Towards an Understanding of Uganda’s Urban Pottery

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Over the past two decades, a unique genre of urban pottery has gained popularity in Kampala. While it has yet to attract much scholarly attention beyond a few local newspaper articles, this new work challenges us to look beyond the history of Uganda’s ‘dying,’ traditional pottery and past an art history shaped by two generations of Makerere artists. It demands that we circumvent the halo placed on the formal institution as the sole midwife and broker for Uganda’s modern art. Accounting for the kinds of aesthetics produced outside of ‘art’ in the normative sense, this essay gestures towards a centring of pottery created by people with limited, or no formal art education. Moreover, I propose Sydney Kasfir’s conceptualisation of jua kali as a productive theoretical tool in exploring Kampala’s informal sector, where this new pottery is created. Vulnerable to the whims of government and other legitimising representatives, this creative community is understandably reluctant to speak openly about its practices. However, one potter, Bernard Katabarwa, graciously engaged in discussions about his training, experiences and practices, offering further context and new insights into Uganda’s urban pottery.

UGANDA’S POTTERY AS MODERN ART

Current scholarship focusing on Ugandan pottery proceeds from the assumption that it must be a ‘tribal,’ traditional practice, faced with extinction. Scholarship centres on research, theories and intellectual work that strive to ‘save’ it from a seemingly inevitable disappearance. Alternatively, but in close communion, scholarship turns on the role of the Makerere Art School in shaping modern art in Uganda/East Africa and how traditional pottery intersects with it.

These research priorities have shaped discourses on pottery at Makerere Art School and Kyambogo Polytechnic whose academics and students have, with assistance from government and funding agencies, attempted to propose ways in which Uganda’s traditional pottery can be improved in ‘quality’ (read: modernised) to withstand market pressures and competition with imported consumer pottery goods. The key question has been one of how to

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1 For example, Christine Kintu writes about the middle class trend: ‘pot that was confined to the kitchen is now moved at the front door and is usually what one will see before his or her hosts.’ See Christine Kintu, ‘Pot Decor Suits Any Place,’ New Vision, http://www.newvision.co.ug/PA/9/522/534129, 24 November 2006, Accessed 01 October 2015.

improve the physical strength of Uganda’s pottery in order to compete with imported alternatives that are cheap, strong and viewed as aesthetically ‘better’.3

These studies improve the physical strength of Ugandan pottery. However, they have not slowed the consumption of imported products or modernised traditional pieces. Instead, the import sector has widened to include plastics that mimic traditional pottery. Hence, debates have shifted to assess how, in an attempt to improve traditional works, graduates of the art school have decisively extended the margins of Uganda’s pottery and its meaning to include contemporary socio-political issues.4 Other scholars have studied traditional resources and their local sources, which formally trained artists have exploited. These have included existing indigenous objects, materials, images, ideas and social memories that artists have used as initial referents in the production of artworks.5

Postcolonial discourses have critiqued this gap. Philip Kwesiga6 analysed the role of colonial education in severing traditional pottery from Uganda’s formal education. He has since presented projects to formal schools in Western Uganda, proposing a model for ‘recovering’ and reattaching a repository for indigenous knowledge systems that support(ed) the country’s traditional pottery. The programme believes that such educational opportunities enable students to learn and adapt their traditional techniques, practices and philosophies. Consistent with this critique is the question of how to analyse traditional cultural resources that can or might be relevant in the creation and interpretation of Uganda’s modern art and its instruction.7

Postcolonial artists have dodged modernity by returning to their traditional pasts, however remote, imagined and problematic some of its pastness and traditionality may be. They also have expanded Uganda’s visual discourse and recent scholarship has accommodated their practices. For Kasfir, the preoccupation with an ethnic pastness opens into a larger question of the ‘tension that exists between taking on the framing of the past in the present and at the same time practicing as an artist living and working in the moment.’8 George Kyeyune contends that the return to the traditional past marks a cultural revival and celebration of identity, especially after the end of the rebellion that brought the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) to power in 1986. The resultant cultural consciousness has led to the integration of Uganda’s material and non-material culture into the country’s modern art.9

5 This was the central thesis in Sunanda Sanyal, Imaging Art, Making History: Two generations of Makerere Artists, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Emory University, 2000.
7 See Tabawebbula Kivubiro, Buganda Material Culture Since 1900: An indigenous interpretation, Unpublished doctoral thesis, Flinders University, 1998. This is what Richard Kabiito does in his Doctoral project as he fuses his modern art into his Buganda community while using modern art as a vehicle/medium for interpreting oral traditions. See Richard Kabiito, Meaning-Making in Visual Culture: The case of integrating Ganda indigenous knowledge with contemporary art practice in Uganda, WS Bookwell Ltd, Jyväskylä, 2010. Additionally, in his ongoing PhD project, Pilkington Ssengendo uses his Baganda ethnic identity to bridge the gap between his modern art fracture and his Ngonge (civet) clan.
Kasfir’s and Kyeyune’s respective works speak to a larger debate that questions how a creative enterprise, often grounded in an awareness of ethnicity and tradition, ultimately transcends provincial claims, affirming an artist’s identity as a modern artist.10

Despite such significant strides, the artist/artisan dichotomy has been maintained, separating the Kampala-based artist resident from the rural artisan. And yet, it is the rural artisan whose practice remains at the heart of Trowell’s research, early instruction and publications,11 but never fully integrated into Uganda’s modern art. Kasfir argues that:

Discussions on the topic of contemporary artistic/artisanal practice in Africa implicitly assumes an urban-rural dichotomy in the way modernism and modernity affect everything in urban life from consumption styles to aesthetic practices. What accounts for this belief that urban aesthetics are different? It seems we have transferred our penchant for dualistic explanation from the now-unfashionable contrast between the traditional and the modern to their spatialized equivalents, the rural and the urban, instead. This is then given reinforcement by the development of specifically urban patterns of production and consumption based on goods and types of sociality available only in cities.

However, Kampala’s burgeoning roadside artisans demonstrate divisions within the urban. Producing and selling a variety of pieces directly to consumers, they have created strategies in order to compete with imports. Katabarwa provides further insight.

Katabarwa, alias Designer, produces pots out of mortar and wire mesh under Brown Designers and Moulders a ‘company’ he formed with four colleagues. He makes and sells his pots at the point where Old Kira Road joins Kira Road at Bukoto, an affluent suburb in Kampala. He ‘graduated’ from the JP Arts Training Centre, a roadside ‘art school’ located at the junction where Bukoto-Kisaasi Road meets Kira Road, northeast of Kampala.

The ‘school’ is unique in many ways. First, its graduates attend to issues of balance, material and aesthetics. However, they are not formally trained in these subjects; they also are not limited by them. They are not bound by the kinds of canons and canonicities of art history, art education and Art, which frame formal training in Uganda. Second, by the time JP Arts Training Centre was started in the 1990s, the notion of ‘formal education,’ as it is currently understood in Uganda, and the structures in which it is offered, was largely undefined.12 The ‘school’ eludes formality, offering a labile curriculum that circumvents the challenges haunting formal education in Uganda: bureaucracy, Western-oriented curriculum,

12 It was only in 2008 that the meaning of ‘formal education’ was resolved and fixed under Section 2 of the *Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act*. This law defines formal education as a package of learning made available by recognised schools and institutions, following approved curriculum standards and guidelines. Recognition by the Ministry of Education and Sports is an essential prerequisite for any institution to offer formal education. Before courses are offered at any school in Uganda, the curricula must be considered and approved by the National Curriculum Development Centre. See ‘Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act (Act 13, 29 August 2008), Acts Supplement to the Uganda Gazette No. 44 Volume CI, UPPC, Entebbe, [http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Uganda/Uganda_EducationAct.pdf](http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/upload/Uganda/Uganda_EducationAct.pdf). Accessed 01 October 2015.
underfunding and rigidities enforced by formal structures. It is in this context that the Centre seems to be making progress where the structures of the State have failed.

Mwesigwa, *Advert*, 1990s, Concrete, iron bars and wire mesh with oil paint, 90 x 120 cm. (Photo: Angelo Kakande)
For instance, JP Arts Training Centre operates as an apprentice system, allowing its learners to interface directly with the market and become learner-traders. It offers a unique and unfixed curriculum under which the services and the range of products availed for sale are the very things taught to its students. As seen in its roadside concrete advert, these include: the making and sale of ‘pot decor, garden furniture, animal shaped pots, clay ornaments.’ This is reflected in the pile of products littering the Centre. Some are finished, others are unfinished concrete representations of a wheelbarrow, flora and fauna and pots of varied sizes, forms and shapes. The site becomes a school, an exhibition space, a market and a space for exploration and inquiry in materials, forms and aesthetics. These are the ideas that the ‘school’ passes on to its apprentices.

Kasfir’s concept of jua kali operates on the principal of what she calls ‘a city as a site of production.’ Working under this principal, young men and women have turned the roadside into a hub for unregulated activities, artisanship and entrepreneurship, leading to a new mode of producing and selling pottery. As Kasfir defines it, jua kali:
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refers to the many small businesses and [all] kinds of artisanship which proliferate on sidewalks or in alleys without benefit of offices, factories or showrooms. Such work, referred to by economists as informal sector production or the ‘parallel economy’ occupies the majority of the productive population in poor countries such as Kenya, where the worker resembles Levi-Strauss’s *bricoleur*, using whatever is available to turn ends into means and means into ends.\(^{13}\)

She also defines *jua kali* as a mode of production known in Kenya as ‘hot sun:’

a reference to a place of work located in the open-air markets and back streets of Kenyan towns, and by extension to the fabrication and repair of goods and the informal transactions which take place there. In most poor countries such as Kenya, these range widely, from iron-working to bicycle and radio repair to woodcarving, and typically are either small kin-based workshops or at their largest and most elaborate, organized artisanal cooperatives.\(^{14}\)

Such practices have not been fully integrated into the mainstream economy. This lack of integration has been productive in ways that mirror the Centre’s ability to sidestep formality. Located on the fringes of the dominant, formal, neoliberal economic regime, the Kampala-based potters have seized materials and opportunities in order to thrive, surviving in a parallel informal sector.

These characteristics have been critical to the survival of potters like Katabarwa. In 2007, Uganda hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM). Given the expected influx of capital, as well as the demands that such an international event presented, rules were relaxed, providing opportunities for entrepreneurs to establish themselves at the roadside and start ‘business.’ Therefore, ‘during the preparations for the CHOGM’\(^{15}\) in 2006, Katabarwa went to Kampala City Council and asked for permission to make pots from an empty site. According to Katabarwa, permission was granted on two conditions:

One, in addition to making pots, I had to plant flowers and clean up the place. And two, I was ordered to make many animals for tourists to see. I made many animals and filled the roadside. When the guests came, they visited my site and marvelled at the animals I had displayed.\(^{16}\)

A number of laws, including the *Roads Act* (1949), the *Traffic and Road Safety Act* (1998), the *Public Health Act* (1935) and the *Trade Licensing Act* (1969) prohibit the use of the road reserve for private business except under express approval by the Minister for Works and Transport. Some individuals use these laws to their advantage at the expense of the poor. Although Katabarwa acknowledges such risks, he thinks he is safe, because the owner of the adjacent land is the National Housing and Construction Corporation, a public company.

However, in 2012, the company wanted to evict him. According to Katabarwa, Councillor Mugume lobbied on his behalf (and that of others in the roadside pottery sector) and convinced the management of the company to postpone the eviction.\(^{17}\) Other councillors have


\(^{15}\) Bernard Katabarwa, Interview with Angelo Kakande, 29 September 2013.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Katabarwa explained, ‘Kasala yabagamba nti wano abavubuka bayiyizaawo baleme kubba ne batuleka.’ (The Councillor intervened on our behalf and explained to the company that the youths need this area to engage in productive activity and avoid becoming criminals.) Bernard Katabarwa, Interview with Angelo Kakande, 29 September 2013.
played similar roles. In return, the potters individually promise to vote for the councillors during elections. The competition between aspiring candidates and political parties is usually fierce. Indeed, Katabarwa elucidates some of the complex layers of political brokering and how urban potters negotiate beneficial terms within this terrain. Such political arrangements have engendered development in which bureaucratic inflexibility and the neoliberal economic policies governing the city have been broken down as the survival of the urban potters fuses with political survival. Nonetheless, this only works in the short term, because according to Section 3 of the Roads Act, the Minister of Works and Transport must authorise

18 However, such interventions have not been effective against private land developers and owners.
their stay by a statutory instrument. At the time of publication, the Minister has neither signed nor gazetted such an instrument.

As it is clear from Katabarwa’s narrative, laws were bent in 2006 since Kampala City Council\(^\text{19}\) and government were struggling to improve the city in preparation for CHOGM. As a result, informal entrepreneurs were admitted into a very crowded space. But if the original arrangement was intended for the CHOGM event, the actors that it attracted have ex-

\[\text{Bernard Katabarwa, } \textit{Mountain Gorilla}, \text{ 2012, Iron bars, wire mesh and mortar with black oxides, 80 x 200/230 cm, Artisan’s display at Bukoto. (Photo: Angelo Kakande)}\]

\(^{19}\) This body became the Kampala Capital City Authority in 2010.
tended their tenures. As such, years after CHOGM and despite the fact that his targeted spectatorship is no longer strictly that of Western tourists, Katabarwa still makes and displays apes alongside a variety of pots made out of bars, wire mesh and mortar/concrete. Less than

Bernard Katabarwa, *Fish Fountain*, 2012, Iron bars, wire mesh and mortar with grey and red oxides, 40 x 180 cm, Artisan’s display at Bukoto. (Photo: Angelo Kakande)
thirty metres away from JP Arts Training Centre, his site resembles the school. He too attends to the essentials of animal sculpture. His ape statues are erect and static but possess a sense of personality. His ape motif is shaped by the popularity of the mountain gorilla found in the Bwindi impenetrable forests in South Western Uganda and the zoo at Entebbe, attracting many tourists to Uganda and Rwanda. The artist randomly displays his ape statues in spontaneous and disorganised ways. The exhibition strategy is probably not effective given the limited space in which his oeuvre competes for space with adverts for international brands, like Sapil, and local brands, like Uganda Waragi. However, it is pragmatic. He contends that it is important for him to show a fish fountain and a variety of pots rendered in different forms depicting tree stumps, nsuju\textsuperscript{20} and geometric shapes, bathed with a variety of colours and textures. These pieces are meant to grab the attention of passersby, especially wealthy customers who regularly spend hours in the city’s massive traffic jams, which sometimes stretch for as long as two kilometres on Kira Road, where his site is located.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Bernard Katabarwa, \textit{Tree Stumps}, 2013, Wire mesh and mortar with grey and yellow oxides, 50 x 60 cm, Artisan’s display at Bukoto. (Photo: Angelo Kakande)}
\end{figure}

It is important for Katabarwa’s products to be visible to these wealthy customers. By insisting that he serves the tastes of ‘the rich,’ the artist’s praxis ignores Elimo Njau’s ‘Art Master’s Hobby Exhibition’ (1962), an impassioned intervention that called on artists to reject ‘ivory tower’ mentality, cultured by colonial modernity and formal education. Rather, he emboldened artists to use art to emancipate communities, thereby becoming relevant to

\textsuperscript{20} Pumpkin.
\textsuperscript{21} Katabarwa explains, ‘Bakasitoma bange be bagagga abayita wano ne babiraba.’ (My customers are the rich who drive by and see the things I make and sell.) Bernard Katabarwa, Interview with Angelo Kakande, 29 September 2013.
her/his respective societies. Coming fifty years after Njau’s call, Katabarwa’s position suggests that as Uganda’s formally trained artists adjust their art practices, gravitating towards what Njau called art which springs from ‘the soil and the full community we live in,’ potters like Katabarwa are choosing alternative artistic paths. Clearly, issues of authenticity, as defined in the art school, and the burden of satisfying such authenticities, take a back seat in the roadside artist’s production. It seems that the rich see the pots they order to decorate the front of their houses as mere objects on the global exchange circuit, testifying to their travels abroad. Embracing convenience, customers order locally rather than importing from abroad. Better still, Katabarwa does not mimic any of his sources, the final pots are products of his effort and interpretation. The initial referent in this process counts as a point of departure; it does not confine him as a maker. Hence, many of the pots on his display reveal more of the artist’s intervention, innovation and creativity — what he calls nziyiìya.\(^{22}\) They are not direct copies from nature or the media.

As if to demonstrate, Katabarwa pointed to a tall pot in his display and said: ‘I copied that one from the magazine.’\(^{23}\) With thick flat lips, a long neck and large shoulders tapering and terminating into a narrow base, the pot has two shades of colour: a light brown at the neck and greyish-green on the rest of the body, interrupted with randomly incised textures. The choice of colours to create contrast and individuality of form is an aesthetic choice. However, it also addresses the problem of dust in Kampala and the fact that the three-foot high pot is

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\(^{22}\) I create them.

\(^{23}\) Bernard Katabarwa, Interview with Angelo Kakande, 29 September 2013.
intended for a public space in which people will regularly touch it. His choice of colour reduces the need for regular cleaning of the pot. Thus, it is arguable that this degree of innovativeness confirms that mass-circulated images, which have become central to Katabarwa’s creative enterprise, are only points of departure for his practice.

UNDERSTANDING UGANDA'S URBAN POTTERY

There is a unique genre of pottery currently produced in Uganda — it is urban pottery. Young men and women, who have migrated from the countryside in search of better opportunities in the city, craft pieces at several sites located along Kampala's snaky, heavily congested and poorly-maintained road network. Its production is shaped by complex political negotiations through which potters secure (and extend) their tenure in gazetted road reserves. Potters operate outside formalised cultural and bureaucratic institutions as they respond to the country's harsh socioeconomic realities, including: joblessness, underemployment, poverty, corruption, overcrowding, a dilapidated infrastructure, pollution, congestion and traffic jams. And yet, these are the very conditions that potters, like Katabarwa, have negotiated into opportunities. Accessing an informal curriculum, unregulated by the State, and capitalising on affluent consumers, these artists have established a market for pottery. I argue that this is the less acknowledged creative enterprise through which urban pottery has breathed new life into the country's cultural production and extended the margins of Uganda's modern art.