Sam Joseph Ntiro (1923-1993) is widely regarded as the first important painter to emerge in the history of East African art and as one of the most influential artists in the region.¹ His position in art history is linked closely to the history of Makerere University’s School of Fine Arts, the first higher education visual arts institution in East Africa, founded by Margaret Trowell. That is where Ntiro received his initial training as an artist (1944-1947) and where, in 1948, he began his long career as an art educator.

Like other pioneering modernists from Anglophone Africa, Ntiro pursued further studies at The Slade School of Art, affiliated with the University of London (1952-1955). He was the first East African artist to hold solo exhibitions abroad, with considerable success in the UK and US. His debut exhibition in the United States has been claimed as ‘the first showing in a New York gallery by a contemporary African painter.’² He also was the first modern African artist to have a work purchased by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York, and possibly the first African artist to have a work purchased by a US public institution.³

Despite being viewed by his detractors at Makerere as a naive artist who was not deserving of an appointment to head the art school, Ntiro occupied several leadership positions. Apart from his short and ill-fated tenure as Acting Head of Department at Makerere, he briefly headed the art department at Kyambogo Teacher Training College on the outskirts of Kampala and later led the art sub-department at the University of Dar es Salaam, where he co-founded the Department of Music, Theatre and Art. He was active in artist organisations, being one of the co-founders of the Community of East African Artists, for which he served for many years as chairman. Ntiro served as chairman of the Tanzania Arts Society and the Tanzania Crafts Council and was probably the only African to head the World Craft Council, established by UNESCO. He was


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Publicity photograph of Sam Ntiro, produced by the Harmon Foundation, New York, 1960. (Source: National Archives of the United States 200S-HN-AA-8J-14)
active in several other art, craft and civic associations, frequently playing a leading role. While information on many of these organisations (and his participation in them) is sketchy, Ntiro’s involvement in such a wide range of initiatives implies a broad commitment to cultural development, and his prominent position in many of these initiatives testifies to his high standing at the time.

Ntiro also had a political career as a high-ranking civil servant. He served as the first High Commissioner for newly independent Tanganyika in London (1961-1964), making him the first African artist to hold such a senior government post in Anglophone Africa. Later, he served as Commissioner of Culture in Julius Nyerere’s administration (1967-c. 1973).

Complementing the above roles, Ntiro made a significant contribution as a writer and scholar. He was one of very few modern African artists to contribute several texts to a range of journals, and he appears to have been the only pioneering African modern artist to have produced an academic thesis. Through his writing, in its blend of art history and advocacy for cultural development, there is a convergence of his artistic and political sensibilities along with an expression of his quiet, understated personality. These qualities are implicit in his paintings, although, as this analysis of his critical reception will show, the political dimensions of his art are little understood.

Remarkably, despite his impressive list of accomplishments, many of them unprecedented, there is not a single full-length book, chapter or journal article on Ntiro. Catalogues of his solo exhibitions were rarely produced and are more accurately described as brochures rather than books. Published accounts are largely limited to broader surveys. Given the paucity of research into his career, it is perhaps not surprising that published references more frequently than not include errors, inconsistencies, misrepresentations and silences. If the details of his career are difficult to establish through published sources, so too is evidence of his creative output.

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4 In his curriculum vitae compiled for the Harmon Foundation in 1960, Ntiro listed the following under ‘other current responsibilities:’ President of the Uganda Art Club, Member of the Executive Committee of Uganda Visual Aids, Art teacher for the Lusira Prison Art Club, Executive committee of Uganda Youth Council. See Sam Ntiro folder, Box 93, Harmon Foundation, Inc., (HF) Records, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.


Allegedly ‘prolific,’ few reproductions of the artist’s paintings have been published, and they seldom appear with dates.

This paper distinguishes several lenses or frames that have been applied to the artist. These readings not only introduce multiple ‘Ntiro’s,’ but also introduce questions of different publics, highlighting the multivalence of Ntiro as a signifier.

**TROWELL’S FAITHFUL DISCIPLE**

Ntiro has mostly been treated by art historians as a ‘faithful disciple’ of Margaret Trowell, a phrase used by Kyeyune. With few exceptions, notably Kakande, who surfaces the African socialist politics implicit in his paintings, little has been done to distinguish Ntiro’s own interests and programme from those of Trowell. Certainly, convincing grounds exist from which to argue that Trowell impacted profoundly on his development as an artist. It is a matter of public record that she taught Ntiro to paint, employed him as an instructor and groomed him to be her successor.

Trowell’s pedagogy has been the subject of extensive research and debate. It constitutes a key theme within accounts of East African (mostly Ugandan) art histories, as well as within polemical texts addressing the paternalism of many of Africa’s pioneering art educators, primarily those of European origins. Her equation of the developmental stage of the ‘unspoilt English child’ and ‘native African’ has been particularly controversial, and understandably tarnished her legacy.

However, a superficial treatment of Trowell fails to grasp her sometimes complex, contradictory personality and approach. She believed that ‘the artist is more than the photographer,’ and was interested in developing ‘creative thought’ rather than ‘mere technical ability.’ Technical aspects were ‘only servants of the main purpose — the making of pictures.’ For her, the essence of art could not be taught through an emphasis on technique. Western art became corrupted during the High Renaissance when perspective and anatomy became a matter of science. By comparison, the art of the Middle Ages captured all that was pure about art, both in its relatively ‘naive’ style of expression and its integration into (Christian) society.

The translation of Trowell’s views on art into an African context is what makes them controversial, particularly because they become entangled with her views on race and culture.

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11 Ibid. p 49.

12 Ibid. p 51.

Trowell saw cultures as ‘simply completely different.’ Consequently, she encouraged what she perceived as African. She wrote that ‘…the African should realise from the first that what is expected of him is not a poor imitation of the English type of picture… but something which is really African and his own… Art is a language and to speak well a man must use his own tongue.’ Trowell’s pedagogy effectively conflated two elements as ‘African.’ One concerned the ‘naive’ style that she advocated, which she regarded as appropriate to what she perceived as the child-like developmental stage of Africans. The other concerned suitable content, specifically themes that were relevant to the everyday lives of her African students.

Complicating Trowell’s pedagogy was her Christian identity. According to Kyeyune, Trowell viewed African spirituality as deficient. This dismissal of Africans’ ‘low type of spirituality’ may help to explain why she did not encourage her students to produce works dealing with indigenous beliefs. On the other hand, while she did not use art as an overt means of religious instruction, her Christian faith permeated her pedagogy. According to Kakande, ‘Trowell wanted to evolve a new Christian art genre grounded in African oral narratives and objects.’ Similarly, Sanyal has contended, ‘In a medieval spirit, Trowell wanted to build a group of religiously motivated artists, who would invent a whole iconography for the East African cultural scene.’

Inasmuch as Ntiro painted Africanised Christian themes along with African scenes, in a style that broadly can be described as naive, it is perhaps understandable that he is all too often seen as a product of Trowell’s pedagogy. However, while she evidently impacted profoundly on Ntiro’s art, Trowell was not his only influence. Little attention has been paid to his own subjectivity. For instance, Ntiro was receptive to the impressionists and post-impressionists, neither of which were promoted by Trowell. He painted British snowscapes, which underline his interest in land, nature and landscape painting, but say little about his ‘African-ness.’ There is evidence that he experimented with portraiture, suggesting a degree of interest in realism. There are also still unanswered questions concerning his agency in the production of an African ‘liturgical’ art. Not least, some questions concerning Ntiro’s politics introduce completely different readings of his work and its publics than has been customarily associated with him.

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14 Ibid. p 51.
15 Ibid.
16 Trowell is celebrated for conserving and promoting traditional art in East Africa. Most of this work was secular, and Trowell commented that if it had been sacred (as in West and Central African sculpture) it would have been of an even higher order. However, her inability to view African spirituality as equal to Christianity meant that sacred African sculpture was seen as inferior to the art of the Middle Ages, which embodied the direct expression and ‘popular’ nature of art that Trowell advocated. See George Kyeyune, *Art in Uganda in the 20th Century*, PhD thesis, University of London, 2003, pp 58-59.
FORMALIST LENSES AND COMPETING ‘REALISMS’ IN NTIRO’S AESTHETIC

Kakande argues that Ntiro is one of several artists ‘for whom formalist readings have done less than justice’ and that formalist readings of his art have denied him his ‘rightful position’ as one of several ‘important pillars in the development of Uganda’s political art’.20 Perceptions of Ntiro’s skill as an artist deserve closer scrutiny, as they impact directly on interpretations of his aesthetics.

Interestingly, early reviews of Ntiro in the British press were mostly complementary, hailing him as a ‘fine draughtsman’21 and as a ‘serious painter.’22 However, these little-known references have been overshadowed by several less-than-flattering assessments of his technical competency. Mount, writing in 1973, was the first to present the artist as formulaic.23 Fosu, in 1986, was more sympathetic, but nonetheless chose to quote Mount’s dubious characterisation of a ‘typical’ Ntiro painting.24 Later, Sanyal decried Ntiro’s formulaic technique.25 It is important to recognise that Mount, Fosu and Sanyal all drew on exceptionally limited material, and their accounts of Ntiro as formulaic can be easily complicated, even contradicted, by available evidence.

For instance, in his characterisation of a ‘typical Ntiro composition’, Mount claimed that the artist did not apply linear or aerial perspective and used an example of a horizon-less composition to make his point.26 From my own study of Ntiro, it is evident that horizons feature frequently in his paintings and that the arrangement of formal elements seldom follow a set pattern. Perspective, which Ntiro taught at Makerere,27 is used regularly, as noted by Court28 and Kakande.29 In one of several discussions of Ntiro by Kyeyune, the writer adopts a middle position. He notes the ‘non-academic’ use of perspective, but in an echo of Trowell’s pedagogy, Kyeyune ignores this because of the artist’s ‘freshness and vigour.’30

27 See Ntiro’s responses to questions from MoMA in 1960 where he lists perspective (and anatomy) among the subjects he teaches. This presumably represents the new curriculum developed under Todd’s leadership. See ‘Museum of Modern Art, Artist Records,’ Sam Ntiro folder, MoMA, New York (provided to the researcher on 23 November 2011).
30 Kyeyune notes, ‘Ntiro’s freshness and vigour subordinated academic considerations of perspective and anatomy,’ See George Kyeyune, Art in Uganda in the 20th Century, PhD thesis, University of London, 2003, p 25. In a later piece, Kyeyune writes: ‘He defied perspective and his analysis of anatomy was nil. It was the sense of colour harmony and application as well as an intimate portrayal of his Chagga people that gave Ntiro's work power and appeal.’ See George Kyeyune, ‘Katarikawe Coming Back Home,’ Dreaming in Pictures by Jak Katarikawe: Paintings from the collection of The Museum of World Cultures, Frankfurt, Germany, 2006.
Kennedy, in her 1992 survey, also was critical of Ntiro’s style. Like Mount before her, she acknowledged his historical importance but dismissed him on technical grounds. Of all Ntiro’s published critics, Sanyal is perhaps the most dismissive. Supporting his view that the artist was formulaic, Sanyal cites Jonathan Kingdon’s observation that Ntiro’s murals at Northcote Hall repeat compositional elements.

The dismissal of Ntiro on formal grounds often is entangled with a critique of his capability to depict his subjects in a lifelike way. Sanyal comments that ‘Ntiro never learned to draw in a realistic manner.’ On the other hand, Kyeyune defends the artist’s technical competency on the

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32 Sunanda K Sanyal, *Imaging Art, Making History: Two generations of Makerere artists*, PhD thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, 2000, p 105. No consideration is given to the fact that repetition of formal elements within what constitutes a single work is a technical device that acts to unify a composition.
33 Ibid. p 103.
basis of evidence of the relatively high level of realism in a work from the early 1960s, *Chagga life*. Kyeyune contrasts this painting to earlier (‘naive’) work, claiming it as evidence that Ntiro’s aesthetic was a chosen one, suited to his vision.\(^{34}\)

Kyeyune’s assumption that realism represents a higher degree of technical ability is in itself not without problems: one of Ntiro’s interests was formal design, and the decorative element of his works requires more acknowledgment than given by his detractors. This aspect was recognised as early as 1955, when a critic commented that Ntiro would make a good textile designer.\(^{35}\) Another British critic remarked, ‘They are decorative pictures: their effect flat, at the same time active.’\(^{36}\) But this quality largely goes unremarked, with more emphasis placed on his narrative qualities and command of or lack of realism.

Ironically, as one who criticises Ntiro for his inability to produce ‘realistic’ images, Sanyal is one of the few writers who acknowledges the importance of design for Ntiro.\(^{37}\) He comments that the artist ‘developed a prominent personal style of flattening his environment and making his human figures as much of his foliage and architecture a part of an overall surface design.’\(^{38}\) However, Sanyal criticises Ntiro for retaining a concern with the narrative, since ‘the narrative character of the subject does not allow the image to become a device for a purely formal experiment.’\(^{39}\) In other words, Sanyal presents two acceptable strategies for Ntiro: mimesis (which he is judged incapable of) and non-representation (what Sanyal calls ‘formal experiment’ with design).

In reading Ntiro in these restrictive terms, Sanyal fails to acknowledge the symbolic dimension of what he terms ‘narrative:’ the equality between human figures and the natural and built environment noted by Sanyal constitutes a conceptual approach, one which presents humans at one with their environment.

Furthermore, formalist readings have largely ignored the visionary element in Ntiro’s work. The artist was neither a classic realist, governed by the appearance of the material world to the optical processes of perception, nor a typical painter of fantasy. Instead, he operated between the observed and the imagined worlds, and it is this interface that requires consideration in assessing his competency as a painter. This quality was recognised by Kyeyune who, in discussing Ntiro’s *Banana Harvest* (1960), noted that:

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\(^{37}\) Ntiro’s decorative tendencies were first remarked on in a review of his 1955 exhibition, with the suggestion that he produce textile designs. See *The Scotsman*, 26 March 1955, From ‘Sam Ntiro Reviews,’ typed sheet with extracts of reviews, Sam Ntiro folder, Warren Robbins Library, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
Ntiro’s painting offers many such surprises: it depicts nature but it resists the temptation of imitating it. It invents its own mixture of fantasy and reality, and allows them to share the same territorial space without undermining the vitality of the picture. Ntiro’s pictures would otherwise lose their delight and charm.\textsuperscript{40}

Interestingly, in one of the few published Tanzanian accounts of Ntiro, the artist was commended for his realism and for influencing Tanzanian art in this direction. According to Jengo:

On the whole, Tanzanian painting has been characterised by a general move ... to academic realism and social concern. Sam Ntiro, one of the great painters among Tanzanian artists who have for many years been the real interpreters of the Tanzanian rural scene, is a good example of these painters whose artistic expression reflects a realistic portrayal of many aspects of Tanzania’s rural life. Ntiro’s works are based on the experiences of rural life, rather than the systematic exploration of stylistic form.\footnote{Elias Jengo, ‘Tanzania: Contemporary trends in art,’ Art from the Frontline: Contemporary art from Southern Africa, Ed Emma Wallace, Frontline States Ltd and Karia Press, London, 1990, pp 60- 61; my emphasis.}

Jengo’s conception of realism appears tied to the ability to communicate the experience of rural life. It is not about physical likeness; it is about visualising the underlying character of the everyday. This conception of realism resonates most strongly when there is a proximity between the artist and ordinary people. As Jengo notes, ‘Peasant life is closest to [Ntiro], and he has always responded warmly.’\footnote{Ibid. p 61.}

One can further note that some of the language used by the British critics (discussed later) when they referred to direct responses to familiar environments — recording things Ntiro saw around him, seeing with clarity, possessing an observant eye — does indeed indicate a degree of realism at work in his art and is compatible with Jengo’s framing of him as a realist. One also can strengthen the argument to frame Ntiro as a realist by introducing Cecil Todd’s description of him as a ‘rural social commentator.’\footnote{Cecil Todd, ‘Enclosure in letter of Professor Cecil Todd, Director of Art, Makerere College, 31 October 1960,’ Makerere College folder, Box 104, Harmon Foundation, Inc., (HF) Records, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.}

However, realism implies a specificity, as localities and temporalities should be particularised, even identifiable, and here Ntiro introduces what may be his most enigmatic characteristics. While some works address specific locales distinguishable by reference to country, ethnicity or place names, these settings generally become identifiable through his use of titles and captions. Without this information, it is frequently difficult to differentiate, for example, a Ugandan theme from a Tanzanian one, or a scene from Kilimanjaro from one from Moshi. This generalised quality introduces the possibility of reading into Ntiro’s works a certain trans-national identity, a generic Africanity, one consistent with broader notions of Pan-Africanism. Arguably, much of what have been identified as technical limitations in his works are precisely the techniques that allow the artist to introduce the conceptual elements that he does, such as the themes of community and self-reliance, both of which are intertwined with the ideological currents of the day, namely Pan-Africanism and African socialism.

A further consideration needs to be introduced into the formalist frame, namely the question of Ntiro’s receptiveness to modern art and its influence on his work. According to Sanyal:

[Trowell] never really introduced her students to the Modernist trends in Europe. In fact, she did not like any of those movements, most of which were ‘art for art's sake’ to her… Modern art was introduced by a NEW group of European instructors in the sixties, under the leadership of Cecil Todd… they were the ones who emphasized individuality of artistic expression in a modern sense, and allowed the students to look at, and borrow from, the cultural archives of the rest of the world.\footnote{Sunanda K Sanyal, ‘East Africa’s Modern Art Movement: REPLy,’ H-Net Discussion Network, 3 February 2000, http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-afrarts&month=0002&week=a&msg=WGEcaNebQApXSS2wTjHRQw&user=&pw=. Accessed 01 October 2015.}
Sanyal clearly excludes Ntiro from any consideration of his role in developing modern art at Makerere. When he comments that ‘Ntiro’s approach to painting… closely follows Trowell’s vision of a two-dimensional image,’ he evidently sees no relationship between Ntiro’s art and modernist painting, where emphasis on the two-dimensional nature of the pictorial surface is a central preoccupation.

Evidence suggests that while Trowell’s tastes were more Middle Ages than modernist, Ntiro was interested in a wide range of art, including, but not limited to, early modernist painters. Following a visit to the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia in 1960, he enthused: ‘The gallery has the most fabulous collection known to me in any country of Cezanne, Renoir and Matisse. They also have Picasso, Seurat, Monet, Manet, El Greco, and some old Masters. He has a fair collection of African sculpture. I was so pleased with the collection…’

45 Sunanda K Sanyal, Imaging Art, Making History: Two generations of Makerere artists, PhD thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, 2000, p 103.
This quote is revealing. Firstly, it demonstrates a keen interest in a wide range of art, with most of those singled out being late 19th and early 20th century European (mostly French) modernists. Secondly, while none of the artists named may appear as obvious references in Ntiro’s work, it is revealing to consider the formal qualities associated with those he found most ‘fabulous.’ Cézanne is noted for his emphasis on structure and form as well as for landscape; Renoir for his sensuality and social scenes; and Matisse for colour, line, design and sensuality. All of these qualities can be seen in his work of the time. Even those writers, like Kyeyune, who argued that formal concerns were of little interest to Ntiro would be surprised by the captions he wrote for the Harmon Foundation, many of which highlight concerns with representing light, colour and shape, sometimes over and above the genre scenes depicted.47 One also can note that

while Cezanne, Renoir and Matisse all demonstrated an interest in everyday subjects, none was particularly drawn toward mimesis. Ntiro’s enthusiastic response to these artists suggests that his exposure to their work both affirmed and stimulated aspects of his own aesthetic sensibility.

Correspondence between Ntiro and the Harmon Foundation also reveals that he was instrumental in requesting a wide range of art historical resources for Makerere. Notably, these included documentaries on modern art and, more surprisingly, animated cartoons. Evidence also reveals that while Ntiro’s aesthetic predilections were toward the representational and figurative, he was not averse to non-representational art. Indeed, it may surprise some of his detractors that, in an interview in Dar es Salaam, 1966, when one may have expected social realism to be a proper response to the politics of the time, he defended abstract art as a ‘valid vision.’

Clearly, discussions of Ntiro that limit his terms of reference to Trowell fail to acknowledge his subjectivity. He may have known very little about art before he went to Makerere, but he spent seven years in London, visited the US at least six times, and visited Rome and Germany. He participated in international meetings in Algiers and Lagos. It also has been claimed that he travelled as an external examiner to a host of commonwealth countries. Certainly, Ntiro was exposed to some of the world’s best collections of Western art, as well as fine collections of art from Africa and other parts of the globe. To disregard his cosmopolitanism is to reveal the narrowness of one’s own gaze.

**COMMERCIAL INTERESTS: AFRICA FOR EUROPEANS?**

Sanyal has argued that the ‘idyllic images’ produced by Ntiro ‘conveniently catered’ to a ‘largely western audience,’ and that he ‘seems to have accepted his audience’s constructed image of an authentic Africa.’ Kyeyune has expressed a similar view to explain the artist’s international success: ‘Ntiro’s work seemed to build on the ‘free’ and ‘direct’ approach that characterised African mask forms, to the European connoisseurs (as well as Trowell), Ntiro’s painting therefore represented that romanticised idea of pristine Africa that must be preserved.

Here it is instructive to consider Ntiro’s reception by the British press, where his authenticity was celebrated. ‘Authenticity’ is an unstable signifier. It has received much attention in recent de

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48 S. Ntiro, letter to M. Brady, 4 October 1960, S. Ntiro folder, HF Records, _op cit._
49 Ntiro expressed this view in response to what appears to have been a leading question, with the interviewer asking him if he considered abstract painting ‘elitist.’ See Chikoo Nayar, ‘Sam Ntiro – A household name in many art centres,’ _Sunday News Magazine_, Dar es Salaam, 4 September 1966.
50 According to his _Wikipedia_ entry, incidentally one of the more thorough published accounts of Ntiro, he ‘served as an external examiner for fine art, art history and sometimes history, geography in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Ghana and Nigeria.’ See ‘Sam Joseph Ntiro,’ _Wikipedia_, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Joseph_Ntiro, Accessed 18 April 2011.
52 Sunanda K Sanyal, _Imaging Art, Making History: Two generations of Makerere artists_, PhD thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, 2000, pp 105-106.
-cades regarding contemporary African art, but it had earlier currency in modernist discourse where it was synonymous with originality. British reviews demonstrate the range of assumptions that inform perceptions of authenticity.

One well-known argument for authenticity concerns the unspoilt African, uncorrupted and uncontaminated by the West, as argued by Kyeyune. In *The Guardian*, Ntiro was celebrated for having been ‘untouched’ by his exposure to Western art education. The artist was commended for his ‘obstinate refusal to pick up painterly hints from Western civilisation. He could easily have done so and it would have destroyed him as an artist.’

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54 Eric Newton, ‘Sam Ntiro Exhibition,’ *The Guardian*, 18 November 1964. From the opposing vantage points of Trowell and Todd, this ability to remain ‘unchanged,’ specifically with regard to his studies at The Slade, was a merit and a veiled dismissal. See Sunanda K Sanyal, *Imaging Art, Making History: Two generations of Makerere artists*, PhD thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, 2000, p 105 and Cecil Todd, ‘Enclosure in letter of Professor Cecil Todd, Director of Art, Makerere College, 31 October 1960,’ Makerere College folder, Box 104, Harmon Foundation, Inc., (HF) Records, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.
Perceptions of authenticity also hinged on the truth or accuracy of Ntiro’s images, which were celebrated for providing an insider view of everyday life. His images were praised for their ‘fascinating documentary interest.’ Their objectivity was underscored with claims that his paintings were said to ‘describe village life in Tanganyika,’ and readers were told that ‘Ntiro is rare amongst contemporary painters in that he can make convincing visual statements merely by recording the things he sees around him.’

A link was also made between Ntiro’s credibility as an insider and his sincere, earnest and uncomplicated approach. In commentary on his first London exhibition, Art News and Review, incidentally the only British review to acknowledge some weaknesses in his work, was nonetheless prepared to overlook that Ntiro’s ‘assimilation of European pictorial conventions is not entirely happy.’ This concession could be made because ‘his pictures prove entirely acceptable by reason of their freshness of attack and disarming sincerity.’ The Daily Mail also applauded Ntiro for ‘stat[ing] familiar facts simply and freshly.’ Eric Newton, writing in The Guardian, praised the artist for his ‘native conviction,’ claiming that ‘This is the kind of direct response that a serious painter makes to the familiar environment of the land of his birth.’ Like Newton’s perception of Ntiro’s ‘direct response,’ Wolfram commented that ‘These paintings of his Tanganyikan environment are made with a lack of pretentiousness that is refreshing.’

Revealingly, Newton was at pains to distinguish Ntiro from the genre of naive art, stating ‘He is not an African “Sunday painter.”’ His innocence is not that of a French “Maitre populaire.”’ His paintings are the result of hard work, an observant, affectionate eye…’ Likewise, Wolfram wanted to distinguish Ntiro from naive artists, claiming, ‘He sees with clarity and his work differs from modern primitive painters in its lack of quaintness.’ Jeanerat had a similar point to prove, claiming of Ntiro’s paintings that ‘[t]hey are not empty imitations of primitive techniques for the tourist market. Nor do they ape Western fashions.’ The Observer, by contrast, saw no shame in associating Ntiro with French Sunday painters, commenting approvingly of his ‘lyrical Rousseausesque pictures of tribal life.’

What was clearly at stake for Newton, Wolfram and Jeanerat was making the case for a serious appreciation of Ntiro. In doing this, they clearly were convinced by the clarity and depth of his vision, and his ability to communicate this through his painting. But they also recognised

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60 Eric Newton, ‘Sam Ntiro Exhibition,’ The Guardian, 18 November 1964.
65 The Observer, 15 November 1964.
the prospect of him being dismissed as quaint, primitive or naive, terms that would, in their view, discredit Ntiro as an artist.\textsuperscript{66}

Not least, the legitimacy and credibility of Ntiro as an artist (i.e. his authenticity) was underscored by highlighting his uniqueness and innovation. His landscapes were described as being of ‘striking and original character.’\textsuperscript{67} Readers were informed that ‘East Africa has no painterly traditions. Sam Ntiro has \textit{invented} his own way of painting the semi tropical landscape, the hard, scrubby trees, the cattle, the native dances, the details of local agriculture and the cumulative result is convincing.’\textsuperscript{68} Invention here is in the best modernist tradition: original, progressive and scientific.

From the British reviews of Ntiro, it appears that Sanyal is correct about the ‘convenient’ catering towards western tastes. However, a few points need to be made. Firstly, the arguments made by British critics for the authenticity of Ntiro’s vision are remarkably close to Jengo’s argument about the artist’s ‘realism.’ One may expect Sanyal (and possibly Kyeyune) to dismiss Jengo on the same grounds as he did Ntiro, that he had internalised western constructions of Africa, but does this not in itself imply that there is a ‘pure’ African response to modernity that is uncontaminated by western culture? If one were to dismiss the legitimacy of two veterans who


\textsuperscript{68} Eric Newton, ‘Sam Ntiro Exhibition,’ \textit{The Guardian}, 18 November 1964; my emphasis.

dedicated their lives to promoting art in East Africa, would this not make one guilty of denying them their own authenticity?\textsuperscript{69}

Secondly, one needs to recognise that Ntiro was well aware of the dangers of commercialisation. In 1960, he claimed to work as a teacher precisely to safeguard his freedom as an artist from commercial pressures.\textsuperscript{70} This observation is not to deny that Ntiro took a keen

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Entry_into_Jerusalem}
\caption{Sam Ntiro, \textit{Entry into Jerusalem}, Kampala, 1958, Oil on board, 36 x 30 in. (Source: National Archives of the United States 200S-HN-AA-8J-27)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{69} A dynamic view of national culture is evident in Ntiro’s quotation from President Nyerere that ‘A country that refuses to learn from foreign cultures is nothing but a country of idiots and lunatics... But to learn from other cultures does not mean that we should abandon our own.’ See Sam Joseph Ntiro, ‘Traditional Arts in the Post-Independence Era,’ \textit{A Decade of Progress: 1961-1971, Tanzania Notes and Records}, 76, Dar es Salaam, 1975, p 114.

\textsuperscript{70} Ntiro, in a handwritten response to a questionnaire from MoMA, where the Museum requested ‘a general statement about your program as an artist in relation to society, or your philosophy of art,’ responded ‘I paint primarily to please myself. I earn my living by lecturing on painting, history of art, anatomy & perspective. By this choice I don’t have to paint to please the public & therefore, to some extent, lower my standard. If I can’t find an art teaching job to earn my living I would rather do something quite different so as to retain my freedom as a producing artist.’ See ‘Museum of Modern Art, Artist Records,’ Sam Ntiro folder, MoMA, New York (provided to the researcher on 23 November 2011).
interest in the sales of his works but to recognise that his primary income came from his life as an art educator and civil servant, not as an artist. His concerns about the negative impact of commercialisation on quality were lifelong, being a consistent theme in his research into Makonde sculpture and his writing on East African art.  

Thirdly, the idea of a ‘Western audience’ identified by Sanyal requires attention, specifically regarding Ntiro’s ‘market’ in the US. The Harmon Foundation had a long history of working with African-American institutions, artists and intellectuals, and these constituted a significant part of his audience. Even after the closure of the Harmon Foundation in 1967, he continued to expand these networks, working with historically black universities.

**AFRICAN AND CHRISTIAN**

The Lutherans established their first missions in Tanganyika in the 1870s, and Ntiro’s parents were first-generation converts. They gave their son two Christian names, and sent him to school at the Lutheran mission. As an adult, he produced work with Christian themes from at least the early 1950s until at least the late 1970s. All of these works were Africanised, with Christ and his disciples represented as black and placed into African contexts.

A link between the commercial and Christian interests of Ntiro is made by Sanyal, who claims that ‘the most popular of Sam Ntiro’s paintings were his representations of biblical scenes in African settings.’ Yet Sanyal offers nothing to support this claim. Based on available evidence, notably lists of works in catalogues, records of sales, and exhibition reviews, it is clear that Christian themes constitute a minor proportion of his exhibited works, and were by no means more likely to sell or merit comment.

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72 Ntiro’s ongoing relationship with Black Universities in the United States, subsequent to the closure of the Harmon Foundation in 1967, is explored in more detail in a biographical chapter on Ntiro in my dissertation (in process).


This is not to discount the importance of Christian networks in promoting Ntiro’s career. Documents in the Harmon Foundation archives reveal that several prominent members of Christian organisations and churches were invited to either attend the opening of his exhibitions in New York or to meet with the artist. One of these organisations, the National Lutheran Council, produced a newsletter in which generous coverage was given to Ntiro’s Africanisation of the Bible. In the UK, the Lutheran Church owns three of his paintings, originally displayed

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75 Ntiro’s file in the Harmon Foundation archives includes an untitled, typed page with names and addresses that list individuals associated with the National Lutheran Council, United Lutheran Church in America, two colleges that are identified as Lutheran (Wagner College and Upsala College), Lutheran Welfare Council, International Missionary Council, and National Council of Churches. It also makes general reference to the staff of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches in New York. See Sam Ntiro folder, Warren Robbins Library, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC.

in their church but now in their offices. It is also possible that the artist benefited from Lutheran support in Germany.

Sanyal, despite his general dismissive attitude to Ntiro, notes how the artist’s Africanisation of biblical subjects was a bold move for the time. However, by privileging Trowell’s vision of a venacularised Christian art, he effectively attributes to her the credit for Ntiro’s Africanised Christian themes.

Certainly, Trowell was a pioneer in promoting an African liturgical art. Kyeyune comments that Trowell was three decades ahead of the Church in her efforts to venacularise Christianity. Possibly as early as the late 1930s and certainly by the early 1940s, Trowell was encouraging the production of Christian art by Africans, although it is unclear whether these works Africanised their subject or not. In a paper published by the artist in 1963, Ntiro discusses two early liturgical works produced under Trowell. He claims that ‘The Good Samaritan was the first painting from Mrs Trowell’s class.’ While this example is not illustrated in Ntiro’s text, The Nativity, ‘painted at the same time,’ is reproduced. The Nativity shows no signs of Africanisation, and Ntiro’s comments make no reference to this as a feature of early works. Instead, he presents the two works as ‘important examples showing the beginning of an art school at Makerere College.’

Both Kyeyune and Kakande foreground the paintings of Charles Ssekinto, crediting him for Africanizing Christian themes at Makerere since the late 1940s. Ssekinto and Ntiro certainly knew each other, and it is likely that Ntiro taught him painting. However, neither Kyeyune nor Kakande make any reference to whether Ntiro’s works as a student or as a young lecturer

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77 It is difficult to reconcile these works with the titles in the Piccadilly Gallery catalogues, suggesting that they were purchased through direct contact with the artist.
78 A letter from Lutheran Publications addressed to the Harmon Foundation expressed interest in publishing and exhibiting Ntiro’s Christian work. See Lutheran Publications, letter to the Harmon Foundation, undated, received 06 September 1960, Sam Ntiro folder, Warren Robbins Library, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC. Following consultation with Merton Simpson, Ntiro was advised to pursue this invitation in collaboration with the Piccadilly Gallery. See Evelyn Brown, letter to S. Ntiro, 11 October 1960, Sam Ntiro folder, Warren Robbins Library, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC. It is unclear whether anything came of this contact, although it should be noted that Winslow refers to a German publication of African Christian art that featured Ntiro. See Vernon Winslow, Living in Tanzania, Nexus Gallery, New Orleans, 1977. One can also note that Ntiro visited Germany some months prior to his arrival in New York, and it is unclear whether this visit had anything to do with his Lutheran links. See Sarah Ntiro, undated letter to M. Brady, received 5 July 1960, Sam Ntiro folder, Warren Robbins Library, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC.
79 Sunanda K Sanyal, Imaging Art, Making History: Two generations of Makerere artists, PhD thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, 2000, p 104. One can note that, particularly in African contexts where missionaries played a key role in facilitating the development of African artists, such as in Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe, Africanised liturgical art was often produced, particularly in the 1960s when the influence of the civil rights movement was influential. See Mduduzi Xakaza, ‘Christianity as a Site of Struggles,’ in Visual Century: Volume 3, Ed Mario Pissarra, Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2011, pp 60-81. However, earlier precedents, such as Ernest Mancoba’s African Madonna, date back to the 1920s. It is fair to assume that most of these initiatives developed independently, as they were not well known at the time.
Sam Ntiro, *Chagga Beer Making* (cartoon for a mural), Kilimanjaro, 1957, Oil on board, 36 x 48 in.
included Christian themes, or whether these were Africanised. The earliest of Ntiro’s Christian works discussed by Kakande dates to as late as 1959, but it is clear that by his 1955 exhibition at the Piccadilly Gallery, this theme was in evidence. There are fair grounds to speculate that the theme dates back to his days as a student at Makerere.\textsuperscript{84} While this is conjectural, the absence of detailed studies of Ntiro make it impossible to dismiss.

An important observation about Ntiro’s Christian works is that they lack any dissenting or critical edge. The missions had a destructive attitude towards traditional African culture, and in Uganda, this was criticised by the Phelps Stokes Commission in 1924,\textsuperscript{85} leading to reforms in educational policy. These reforms in turn laid the ground for individuals such as Trowell to begin work on researching and conserving indigenous material culture. Ntiro was born when this shift in colonial attitude to indigenous culture was taking place, meaning that he did not directly experience the excesses of the missionary intolerance to indigenous culture. This observation may partially explain why his paintings do not give us even a hint of a critique of the historical role of the missions in undermining African culture.

However, in a published survey of East African Art, written during his time as an ambassador for newly independent Tanganyika, Ntiro has some criticism for both Christianity and Islam, claiming that they had introduced an anti-social character to spiritual practice. As he put it: ‘The approach to the gods or the unseen is not now communal but individual.’\textsuperscript{86} This observation sits uneasily with Ntiro’s valorisation of the social in both his art and writing,\textsuperscript{87} yet there is no visual critique of this individualism that he associates with the introduction of Christianity (and Islam).\textsuperscript{88}

The absence of documentation of early works by Ntiro introduces questions regarding his role in developing an African liturgical art. It is unclear whether he followed Trowell’s instruction or Ssekinto’s example, whether he was a collaborator and co-conspirator with Ssekinto, or the unacknowledged pioneer of African liturgical art at Makerere.

\textsuperscript{84} As the (first) Piccadilly Gallery exhibition took place at the end of Ntiro’s three years at The Slade, it is certainly likely that most of the works were produced between 1952 and 1955. Several commentators have claimed that Ntiro’s approach was unchanged by his study abroad, and this apparent consensus implies that a new theme in his oeuvre would have been commented on. See Trowell, quoted by Sunanda K Sanyal, \textit{Imaging Art, Making History: Two generations of Makerere artists}, PhD thesis, Emory University, Atlanta, 2000, p 105; Marshall W Mount, \textit{African Art: The years since 1920}, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1973, p 33; George Kyeyune, ‘Modern Art at Makerere University, Uganda,’ in \textit{An Anthology of African Art}, Eds N’Gone Fall and Jean Loup Pivin, Distributed Art Publishers, New York, 2002, p 196. This observation suggests that it is possible, even probable, that Ntiro’s Christian works predate his studies in London. If this conjecture is correct, the genesis of his Christian themes can be traced back to at least the first years of his lectureship (i.e. the years of Ssekinto’s studies at Makerere). However, given Trowell’s strong support for Ntiro, as well as her interest in Medieval art, it is certainly possible that his Christian themes began even earlier, during his days as her student.


\textsuperscript{87} Ntiro explains that the purpose of his survey is to put one ‘in a position to say whether Art plays an integral part in the lives of the people in East Africa, and if so, what place it should be given in our society. See Sam Ntiro, ‘East African Art,’ \textit{Tanganyika Notes and Records}, 61, Dar es Salaam, 1963, p 131.

\textsuperscript{88} On the contrary, it is striking that whereas figures in Ntiro’s paintings are given equal importance, with no individual characteristics depicted, his representations of Christ or Priests in the works owned by the Lutheran Council are distinguished by being depicted on a significantly larger scale than their flock. This singles them out as apart from the masses, but there is no alienation implied by this; rather, they are at the centre of the social setting.
ETHNIC IDENTITY AND POSTCOLONIAL NATIONALISMS

A recurring theme in the literature on Ntiro is his ethnic identity. Several texts begin their discussion of Ntiro by identifying him as Chagga. With his identity localised by ethnicity, many commentators also identify the content of his work as being principally concerned with remembering or documenting Chagga life. A strong tendency to read the artist in terms of his localised ethnicity is evident, from Todd’s statement in 1960 that ‘[Ntiro’s] work is produced almost entirely from the rural background of his own people the Chagga on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro’ to as late as 2008, in a book on East African art, when Kyeyune claimed that ‘Ntiro’s imagery derives directly from his Chagga home environment.’

Arguably, these writers have taken their cue from Ntiro himself. In a handwritten biography supplied to the Harmon Foundation in 1960, he began by identifying his date and place of birth, rapidly established his identity as Chagga, although it is notable that this introduction is followed by an acknowledgment of his upbringing and early education as Lutheran.

Ntiro’s autobiographical text was revised by the Harmon Foundation for a modest catalogue they produced for his debut exhibition in the US. Titled Oil Paintings on Life in British East Africa by Sam J Ntiro, the cover included the description ‘Artist from Kilimanjaro, Tanganyika, and Lecturer in Fine Art at The Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art, Makerere College, The University of East Africa, Kampala, Uganda.’ This description is significant. It signifies a multiplicity and simultaneity of overlapping identities that are partly geographic (East Africa, Tanganyika, Uganda), professional (artist, lecturer) and political (a colonial subject of the British Empire). Notably, none of these say ‘Chagga.’ The catalogue essay carries the subtitle ‘sensitive observer of the African scene,’ thereby introducing a new element by conferring on him a trans-national identity (African). This is subsequently localised as Chagga in the opening of the catalogue essay, based, as noted above, on Ntiro’s autobiography.

However, introducing new text that does not feature in his handwritten account, the catalogue goes on to distinguish four key themes: ‘his own people [presumably Chagga], … landscapes…

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94 Ibid.
other tribal life around Kampala…[and] Christian." An analysis of the works Ntiro shipped to the US shows this to be a reasonably accurate description of the thematic range of his work at the time. Todd, Kyeyune and others would have done well to recognise that captions written by the artist for fifty-five of the works, produced between 1956 and 1959, reveal that almost half (twenty-seven) had Ugandan themes. Most of these (sixteen) were unpopulated landscapes, all apparently painted on site. The other Ugandan themes (eleven) concerned human activity, mostly in and around Kampala, with natural elements frequently integral to these activities. Six paintings had biblical themes, with at least two of these being set in a Chagga environment. Less than half the paintings (twenty-two) had Chagga themes, and all of these were painted in

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95 Ibid.
96 Many paintings depict trees (mango, eucalyptus, palm, fig, mule); three represent specific places. Interestingly, Merton Simpson only selected two of these Ugandan landscapes.
Kilimanjaro. This observation suggests that, in contrast to a common perception that Ntiro painted mostly from memory, many of his works appear to have been direct responses to his immediate environment.

However, despite Chagga themes constituting less than half of the works shipped to the US, Ntiro’s handwritten response to questions from MoMA boldly linked his art to his Chagga identity, which he presented with a pride bordering on ethnic chauvinism. In response to the question “What in your ancestry, nationality or background do you consider relevant to an understanding of your art?” Ntiro replied:

A good deal of my painting is about life, tradition, the customs and the day to day activities of the lives of my people, the Chagga, on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. My home is about 6,000 feet high. The best way to have a full understanding of my painting is to pay a visit to my country and see the country, meet the Chagga who are energetic, friendly and very hardworking in comparison to the tribes living along the coast of the Indian Ocean.

The privileging of ethnic identity provides for a very specific, even restrictive reading of Ntiro. For Kyeyune, the strong emphasis on collective activity that one sees in much of Ntiro’s work can be explained in ethnic terms. He comments that ‘[i]n Chagga land, people worked communally to build their homes, plough the land, graze goats and cattle and make banana wine.’ This echoes the artist’s own explanation of his work to MoMA: ‘It is a custom for instance for a man to ask his neighbours, relations to help him with his harvest. When it is finish [sic] he is asked by his friends to do the same for them.’

In contrast to the above interpretations, Kakande interprets the visualised collective action as an embodiment of Ntiro’s socialist beliefs. The Ugandan scholar argues that ‘the definition and set up of “the village” (and the tribe) in Tanzania altered greatly starting with the early-1950s as Julius Nyerere spread his views of socialism. Ntiro clearly embraced these views…’ For Kakande, then, Ntiro’s village is a microcosm of the socialist state. In fact, as discussed later, he postulates that they refer directly to the villagisation policy implemented by Nyerere’s

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98 Mount quoted Ntiro as saying ‘My painting is a memory of what I know best of the life of my people.’ See Marshall W Mount, African Art: The years since 1920, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1973, p 98. This quote was subsequently used by Fosu, op cit, p 33 and Bonhams, op cit, p 34. The original Ntiro quote comes from SJ Ntiro ‘Kilimanjaro gold dust,’ Roho, 1, Kampala, 1961, p 9.

99 This is not to discount the role of memory in Ntiro’s work. Ibrahim el Salahi, who studied alongside Ntiro at the Slade, told me that while students were responding to Cezanne and ‘painting apples,’ Ntiro was ‘aloof’ and painting images of cattle (Ibrahim el Salahi, informal conversation with the author, Marriott Hotel, Philadelphia, November 2012).

100 ‘Museum of Modern Art, Artist Records,’ Sam Ntiro folder, MoMA, New York (provided to the researcher on 23 November 2011). Note that at this time, Ntiro also tended to define Chagga as a ‘country,’ introducing an ambiguity here concerning which ‘country’ he is referring to. See Sam Ntiro, handwritten autobiography, Sam Ntiro folder, Warren Robbins Library, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC.


102 ‘Museum of Modern Art, Artist Records,’ Sam Ntiro folder, MoMA, New York (provided to the researcher on 23 November 2011).

(Source: Bonhams catalogue, 2000)
government. However, one still has to reconcile this interpretation with the numerous works that the artist himself identifies as Chagga, or assigns other ethnic identities, as well as the fact that many of Ntiro’s paintings of villages were produced before the Arusha Declaration (1967), when villagisation became an official programme.

A key question is at what point Ntiro’s works are specific to Chagga themes (or other localised, ethnic identities) and when they rather speak to broader identities, be they national (Tanzanian or Ugandan), trans-national or international (East African, African, Black, Christian, Socialist). And if localities shift in his works, so too do temporalities. Scenes of Chagga life, for example, may present themselves as the everyday, but it is a present in dialogue with the past as well as with the future.

Questioned by MoMA about the ‘significance’ of his work, Ntiro replied:

[M]any of my paintings are about life as it has been lived in Kilimanjaro, Tanganyika, for many generations. Time is coming fairly soon when modern inventions will transform it. For example in 1914 there were very few cars in Kilimanjaro, certainly not a single tractor! Today, there are thousands of cars and numerous tractors, which do a lot of ‘carrying and filling the soil.’

This quote is revealing: Ntiro’s imaged Kilimanjaro has no tractors; it is an image of a lost world. But it is also noticeably a comparatively recent past, one that through the depiction of Western-style clothing does not refer to an idyllic precolonial past.

Similarly, in explaining the painting The Red Hut, Ntiro identified the setting as being on the outskirts of Kampala, and posited the view that soon such buildings would be replaced by Westernised ones. This reveals a ‘salvage’ paradigm on his part, recording a cultural and historical phenomenon before it disappears. This consistency of concern in recording the past in both Tanganyika and Uganda represents an intellectual project to restore African pride by validating ‘life as it has been lived.’ A similar concern would lead him to validate Tanzanian rock painting (notably in contrast to Trowell, who claimed that rock painting did not exist in East Africa).

While paintings of Kilimanjaro have no tractors, many of the Kampala paintings depict modern building methods. This suggests that, as a native of Kilimanjaro, Ntiro was able to draw on (recent) oral history in ways that were natural to him. On the other hand, being a relative stranger in Kampala, he would have to find another way to respond to the place, and capturing the contemporary everyday would be one such way.

In recognising that Ntiro’s documentary interests operated across a range of temporalities, with the past more prevalent in his Kilimanjaro paintings, and the present more visible in his Kampala paintings, one has to recognise that he was, to some extent, a displaced Tanzanian — he left for Makerere aged twenty, and while he returned reasonably frequently to Kilimanjaro for vacations, he lived in Uganda for about fifteen years, and spent seven-odd years in London.

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104 *Museum of Modern Art, Artist Records,* Sam Ntiro folder, MoMA, New York (provided to the researcher on 23 November 2011).
While stationed in London, he had several opportunities to travel to parts of Tanzania he did not previously know.\textsuperscript{106}

It is significant that several postcolonial texts quietly depart from the established emphasis on his Chagga identity. Elimo Njau, in the text to Ntiro’s catalogue for his 1964 exhibition at the Chemchemi gallery in Nairobi, refers to ‘East African scenes — his favourite subject for many years.’\textsuperscript{107} Also significant is that Ntiro’s 1977 exhibition in New Orleans was titled \textit{Living in Tanzania}. While three of the titles among the twenty-eight works reference Kilimanjaro or Chagga themes, emphasis on his ethnic identity is lacking. This suggests that Chagga themes may have declined over the years, to be replaced by broader national identities. This is reflected in the national epithets used by some writers. Fosu demonstrates a receptivity to postcolonial politics, and, revealingly, he chose to introduce Ntiro as ‘the Tanzanian pioneer artist.’\textsuperscript{108} Similarly, Jengo positions Ntiro as Tanzanian.\textsuperscript{109} Biography accounts for some of this shift — Ntiro left ‘Chagga country’ barely in his teens, and vacations aside, never lived there again; his later residences in Tanzania were in Dar es Salaam and Moshi. But politics should not be underestimated — participating in the construction of the postcolonial nation state necessitated a realignment of perceptions of identity.\textsuperscript{110}

\textbf{Ntiro as Humanist?}

A further consideration of Ntiro’s identity can be introduced through consideration of his British paintings, five of which he exhibited in 1964,\textsuperscript{111} and none of which appear to have ever been published. Ntiro was presumably familiar with snow on Kilimanjaro, so snow itself would not have been new, although its impact on the urban British landscape would have presented itself as an exotic sight. Apart from snow scenes, he painted a work titled \textit{Cattle in England}. These works suggest that Ntiro was not only responding to ‘familiar’ themes, but also to their novel (for him) settings. One can read into this an awareness and consideration of universal or transnational, transcultural themes which would introduce readings of Ntiro as ultimately a humanist, a quality noted of his work by Newton in 1964.\textsuperscript{112} Interestingly, the two Winter scenes and painting of cattle were not shown to his British audience but rather to his East African public; this suggests a deliberate, possibly educative intention on Ntiro’s part, since he appears to be highlighting cross-cultural affinities.

\textsuperscript{110} One should note that both Njau and Jengo were Tanzanian. Both artists studied at Makerere, and subsequently collaborated with Ntiro on many projects.
\textsuperscript{111} Three British scenes were exhibited in Nairobi and two in London.
\textsuperscript{112} Eric Newton, ‘Sam Ntiro Exhibition,’ \textit{The Guardian}, 18 November 1964.
A POLITICAL ARTIST

Fosu, writing in 1986, was the first to position Ntiro within the contemporary context of decolonisation and perhaps the only writer who has seen a link between Ntiro’s uses of the past and a vision of the future. According to the Ghanaian scholar:

[Ntiro] has based most of his paintings on the indigenous survival cultures of the peasant. He sees them as providing some of the answers to the modern African economic woes wrecked by years of colonial control and mismanagement in Africa. The salvation of the new economic order… depends on self-reliance based on the traditional principle of Ujamaa or working together. Ntiro cherishes dignity in labor and believes in cooperative work.\(^\text{113}\)

While the reference to ‘dignity in labour’ can be associated with protestant values, it is clear from Fosu’s account that he perceived that Ntiro had a vision of progress informed by traditional African principles, notably Ujamaa. This, together with his introduction of Ntiro as Tanzanian as opposed to the customary framing as Chagga, positions Ntiro within the contemporary political context and aligns him unambiguously with Nyerere’s socialism.

Fosu was also the first writer to recognise a symbolic dimension in Ntiro. He commented that many of Ntiro’s figures resemble ‘germinating pods,’ and he claimed that ‘Ntiro interprets them as “representing new life, and the joy of harvest, resulting from hard and honest labour.” The pod-like figures, he says, appear “as if life is emerging or is created.”\(^\text{114}\) Later, Kyeyune would return to Fosu’s (Ntiro’s?) interpretation of the symbolism of the ‘pod-like figures,’ making the political analogy more explicit: ‘Produced during the period of independence struggle, the metaphor of a germinating pod as an expression of renewal and rejuvenation of the African dynamic could not have been more touching.’\(^\text{115}\)

Fosu’s positioning of Ntiro as part of the contemporary, postcolonial moment was unprecedented and groundbreaking, but Kakande has been the most forceful in making an argument that Ntiro’s work was political in its intentions.\(^\text{116}\) His argument has two main thrusts. One concerns establishing the artist’s political credentials; the second focuses on presenting key themes or motifs in Ntiro’s paintings as emblematic of political discourse.

Kakande establishes political legitimacy through frequent references to Ntiro serving in or being in contact with Nyerere’s government.\(^\text{117}\) No details are offered of his actual role in ‘Nyerere’s administration,’ but this ‘fact’ nonetheless substantiates Kakande’s claim that ‘[Ntiro’s] commitment to African socialism was unwavering.’ The writer also claims that Ntiro ‘clearly embraced [Nyerere’s socialist] views… through his subscription to the growing debates

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\(^{114}\) Ibid, p 33.


\(^{117}\) Ibid. pp 137, 140, 143, 145.
at Presence Africaine, but offers little evidence of this ‘subscription’ other than Ntiro’s attendance of the Second International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome, 1959. The Nigerian pioneering modernist Ben Enwonwu attended the earlier Congress in Paris, 1956, and his South African contemporary Gerard Sekoto attended the second in Rome (where he presumably met Ntiro), and neither is generally viewed as socialist. We are also told that ‘Sam Ntiro was an Africanist,’ but again, there is little elaboration on this ideological positioning of Ntiro.

Kakande highlights three related themes in Ntiro’s paintings, forcefully linking them to the politics of the day. These themes are collective action, the village, and coffee farming. The

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118 Presence Africaine was a major organisational and literary platform for the dissemination of contemporary political currents such as Negritude and Pan-Africanism.
Sam Ntiro, *Working on a Winding Road*, Oil on board, 68.5 x 53.5 cm.
(Source: Michael Stevenson and Joost Bosland, ‘*Take Your Road and Travel Along,*’ Michael Stevenson, Michael Graham-Stewart and Johans Borman, Cape Town, 2008, p 98)
imaging of groups of people working together is a characteristic feature of many of Ntiro’s paintings. Typically, these figures are given equal importance, and there is an absence of differentiation as individuals. The egalitarianism visualised in Ntiro’s work is further emphasised by the absence of figures of authority. As noted by Kakande, no one supervises the work.  

Ntiro’s practice of representing figures with equal emphasis was ridiculed in a thinly disguised attack on his aesthetic by Todd, who made mocking reference to ‘busy ant[s].’ In a more sympathetic vein, Kyeyune interpreted Ntiro’s images of collective work as being about the sociality of the Chagga. Kakande concurred with Kyeyune in that “[t]he clustering and density of population in his work betrays the artist’s valorisation of communal life,” but broke new ground by linking Ntiro’s ‘socialised, collectivised and industrious rural communities’ to contemporary politics, pointing out that ‘they carry resonances from the socialist ideology which became popular in the region.’

Kakande further makes a valuable intervention by pointing out that Nyerere’s concept of African Socialism was based on the unit of the village as a microcosm of the broader philosophy. Kakande contends confidently that ‘what we see in Ntiro’s paintings are the official bureaucratic villages grounded in TANU’s, but mainly Nyerere’s, ideology of African socialism.’ Kakande uses this interpretation to rebut Ntiro’s critics, as this view ‘contradict[s] scholarship which suggests that the artist primarily intended to satisfy Western insatiable appetite for exotic images through his village symbolism.’

Kakande provides alternative readings of not only the village but also Ntiro’s images of coffee farming. He claims that themes such as coffee farming were developed by Ntiro ‘to celebrate a modernising postcolonial state-led economy in the region.’

In several instances, Kakande displays caution in rewriting Ntiro: ‘he did paintings which, in my view, are evidence of his interest in this socialism’ and:

…the available evidence suggests that Ntiro explored and intensified the industrious villages, rhythmic countryside and masses seen in his Christian art to develop a secular genre promoting the case for collective effort, and resonating the tenets of socialism as a form of good governance. This then suggests that indeed Ntiro propagated regional political issues using his art.

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122 ‘Through painting Ntiro enunciated his unwavering support for collective effort as a way of overcoming chores which would otherwise overwhelm an individual. His paintings elicit a kind of “associationalism” which allows for group effort, loyalty, reciprocity, shared values, a collectivised economy and a polity which is not subjected to vertical and foreign-mediated influences/ordering… there is a sense that, in his representation of village life, everybody is working, yet there is no one supervising the work! This is an unusual group dynamic which permeates his work; it insinuates an overarching ideology grounded in social capital.’ See Angelo Kakande, Contemporary Art in Uganda: A nexus between art and politics, PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2008, p 141.


126 Ibid. p 92.

127 Ibid. p 145.

128 Ibid.

129 Ibid. p 137.

130 Ibid. p 140; my emphasis.
Elsewhere, Kakande consolidates his repositioning of Ntiro through bold assertions. According to him, the artist ‘enunciated the post-colonial socialist state,’ and he refers to ‘[t]he fact that Ntiro made art as an embodiment of the aspirations of the post-colonial nation-state.’

In general terms, I think that Kakande’s instincts to position Ntiro within the politics of decolonisation are valid and provide a far more appropriate reading of the artist’s intentions than is customary. However, in developing his interpretations, Kakande’s methodology highlights challenges faced by Ntiro scholars. The first of these concerns the lack of published detail on Ntiro’s political career. It is one thing, as Kakande does, to claim that serving in Nyerere’s government provides evidence of his steadfast support for socialism, but there is still a lack of clarity and detail concerning Ntiro’s performance as a civil servant. In short, did he effectively fulfil his political mandate, or did he opportunistically use his office to advance his career as an artist?

Perhaps Ntiro’s loyalty to Nyerere’s political vision can be detected in his lack of self-reflexivity concerning the problem faced with the villagisation programme, or African socialism.

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133 Ibid. p 138, my emphasis.  
134 For instance, why was Ntiro replaced as High Commissioner? Could it possibly have had anything to do with questions of his suitability? Why did he leave public office to return to Uganda? Were personal or artistic interests behind this, or was he disillusioned with public office? And what exactly did Ntiro’s duties as Commissioner of Culture entail? Was he, like Ben Enwonwu in Nigeria, not really required to perform official duties but rather to practice as an artist? See Sylvester OgbECHIE, Ben Enwonwu: The making of an African modernist, University of Rochester Press, Rochester, 2008.
more broadly, as noted by Kakande, but Kakande does not use this as ‘evidence;’ instead, he invariably refers to Ntiro’s political office to establish his political bona fides.

A second problem demonstrated by Kakande concerns distinguishing the temporalities and localities of specific Ntiro works. Without titles and dates, it is often difficult to distinguish a Ugandan theme from a Tanzanian one, or a work from the colonial period from one produced after independence. Kakande observed this ambiguous quality about early Ntiro works, but argues it is not a feature of later works.

Kakande highlights Ntiro’s ‘non-reflective depiction of the villagisation programme… there is no sense of the weaknesses of African socialism within his work.’ See Angelo Kakande, Contemporary Art in Uganda: A nexus between art and politics, PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2008, p 148.


‘[B]y the 1950s Ntiro was making landscapes with no specific reference to place or time. They were harsh, anonymous and desolate… By the 1960s, however, Ntiro had immensely populated his compositions. He depicted panoramic views of densely populated land with socialised, collectivised and industrious rural communities… they carry resonances from the socialist ideology which became popular in the region.’ See Angelo Kakande, Contemporary Art in Uganda: A nexus between art and politics, PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2008, p 139.
An obvious problem concerns Kakande’s bold assertion linking Ntiro’s villages to the rural villagisation programme implemented by Nyerere. I have already highlighted that Ntiro represented both Tanganyikan/Tanzanian and Ugandan themes in the 1950s and 1960s. I have also acknowledged that many of his themes are specifically Chagga. There is also little evidence of overt political content in Ntiro’s titles or commentary. A notable exception is the catalogue listing of *A Socialist Village*, exhibited by Ntiro at The Commonwealth Institute in 1977.  

Nonetheless, despite a shortage of overtly political titles, I would concur with Kakande’s opinion that ‘[Ntiro’s] socialist sympathies become obvious…’ However, one has to address the fact that most of the examples he discusses were produced before villagisation was introduced. My own view, still to be explored further, is that Ntiro operates somewhere between nostalgic memory and utopian vision, bringing the past, present and future into a complex conversation about not only what was but also what can be. These ‘early’ images of villages ‘enunciated’ (to borrow Kakande’s term) a ‘traditional’ African socialism.

Similar observations can be made about Ntiro’s images of coffee farming. While Kakande claims these works as a visualisation of the postcolonial economy, there is the possibility that coffee for Ntiro signified his childhood, since his father was a coffee farmer. The Chagga were also prominent coffee farmers, so once again, there is an interplay between the nationalism of the ethnic group and the nation-state, as well as between the individual and the collective. That coffee was introduced under colonialism complicates its positioning as a ‘traditional’ practice, but this seemingly goes unremarked on by Ntiro.

In other words, by visualising collectives practicing sustainable lifestyles (‘self-reliance’ of a sort) that drew on past, pre-industrial ways of living, Ntiro not only valorised the past but presented a vision of the future, as recognised by Fosu. In doing this, Ntiro would have presented Nyerere with a lucid visual language to affirm his argument that socialism in Africa was a way of life predating its introduction as a ‘foreign’ ideology.

Kakande has made a forceful argument to foreground the ‘political symbolism, rather than strictly formal aesthetic, of [Ntiro’s] work.’ He has argued that:

Ntiro’s formalist contemporaries (and art scholars) have rejected his genre; they have questioned his professional ability … [T]hey have missed the political text the artist intended through his lyrical, choreographed, densely populated and rustic compositions. By engaging the political function of his art, the formalist debate loses currency…

Kakande’s contribution towards to a new reading of Ntiro has been invaluable, but has been limited by his interest in establishing Ntiro’s ‘contribution to the development of the nexus

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138 As I have yet to locate this work, it is not clear if it differs in any significant respects from other village scenes.
140 Kakande notes that ‘in the mid- and late-forties African artists were to critique the colonial economy,’ but does not give examples, and seems to not include Ntiro, whom he comments on from the 1950s to 1960s. See Angelo Kakande, *Contemporary Art in Uganda: A nexus between art and politics*, PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2008, p 139.
143 Ibid.
between Uganda’s modern art and politics.\textsuperscript{144} By definition, this drew largely on his Ugandan practice, suggesting that a fuller exploration of the politics of Ntiro’s practice still needs attention.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

Given that he was an artist who produced deceptively straightforward, uncomplicated paintings, interpreting Ntiro is a remarkably rich project. Clearly, his professional, cultural and political identities overlap in far more complex ways than may be immediately apparent from the available literature. With little written about his career as an artist and little consideration given to the intersection between his roles as artist, educator, cultural activist and political agent, Ntiro provides fertile ground for further critical excavations.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.