

## CHAPTER 11

# Beads Aesthetics in Uganda: The Dialogue between the Past and the Present to Imagine the Future

### **Introduction**

Beads are one of the most unique, complex and dynamic entities that circulate through space and time. Typically, a bead is a small ball of bone, shell, stone, metal, wood, glass, plastic or clay with a hole through it for threading on a string or wire. Usually beads present an elliptical shape that is frequently standardised, with ability to be presented in repeated assemblages, and arranged in almost endless configurations to project the diverse meanings beads could take in different contexts. Beads have been enlisted as symbolic repositories in the preservation of cultures. They are known to have been in existence as early as the Palaeolithic period, and have been an essential component of human life ever since. A wide range of scholarly accounts (Beck 1928; Dubins & Sherr 1987; Abidemi 2015; Mayer 2017) have confirmed their existence through archaeological studies. In Africa, beads acted on the bodies and objects of kings, chiefs and their families to convey messages of power, status, access, identity and prestige. In this frequency of occurrence, beads combined and recombined to reflect diverse and unique aspects of culture and practice.

Notwithstanding the beads' significant role in culture, their meanings have often been misinterpreted as fixed and isolated (Labelle 2005). They have been framed as merely decorative objects, quieter and lower arts belonging in the private domain for personal use and thus placed on the margins of inquiry. This marginalisation, according to Mudimbe (1994), is partly a result of Western cultural imperialism that branded African culture as barbaric, non-progressive, primitive, etc. Such was the context within which

beads came to be perceived as devoid of subjectivity and deeper meaning, to a point that only their ornamental and ritualistic purposes were projected, thus leading to their artistic devaluation.

In this chapter, I critically re-examine the social, political and cultural aesthetic importance of beads. I interrogate their complex and dynamic nature as sites for extending meaning and creating knowledge. The idea of this research was conceived against the background of previous studies that relegated beads and beadwork to the margins of knowledge as static and merely decorative entities of lower status. I analyse two avenues through which contemporary use and production of beads and beadwork emerge as dynamic and transforming to challenge the earlier static interpretations. First, I examine the specific histories during which beads were shaped and how their use went beyond body adornment to define social, political, cultural spaces and identities to shape artistic knowledge in Uganda. Secondly, I analyse the debates in which the use of beads has become interlinked within the context of lives of Ugandan women who are using paper beads to shape their view of the world. In this process I raise the following question: What historical imperatives have informed the histories during which the production and use of beads in Uganda have transgressed normative traditional meanings while implicating beads into wider contemporary debates on art, gender and politics? To address this question, I engaged in a qualitative study using archival materials, in-depth interviews and field observation to assess how beads draw from their specific histories to shape social, political, economic and cultural fields. Using a multidisciplinary approach, I borrow lenses from the critical underpinnings of Kopykoff (1998) who argues that the biographies of objects are deeply connected to the social context. In the specific histories of objects, their meanings were never still but dynamically shifted through space and time, in and out of relationships to project the diverse meanings the objects could take on in different contexts. I trace this discussion

through selected contemporary art that implicates beads in debates on art, art making and gender. In this discussion, I engage Alfred Gell's (1998) social art theory that points out the rich location that art occupies in foregrounding the intersection between social constructions and reality to extend meaning that reflects beads as agency. Drawing upon Appadurai's (1986) theorisation about the agency of objects and their capacity to extend their makers' or users' agency, I trace the agency of beads within the context of the lives of Ugandan women who are using paper beads to shape their view of the world. I do a close reading and textual analyse of material in print media, and pop culture to draw linkages that have shaped and reshaped beads as art and research item. To start this analysis, I go back to scholarship that traces how beads were distanced from critical inquiry on Uganda.

### **Isolation of Beads and Beadwork from Scholarship in Uganda**

In Uganda, the influence of colonialism and missionary work since 1894 where beads and beadwork were relegated to the fringes of knowledge to allow the influences to advance was part of a larger scheme in which African bead art was misinterpreted from a Western perspective. This perspective classified beads in the category of crafts vs the fine arts and drew hierarchical distinctions between them. The fine arts including painting, sculpture and architecture were perceived as 'high art' while crafts including beadwork, basketry, and textiles were placed in the 'low arts' category, assigning the latter a lower aesthetic value. The crafts into which beads and beadwork were categorised were perceived as women's pastime work, firmly fixed in the private sphere (Logan 2001). Beads were perceived as serving only a personal and decorative purpose, thus their relegation to inferior status.

In Uganda, by 1947, Margaret Trowell<sup>1</sup> had provided a complex political history that categorised the position of beads and beadwork within the field of knowledge. She classified beads and beadwork as tribal crafts and categorically asserted the absence of creativity, let alone art in them. She assigned beads and beadwork to a lower hierarchical level as objects appropriate for personal consumption and nothing more. These institutional forces projected a passive view of beads and beadwork forms as non-representational entities – as ‘pattern-work chiefly of geometric form, found worked out in almost every type of material’ (Trowell 1947, 2). In Trowell’s analysis, she argues that the craftsmen behind such crafts, including beads and beadwork, did not work in professional guilds, and as such the beads artistic prowess was undermined. Trowell later acknowledged that the bead craftsmen were skilled, respected among their communities and enjoyed privileges because they produced a kind of decorative art which was highly revered by the local communities. However, she emphasised that beads were for personal use on domestic utensils and personal adornment. This included the ‘masses of beads and metal worn on the neck, arms, and legs, show[ing] a tremendous appreciation of decorative values’ (Trowell 1947, 2). On the contrary, the very ornamental values of beads Trowell talks of had earlier appeared in the illustrations she made for A. R. Paterson’s book entitled *The Book of Civilisation: Part II the Story of the Forest and the Land and the Men and the Cattle* (1934). In this work she seemed to suggest that, in addition to sex, dress and dance, beads can be a means to define the African identity and civilisation. She made this point in the way she portrayed some of the subjects wearing beads on their bodies in her illustrations. Although she visualised beads in her work, and also encouraged her students to rely on

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Katherine Trowell (1904–1986) was a missionary, artist and art instructor who introduced collegiate formal art education in Uganda during the late 1930s. She is credited with having been the most dominant force behind the birth of modern art in Uganda when she started art education at Makerere Art School (renamed in 1995 the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Art of Makerere University). This institution has trained most of the artists in Uganda.

themes of the indigenous everyday life, in her teaching at the Makerere Art School, she carefully segregated the use of beads as a viable material to shape modern art in Uganda (Trowell, 1952), (Doring 2002), (Sengendo, 2013). It would be arguable that she was a missionary and a European instructor of a modernist art project that was framed by the universalising forms of Western perspectives. This is the context within which beads and beadwork began to be distanced from art and scholarship in Uganda.

Other attempts to examine African material culture, including beads and beadwork forms, later appeared in 1957, in Roger Fry's *Vision and Dream*. He presented an appreciation of African artefacts by stating that 'they have indeed plastic form conceived in 3D without even attaining anything like representational accuracy; they have complete freedom' (Fry 1957, 106). Here Fry revered the artefacts' vitality and expression through form and material, but went ahead to counter this view by projecting that the very same artefacts possess no ability to produce culture, which he ascribes to a lack of conscious critical awareness. Yet, he further projects these forms not as mere echoes but as entities that possess inner lives of their own. This was a direct effect of the influences of growing modern concerns that defined African arts as primitive art in which their interpretations securely positioning these objects as 'signs of racial and evolutionary difference' (Robbroeck 2003, 172). From this perspective, Fry's thinking forces us to ask what lies beneath the static definitions in which beads and beadwork were perceived.

Further interrogation of Fry's writings revealed that his thinking was focused mainly on the 'sculptural traditions of West Africa and Central Africa which most closely corresponded to Western notions of art as free-standing and non-functional objects' (Robbroeck 2003, 172). Such notions insinuated that all other African arts, including beads and beadwork, basketry and textiles, belonged to the merely decorative category in the crafts. The crafts were perceived as women's private work that served only a

decorative purpose for personal use. These views raised almost no protest, in part because they aligned with the Western notions that drew hierarchical distinctions between art and craft.

The hierarchical classification of art and crafts, which originated in the Renaissance period, made its first claims for sculpture and painting as liberal arts rather than mechanical arts (Auther 2008) where crafts, including beads and beadwork, were classified. Feminist writer Robinson (2015) argues that the distinction between art and crafts were tagged to their different social and economic relations. This position was pursued in terms of the specific purpose and aesthetic pleasure of each category, where art was perceived as a free form of creation devoid of utility and function; and crafts, including beads and beadwork, were associated with material, emphasising their sheer technical and aesthetic qualities rather than their belonging to the cognitive realm. Thus, beads and beadwork forms became entities that could not be appreciated on their own as they were hampered by the utility, so called low aesthetic and technical aspects that they possessed. These attempts to contain beads and beadwork also revealed the extent to which an emerging African cultural modernity was threatened through social hierarchies.

However, by the 1960s, Asante Molefi had succeeded in positioning his philosophical ground-breaking works on Afrocentricity, a field of knowledge that constituted 'a framework of reference where African forms and material culture were viewed and understood through the lens of the African people' (Asante 1998, 171). In this project, the centrality of African-centred ideas and theoretical grounding, interests, values and perspectives had gained some recognition within scholarship (Mazama 2001).

As part of this project, *Ganda Art* by Lugira Muzzanganda (1970) presented a remarkable shift in the conceptualisation of indigenous Ugandan-Ganda artefacts (beads and beadwork) since the publications of Trowell. In his book he recognised the

centrality of beads and their essential links to objects and bodies that used them. Further studies (Burt 1980; Otiso 2006; Robertson 2014; Bhatt 2016) also explored the relationship between traditional and modern crafts, alongside the feminist revolution (Morgan 1995) of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup> These projects attempted to collectively elevate crafts, including beadwork, within the female domain into the field of inquiry as a new medium of visual culture and expression. According to Auther (2008), such projects mapped crafts onto the larger social hierarchy of gender. However their focus also tended to project more of the beads and beadwork's formal aesthetic and technological qualities, which enabled the identification of formal styles, colours designs and techniques. While insisting on investigating the structures that prevented women and their crafts, including beadwork, from informing inquiry, the project did not interrogate how beads in their dynamic nature have reshaped social, political and cultural spaces to extend meaning.

In the next section, I examine how the circulation of beads in their specific histories, in which their use went beyond mere decoration, came to define the identities of makers, users and the socio-political and cultural spaces in Uganda and beyond.

### **Bead Aesthetics: Interaction in Everyday Life**

For many decades, the socio-cultural presence of beads was diffused into many aspects of culture. They were made from any conceivable material sourced from the immediate environment, such that their materials, processes and the multiple contexts of use all reflected indigenous cultural sophistication in society. Archaeological accounts trace the

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Scanlan, Pathmakers: Women in craft, art, and design mid-century and today. *The Journal of Modern Craft*, 2 (2015): 109-144. Accessed on 20 April 2019. Retrieved from doi: 10.1080/17496772.2015.1054696;109-144.

origins of beads to the era of the first known objects found where humans lived (Beck 1928; Chen 1968). These bead collections featured as among the first concrete evidence of body ornamentation seen in cave dwellers' wall drawings that are over 20,000 years old (Untracht 1982). With evidence of use of simple manual skills such as chipping, grooving, perforation, grinding, polishing and basic burnishing these accounts show how beads have since been powerful forms of thinking.

It is perhaps right to say that the story of beads in articulating multiple subjectivities is more pronounced in African traditions than in any other part of the world (Kasozi 2019; Sciama & Eicher 1998; Ben-Amos 1989). For the ordinary viewer, the beads and beadwork worn in several traditions seemed nothing more than just a colourful assemblage of adornment. Yet from the African perspective, beads and beadwork symbolised much more. They were items used in varied ways, marking identities to emphasise different aspects of the bodies and objects they adorned. Both in the way the beads were worn, the patterns used, beadwork items were important visual markers of the social roles and positions of its wearers. The progressive nature of beadwork can be seen in its most extreme form when observing the use of symbols within African traditions that organised its people according to age levels. Among this group the Samburu, Maasai, Nguni-speaking peoples and the Karimojong communities (Fisher 1984), where each male passed through childhood, warrior-hood and old age, and each female passed through childhood, womanhood and marriage, beads played a central role in articulating these different life stages. In these communities, the human body on which the beads were displayed was majorly assigned the role of a portable canvas to convey other social differences such as status and age. Each beaded item, in the form of armllets, bangles, headdresses, crowns or necklaces, had specific or multiple symbolisms assigned to them in different contexts. These symbols generally reflected the dynamics in the different important spheres of life in the communities.



In Uganda, during pre-colonial times, a period prior 1894, beads in the form of shells, stones, discs and seeds also performed the roles of articulating identity, status and one's rank in society. People's needs for spiritual protection in gaining resources that they found difficult to obtain and yet were considered necessary to have were mediated through the use of beads. For example, among the Banyoro in Uganda, the '*obukwanzi*' beads were believed to possess natural power, and were presented as sacrifices to gods to cause rain during dry seasons, manage conflict and enable successful hunting expeditions. In Buganda,<sup>3</sup>the largest sub-national traditional kingdom occupying central Uganda, it was believed that through wearing an animal's tusk, claw, tooth, shell or bone, a man would gain courage and a measure of control over the animal's spirit. Within such contexts, beads presented an inherent flexibility that allowed communities to visualise, conceptualise and create measures of strength, beauty, identity, power and status. These measures have permanently shaped our understanding of the world (Rogobete, Sell & Munton 2015).

In the context where the African continent was partitioned into Western colonies at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, new beads traded by the colonial masters also became popular in African markets. In reconciling colonial ideas with African traditions, an artistic phenomenon that would have challenged these ideas instead led to ambivalences. These beads they 'combined and recombined' (Kopykoff 1998) into African local customs of divinity, dress and other indigenous material culture which demonstrated a blend of designs and aesthetics that served both the African and Western audiences. Some examples of beaded costumes and traditional royal regalia are showcased in the Uganda Museum. In such contexts, beads and beadwork became

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<sup>3</sup> Semakuka Kiwanuka. *A History of Buganda: From the Foundation of the Kingdom to 1900*. London: Longman, 1972, xiv+322.

apparent in Ugandan history as means that communicated the African pre-colonial and colonial influence in which the beads became connected to broader socio-economic groups. This propelled the beads further into the political realm as creative entities.

### **Beads and Beaded Forms: Transgressing Borders to Shape Visual Art**

On 14 June 2018, the Makerere Art Gallery hosted its first alumni art exhibition that featured former graduates of the Art School. In this exhibition, paintings, sculptures and textiles, fashions among other arts were showcased. This exhibition was unique as it projected the intersection of discourses between the fine arts and crafts. Of specific interest was the work of Ivan Yakuze, a graduate of the year 2000 and a contemporary male Ugandan artist. His work was unique in the sense that it explored the use of cowrie shell beads among other non-conventional art materials, such as fibres and bark cloth, to make statements in art and art-making and gender. Yakuze's statement embodied the tensions of conflicting definitions of fine art vs crafts and beads as research. His work also reveals the strategic use of cowrie shell beads to speak to a larger body of history in Uganda.

The cowrie shells (Figure 1), *Cypraeidae rare (ensimbi* in Luganda<sup>4</sup>), are some of the earliest bead forms in Uganda.

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<sup>4</sup> Luganda or the Ganda language is one of the major languages in Uganda and is spoken by more than five million Baganda and other people, principally in central Uganda.



*Figure 1: Cowrie shells displayed at the Uganda Museum*

Dating as far back as the 17th century, cowrie shells have had great value as trade goods, having been introduced by the Arabs through trade along the East African coastline. The shell beads were held in high regard for their pearly white colour, weight, shape and size that made them easily recognisable, countable, handled, carried around and threaded together into diverse objects that took on different meanings. In African material culture the beads functioned as valuable symbolic allusions to wealth, status, identity, power and fertility, and as body adornment (Heller 2015). Since the cowrie beads had also travelled long distances across continents, they were embodied with different cultural experiences that allowed them to be interpreted differently across African cultures.

In Uganda, the beads' metaphorical function of protection and as symbols of courage allowed the beads to transcend into the realm of the supernatural. As objects used in rituals, to calm mental illness during war, as traditional medicine and fortune-telling mechanisms, these diverse functions allowed the cowrie shells to transcend into the spiritual as powerful links with the afterlife (Bourgeois & Rodolitz, 2012; 130; Ovuga, Boardman & Oluke, 1999; Thiel, 1973). During these circumstances, where the shells took on diverse meaning, the beads assumed power to become a dynamic force that still

live even as a common archaeological artefact in the material culture of Uganda (Figures 2 and 3).



*Figure 2: Ganda King's beaded attire showcased at the Uganda Museum*



*Figure 3: Ganda war fetish showcased at the Uganda Museum*

Yakuze is aware of this rich Ugandan history of cowrie shells. Thus, he draws upon it to shape his ideas in 'Couples' (2018) (Figure 4) where he engages in the gendered social politics in which masculinity and femininity are defined and ascribed in Uganda.



*Figure 4: Yakuze Ivan, 'Couples' (2018), mixed media*



*Figure 5: Detail in 'Couples'*

'Couples' (Figure 4) presents four silhouette coupled images showing a male and a female figure in a standing pose on a bark cloth canvas. These couple images represent a heterogeneous relationship between man and woman. The first set of couples that appears on the left upper section is made using two shades of patched bark cloth pieces. The human figures in this set are presented up to their torsos while the other couples are presented in full profile. In the first set, the man appears on the left. His gender identity is interpreted from the portrayal of his big head which appears taller than that of the woman. His hand stretches out to touch the woman's shoulder. This touching gesture is also portrayed in the couple standing on the right-hand side of the composition. In the set of couples on the left bottom side of the canvas, raffia twists were used to outline the forms, to show the sex distinctions with the man's big phallus and the woman's vulva clearly shown. Yakuze places four circular metallic rings under the couple on the left upper section of the composition to represent a union and a sense of togetherness. Yakuze's work is productive. He clearly steps into a debate on gender and social norms. Here he steps into the patriarchal order when he relates the man's big head and its protrusion to the common views held in many African traditions that assign the man as the head of a family, breadwinner and provider in society. In portraying the woman as shorter than the man, the artist tapped into a gendered economy in which women must submit to men. Yakuze also deploys twisted raffia material to introduce texture and pattern on bark cloth. In his use of these common materials, he stretches their significance, particularly the association of bark cloth with death in Buganda. In Nakazibwe (2005), bark cloth comes from the bark of the mutuba tree (*Ficus natalensis*). In Uganda, bark cloth has historical and traditional values as a link with the spiritual world, death and the afterlife. Yet in Yakuze's art, bark cloth becomes a means of visual statement.

To contextualize Yakuze's 'Couples,' Alfred Gell's (1998) social art theorisation contextualises the rich location that art occupies in foregrounding the intersections between social constructions and reality. Within this theory the artist conjures up the contradictions that emphasize the divide between the high arts and the low arts within the social hierarchies. In this sense, the work portrays the static positions that define common materials as lower arts on one hand, and the artistic exploration of these materials on the other hand. This scenario, projects how dominant positions that draw hierarchical classifications between fine arts and crafts can be negotiated and challenged. This places 'Couples' in the realm of art that visualises the tensions created by conflicting definitions between the canonical high arts and the low arts to forge a reciprocal relationship between the two fields.

Another debate raised in 'Couples' is visualised in the mid-section of the composition shown in the detailed photograph in Figure 5. In this figure, Yakuze interprets cowrie shells as art for research. Five shells strung together are vertically placed in the centre of the composition next to the woven fibre stands used to introduce texture. Another shell strung on a raffia chord is enclosed within a rectangular bark cloth and is used to visualise the human process of fertilisation. This process happens during a sexual union between a man and a woman but Yakuse chose to visualise it on canvas. The shell represents a male sperm while the rectangular bark cloth shape represents a female sac where conception takes place to mark the beginning of human life. This work explores the wider relevance of symbolism. As seen in the composition the cowrie shell is altered from its normatively known position as a female symbol to symbolise a male sperm. In Buganda, where Yakuze comes from, the cowrie shell was popularly seen as a fertility symbol associated with the female form (Heller 2015). The idea of the cowrie shell as a female symbol was coined from the perception that the rounded side of the shell is reminiscent of a woman's belly, while its underside fold is seen to

resemble the female vulva. Such that in traditional Buganda tradition, in exchange for just two cowrie beads a man could acquire a bride.

In a discussion I had with Yakuze, he explained that his decision to appropriate the cowrie shell's traditional meaning to symbolise a male sperm arose from his belief that a man is an assurance of life's continuity; he makes decisions and determines the lineage of a family. In African traditions, it was important for 'a man to have an heir especially a male to carry on the family name' (Khapoya 2015, 28). In the same interview, Yakuze justified his vision as an artist thus:

My kind of art allows me to say anything. I explore the concepts of reuse and recycling using common materials I find. They allow me to build 3D forms and to also put my message across. Here I can engage in the Ugandan day-to-day experience. (Personal interview, 2018)

Yakuze's view resonates with Gell's view that art is defined by the distinctive function it performs in advancing social relationships. Gell argues that as artists work, they distribute elements of their selfhood within their art and, at the same time, they can displace culturally constructed positions to forge alternative ways of perceiving these positions. Therefore, Yakuze's use of cowrie shells in his art ascribes to thinking that reflects the fluidity of dominant positions; it also reflects the dynamic nature of beads. According to Yakuze this understanding was shaped by his awareness of the many historical functions that cowrie shell beads performed in Uganda.

Graeber (1996) informs that by 1874, the value of the cowrie shell beads had extended to being used as currency. However, by 1901, the time Uganda fell under British colonial rule, cowries were demonetised as they could not sustain the Ugandan capitalist economy (Kakande 2017). This further relegated them to objects that remained cultural

symbolisms. However, by 1958, Cecil Todd, who was then head of the Makerere Art School, made some considerations for beads as object of research (Kyeyune 2003). By 1961, Todd produced his 'Exchange and Barter' (1961), a modernist two-dimensional plane artwork previously located at Tropical Africa Bank, in Kampala. In this work he used ceramic mosaics and terrazzo to visualise the different currencies which Ugandans had used since their initial contact with the Arabs. He included the 'cowrie shell, rupees, shilling, pound sterling and US dollar symbols in the relief to recall the discussion on the evolution of Uganda's monetary policy' (Kakande 2008, 145). Although by 1962, Todd's project was criticised because Uganda had just received independence, the ideological backdrop of cowrie shell's cultural renewal and discovery remained.

In 1995, during the headship of Pilkington Sengendo at the Makerere Art School, he nurtured an African modernism in which beads in particular officially became as art discipline, research for knowledge on issues of gender, identity and ethnic nationalism. This trend of events shaped Sengendo's art practice and other including Ahimbisibwe Ronex's 'Gwaliwo Negufa' (2018) and Mutebi Fred's 'Last Meeting' (1999). Other cowrie shell collections have also survived in the archives of the Uganda Museum, Bank of Uganda, in public exhibitions, art and craft fairs to validate the claim that cowrie shell beads, among other material culture are valuable in the production of meaning and the shaping art practice and history.

In Uganda, cowrie shell aesthetics also continues to live and perform in royal tribute and in commemorations of important cultural ceremonies. In the past, cowrie shell beads were also linked to royal power and status, as traditions that survived colonisation and continue to live in the present day. In Buganda, beads continue to feature especially in royal possessions of the king. The beads' use as embellishments on drinking vessels, furniture, robes and music instruments-everyday objects, elevated



these objects from their ordinary status to another level of royal treasured possessions (Kivubiro 1998, 215). In this category of the kings' treasured possessions is the 'Mujaguzo' a drum that is sounded by the king at important events such as the birth, enthronement or death of a king in Buganda (Busulwa 1999). Figure 6 shows the king of Buganda sounding the colourfully beaded *Mujaguzo* drum at his coronation on 31 July 1993. This event, among other important cultural events such as the Kabaka's royal wedding to Sylvia Nagginda in 1999, the recent Jubilewo celebrations that commemorated 25 years since Kabaka Ronald Muwenda Mutebi ascended to the throne in Buganda conjure up an image that shows the invincible power and authority of the Kabaka in Buganda. As these examples suggest, beads are placed at the core of research about Buganda royal symbols of status and power and other cultures in Uganda.



*Figure 6: Kabaka Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II of Buganda on his coronation day wearing his royal robe while waving at his subjects. Inset is the Mujaguzo drum beautifully decorated with beads to distinguish it from other drums*

The meaning of beads also continues to live through their importance as repositories of historical knowledge about women's reproduction and celebration of their womanhood, femininity and sexuality in Uganda. For example, in many Ugandan patriarchal traditions where cultural beliefs and colonial norms persuaded women to

remain silent on matters of sexual reproduction, beads in their diversity 'took the place of speaking' (Wells 2006, 9). The women of Buganda and Ankole, like other women in South and West African as well as Asian traditions had earlier on understood the ability of beads to speak through oral tradition. These women recognised that a powerful medium of attractive beads that had been associated with the female domain was within their reach. The beads' diversity and ability to be configured in almost endless ways made it possible to be tailored to women's personal needs. Such that these women wore strings of waist beads made from seeds, glass beads around their waists to communicate their intimate desires with their male partners.

Although the waist beads have a long history steeped in traditional values, the beads' hybrid nature and mobile configuration to move in and out of relationships to mean different things in different times (Kopykoff, 1998) has allowed them to transcend beyond personal visual dialects to permeate new territories. On the Ugandan contemporary art scene, Teddy Nabisenke's jewellery art projects lie at the core of the waist beads as shown in Figure 7. Nabisenke is a female contemporary Ugandan visual artist and also a graduate of the Makerere Art School. Her jewellery projects draw on the waist beads tradition to engage in discussions about family planning, HIV/Aids and human trafficking. She particularly uses glass beads as materials she is aware that they can attract, signify, identify, protect, symbolise and empower; all of which are aspects that shape her creative imagination. Her interpretation of the beads as units of design in their own right, allows her to modify her work using traditional methods to create modern versions. She affirms that her interest is to create contemporary jewellery art pieces that are tied to Ugandan traditions and identities. (Personal interview 2016)



Figure 7: Nabisenke Teddy: *Beaded necklace (2018) glass beads and thread and button*

Nabisenke situates her work as an expression of agential change that draws from the past to shape her current practice. She ensures that her work speaks for the love of African culture while mourning the despicable pollution of the true spirit of African art that is scarred by Western views. This is seen in her other projects which integrate other African found materials – *kitenge* fabric and fibres – to add a modern twist to the age-old art of beadwork. In this context Nabisenke’s project recreates beads out of their static category into the territory of contemporary high-end design and fashion.

Gateja Sanaa<sup>5</sup> shares a similar theme of waist beads in his ‘Untitled’ (2015) shown in Figure 8. It should be noted that Gateja started an innovative paper beads project in Uganda in 1989. Currently employing over 600,000 women, this project has changed the way in which beads and beadwork are understood. Gateja deploys recycle and reuse processes to make jewellery wall art, wearable and tapestry art that he sells both on the local and the international market. In ‘Untitled’ (2015), the use paper beads as forms, colour, texture, contour to depict a youthful female figure donning waist beads is explored. Her subjectivity is captured through the hairstyle and subtle feminine curves.

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<sup>5</sup> Sanaa Gateja is a contemporary Ugandan artist, the founder of Kwetu Africa Art and Development Centre in Lubowa, Kampala, Uganda and is engaged in research and innovation and the creation of art using easily available materials – paper beads, bark cloth etc.

In a discussion I had with Gateja, he explained that he drew 'Untitled' from the meanings of waist beads used in African traditions. He noted that they are known as *obuttiiti* in Luganda<sup>6</sup> and *endigita* in Kinyarwanda<sup>7</sup>; with *endigita* meaning 'invoking an action' and *ndigita* referring to the way in which the beads sound when one touches them.



Figure 8: Sanaa Gateja (2015), 'Untitled', mixed media.

Where the waist beads were previously perceived in the private realm and seen by a woman's husband only, today the trend of waist beads has moved beyond the private space to become popular among women since these beads can embrace any body shape. This aspect is empowering in itself, so much so that today waist beads are flaunted in public, sold openly in bead shops, at house parties and at bridal events. Many young women wear these beads publicly over their clothes and bodies. This context

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<sup>6</sup> The Ganda language or Luganda, one of the major languages in Uganda, is spoken by more than five million Baganda and other people, principally as the native language in central Uganda, including the capital of Uganda, Kampala.

<sup>7</sup> Kinyarwanda is the official language of Rwanda and a dialect of the Rwanda-Rundi language spoken by at least 12 million people in Rwanda.

introduces another dimension where the beads challenge the aspect of belonging in the private realm. In addition, the idea that waist beads can embrace any body shape also creates shifts in dominant discourses that idealise female body images in media. In this context, the use of beads today remains important in complicating static definitions and other legitimising narratives about a woman's body. Against this backdrop, the debates of beads as art statements in Nabisenke's and Gateja's projects and the mobile configuration of the beads to shape private/public spaces were productive. Together these debates project beads as a site that looks beyond the normative positions of mere decoration to reveal the position that legitimising positions are never fixed. Rather, these positions exist within complex and intersecting fields of social power that intersect and collide to produce new meaning about beads.

### **Beads Aesthetics Shaping Futures**

The beads context discussed here analyses the debates in which the use of beads has gone beyond mere decoration to become interlinked within the context of the lives of Ugandan women who are using paper beads to shape their view of the world. This comes at a time when paper beads in particular are shaping and reshaping the economic lives of Ugandan women (Snyder 2000), yet these beads are perceived to make a minimal contribution to the country's economy. In this section I interrogate how paper beads are deployed as agency by women to overwrite static conventions that define private and public spaces while making connections to the wider debates on gender, politics and culture. I trace these debates through a female paper beader's narratives which are linked with meaning that assigns paper beads as means of power and influence to shape futures.

## Paper Beads in Uganda

Paper beads are not a phenomenon that started in Uganda. Accounts about their beginnings trace them to the Victorian era (1837–1901) as part of home craft activities that were done by women during their leisure time (Kasozi 2019, 41). In Uganda, paper bead-making was introduced by Sanaa Gateja in 1989 after he returned from England where he first experimented with paper as a material for art. While in Uganda, he popularised the beads as a prime material for art-making, jewellery, wearable art and wall tapestries and now engages in their production at his art studio, Kwetu Africa, in Lubowa, Kampala. He employs several women to make paper beads, which he buys back in bulk to produce his art. He has also trained several NGOs that engage in the production of paper beads on an industrial scale. These organisations, majority operating under fair trade arrangements, employ women to produce paper beads that are sold both locally and on the global market. This is the context in which paper beads have become a means through which Ugandan woman earn from (Snyder, 2000), especially those affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) guerrilla war, including Agnes Achan.

Achan was born in the Acholi sub-region in northern Uganda, the epicentre of the LRA rebellion. During the 1990s, aged around 10 years, Achan, together with her family, were forced to become refugees. Now an adult with five children, residing at Kireka Banda,<sup>8</sup> Achan found work in paper bead-making and became part of a sizeable group of women engaged in paper bead-making (Figures 9 and 10) in 'Acholi Quarters' in Kireka Banda.

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<sup>8</sup> Kireka Banda is a suburban town 11 km east of Kampala that formed in the 1950s and 1960s. The continuous flow of migrants from northern Uganda, mostly of Acholi descent, has given this area the name 'Acholi Quarters'. It is the home of many families, especially of women, widows, refugees and those affected by HIV/Aids who escaped the 1990s Lord's Resistance Army guerrilla war in northern Uganda. These women engage in paper bead-making in their homes to supplement their incomes.



*Figure 9: A woman in Kireka showing a necklace made of paper beads*



*Figure 10: Women and their paper beads products*

The women make ends meet by making paper bead necklaces, purses, earrings and bracelets, which they sell locally through cooperatives, in craft shops and on the streets of Kampala. **Here the women’s beadwork becomes accessible to a wider audience within the local and global field.** I found Achan selling paper beads along Ben Kiwanuka Street in Kampala.<sup>9</sup> I chose her purposefully as she was willing to engage in a meaningful dialogue about how paper beads have shaped and are reshaping her experiences. She narrates:

I have five children. I am able to secure their future through paper beads. The money I get from producing them has enabled me to build a house, pay school fees, buy food and meet my other needs. (Personal interview, 2017)

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<sup>9</sup> Ben Kiwanuka Street is located in Kampala city at the crossroads of several main roads into the city. It is located in the middle of several shops and malls near the main commuter taxi park and enjoys a massive influx of customers. It is a busy congested spot where many people pass or gather.

One persuasive insight from Achan's narrative is the understanding of how beads become a means through which she re-contextualises her status and position as she structures her ideal world. This understanding is influential and can shape discursive and political realities. It draws upon Appadurai's (1986) theorisation about the agency of objects and their capacity to extend their makers' or users' agency. In this understanding, the meaning of objects is borne when they are used to achieve a purpose, given to them by humans that allow the objects to affect change. Achan's contextualisation of paper beads as a means through which she earns income to provide for her family, places her in a position that challenges the man's deemed social role as provider for the family. Her contextualisation also shapes the beads' subjective meaning. Where beads have been relegated to the margins of inquiry, in this case, beads turn out to be the very means that echo a shift in the balance of economic power in Achan's household. Through engaging in beadwork, she is placed in a better economic situation, contrary to the 'traditional' expectation that asserts patriarchal control of women's access to resources. Further along, Achan informs that the husband returned to the village. In this context it is Achan, a woman/wife, who can now manage the city space. It should be noted that the city, with regard to work, has always been a male space (Elshtain 1981). Its planning, management and mobility present resources for men to explore masculine traits while it tends to condense women's abilities to effectively manage their needs. Yet, in the socio-political sense, the city also presents some elements of freedom and independence for women. In the city, women's expectations of more equality and some autonomy can be forged through enhancing their ability to set up and own their own houses, feed their families and provide shelter for the children (Tumusiime 2012). These opportunities allow women to escape some of the traditional commitments, such as exclusively performing domestic chores, domestic violence often associated with lack of economic empowerment – which relegate them to the margins in society.



In addition, Achan's narrative also casts doubt upon the thinking that women's specific projects do not easily change women's lives. In fact, her story reveals that the women involved in paper bead-making can also successfully pursue both family well-being and their beads businesses. These insights place paper beads as counterpoints to dominant stereotypes about women's work; these insights also empower women to demand new representation and greater autonomy. Achan recounts that her husband was pleased that she was making money from paper beads; he even allowed her to budget for the household. This motivated her to produce more beads. So she started saving some money, and later built a house to secure her household's future. This confirms that, in every sense, paper beads are making futures, and empowering a woman/mother may lead to improving the welfare of the entire family. The beads are raising questions about the place that women's stories have in making cultures and the articulation of socio-economic and political life. In all these, beads are reframed from the static group into an increasingly complex, dynamic category that is always in the process of transforming itself in order to shape knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter analysed how specific histories of beads and beadwork aesthetics went beyond mere decoration to define social, political and cultural spaces and identities in Uganda and beyond. It examined how the use of beads has become interlinked with the context of the lives of Ugandan women who are using paper beads to shape their view of the world. In this dialogue the beads' specific histories, use as art and as agency to shape futures, beads have consistently held their ground to project multiple subjectivities that undermine normative definitions. This defiant stance projects a powerful message where we are reminded that normative definitions and social norms

are neither singular, nor a fixed set of assumptions. Instead, norms are socially predetermined and often vary with time and circumstance. In this way, beads and beadwork become platforms that project different ways to perceive and interpret power relations. These views dare us to reconsider ideas about beads and beadwork and their place in society. We are reminded of the changing face of beads and beadwork not only as links to our traditional roots, but as active objects whose meaning is created out of contextualised social, political and economic interactions. Within such diverse interactions, beads and beadwork permeate predetermined boundaries to expose multiple dimensions that reflect at the same time mediate creatively between the past to shape the present and the future. This makes us realise that beads and beadwork 'possess a life of their own' (Kakande & Kasozi, 2016) and a dynamic presence that we can no longer afford to ignore. However, this presence may diminish unless the beads and beadwork stories continue to be passed down along with their practices and the connections that the beads are making to act upon the world to influence social change.

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