are everyday phenomena found in contemporary expressions, films and TV, beliefs and practices. Even in the age of the European Enlightenment, and despite Cartesian thinking, many cultures, no matter where located or how educated, people continue to live within the noumenal realm, whether discursive or believed, such as within inner cities, refugee populations, faith-based institutions, the economy, and in the ontologies of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and evangelicals. In African ontologies the ancestors (the deceased) are assumed to be ever present, in communion with living people and shaping their corporeal

behavior. Usually confined to the discipline of religious studies, or anthropology, such beliefs actually permeate life in general.²⁶

European researchers often experience disorientation when they engage ordinary Africans, for what they encounter (the unintelligible) may bear little similarity to that which their disciplines teach them. For example, Jean Rouch had worked amongst the Dogon and Songhay in Mali and Niger in the 1940s. He was followed by anthropologist Paul Stoller²⁷ 30 years later. Stoller was initiated into indigenous practices and rituals of the lives of Rouch's subjects' descendants through mysterious experiences of spiritual and ontological inclusion. It took Stoller a while to work this out. He then jettisoned his Western theories in coming to terms with his West African hosts. Stoller argues that radically empirical anthropologists participate **fully** in the lives of their subjects, but he does not suggest ways of explaining what was experienced.

Cartesian derived analysis cannot explain the scientifically unthinkable. Where industrial societies have analytically separated the Subject from the Object, oral cultures (even if literate) retain this ontological integration. Surrealists take the expression beyond observational representation into a kind of dream world of irreducible images that defy categorization.²⁸ Surrealist signs are capable of revealing other levels of reality - "surreality" - understood at the level of the unconscious mind rather than any logical thought process.²⁹

Once the researcher has experienced "the inside" or "the place where logic bites its own tail",³⁰ realist science is no longer adequate. When working amongst ordinary Africans, Western

assumptions about the world are uprooted from their foundation on the plain of Western metaphysics. As Stoller further explains:

Having crossed the threshold into the Songhay world of magic, and having felt the texture of fear and the exaltation of repelling the force of a sorcerer, my view of Songhay culture could no longer be one of a structuralist, a symbolist or a Marxist. Given my intense experience — and all field experiences are intense whether they involve trance, sorcery or kinship — I will need in future works to seek a different mode of expression, a mode in which the event becomes the author of the text and the writer becomes the interpreter of the event who serves as an intermediary between the event (author) and the readers.³¹

There is no "law" in terms of which to 'explain' paranormal occurrences, and no canon guiding interpretation. Interpretations cannot be solely reduced to the three stage transparent, negotiated or contested decodings delineated in Hall's encoding/decoding model. Something else is occurring during the encounter.

In the context of the immaterial, the encoding/decoding model is not rendered irrelevant, but merely incomplete. The Peircean three stage semiotics (icon, index, symbol), through which "all that is present to the mind" is constituted can account for fictions, apparitions and the immaterial.³² These are the sense dimensions present in Stoller's anthropology but which are largely lacking from cultural studies. The inability of contemporary science to explain such events other than labelling them as literary and/or visual genres of magic, the marvelous, the uncanny or the occult, does not render science nor indigenous knowledge bereft. Neither Cartesian nor cultural studies derived methods can explain the para-normal, but they can describe manifestations of them. Rouch

never crossed into the immaterial even if he acknowledged this realm. But he could bodily participate in it via the cine-trance method of representation via his movie camera. This supra-conceptual dimension beyond Descartes is where Peirce's notion of the 'interpretant' – interpretation/making sense – can signify frameworks beyond the material or phenomenological dimensions such as the uncanny, the marvelous and the fantastic.³³ Where literate industrialized societies separate Subject from Object, oral cultures (even if literate) tend to retain something (or all) of this sometimes totemistic, integration. What is irrational for Western science is often rational for Africans. When Subject and Object are not separated for the purpose of analysis, essentialism becomes the new rationality – 'I know what I know but I don't know how I came to that knowing'. That is why the immaterial needs to be studied – where appropriate – in conjunction with the material realm in order to get a holistic view of how people make sense and why they act as they do. Yet sacred discourses suppressed from the bulk of Western positivist and historical materialist analysis are evident everywhere.³⁴

In the spiritual world, and the electronic gaming environment that includes the player as both encoder and decoder, the interpreter is simultaneously actor/participant/encoder/decoder – participating fully, as Stoller observes. Description is the prime scientific option. As Jean Rouch concludes, he had no idea after making 50 films on Songhay possession, "what the techniques of possession are".³⁵ So he participated in possessions via 'cine trance', where the camera becomes part of the performance taking viewers inside the rhythm of events rather than offering explanation.

The known and the knowing is located in the subjective existence of the knower. What is known is the phenomenon, what knows is the understanding within the mind of an interpreter, and the

source of the phenomenon is *unknowable*: that is, the noumenon, visually represented by cine-trance as in Rouch's work.

Let me explain this via the proposition that money is magic whose representation is managed through American financial stock market rituals. The strangeness to Africans of what is taken for granted in New York should become clear. The American stock markets opening and closing ceremonies, as screened on CNN, similarly to some African behaviors, are ritualistic forms of possession and worship celebrating the magic of money and its manipulation as a surrealistic life force driven by 'markets'. Think of CNN's Richard Quest's messianic exhortation in his program, *Quest means business*, "What a profitable hour" –even as the stock exchange may be crashing. For the stock brokers, such performative rituals such as occur during the daily opening and closing ceremonies are normal and natural, even liminal, but for outsiders, they might be read as bizarre manifestations of possession, greed, and class celebration of global exploitation. The financial traders clapping and cheering from the podiums, engaging in the revelries of profit and capital and the worship of wealth, do not find performative equivalence in the stock markets of other countries. Capital becomes savior even as it is ephemeral, and the gospel of wealth is what is being celebrated. As Jean and John Comaroffs observe:

We seek, instead, to draw attention to, to interrogate, the distinctly pragmatic qualities of the messianic, millennial capitalism of the moment: a capitalism that presents itself as a gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered.³⁶

For us in the Global South, the Nasdaq rituals also signify imperialism, neo-colonial insanity and capitalistic superstition. The ‘markets’ that are ascribed Godly powers are ascribed transcendent ontological qualities in the US (such as in ‘market sentiment’, and claiming that ‘the markets will ‘decide’ or ‘have spoken’, or will ‘punish’ etc.). Commodities and the markets which abound in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,³⁷ become authors of events and stock brokers are cast as the interpreters of what is ‘written’ in these seemingly disembodied events. As such, the markets are communally constructed illusions that take on the character of the id. They manage virtual currencies whose flows and regulation of exchange relations is represented by mediatized rituals, opening and closing bells and celebratory behavior enacted for the camera. Materialist in the extreme, they are nevertheless spiritual in nature as they require supernatural belief systems enabled by the (im-)materiality of a stereographic capitalism to function properly. For example, most currency is imaginary – it does not exist on paper or in coins but is projected, stored as electrons on hard drives and recorded on balance sheets. When the transactional use-value of real tangible currency in-the-hand is now cast as a commodity, money is treated as a tradable object in itself, irrespective of the labour expended to produce it. Cryptocurrencies are the ultimate illusion as their values are based on scarcity rather than productivity. They require belief and commodity fetishism rather than measures of baseline measurable asset-based wealth.

The interpenetration of conscious and unconscious dimensions within the capitalist occult makes it difficult for stock brokers to distinguish the real from the imaginary, since currency is a creature of network effects as it requires a community of shared belief to ‘work’, to exist as something recognizable as money.³⁸ This occurred with the derivatives and speculative behavior that caused the 2008 housing market collapse. Stock exchanges create existential relations that locate their

subjects within both material and immaterial discourses, made intelligible via virtual currencies, bodily and verbal rituals, social performance and cultural representations. American stock brokers' belief systems and performances of possession are thus arguably little different to the possession ceremonies of supposedly superstitious Africans.

The appeal of stock exchanges is because they enable such audiences (and brokers, traders investors) to move out of their material existence into the liminal surreal world that promises salvation that financial institutions have created. Individuals maneuver between these often superstitious institutions and their regulatory structures like FICA in their daily lives. While our Western identities are fixed by surveillance mechanisms (e.g., ID cards, driver's licenses, passports and utility bills), our belief in, and relation to, monetary systems positions us as citizens, consumers and investors. Socialism is equated by Trump with the devil, while for the South, it is actually a mode of production. This re-articulation of the material into the immaterial and of the Subject into the Object provides subjects of financial social practices a firm sense of grounded reality, even as it is imaginary, largely unknowable and transcendent.

Financial instruments can only be understood in terms of "pasts remembered, futures anticipated, and time measured". Money is accepted because the expectation is that it will retain its transactional character in the future.³⁹ In Africa, from where I am writing, the financial example would be that the past is experienced via the ancestors (the deceased) in the present, and the present is financially secured by siring many children to look after their parents in the future (the insurance). And, since the ancestors from the past interact with folks in the present, all three dimensions are assumed to co-exist simultaneously by ordinary African people.⁴⁰ In this context of the ancestors, the late Zambian

journalism professor, Francis Kasoma, generated a theory of Afriethics that attempts to explore ways of appropriating a spiritually responsive cultural studies within the epistemological and ontological framework of social theory, social justice and positionality. He argues for a decentering of money and power-centered journalism in favor of a society-centered journalism grounded on traditional communal values. Kasoma suggests that “the basis of morality in African society is the fulfilment of obligations to kins-people, both living and dead. It is believed that some of the departed and the spirits keep watch over people to make sure that they observe the moral laws and are punished when they break them”.⁴¹ Such ontologies have different relations to capital, the rituals of capital and its relations to culture.

The noumenal world is experienced as real no matter the ontology of the perceiving individual no matter where they live or what they think. That is, if the markets are conferred ontological significance and assumed to make decisions, then the noumenal is at play. But, because it is non-mental it is unknowable. People make judgements on matters as they are relevant to these, or they express opinion: the former is to be seen as a truth-claim, the latter being of a lower order.

Simultaneously, the brutal realities of ISIS’s one-dimensional ideology that denies the value of corporeal existence but which uses the tangible weaponry of modernity in its genocidal anti-Enlightenment quest are increasingly evident⁴². In contrast, the role of African ancestors who can be heard but not seen in the present is much more benign. Cultural studies, unlike anthropology, has yet to engage these kinds of practices and their associated belief systems, or to see them in global, rather than just ethnic contexts.

Conclusion

As for inter-hemispherical per-to-peer conversations, these are always difficult because of our different contexts, definitions, languages and epistemological assumptions. Cultural Studies from the South are indeed area studies, but they should not be ring-fenced as such because their analytical frameworks can indeed be transnational and transcultural when applied with due contextual sensitivity. Activist cultural studies applies theory in practice and often the practice informs the theory as in the case of Kamiriithu. Doing cultural studies and activist research in repressive states can endanger scholars and practitioners. How to effectively negotiate these conditions becomes part of cultural studies praxis. However, we should not assume that the subjects of industrial and postindustrial societies are themselves living only within materiality. My example of money, magic and meaning questions any such positivistic claims.

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