

# ‘Don’t Talk into my Talk’

## Oral narratives, cultural identity & popular performance in colonial Uganda

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### Introduction

Performance in colonial Uganda was dominated by dance and song, although individual technical mastery of dance, song, and instrumentation was a prerogative of the professional performers and court musicians who played at the royal courts, beer parties, and market places. There are limited written materials available on indigenous performances of the colonial period in Buganda. However, the existence of a corpus of archival Luganda musical recordings, going back to the 1930s, and oral narratives of aged people, gives us an insight into performance activities of this period. Old musical recordings help us to understand various forms of performance about which we know little, and contribute to aspects of performance that have shaped contemporary Ugandan theatre. Popular performances of the colonial era allowed the Baganda indigenous culture to indulge itself, therefore, they have become a memory bank where everything, economic, social and political is presented. Ian Steadman in his article, ‘Towards Popular Theatre in South Africa’, insists that any evaluation of archived indigenous performances ‘must be sensitive to the complexities of performance which are inscribed therein, complexities in which surplus meanings are produced and often subvert the meanings intended for the reader of the printed text’ (1990: 208).

It is from this approach to an embodied archive, with performance central to the analysis, that I am approaching the following examples of colonial theatre in Uganda. In orientation and performance, Serumaga’s *Majangwa* (and Kawadwa’s *Oluymba lwa Wankoko* (1975)), offered re-interpretations of indigenous theatre in order to challenge oppressive systems whose policies impinged on people’s freedom. At the same time, these plays drew upon specific forms of indigenous theatre known for their cryptic defiance of authority, through, for instance, folk and solo songs, dance, recitation, and story telling. In *Oluymba lwa Wankoko* for example, Wankoko is hailed by the people as the ‘liberator’, and he responds with a defiant song, which, apart from mocking the palace administration, draws the workers’ attention to the tyranny in the palace, and asks them to stand for their rights: ‘*Ani asobola atyo? Nze*

*banange kye ngamba: Ffena Twenkana!* / Who wants to go on living like this? This is my proposition: We are all equal!' (Kawadwa, 1975: 9) Once again, this draws applause from the workers (and the audience) and immediately Wankoko invites them to learn his song of resistance, *Ffena Twenkana*.

Kawadwa in his plays, *St Lwanga* (1969) *Makula ga Kulabako* (Kulabako's Beauty, 1970), and *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (Song of Wankoko, 1971), appears to suggest that musical narratives are central elements of traditional Baganda popular performance that continues to attract audiences and performers alike. Kawadwa's death by torture at the hands of Amin's government pundits, who seem to have understood the play's message and been threatened by it, reminds us of the potential subversive power of indigenous popular performance. I use this post-independence example as a preamble to explaining the power of entertainment and critical aspects of indigenous performance that were embedded in dance, choral/solo folk songs, recitation, story telling, and ritual performances during the colonial period.

In this article, I explore ritual, folk songs, the travelling musician, and the changing context of traditional performance of the colonial period in Uganda up to 1950. This selection may not be comprehensive but it is indicative of the theatre performances of the period, and highlights their popularity, as practices that are archived within embodied memory and culture. Because many of them are 'musical or dance oriented', we have to rely on a limited number of physical recordings of solo folk performers and written records of these dramatic activities. Therefore, my analysis will draw on a selection of recorded song performances, eyewitness accounts of early European travellers, and personal observation of embodied performances as an attempt to provide as comprehensive a picture of cultural creativity of colonial Uganda as is possible.

Many early records of Uganda's indigenous performance came from European missionaries and administrators' witness accounts. Roscoe (1911), for example, whose work gives a eurocentric interpretation of the customs and beliefs of the Baganda, blends his observations with statements on (im)moral issues:

Dances, among the young people, took place nightly amidst the plantain groves during the time that the moon was nearing the full, and especially on the night of full moon. The mixed dances ended frequently in immoral conduct.  
(Roscoe, 1911: 24)

Roscoe's contemporaries extensively developed this European (moral) gaze, for instance Lugard, the first British Imperial Company representative in Uganda,<sup>1</sup> describes the theatricality displayed in the greetings between King Mwangi and Prince Mbogo's entourage:

The meeting was a curious spectacle. They held each other's hands and gave vent to a long drawn O—Oh in a guttural; the Ah—Ah in higher note; then long low whistles, as they gazed into each other's faces; this went on for a very long time, and became ludicrous to a European conception, for at times while giving vent to this exclamation indicative of intense surprise, their eyes would be roaming round in a

very inconsequent manner. Then they fell on each other's necks and embraced, and then again began the former ceremony. Then Bambejja – princesses who had followed Mbogo – fell on Mwanga's neck, and princesses of Mwanga's suit fell on Mbogo's neck. Meanwhile the same performances were going on between chiefs, and chieflets, and common people on every side on a more compressed and not quite so long-drawn-out a scale till the crush became greater and greater, and *it was hard work to preserve one's dignity or even one's balance, among the crowd of performing monkeys.* (Lugard, ed. Perham, 1959: 266 – my emphasis)

Lugard's description, in addition to Roscoe's quoted before, reveals significant European attitudes towards the Baganda and their performance; that 'they' are the binary opposite of the European, their greetings mirror the behaviour of monkeys and that these people are easily given to immorality, with an implicit comparison to animal behaviour. Indeed, their 'wild' gesticulations, vocalisation, mimicry and movements communicate a different message for a different/potential audience in colonial Uganda. The interjections of 'guttural noises' contribute to the theatricality. Arguably, in Roscoe and Lugard's view, these native performers are the 'other' (Said, 1979) and 'the space on which the battles for truth, value, and power' (Taylor, 1998: 162) will be fought by missionaries and colonial administrators. Notably, by re-presenting these performances in their diaries, Europeans force us to be the voyeurs of aesthetics, cultural codes, and styles displayed in various indigenous performances. Nevertheless, this writing offers descriptions of forms that are otherwise lost in contemporary history, outside embodied contemporary residual forms; hence, if one can unravel the colonial gaze and values, one can 'read back' to some extent into these older performances.

### *Folktales and dramatic performance*

Story telling was an intrinsic communal form of theatre in Buganda. In this theatre form, knowledge of performance skills and texts was internalised, or as Taylor argues in relation to similar forms in South America, it was 'learned and transmitted through the embodied practices that are termed as the repertoire. Through formal and informal techniques of incorporation, people memorized and rehearsed stories and the accompanying music' (Taylor, 2004: 358). These dramatised narratives encapsulate and transmit not only performance forms, but also primary values of the community including 'theatrical, verbal and non-verbal components of performance' (Irobi, 2007: 270). Predominantly communal in orientation, this theatre was 'integrated' and everyone could take part in 'the performance of [...] song, dance, mime, and drama' (Mbowe, 1999:228). Performances were shaped by the need to engage with issues of identity marginalisation, opportunity, and community. I now turn to a few specific examples to illustrate these ideas.

*Olugero lw'Akakookolo* (The Leper and The Pretty Girl), is a common story learnt by children in Buganda and its content and style of presentation evolves and expands as they reach adulthood. The plot is simple but it has characteristics of indigenous performance, for instance, it includes elements of mimicry, music, and dance. In this context, *akakookolo* may mean a mask or someone

with a blemish on his nose therefore, the protagonist's name is generic, suggesting someone who is marked.<sup>2</sup> In the story, suitors, including Akakookolo, dressed in colourful costumes came to the village to woo the girl. During the narration, the storyteller used verbal and physical means to impersonate the suitors. For instance, he blocked his nose with his fingers in order to produce the nasal sound generally associated with the character of Akakookolo. The latter, dressed in strips of dirty bark cloth, was presented as uncouth, and in addition, he was treated as an outcast. Despite his physical appearance, his musical performance that included singing and playing the bowl-lyre, amused the people. Finally, attracted by the virtuoso performance, the girl followed him off stage singing:

Girl: *Kakookolo gwe, Kakookolo  
Kakookolo kwako eddiba lyo*

Akakookolo: *Ndetera Maama, ndetera  
Agenda n'omulungi talaga...*

Girl: Kakookolo, please, Kakookolo  
Kakookolo here is your mat (animal skin)

Akakookolo: Bring it to me, my dear, bring it  
He who elopes with a pretty one never says any farewells.<sup>3</sup>

The dramatic action was realised through dance, music, and spectacle. The narrator may have had props such as a smoking pipe and a bowl-lyre, which he used to enhance the dramatic presentation. It is normal practice in indigenous theatre for the performer to ask the audience to applaud the performance and in addition, to direct them to be quiet and orderly. Hence, Akakookolo contrived comedy by his cynical remarks directing the audience to control their excitement:

*Nze bwemba nnyimba saagala anyumya.*  
Don't talk into my talk/song.

This always created potential for a dynamic interactive process between the performer and the audience. It demanded and encouraged audience participation as well as critical reflection on the performance act. 'Don't talk into my talk/song' was a phrase used by the performer to contrive humour and create rapport with the audience and/or to control an excited audience. In this context, the performance charmed the audience and at the end, they rewarded the narrator and Akakookolo with beer and food. The narrator invested the story with his own meaning hence the depth of his performance and thought identified him as a person with a vision. Often this excited the audience further, giving the actor/performer/singer a chance to terminate his show and name his price, usually a gourd of beer, for a repeat performance.

Knowledge of both the performance skills and the stories was 'learned and transmitted through the embodied practices that are the repertoire' (Taylor, 2004: 358), and thus come down to us in embodied forms today. The dramatic presentations of these narratives, accompanied by audience verbal interjections,

loud drumming, and singing marks the beginning of drama. These types of stories have continued to be popular and their style of narration provides us with insights into the performance styles popular in colonial times.

Ruganda's *The Burdens*, was inspired by this story and he uses it to highlight the attitude of Tinka to Wamala, her husband, and to comment on the deteriorating relationship between the politicians and the electorate in Buganda. Retelling her own version of the story to Kaija, her son, Tinka compares her plight to the chief's daughter, Nyenje, who married a leper (Wamala):

- Tinka: Ngoma, Paramount Chief ... sent word round that whoever wanted her beautiful hand had to prove his prowess by climbing a very tall tree and bringing down, in one piece, the gourd containing her umbilical cord ...
- Kaija: And Nyenje's beauty dazzled their [the suitors'] eyes.
- Tinka: You have it. Then came the leper. A common leper stinking with leprosy and commonness. Dragging misery behind him...
- Kaija: People ran away in horror.
- Tinka: But Ngoma was a fair man. He let him try his luck.
- Kaija: Nyenje was tucked away in a corner drenched in tears...
- Tinka: As the leper climbed the tree he sang his song.
- Kaija: The tune...let's have the tune mother.
- Tinka: The night, too, has ears, son.
- Kaija: Just this once, mother.
- Tinka: He climbed higher.
- Kaija: Nyenje's heart sunk low.
- Tinka: You have it... He climbed higher and higher still.
- Kaija: Ngoma regretted his fairness.
- Tinka: [T]he gourd was now an arm's length from him.
- Kaija: Ngoma bid his subjects tie a band around his tired loins. (*Wamala's voice can be heard faintly from without*)
- Tinka: To cut the long story short, the leper brought down the gourd.  
(Ruganda, 1972: 14-17)

Arguably, through Tinka, the memory of the pretty girl is conveyed through this embodied retelling of the tale. The story presents a symptomatic representation of how dramatic folk tales shape contemporary theatre. More especially, it foregrounds the concept of *abadongo*, travelling musicians who either played instruments as solo artists or performed as an ensemble. Their strength is marked by the 'conscious' exploitation of their socio-political role as the voice of the community, which collectively makes this perhaps the most dynamic form of traditional entertainment to be adopted by later formal theatre in Uganda. The political aspect of the performer's role is illustrated by the public performances of Majangwa and Nakirijja, the last surviving travelling musicians described by MacPherson in her article, 'What happened to Majangwa?' (1976: 68-70). From 1940 to 1975 Majangwa was part of the life of the people in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, and Nakulabye, one of its suburbs. His importance as a performer was the manner in which the people related to him. Majangwa was an exhibitionist who played his *ngalabi*, long drum, and sung at different open markets while his wife, Nakirijja, performed

dances to the crowds. Their performances took place in the open markets and/or sometimes in drinking places (*ebinywero*). In a jovial mood, surrounded by a crowd, Majangwa would move around, persuading people to join the performance or to pay him for the show. Macpherson notes that Majangwa was

Frightening ... challenging... [and] ...pathetic ... a little piece of Kampala's social history, something a little out of the ordinary, someone who reminded us all that there was a little bit more to life beside a job for the day light hours, a bit of social oblivion in the evening and a dead night's sleep. (MacPherson, 1976:69)

Majangwa refused to conform to modernity – he had no permanent job so he lived on donations of food and money from his audiences. His dance music contained sexual innuendos mirroring a society that had become impotent, both literally and metaphorically. His performance also displayed the specific exhibitionistic performance style of folk musicians that underlined solo performance.

### *Archived performances*

Global developments, specifically the gramophone, had a direct impact on popular performance in Uganda. Vernon states that companies concentrated on 'Native music' records because they were a 'cheap' product that would boost their sales of gramophone machines (Vernon, 1997: 3). Since archived recordings of the indigenous performances that date back to colonial times are limited in number, we cannot know the exact details of the performances and what they meant to the audience and the performers. This section offers an analysis of a selection of archived performances that document knowledge of socio-political changes in Uganda, namely, the Baganda contributions to Ugandan theatre. By analysing the performances we uncover important aspects of Ugandan culture, politics, and theatre that were expressed in songs composed in the *abadongo* style. We know that these songs were performed in Kampala, but there is also enough evidence to suggest that they were performed outside that town as well.

In indigenous settings, performances were interactive, however, with the introduction of 'studio' recording where artists performed without live audiences, folk songs were more focused on performance rather than on communication with the audience. It would be interesting, therefore, to know how musicians responded to performing to or in an empty room. Early recordings of popular indigenous music were made in the 1930s with performers like Ssekinoomu and Sumoni. In spite of the unfamiliar space in a recording room, these performers used the performance occasion to make politically engaged statements on themes particularly to do with their sociopolitical position within a colonised country. In the songs discussed below, performers weave the theme of colonisation into their songs, sometimes by allusion and sometimes directly.

Colonial indigenous theatre speaks through many voices, and constructs multi-layered performance texts. This theatre should not be regarded as static but rather as constantly metamorphosing into new forms, always becoming part of new, contemporary theatre forms. Consequently, new voices are always

emerging from this period. While the Europeans, specifically missionaries, attempted to erase popular performance by labeling it *tabbulu* (taboo) because they thought it encouraged drunkenness and promiscuity, performers like Ssekinoomu sung back to Christian music through the performance of songs and dances that were more oriented to the indigenous subject. The legacy of colonialism is most evident in the archived performances, which show traces of proselytising, oppression, and modernisation. In this section, I intend to show how indigenous performers contributed to theatre development through their 'exploration' of cultural identity.

Early recorded folk performances came from solo performers led by Ssekinoomu, a Muganda professional musician whose work blended instrumental music with social themes and political topics that juxtaposed urban and rural scenes. By projecting the contemporary experience of society, especially its social stories in relation to poverty, he presented a broad view of colonial Uganda. In 1945, Ssekinoomu made two recordings, one on social themes and the other on the first experience of the wireless receiver in the 1930s. These performances of stories which focused on colonial experiences represented the emerging climate of critical performance dialogue in Uganda. Ssekinoomu's performances echoed Florence, Sumoni and other singers of the period, in their embodied engagement with the new concern regarding identity, which is apparent in the style and themes of the narrative. In Sumoni's critical recording, *Sesse* (Sumoni, 1940), he attempts to locate himself in a new experience of a converted Muslim. In the lyrics he sings about 'we', referring to the 'Moslems' and the 'other', as if he identifies himself as part of a segment of society that existed within the country, but which was different from the Whites or Anglicised Ugandans. Moreover, while Islam has customs comparable to those in African, for instance, its marriage customs, becoming Christians meant constructing a new identity. Hence, the performance engages with issues of living within a changing Uganda, and engaging with three cultures – Arabic, European, and Ugandan.

To illustrate how revealing these songs are for the contemporary researcher, I turn to two popular songs, '*Ekyalema Nakato*' (1945) and '*Wayalesi*' (1945) which mix characteristics of performance – story, characters, words and images to impact on the audience (listener) in an unsettling way. Collectively, these recordings develop a conversation on questions related to female sexuality, modernity, and culture. By recording '*Ekyalema Nakato*' (Nakato's Challenge) and '*Wayalesi*' (Wireless), two of the famous songs of the colonial period, Columbia Records intervened in the rendering and reception of popular performance. When we listen to the recordings we can imagine the impact of the performance on the audience. Ssekinoomu uses metaphors to narrate the events and sexual innuendo to describe the contest between Nakato and Mulinnyabigo. Our image of Ssekinoomu playing the part of Mulinnyabigo addressing Nakato and the crowd of onlookers is amusing. '*Ekyalema Nakato*' is a popular song today although artists divert from the original in favour of a dramatic license to intensify the audience's enjoyment of Kiganda Baakisimba dance. Hence, instead of performing the song in its entirety the song leader

merely sings the lead line for the chorus:

Leader: *Ekyalema Nakato aa kyalema*

Chorus: *Aa kyalema Nakato e Kawanda*

Leader: Nakato's challenge aa what a challenge

Chorus: The challenge of Nakato of Kawanda (village)

'*Ekyalema Nakato*' is a multilayered text that narrated the extraordinary encounter between Mulinyabigo, an allegedly promiscuous man, and his mistress, Nakato. While we may not know much about his live performances, the surviving recordings show that Ssekinoomu had much interest in dramatic presentation. Theatrical performances often took place in beer houses and at wedding feasts; hence Ssekinoomu and his ensemble could have performed this typical wedding song at such a feast. The opening stanza was intended to draw the crowd's attention. As happens in the traditional openings of folksongs, the singer continued his story:

*Mmm mbu amazima oganza ow'ebigere olinga ali mu nkuyo  
awulira enkoko zikookolima ssebo nayita olugendo  
o'womukwano zuukuka tugende bukedde okole.  
Yiii, olabye bw'akwatira omuggo akirako agoba ente  
aa aa, olugendo olugabira wakati, nga agaba ennyam.*

Mmm, they say, to fall in love with 'barefooted lover' is like playing the *nkuyo* game (game of the cone)

As soon as the cock crows at dawn, he calls out for a journey or thinks of a journey prospect:

My love, wake up and lets go, its dawn, go to work.

Yiii, see how he raises the stick at you as if he is herding cattle

aa aa, he splits the journey into two parts as if he is sharing [out] meat.

In Luganda, Ssekinoomu's reference to a 'barefooted lover' alludes to a poor man or a lover on foot; or it could refer to a promiscuous person. The pun demonstrates the performer and audience's deep appreciation for ambiguity, which was a strong characteristic of oral tradition and performance. His language appears cryptic here partly to achieve a comic effect, and because it was normal practice among the Baganda to use innuendo and metaphor when discussing topics to do with sex. It is also important to note that the word '*omuggo*' (stick) has various interpretations. In this context, the word refers to the male genitals, specifically Ssekinoomu and his crudeness, a point that is emphasised by '*bw'akwatira omuggo akirako agoba ente*' (he raises the stick at you as if he is herding cattle). Excited by the sexual metaphors, the crowds would respond with ululation. We note the interdependence between song text, music, and dramatic action, which underlines how Ssekinoomu would have manipulated the audience to applaud his performance. At the same time, the instrumentalists and the dancers would make exaggerated sexual movements intended to illustrate the singer's lyrics. In addition, there is a veiled reference to poverty echoing the belief that poor men can never court beautiful women.

*Yiii, mazima bw'akulengera enkoona eyo, n'emusaliza omwoyo.*

*Owange ettutumu abaagala emyo.*

*Ekyedde ekyeddamu kyaaki? (Ssekinoomu, 1945)*

Yiii, its true, he envies you as he sees you disappear over the horizon.

My dear, people like courting popularity.

Isn't it senseless?

At this point Ssekinoomu, playing the role of the narrator, would move closer to the audience to begin his impersonation of characters. He would alternate his performance of the characters Nakato and Mulinnyabigo, with the narrator, all the time using cryptic expressions. Probably the instrumentalists would play the role of the primary audience thus drawing the secondary audience into the action on stage. This helps to draw the audience's attention to the key points of the narrative hence enhancing their enjoyment of the drama. The narrator, spurred on by the instrumentalists and audiences excited response, would extemporise and extend the narrative. Meanwhile, the audience, gathered around the performers, perhaps even joining the dancers in the performance arena to show off their individual dance skills. In this context, they would use head ties or wrappers as dance costumes.

*Mmm kambabulire*

*yiii bano abatamanyi kuyimba*

*bannange nkoleki?*

Mmm let me tell you

yiii, these people who can't sing

My friends, what should do I do?

*Ne b'asasiira Nakato e Kawanda*

*ebigambo byalema Mulinnyabigo gw'omanyi*

*oli mukyala w'angeriki atamanyi mukwano?*

*A aa kale nagula sukaali nze nali mwannyoko?*

They empathised with Nakato of Kawanda

Mulinnyabigo,<sup>4</sup> the one you know, failed to seduce her

what kind of woman are you who doesn't know the game of love?

Aaa am I your brother to buy you sugar?

In the above dialogue, Nakato lamented why she ever accepted Mulinnyabigo's love advances. However, in response Mulinnyabigo stated that it was not his fault that Nakato is a hopeless lover (who could not pick cues of love). The parallel statements drive the audience to a state of ecstatic frenzy, dramatised with ululation and dancing.

*Yiii naye omwami nakukyalira ewamwe s'akusiibula?*

*Yiii ye gwe ebbinika ogifumba mu ngeri ki eyo eteva ku kyooto?*

*Kale sukaali gw'otosaasira.*

*Kambalojjere amazima  
abakyala mubasaasire  
mubasaasire okulima  
ssebo abajja batuutira, abasajja batuutira amazima  
Yiii olwagala omukuule nti nze aliko omuzungu  
okumanya muzungu amata tegava ku kyooto  
di di di di di diria olwo bwe batyeebule!*

Yiii, my man, didn't I say farewell to you after my visit?  
Yii, how long does your kettle take to boil?  
You can't even show some generosity (sympathy) to the sugar.

Truly, let me narrate my truth to you  
have empathy for the women  
digging [sex] is hard work, be considerate to them  
sir, they come when they are ripe for sex; but truthfully men are always erect.  
Yiii, why do you love such a man? I have the wherewithal of a European/whiteman  
to prove it, I always have an endless supply of milk  
di di di di di da diria then they dance away!

Perhaps Ssekinoomu's use of euphemistic cliché is because the dramatic dialogue mirrors new experiences in the community, specifically that of openly engaging in immoral sexual acts. Notably this section includes the favourite analogy between a wealthy man and a *muzungu*, European, 'Yiii ... nze aliko omuzungu' (Yiii ... I have the wherewithal of a European). Here Ssekinoomu implies that the ordinary person differed from the wealthy Baganda or Europeans in wealth and manners. In addition, he uses appropriate slang terms and euphemisms, for example, 'sukaali' (sugar) whose meaning in this context is sex or private parts, and 'ebbinika' (kettle) that refers to male private parts. This reminds us that since this community theatre, audiences may have included children, in-laws or even the king whom the performer would not have wanted to offend.

Interwoven into his comments on Nakato's experience are comments on drunkenness. In the second part of the song, Ssekinoomu changed the theme focusing his criticism on beer. Here are some excerpts of the dialogue:

*Yiii omwenge si mubi kya kunywa kizaale  
aaa uu  
kya kunnywa kitonde.  
Kambalojjere omwenge.  
Yiii wabula abagunywa be bagwoonona  
bano ne badda mu nguudo  
era bwavaawo n'akuba enduulu  
munne akuba abantu  
Ssabakulu oguteekako etteeka kutumalira bantu*

Yiii there is nothing wrong with beer, it is a natural drink  
aaa huu  
its a drink dating back to creation.

Allow me narrate its story  
 Yiii its just those people who drink it who abuse it [...]  
 Let me warn you, there are fines imposed for both its use and abuse

The above stanza illustrates how Ssekinoomu uses identifiable conventional forms, like idioms, proverbs or even intertextual references to construct his narrative. For instance, the third line '*abagunywa be bagwonoona*' (people who drink it who abuse it), is an intertextual borrowing from a number of Luganda songs that would have been familiar to the audience.

In the following stanza, Ssekinoomu changed themes and, satirising a known personality, Keya, who served as a tax collector, he drew on the tradition of mimicry. In the following lines Ssekinoomu intended to focus the audiences attention on his mimicry of Keya:

*Eya Keya mazima empale ye mbu nnamba  
 yiii naye mazima buagikwoleka  
 amagulu n'omusono ogwo gukulema  
 yiii mpanvu si mpanvu, nnyimpi si nnyimpi*

Keya's trousers are full length  
 however, I think when he puts them on....  
 Iiii, sincerely when he faces you may even fail to recognise the style  
 Iiii, its neither long but not long, short but not short

Once more, the crowd, together with the musicians, danced and made caricatures of characters presented by Ssekinoomu, mocking people who adopt European shorts in preference to Kiganda *kanzus* (tunics). The subtle shifts to more contemporary themes invigorate the audience. The dramatic quality of the text in the preceding stanza illustrates that this performance is just one example of the dramatic enactment in which a common experience is theatricalised by mimetic, verbal, and vocal expressions. Ssekinoomu uses *bisoko*, a Luganda term that means instrumental music or poetic idioms, to display his virtuosity. Although this is an archived performance of one of Ssekinoomu's performances, oral sources, for example, Sam Sserwanga and Busuulwa<sup>5</sup>, affirm that it offers a possible 'depiction' of what travelling musician performances, for instance, Majangwa's or even Ssekinoomu were like.

Oral informers told me that the song alludes to a 1940s event in Buganda when the Queen Mother, Drusilla Namaganda, broke custom and remarried. Hence, the song portrays her as an over sexed person. Notably, contemporary performances of the songs are more explicit. For instance, in 2010 when Busuulwa performed a variation of the song at Makerere College School he intercut the original scene between Nakato's plea to Mulinyabigo with a general comment on women's experience of public wrath with the following stanza:

*Drusilla Namaganda yalya ekibe  
 Bali bakibabuzza ssanja emmuli zabula  
 Bakirya mu kiro nga abaana beebase*

*Bamusindike agwe eri aseseme bye yabba  
Bamusindike agwe eri atomere ebifunvu*

Drusilla Namaganda killed (ate) a fox  
They roasted it using dry banana leaves for they could not find dry reeds  
They ate it at night while the children were all sleeping  
People should push her away, don't care whether she stumbles and falls  
Push her / let her knock against the walls

This direct comment on the Queen Mother's relationship is Busuulwa's own creation, is his own re-presentation of the event. His rendition directly names Namaganda but still uses the metaphor of the fox to refer to the undesirable sexual relationship between the two lovers. His performance, accompanied by sexually suggestive facial expressions and dramatised voice inflections illustrate the qualities of *abadongo* performers. The performer is the most important medium of artistic expression. His movements are stylised and are locally described to resemble the jerky movements of *kaamuje* (squirrel).

In the following example of 'Wayalesi' (Wireless), recorded in 1945, Ssekinoomu focused on modernity, specifically the introduction of wireless technology to Buganda/Uganda. This song consists of eight different stanzas, each of which develops the theme of the experience of the introduction of wireless receivers to Uganda.

*Waya, waya, waya, wayi wayalesi  
Waya waya way' Abazungu baziyiya  
Kale tubade twewuunya za tabaza mbu ez'eddoboosi limu  
Sibalimba ayogera ayima Kampala nowulira eddoboosi lyoka.*

*Naye nze Abazungu kye mbatiirako n'eBuganda bagireeta  
Sikulimba Buganda b'agisanyusa nny'okumanya nga zanyunya  
Bwolaba ng'abe Mukono babaterawo himm naye baategeera  
Tegereza abe Kisubi<sup>6</sup> babateera aa aa babawa  
Mu Nakivubo wansi baagitekako mbadde nga yetugatika  
Tegereza ku Lubiri<sup>7</sup> baagitekako nga yey'abakungu bokka  
Nze ndowoza Kitaka ne Kilainingi balinga bebagireta.*

*Newuunya abasajja mu [ku]gaba ebbaluwa wamma gwe bakanya  
Nga waliwo omusajja ow'oluberera ng'eddoboosi litta bantu  
Newuunya omulala okugera engero nze simanyi kikaaddekadde  
Omusajja bwalikula balimuddawa nay'engero zamuyinga.*

*Omupiira kibuga<sup>8</sup> kaba gubeerako nze obukadde sibulabanga  
Embaga zona zona kaba<sup>9</sup> zitandika nze obukadde sibulabanga  
Obukadde bwe Kasubi bwajjira ku miggo bulabe ku wayalesi  
Sikulimba akalala kajja n'emmindu, nay'olwo emmindu bagirinnya  
Nga kali awo kitange kagiringiriza, kanno kagiyita eggii  
K'aba ddaaki k'abuuzza n'obusungu nti obwedda mpulira  
Baana bange obwedda mpulira ddooboosi abo aboogera be baliwa*

*Nebamugamba nti ayogera ayima Kampala, naye lino ddoobozi lyokka  
Sikulimba nako ako ka Ddamba k'agenda tekategera  
Kitange omusese yajja n'omutwalo gw' enkejje bagurya  
Nga ali awo anti Nakivubo agiringiriza banne bagiyita eggii  
Ye nze bannange n'annyumya biki akumanya nga z'anyuma  
Ba Nakalanga be Kyagwe bajja n'essami<sup>10</sup>, essami nebalitwala  
Kitange Omukunja yajja n'ebirugu, ebirugu b'abirya  
Musaasire owe Bukoba ey'ajja n'amenvu naye ago amenvu b'agalinyya  
Ye nze bannange n'annyumya biki mbu okumanya nga z'anyuma.*

*Ye nze banange kye mbabulira era muleke mbabulire  
Ng' abakyala ejjooje beesiba kufa nga ne nsonda bazimwa  
Ng'abaami emyaasa b'esala kufa nga n' embale beetema  
Ennaku zino eziriko nsasira abakyala ba myabo balabye  
Si b'ebesiba kale baly'esiba batya newankubade beesiba  
Na'nasiba Mukono namutegeka newankubade beesiba  
Na'nasiba kisubi namutegeka nga n'emmotoka ziyita  
Yii ye nze era n'annyumya biki mbu okumanya nga beesiba  
Ban'asiba batya Nakivubo wamma gw' okumusiba  
Ye nze bannange n'annyumya biki okumanya nga beesiba.*

*Ye nz'era abakyala kye mbatiirako amagezi g'abayinga  
Oba oli awo era ne bagyesiba okumanya nga beesiba  
Bwolaba nga ne kavvu bamusibako so nga obulwade butta bantu  
Naye nz'abakyala kye mbatiirako okuyiira kwabayinga  
Ye nze bannange na'nyumya biki mb' okumanya nga kwabayinga.*

*Ye nze bannange kye mbabulira era muleke mbabulire  
Bw'olaba nga ne Mawanda<sup>11</sup> bamusi... yiii muleke mbabulire  
Olaba nga ne Mawanda b'amusibako muleke mbabulire  
Newewuunnya yenna yenna n'atambula yii newewuunnya okumusiba  
Oluwo singa omumpi asibye mu mannyo, nga bajja beraga  
Nkubulire omuwanvu asibye mu byenda, nga bagya beraga  
Nebatwala n'omukono nebasika, abakyala tebatya  
Nga bagamba nti kye kita kyasibirako muleke mbabulire  
Leero luno abakyala ban'asiba batya newankubadde beesiba  
Ye nze kye mbabulira era muleke mbabulire.*

*Ndowooza bannange kye mbabulira amagezi b'agayinga  
Ye nze Abazungu kye mbebaliza, Abazungu bebale.*

Wire, wire, wire wii... wireless

Wire wire wir ... invented by the Bazungu

Imagine we were amazed by the streetlights that they work in unison

I swear the speaker is in Kampala you hear his voice only

I respectfully fear the Bazungu, even to Buganda they brought it

I swear to you it was very entertaining; Buganda was excited

See, they fixed the link to Mukono hmm they loved it

Imagine even Kisubi was linked up aaa aaa connected

In downtown Nakivubo they fixed one that linked us together

Imagine at Lubiri palace they fixed one for the royals alone  
I think Kitaka and Clining seem to have imported it.

There was a man daily whose voice left people titillated  
I am awed by another's knowledge of proverbs; I wonder whether he is middle-aged  
The man when he gets old no one will challenge him for he is so knowledgeable  
about proverbs.  
Ever since football came to town I have not seen the elderly in the crowds  
Since festivities started, I have not seen elderly people in the crowds  
The elderly from Kasubi came hobbling on sticks to see the Wireless  
I do not lie that one old man came with a smoking pipe, but that day they stepped on it  
Poor man was peeking at it; he thought it was an egg  
Eventually he asked in anger that all the while I have been hearing  
My children, I hear a voice but where are the people speaking from?  
They told him that the person is speaking from Kampala; this is only his voice  
I swear the poor man left in a confused state  
The pitiless with came with a whole load of small dried fish (enkejje)  
He was there peeking at it while his friends called it an egg  
My friends what shall I say to show that it was exciting  
The dwarfs from Kyagwe came with stocks essami (insects); they stole them  
Poor man from Bukunja came with yams; yams were eaten  
Sympathise with the one from Bukoba who came with sweet bananas, those sweet  
bananas were stepped on  
My friends what should I say to show how it was so entertaining  
My friends what I am telling, let me tell you.

The women beautified their skins they even shaved their fore heads  
The men shaved their heads clean they nearly shaved off the skin  
These days I pity women, poor things  
They tightly wrap the dresses now how well will they dress then<sup>12</sup>  
Even the one who will wrap Mukono sorts it, even if they wrap up tight  
Even the one who wraps small bananas sorts them as the vehicles drive past  
Iii, how can I explain this, you know, they dress well  
You tell me; how they will wrap Nakivubo, wrap it tight  
How will I explain to show that they dress well?  
For me I hold them in high esteem; they are so clever  
You wait, they will wrap it around their bodies; that is how good they are  
You see, they wrapped up bundles of money yet diseases kill people  
But for me I hold women in high esteem creativity overcomes them  
For me my friends what will I explain to show that they are so clever  
For me my friends what I tell you, let me tell you.

You see even Mawanda was ti... iii let me tell you  
You see even Mawanda<sup>13</sup> was imprisoned, let me tell you  
You wonder the way he proudly strode yiii you wonder how they handcuffed him  
What if he is short and has wrapped it round the teeth, would they show off [their  
might]  
I tell you the tallest has wrapped tight around her stomach they came to show their  
might  
They hold the hand, pull and twist, women are fearless

They said, it is the gourd she uses to wrap tight; let me tell you  
This time the women, how will they dress up even if they wrap up tight  
For me I tell you so let me tell you.

I think my friends what I tell you they are too clever  
For me the Bazungu for that I thank them, Abazungu, thank you.

The theme of this song *Wayalesi* (wireless) was a very topical one. In 1936, a private company, probably owned by Clining but in partnership with Chief Kitaka, had brought the wireless to Buganda. Loudspeakers had been placed in key locations in the town: in the Kabaka's palace at Mengo, Nakivubo park in the town centre, and at the Roman Catholic missionary centre at Kisubi. Not surprisingly, ordinary people were mesmerised by technology that transmitted human voices. Ssekinoomu mockingly describes the crowds as '*obukadde*' (wimpish old men), '*bunakalanga*' (gangly men), and uses diminutive words such as '*ka kitange*' (poor fellow) to suggest an invasion of the town by villagers. In addition, the audience notes his use of pejorative nouns that refer to people's places of origin, for example, '*omukunja*', someone from Bukunja country and a derogatory term for night dancers and '*omussesse*' (one from Ssesse islands, which suggests people whose diet is entirely dependent on fish). In our minds, these elicit memories of people living deep in the villages; and also suggest a consciousness of rural to urban migration and the sense of the hierarchy and superiority felt by Ssekinoomu as a member of the emerging urban community. Interspersed in the comic dialogue are culturally specific discourses on colonisation and oppression, and national identity that echo the people's resentment of imperial rule. Note Ssekinoomu's contribution to the discourse regarding the backwardness of people from the countryside. In his provocative statements in the last stanza, Ssekinoomu insinuates that the Europeans were spiteful towards the Baganda when they humiliated the King's elder brother, Prince Mawanda. Hence, the sentimental statements are intended to arouse a sense of 'nationhood' among the audience. Ssekinoomu took on the task of recording contemporary experiences by creating characters that reference people from all sections of society; not surprisingly, throughout the performance he assumes all the roles and performs all the experiences. By using the stage to entertain and satirise the Europeans' ignorance and rude behaviour he created humour. In the above song, traditional generic forms of social discourse provide the thematic focus.

Writing about these songs, Cooke comments on the use of 'allusion and metaphor in texts that can have double and even triple meanings', as evidenced in this song, is what would have made the performance allusive, hence difficult for censors to decode (Cooke, 2010). Therefore, an extended analysis of these texts will illustrate how far contemporary Ugandan theatre has borrowed from earlier forms of theatre to develop its own form of expression and style. These songs, stories and dances helped to create a cultural focus for the community hence they are still being performed. Although the characters may change their ethnic identities, and their roles may be transformed, the stories remain as important cultural symbols of indigenous popular theatre.

### *Censorship*

The fixity of the recorded performance, which is likely to remove the dialectic of the relationship between the performer and his audience, did not prevent the composition of subversive texts. Consequently, a 'good deal of official censorship' was practised by the colonial authorities because they wanted to clamp down on indigenous practices they regarded as immoral, they were suspicious about the agitation for independence in Uganda, or they had anxieties about the emerging so-called Mau Mau rising in Kenya and the agitation for independence in Uganda (Cooke, 2010).

Music theatre was popular because it disseminated community sentiments with regard to social and political concerns. For instance, in pre-colonial times, when the royal musicians were offended by the king they composed '*Omusango gw' abalere*' (The Royal Flutists' Crime) to show their distaste of his behaviour. Here the musicians were exercising their right to reprimand the king on behalf of the community. In addition, by stating that when things go wrong they can go back to their place of origin they are asserting their cultural (clan) identity.

*Anti omusango gw'abalere gwegaludde  
bantwale e Bbira,  
gubadde gutya?*

*Nze emeeme enkulungutana  
Binsobedde, bantwale e Bbira gyebanzaala*

Look, the case of the flutists has reached its height  
Let them take me to Bbira  
What has gone wrong?

My spirit is not troubled  
I am perplexed let them take me to Bbira where I was born

Archived letters between Columbia Records at Hayes and Shankar Das and Sons, the recording agent in Nairobi, show that the company attempted to censor and even cancel the distribution of some Luganda recordings, claiming that they were 'unsuitable for sale' (Cooke, 2010). For instance, in 1940, '*Bamuta*' by Arajubu & Party was deemed immoral because it narrated the story of Bamuta who was found guilty of raping a prostitute. While today this might be a moral issue, it would have been regarded as a political offence by the colonial government at a time when the Christian missionaries closely identified with the colonial government. Hence, insulting Christian morals was equated with breaking colonial laws. That Shankar Das and Sons stated that they did not know that Arajubu had recorded a popular Baakisimba-Nankasa dance song that is accompanied by sexually suggestive dance movements that were socially acceptable, is not surprising since they were ignorant of its language of performance. Once again, in 1940, Columbia Records wrote to the agent requesting them to withdraw recording No. 337 (Sesse) because the Ugandan Police had noted that some of the lyrics were of a 'subversive' nature:

We regret to have to advise you that we have been informed by the police in Uganda that tier ? [the entire] subject matter of record No. 337 is such as to make it entire! [entirely] unsuitable for sale in the country. The Police have assisted us in getting a translation and we find that the subject matter recorded does not agree with the script of the words which Were [were] supposed to have been recorded. We? [We] [s]Should tee [be] glad if will cancel any orders which you have for this number[.] [A]aim [to] have the master destroyed to [ensure] ensure? [t]That no further pressings are made [.] (Vernon, 1997: 2)

The offending text recommended Islam as the religion of choice because Muslims were very clean: (Sesse ‘If you have a Mahommedan as a guest you can be sure that he will get up early in the morning and be progressive. Even the water he passes he throws forward and not backward.’ (Vernon, 1997: 1) Being illiterate regarding the performance aesthetics of the group, the recording company was not aware that although instrumental accompaniments are stable, dialogues/lyrics are recreated at each performance. Thus we note that in their recording of musical performances, record companies and the radio stations did not understand the theatricality of the culture outside its performance space; that although it alienated them from their environmental context, performers remained ‘skilful theatrical entertainers who also carried news and views in their lyrics’ (Cooke, 2010).

In addition to these and other songs and folk dramas, there are the important anthropological writings in Luganda published early in the twentieth century that record indigenous popular cultural and ritual performances. The most significant is Apolo Kagwa’s *Empisa za Baganda* (The Customs of the Baganda, 1901).

In the above discussion, I have explored various indigenous performance forms: folk dramas and folk music of the colonial period, showing how the socio-political and historical contexts affected the performances and their reception, and how contemporary ‘reading back’ through recordings can help us reconstruct these performances. We also see how later playwrights like Serumaga, Kawadwa, and Mbowa’s drama, and most recently, Rwangyezi’s *Lawino and Ocol* (2000), drew on embodied indigenous theatre forms, and thus provide insight into performance forms and styles of both the pre-colonial and colonial periods.

## NOTES

- 1 In 1885 the Imperial British East African Company was appointed by the British colonial government to administer British East Africa before it became the East African Protectorate. Its main aim was to develop African trade in the British area of influence.
- 2 People believed that if someone suffered from leprosy they would lose part of their nose.
- 3 All translations are the author’s own.
- 4 Literally a name for one who climbs over fences, figuratively suggesting that he could conquer any woman.
- 5 This is based on the present author’s interview of Sam Sserwanga and Stephen Buulwa, professional indigenous performers, in Kampala in April 2010.
- 6 A village on Ntebe Road
- 7 Mengo palace
- 8 Short for *ku kibuga*
- 9 *Kaba* is an old Luganda word meaning ‘since’. The contemporary equivalent is *kasookanga*.

- 10 This must be a small insect usually found around lakes (or large rivers). It is a delicacy for some people
- 11 King E. Mutesa's elder brother. He was big, tall and fierce.
- 12 There is a play on the word *kwesiba* here and he uses the meanings interchangeably i.e. *kwesiba* to wrap up tight and *kwesiba* to dress well. This specifically refers to *busuuti*, and enables the audience to recognise caricatures of women, and Mawanda presented by Sekinoomu.
- 13 See note 11.

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