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THE ROLE OF ART AND POPULAR CULTURE IN PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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1. Introduction

One of the greatest contributions that art can make to society is to become a tool for critical thinking and social interaction (Gabriela 2016). Artists speak their minds about not only human achievements but also the horrors of the world. The artworks resulting from artists' reflection provide a platform for humanity's introspection.

This paper discusses art as a medium of expression and explores its application in the promotion of democratic principles and social justice in Uganda. It builds on the premise that art is a universal language, accessible to both the literate and the illiterate. That said, art is a complex narrative which manifests itself in a wide range of formats; and to benefit from it, it is imperative that we bear that in mind. We commonly speak of high art and low art.

High art, as Prof. Cecil Todd (1961) once remarked, is generally recognised by the educated and elite. High art, whether in sculpture, painting, advertising, fashion or other media, is usually intellectually engaging. Low art, on the other hand, is generally produced and presented in a manner that appeals to the immediate senses of ordinary people. Such art ranges from crafts, sometimes referred to as material culture, to simple forms of visual representations produced in a journalistic way. Popular art falls in this category. I, however, would like to caution that the divide between high and low art is a false construct, because, as Margaret Trowell explained, "these two categories stem from the same roots, which is man's desire to create things of beauty as well as his need to use his products in the service of the community". Although these intangible urges are more obvious in figurative (high) arts, they also exist in crafts (Trowell 1960, 13). Picton further endorses this view when he asserts that "[a]ll art is a process

of making that inevitably entails an engagement between art's sake and social purpose" (Picton 2001, 8).

The creative works I am discussing in this paper, therefore, are blind to the categorisations of high art and low art or art and popular culture. I am as such envisioning art in a broad sense.

It is important to note that it is not the business of art to solve problems – secular or spiritual. Art does not tell people what to do. All that art does is to give people tools to think about issues that affect them, so that they can become agents of change. To successfully do that, of course, art should attract our attention and sustain it. Art sustains our attention because it is aesthetically pleasing and/or elicits controversy as it remarks on the world around us. Art is art when it upsets our expectations, enabling us to experience the world from a fresh perspective. In art, therefore, we renew ourselves.

2.

The Domestic Creative Landscape

Every community has produced art that addresses or corresponds to the challenges and needs of its time. It is noteworthy that in pre-colonial Uganda there was no separation between low and high art, as I noted earlier. Ornamental arts, pottery, weaving, storytelling, poetry, fashion, comedy, music, dance, myths and legends were all woven together, and the experience of art was holistic. It is this composite whole that, nonetheless, formed the foundation of modern art developments which, although fragmented into distinct units today, is still effectual in its power to subtly communicate difficult and sometimes delicate subjects. Because art and society are inseparable, it makes sense that art should be and has been used to contribute to debates that promote democratic rule and social justice.

Before we discuss how art has been referenced in promoting democratic principles and social justice, I want to reiterate that artists in Uganda have always been at the forefront of engagement with social and political issues of their time. For example, during the run-up to independence, Uganda had a critical mass of (educated) people in the creative industry who were able to generate thought-provoking material in the form of visual art, literature and drama, among others – that, in some cases, became iconic features that expressed our identity and promoted a spirit of nationalism and patriotism. The state equally sponsored artists to compose the national anthem, the coat of arms, the national flag and the independence monument, whose enduring usage continues to galvanise the

country.

3.

Uganda's Political Landscape after Independence

I have decided to use the post-independence period as a backdrop to my discussion of the role of art and popular culture in promoting democratic principles and social justice because, in my view, it is after independence that we have experienced undue political anxiety that have given artists an opportunity to speak out.

As we know from our history, the euphoria of the 1962 independence quickly degenerated into disillusionment as Uganda descended into political chaos which, in the independence decade, was characterised by the abolition of monarchical authority in 1966. This led to what came to be known as the 1966 crisis.¹ The overthrow of President Apollo M. Obote in a military coup by Idi Amin followed in 1971. Amin's brutal regime lasted for eight years and the political confusion of the early 1980s paved way for a National Resistance Army (NRA) or Museveni-led civil (guerilla) war in Luweero. The HIV/AIDS pandemic which engulfed the country from the early 1980s complicated the political and social landscape. Since 1986, however, Uganda has experienced a semblance of peace and stability. These are important events accounts that have provided a rich menu for artistic engagements. In their contribution to ease the weight of these difficulties through their creative efforts, artists in Uganda have been unequivocal.

1 <http://www.uganda.com/crisis66.htm>

4. Artistic Application

To understand how artists have framed their evocative statements that allow us to connect with reality, I have created four categories of artistic experience as follows:

- a) Art that celebrates nationalism and identity
- b) Art of protest
- c) Definitive art that pays tribute to sacrifice
- d) The art of revelation and advocacy

In discussing this art, I have not segregated between disciplines. Art has been treated inclusively as a product of a creative industry.

4.1 Art That Celebrates and Promotes Uganda's Cultural and National Identity

Before Uganda became a nation-state with all the borders firmly sealed after World War I, it was not possible to have meaningful discussions about nationalism and national identity. These concepts became a matter of urgent attention in the run-up to and after achieving independence in 1962. Although Uganda is constituted by over 50 ethnic communities, it is held together (at least in theory) by a common history and national goals and aspirations embodied in peace and justice. To the building of peace and justice, these artists have made their contribution as follows:

a) Sculpture - The Independence Monument

Designed and executed by Gregory Maloba (a Kenyan sculptor), the independence monument is one of the major art projects the country has ever undertaken. Its content reveals optimism, a

confluence of cultures and restoration of pride in our inheritance.

Progress in different sectors of life, such as education, roads and health, notwithstanding, the 60 years of colonial rule had dismantled and recreated our cultures into new units that were often socially unconstructive. The post-independence decade was a time of renewal of past traditions that were still relevant. In the independence monument, Maloba revisited African art, where eccentric proportions are underlined. Yet the facial features of this monument are a result of careful observation, which is an attribute of academic art. By returning us to the past as well as embracing modernity, Maloba in this monument is reminding us that we ought to both take ownership and stewardship of our country and also engage with our past to have meaningful development.

The independence monument is a monolith sculpture constituted by two figures. The sombre-looking mother is carrying a jubilant child with open, raised hands. The mother represents Uganda, our motherland, whose cords of colonialism that once tied her are loosening and the young child is her hope, her future. This optimism and euphoria permeated the independence decade. When it

faded owing to political instability in the years that followed independence, the independence monument continued to be a rallying point for hope. For its message of optimism, the independence monument has been a convenient motif, applied in nurturing social cohesion. For example, it graces the new family of Uganda banknotes.

b) Literature

Like visual artists, writers in literature and poetry have generated narratives with the goal of emboldening the African spirit. Critical of the colonial project, which allegedly cheated the African out of his inheritance, African writers such as Okot p'Bitek recreated an African consciousness that positioned a post-colonial Africa in a modern progressive world, without becoming disengaged from his history and memory. His best-known work of literature is Song of Lawino.

Both Maloba and Okot are helping us to reclaim our agency: unless we are proud of who we are as Africans and that we have the same abilities as anyone else in the world, we cannot be assertive, and we cannot effectively compete on the world stage.

4.2 The Art of Protest

Nations must be free and secure if peace and harmony are to prevail. Peace and harmony have evaded Uganda since independence, reaching its peak in the 1970s and 80s. The abuse of power coalesced into civil strife, which was routinely met with brutal repression. Artists responded resolutely to such injustices.

a) Sculpture – War Victim

Although many artists fled the country in the 1970s, the home-bound artists did not relent in their practice. They improvised with locally available materials and produced images that

expressed disgust at the state of politics and leadership at the time. Given Amin's suspicion of academia, artists had to disguise their artistic representations. They dared not be direct. One of the iconic art pieces of this period is War Victim, a wood carving of imposing scale that tells the story of a brutal regime. Carved by Prof. Nnaggenda in 1985, War Victim is a standing figure that has been decapitated, and has no hands and only one leg, expressing the cruelty that characterised the Amin and Obote II regimes. More importantly, however, the sculpture expresses the resilience of the people of Uganda who, despite the difficulties, never lost hope. Hope, indeed, is the concrete thing that this sculpture is bringing to our attention.

b) Painting – Misfortune

Misfortune is a painting which brings to the fore the wanton destruction of lives and property that Ugandans experienced during the civil war (1981-1986). According to Muwonge Kyazze, the author of Misfortune, Uganda suffered a stillbirth. The jubilant child hoisted in the independence monument did not live! The mother was, in fact, disemboweled and, thus, lost that child. Gruesome scenes of swords slitting throats of demonic mythical figures crowd the lower part of the painting. The horror that went on during what I call a 'dark period' of Uganda's political history is palpable with such strong incredulity.

c) Drama – Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko

Some of the incisive productions that kept post-independence political leaders on their toes came from music and drama. More than the visual arts, music and drama had the capacity to cause civil disobedience, given that they could reach a wider audience and, in addition, they carried an element of entertainment. One such example was a drama (and music), Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko, written by Byron Kawadwa in 1967. The play was a covert political satire on the political situation in Buganda after the ousting of King Freddie Muteesa by the

Obote military forces. It is a story of an attempt to oust the rightful heir to the throne by an ambitious politician. Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko was timeless and seemed to apply to an intolerant Amin, who murdered Byron upon his return from the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture – FESTAC 1977 – in Nigeria, where the play had been staged.

The murder of Byron Kawadwa is indicative of the capacity of art to inflame emotions against social injustices and, in some cases, lead to, as Idi Amin feared, civil disobedience. But also, the murder explained the volatile nature of politics at the time. Tickets for Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko sold out each time it was staged in the National Theatre.

d) Music

Music is one of the oldest and most universal means of artistic expression. During the 1970s and 80s music from Congo dominated the Ugandan market, even though the language in which it was expressed – Lingala – was unintelligible to many Ugandans. As a tool of entertainment and communication, music is an intangible heritage and a medium for cultural preservation. Traditional music is still alive and well in Uganda; it has over the years, however, through hybridisation, evolved, incorporating modern instruments and sounds. Hybridisation has contributed to the generation of what I can call a badge of identity for Ugandan music in modern times. Drums in concert with guitars have often been played even in places of worship such as Catholic churches.

Music has played a major role in political struggles against colonial occupation across Africa. Miriam Makeba is one of the legendary musicians who, through her songs, contributed to the dismantling of the apartheid political system in South Africa.

Yet music has been exploited by post-colonial politicians as a propaganda apparatus. When Amin took over power in a military coup in 1971, songs extolling his ‘farsighted’ leadership were composed and played. A few years later, songs demonising his brutal regime were composed and played following his deposition in 1979. In the 2016 Uganda elections, musicians animated political campaigns. Tubonga Naawe was a political song that reassured the incumbent that he was winning the vote, because he was a progressive and steady leader. It is reasonable to argue that in the 2016 general elections, music played a role in denying the opposition success.

In its breadth and diversity, music has, in the same breath, carried voices of political dissent. In the recent Kyarenga concert at Busabala Lovers Beach, Bobi Wine attacked government – albeit covertly –, accusing it of being authoritarian. Bobi Wine has frequently used metaphors to express his revulsion at corrupt officials in government. His music has had far-reaching repercussions in terms of raising public awareness about its rights and responsibilities. Judging from the large crowds, the profusion of red – a colour that has come to symbolise a growing opposition – and the level of excitement, I can only speculate that the attendees at the Kyarenga concert, who were mostly young people like Bobi Wine himself, were there for reasons beyond entertainment. They were, among other reasons, expressing their political dissent and Bobi Wine happened to be a convenient and appropriate point of reference.

4.3 Definitive Art That Pays Tribute to Sacrifice

It has always been a daunting task to serve with honesty in Uganda. There are, however, people who have been undaunted fighters. They have directly questioned the state and paid the ultimate price for it. Their brave actions are permanently engrained in our consciousness and have become a flagship for liberation struggle and peace. They have been immortalised through art.

a) Sculpture – The Ben Kiwanuka Bust

On 21 September 2018, the Uganda High Court organised and conducted the first memorial Benedicto Kiwanuka lecture. Kiwanuka was a distinguished politician who served as the chief minister when the Democratic Party won the majority seats in Uganda's post-independence Parliament of 1961. Kiwanuka was imprisoned by President Obote and, following Obote's overthrow by Amin in a military coup in 1971, Kiwanuka was appointed Chief Justice. Within one year, Kiwanuka was killed by Amin because he spoke the truth which did not sit well with the President.

One of the highlights of the occasion was the unveiling of the Kiwanuka bronze bust. This bust is nothing more than a visual resemblance, which makes it an ordinary object of artistic representation. There are a number of issues to think about here. First, when the glamour of the lecture, characterised by opulence, was over, it was the bust that was left as a permanent reminder of the occasion. Second, the bust is an immortalisation of a man who was incorruptible and personified honesty. The bust was unveiled by the Vice President, Edward Ssekandi who represented President Museveni. Although President Museveni has made a major contribution to rescuing Uganda from the political and economic doldrums of the early 1980s, today voices of dissent accusing him of tampering with

the constitution are growing. The president of the Uganda Law Society is a young man, probably in his 30s. He spoke on the occasion. He reminded the government that – and I paraphrase – “the rhetoric of Twalwaana (we fought) is an important part of Uganda's dark and foreboding history and should not be repeated. Today we are confronted with challenges that require us to recover the values that Kiwanuka stood for and cherished”. The Law Society president appeared not to see these values in the current regime.

Conceived and executed within the frame of the Ben Kiwanuka memorial lecture, the Kiwanuka bust at the Uganda High Court has implications that reach beyond the precincts of the Ministry of Justice. It is monumental and represents the courage to speak the truth at all times, even when the truth can potentially be lead to one's end. With such potency of revelations, the Kiwanuka bust represented an initial threshold in discussing issues of good governance within the judicial fraternity.

4.4 The Art of Revelation and Advocacy

Uganda's turbulent political past has produced a generation of people who are disengaged and averse to law and order. For the individual, apathy and concern for the common good are persistent problems. Artists with courage and a sense of adventure have created outstanding creative works that remind the public to take responsibility for their misdeeds.

a) Sculpture Installation – Nakivubo Channel

More often than not, we blame the government for failing to deliver on its campaign promises. We rarely come clean and take the blame when we find ourselves in conflict with the law. Nakivubo Channel was an installation which indicted Kampala

residents for their poor sanitation practices. Kampalans have not used the dustbins provided by KCCA, choosing instead to litter irresponsibly. It is for this very reason that the city channels are choking and the city is engulfed in floods even after a mere drizzle. Nakivubo Channel was constituted by two containers, one on top of the other, on which plastic materials of different colours, sizes and shapes were strung and, running a couple of metres behind the containers, they were such a visual spectacle. Nakivubo Channel was on display for two months at the Kampala Railways Park during the 2014 Kampala Cultural Gala.

b) Drama - Ndiwulira

At the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Uganda in the early 1990s, drama played a crucial role in sensitising people to the mode of its spread and how we can protect ourselves from getting infected. At that time, the Bakayimbira Dramactors composed a revealing and inclusive play with a message that, it can be argued, contributed to the concerted efforts of the government and development partners in lowering the HIV/AIDS infection rates from 30 per cent to under 7 per cent at the end of the 1990s. The play reverberated with the ABC messages of A – abstaining from sex before marriage, B – being faithful to one sexual partner and, if that was not feasible, then C – using a condom.

c) Music

Running parallel to Ndiwulira were musical compositions with related messages. Philly Bongoley Lutaaya emerged as the first Ugandan to publicly declare himself an HIV/AIDS victim. A combination of his songs about HIV/AIDS and his testimony to his HIV/AIDS status deeply touched Ugandans, generating an outpouring of emotions and empathy. Through his music, Lutaaya was

able to construct a true image of a deadly virus, that must be avoided. His message and music are eternal.

Besides drama and music, other forms of creative expression such as poetry, dance, visual art etc. were engaged in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In part, because of the collective contribution of these forms, many lives have been saved.

d) Comedy

Since the start of the millennium, Uganda has witnessed an unprecedented growth of the creative industry. While the traditional media, such as radio and television broadcasting, theatres, art galleries etc. have expanded in range and scope, new channels of communication, such as the internet and social media, have emerged, becoming popular avenues for social interaction. Such media has played a role in boosting the previously little regarded modes of communication and entertainment, such as comedy. Comedy has been able to flourish because of the conducive political environment which is tolerant of dissent and criticism. *Kaliisoliiso w'emizanyo* on Central Broadcasting Corporation (CBS) has, for example, endured for over 10 years. This sports programme is interspersed with satirical remarks criticising politicians, civic and religious leaders for their lack of transparency.

Like any other forms of creative media, comedy can sometimes seem to be confrontational. In 2009 CBS was closed for one year following remarks that emanated from the *Kaliisoliiso w'emizanyo* programme which were judged by the government to be inflammatory.

Conclusion

On the one hand, art has been described as a language that is accessible even to those that cannot read or write. On the other hand, it can be complex to deconstruct, especially when it is carrying hidden meaning or is used as a metaphor. Yet, when well framed and disseminated, art has the capacity to ignite constructive debates that can open up new spaces and possibilities for delivering democratic principles and social justice. Even when it is focusing on seemingly non-political spaces such as public health and general wellbeing, such spaces have a tangential implication for the political environment.

It is noteworthy that, in the name of demanding accountability from those in positions of authority, artists have oftentimes crossed the 'political red line' and have suffered incarceration. Such is the power of art and popular culture in contributing to political debates for social transformation. Art and popular culture is relevant in all sectors of life – private and public. As it entertains, it clarifies, empowers and reminds us of our civic duties and stake in national development. Regardless of the media and manner in which it is delivered, we ignore art and popular culture in our communication, education and information programmes at our own peril.

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