

## **African Performance Review**

Vol.1 No.1 2007

pp38-49

### **Resistant Voices in African Popular Performance**

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#### **Abstract**

There are implicit opportunities in Ugandan theatre that allow us to explore the tensions of politics, culture, ethnicity and gender in a performance rooted in the women's experience of growing up in a post Idi Amin Uganda. The prospects arise within uniquely layered performances integrating dialogue, play acting, song, and dance that interweave narratives of contemporary and past experiences. This paper investigates women's resistant strategies in the performance of popular theatre. The paper seeks to demonstrate that women in popular theatre are in an exceptional position because they have to struggle for the control of a space, and the power of their voice, in an art form dominated by men. As opposed to male performers, who sustain the traditional patriarchal concerns, themes dominating the works of female popular performers are female sexuality, male promiscuity and rediscovering the female voice. I draw examples from women's performances and productions including Rose Mbowa's *Mother Uganda*, women popular band, and *Kadongo Kamu* (Picking Guitarists), music recording and performances.

Critical attention to African popular performance leads us to examine the notion of resistance for contemporary African women. My discussion of contemporary popular musical theatre, the *avante garde* of Ugandan popular performance, will delineate resistant strategies in popular performance and theatre, reflecting upon shades of political and social transformations. This paper will seek to demonstrate that women in popular theatre are in an exceptional position because they have to struggle for the control of a space and the power of their voice in an art form whose processes and production, in the adult world, is dominated by men. Throughout this paper examples are taken from urban performances in Kampala, and Ganda (Baganda) indigenous performance forms.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the significance of the concept, *Katamba*,

which originally meant 'to possess/climb upon one's head', but in contemporary common usage generally refers to theatre. The term is packed with both negative and positive connotations (Sam Kasule, 1998). *Katamba*, means foolery, illusion, magical behaviour or performance, but with implications of aspects of entertainment, impersonation and role-play. The idea of being 'stupefied' by a performance, and the laughter it triggers, is closely related to the audience's perception of *Katamba*, which makes them remark afterwards, 'those are very good performers' (*Abaana bali bazanya*). Closely linked to *Katamba* are *Abadongo*, indigenous traveling musicians, not highly regarded in society because of their mostly rootless nature, and love for the soft life. The negativities that both concepts trigger off are what made the practice of performance a stigma, to be avoided by 'decent' women.

The mutation of popular performance, from the travelling musicians to the popular artists, has been in stages. The *abadongo*, early travelling musicians in Buganda, consisted of instrumentalists, drummers, harpists, flutists and dancers who were predominantly women, save for the occasional male dancer. Women were not allowed to play drums and the Ganda patriarchal society claimed that they were ritually forbidden to do so. However, this may be attributed to the fact that the drums were gendered, *engalabi*, the long drum alluded to men's genital parts, similarly the *mbuutu*, short and rounded symbolised female genital parts. (also see Sylvia A Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2006:66) In the early sixties night club performances, and night club functions referred to as *Tabbulu* or *ebidongo*, particularly describing western guitar instruments or six piece bands, incorporated the token female vocalist plus a group of female dancers. Kadongo Kamu (Picking Guitarists), a sixties offshoot of the indigenous travelling musicians, were usually one man groups, but to make their performances more appealing they recruited female singers. Alongside these groups are *Abagoma*, composed of indigenous instrumentalists and dancers, who mostly performed on weddings and other festivals, but who again depended on women performers to make their performances more appealing to the public. Within these groups there are identifiable patterns of resistance which include the women performers taking charge of their bodies, economics, and the message. They reclaim the performance space and use it to make statements that criticise dominant discourses of gender and sexuality.

In the context of postcolonial violence and gender inequality, the practice of popular performance is likely to take the form of bearing witness and resistance - to violence, corruption and abuse. Women's performances express their lived experiences, all the time challenging traditional discourses of power relations and, as Annalise Moser (2003) underlines, 'the symbolic potency of making one's voice heard in public as an actively participating citizen', promotes a process of 'democratic discourse'. Frequently subjected to male sexist imagery, women have in

turn made the stage a site of resistance, inverting some of the innuendos in song narratives and folktales, or subverting the meaning of words and phrases.

It is pertinent in this context to apply Mikhail Bakhtin's (1968) concept of dialogism to the ongoing verbal musical expression to highlight the current dialogue between indigenous performances, recent changes in the political landscape and women's acts of resistance. As George Lipstiz writes: 'Traces of the past...pervade the popular music of the present...reflect [ing] a dialogic process, one embedded in collective history and nurtured by the ingenuity of artists interested in fashioning icons of opposition' (in Tricia Rose, 1994:148). The nature and impact of these experiences of protest, and resistance, affect women's role in theatre and performance. The link between theatre and women's resistance is that, beginning with Amin's time, popular performance was the only safe platform for expressing resistance, and the army being predominantly male regarded women's voices as inconsequential. It is worth noting that despite the expansion of the popular music industry the number of women artists has not matched the growth, particularly in the area drama performance. Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu and Rose Mbowe, usually referred to as rebels, remain perhaps the most prominent Ugandan female artists working both in English and indigenous language medium. They defied society, men in particular, and contributed to the redefinition of the meaning of *Katamba* at a time when popular theatre was the most important space for sociopolitical discourse. Strong female characters who voice the concerns of women are evident in their dramas as well as in scripts written by a selection of male playwrights, for example, Byron Kawadwa, Robert Serumaga and Wycliff Kiyingi.

As opposed to male performers who sustain the traditional patriarchal concerns appertaining to the restriction of women, and decorous behaviour, themes dominating the works of female popular performers are: female sexuality, male promiscuity and rediscovering the female voice. A selection of musical performances stretching over fifteen years evidences the ongoing performer-audience 'democratic dialogue' on male sexual promiscuity, the exploitation of women by men and in-laws, and the dominant discourse of safe sex. Women make connections between economic exploitation, conflict, health and sexuality. In recent years their messages became particularly powerful with the use of video and cassette recording and they have now turned to DVD and CD recordings. The generic qualities of popular dance and song, particularly rhythm and strong lyrics adapted from indigenous forms, are exploited to deliver radical messages. Therefore, through a combination of performance styles including dance, mime and movement, the women artists are able to deliver witty, explicit statements, relating tales of their own experiences. The appropriation of indigenous folksong, and dance songs forms and styles have been possible because they require the singer to relate the

content to relevant issues in the community, or to sing their experiences, particularly because their knowledge is acquired through their travels as they traverse the country.

The development of a female-centred socio-political consciousness in popular music theatre was inspired by The Ebonies and Afrigo Band performances which specifically articulate the anxieties of women concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic. They are a testimony of independence and power unleashed by the active frontline participation of women in the NRA liberation war. The National Resistance Army Code of Conduct and the Then-Point Programme that formed the basis of its bush administration had ten points one of which stated: Never develop illegitimate relationship with any woman because there are no women as such waiting for passing soldiers yet many women are wives, or daughters of somebody somewhere (see Mohamood Mamdani, 1988). The performances attempt to find answers women seek about their promiscuous men and how these affect their relationships and families. A close examination of the performances gives us an idea of the way women's expression of sexuality, and criticism of male promiscuity is constructed, and how it transforms into resistance. In particular, Joy Nakimuli, performer and producer of the Ebonies, Stella Nanteza, the lead soloist of the group, and Joanita Kawalya of The Afrigo Band are notable for their role at the frontline of resistance.

From the early 80s they built a strong following and became more powerful than politicians in exerting social change on Ugandans. Through *gestus*, dance movements, and declamation they target the male-centered audiences. Stella Nanteza's *Emitima Egirwadde okwagala* (*Where do Broken Hearts Go?*, 1987) is an expression of women's sexuality which conflicts with the normative expectations of society for women to be the silent partners in love relationships. She appeals to the audience to point her in the direction of a desirable partner who will comfort her. Her other dramatized song, *Emyoyo gy'abasajja kyenkana gya muyizzi wa mu kibira* (*Men are as Voluptuous as Game Hunters*, 1988) - warns young girls to guard against unscrupulous men who are as wanton as game hunters. They will trap an antelope as well as a bush rat, a bush back, or, join a pack chasing another bush rat. The range of animals used in the metaphor also illustrates men's reckless nature as 'sexual joy riders' (*ba nkuba nzibiridde*). Nanteza performs the song, *Essanduuko* (*Suitcase*, 1989), a wide ranging critique of a society characterised by deception. She describes one of her friends, wealthy and endowed with beauty: slender, with long hair and 'bead eyed'. Although she is HIV positive, like reckless men, she does not practice safe sex but infects those who are attracted to her by her appearance. The same song describes fighting couples who put on a show in public despite their domestic problems (*ebizibu batuulira bituulire*). In conclusion she reminds her audience that appearance is deceptive:

*Buli kyolaba wegenderezenga,  
kuba oluusi kyolaba, kiba ku  
ngulu, oyo gw'olaba nti talina  
bizibu, ssanduuke lwelibikuka,  
kazambi we lwalifukumuka.*

(Take care, physical appearance is deceptive, the time your perfect person's 'suitcase' opens, is the time her/his dirt will be exposed...)

This is a concealed statement on what women would want to say about men who harass them for sexual favours even when they are already in other relationships.

Joy Nakimuli's *Lwaki otaga* (*Why Become a Sexual Tourist?*, 1989) has enjoyed much popularity because of its message to men to stop being promiscuous. This is a seminal song which, in centralising the liberated assertive female voice, graphically describes men who indulge in multiple relationships. It alludes to an old English saying: 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush', here reworked as 'One bird in the hand is worth two ailing ones.' She asks men to 'zero graze' or limit themselves to one partner because of the lethal HIV/AIDS locally known as the 'lethal Rakai epidemic' (*nnawookera we Rakai nnamuzisa*), alluding to Rakai village on Uganda's southern border with Tanzania where there was an explosion of the HIV/AIDS infection in the 1980s. Nanteza targets this cryptic remark at men who harass women for sexual favours even when they are already in other relationships. The costs for such relationships are high, sexually transmitted diseases. In performance she moves into the auditorium to make a direct appeal to men in the audience.

*Lwaki otaga ekikubunya ensi eno  
kyeki kimbuulire?  
Gwe n'onaayiza, ebule ne bweya  
nga gwe lwaki towumula?  
Ekinnyonyi ekimu mu mukono gwo,  
kisinga ebibiri ebipaapaala,  
Lwaki otaga, ng'emirembe gikuli  
ku lusegere?*

(Tell me, why have you become a sexual tourist? Why do you to hunt for sex in every corner? A bird in hand is worth two ailing ones. Why become a tourist when peace is beside you?)

Nakimuli admonishes 'her' man who 'ogles' every girl with the hope that she will satisfy his sexual hunger. She concludes by warning men to limit their partners because of the 'lethal Rakai epidemic' (*nnawookera we Rakai nnamuzisa*).

Kawalya is the most defiant female performer in contemporary

popular music theatre. She follows in the footsteps of her father, Eccles Kawalya, a popular musician and actor of the sixties and seventies. She grips the microphone, surveys the audience, and commands the stage space with authority, articulately speaking/singing explicitly about the position of women in sexual relationships. Skills honed when, as a young girl, she was a virtuoso folksong soloist, are quite useful in her new role but it is her ability to function as a voice of the new woman that marks her oppositional transcript. The folksong is one of the 'oldest forms' of popular entertainment and theatricality and is often used by female performers as an avenue for making their voice heard. Performance skills include verbal mastery, mastery of delivery, creativity, distinctiveness of style, and virtuosity. Kawalya's rendition of *Mundeke mbere Nooyo* (*Hands of My Partner*, 1990), and her production of the music video for the sexist song, *Emmere essiridde*, (*The Meal is Burnt*, 1995) covers a range of 'new themes and styles' which, through its dialogue structure, concerns itself with both the woman's role as a 'cook', and as a voiceless victim of male promiscuity and his authoritative voice. *Mundeke Mbeere Nooyo* appropriates the character of a female guerilla fighter of the National Liberation Army who overthrew Milton Obote's second government in 1986. For the first time Ugandan women carried AK 47s, nicknamed, 'kagala', (the iron whip). Kawalya threatens to use the AK 47 to defend her right to love the man of her choice. Performing *Semuwemba*, she rejects Semuwemba's seductive approaches and uses the characteristics of the folksong, for example, figurative language and implicit statements, to assert her womanhood and to warn him to stop being promiscuous (*owewuwo akumala beera nooyo, Semuwemba; bwosindika emmotoka notagibuukira weyitaki ku guno omulembe*). The call and response in her song draws on indigenous performance traditions seeking to involve the audience in the dialogue/discussion; draw on their views, and pass a verdict that incriminates Semuwemba as an undesirable character whose behaviour does not befit his position in society. *Emmere Essiridde*, in which Kawalya is castigated by her partner who threatens to divorce her because her food is always burnt, shows two young girls perform a dance that makes a subversive statement contradicting the male-centered lyrics. Kawalya rebuffs and dares him to carry through his threats. The notion of dance as a form of resistance is characteristic of popular performances which are overtly socio-political theatre, incorporating satirical aspects fashioned on *Baakisimba* dance, and dance songs that carry explicit e

mance revolved around them and they had the power to deconstruct song lyrics and dance movements, to make political statements. The Ganda tradition of ending every festive gathering with a dance, *Bakisimba*, is similar to what Moser notes of Peru, 'clearly reminiscent of Bakhitinian carnival' (2003). James Scott, in 'Domination and the Arts of Resistance' refers to the "hidden transcript" (in Rose, 1994:100) of resistance performance art forms and popular performance that is evident in the

*Baakisimba* indigenous folk dance song accompaniments. The dance is usually accompanied by a song usually composed of a selection of short verses on various topics whose apparently nonsensical topics are dramatized by female dancers, each marking a different movement in the dance. Songs, led by female singers, entertain, exaggerate, invert and parody, thus making socio-political statements. Because of the loose structure of the songs the performers extemporise and improvise to engage with current socio-political discourses. The enhancement of dancing styles is defined by sampling, where a number of songs are strung together. Sampling is fundamental in this performance but it also underlines fragmentation, which is a quality of dance songs, especially because dance movements require the singer to change lyrics to fit the pace of the dance. She is, therefore, able to string together several songs covering multiple themes and issues. A typical sequence may include: *Ndeeta amazina ga ssebo*, the opening formula dedicates the dance to the king or chief guest(s), *Amazina nseetula maseetule*, that accompanies the display of graceful feet movements as well as an agile dancer's body, *Byazze Kuzina* deliberately insults male audiences who are glum faced and lazy, and *Walulumba*, *Kyalema Nakato e Kawanda*, accompanies seductive movements.

*Kyalema Nakato e Kawanda*  
*Aaa Kyalema*  
*Laba Kyalema Nakato e Kawanda*  
*Sebbo Owe Ngalabi gwe gikooneko*  
*Aa Kyalema Nakato e Kawanda.*  
(Nakato met her match at Kawan's da  
She was overpowered  
Play more music  
Let us show her the gimmicks....)

The subtext describes the legendary Nakato, a woman reputed for her 'loose' character' but whose relationship and friendship with a particular oversized partner had failed.

*Walulumba*, formerly performed at beer parties to satirize warriors through glorifying their narrow waists, worn thin by daggers which they carried everyday, mimes and alludes to the slender figure of the wasp.

*Walulumba*  
*Ekikutambuza*  
*Nga odduula, Walulumba?*  
*Ge mateeka g'obusimooni.*  
*Walulumba,*  
*Ektakukenduula enkende ki?*  
*Walulumba ...*  
(*Walulumba, why do you brag?*  
*Blame my wealth*)

Walulumba, why is our waist worn thin?  
Blame my dagger  
Walulumba ...)

Female dancers, however, physically interpret the lyrics, pressing their stomachs close to the spine, stretching upwards, and comically dancing round the stage. The scene is made more farcical by dancers who are too fat to 'shape up' their figures. The performers, in a semi-tranced state, clown, become caricatures (*beekola obusolo*) and deliberately dance awkwardly in order to show off their agility. In performance, female dancers, who rule supreme in the Ganda dance arena, publicly display defiance through the exhibition of physical bodily expressive movements which challenge the male audience's notion of female sexuality, pleasure and their rights to desire. The female dancers' dominance of the performance space in dance is further confirmed by Nanyonga-Tamusuza commenting on Baakisimba dance aesthetics: "The wriggling of the waist and the quivering of the buttocks...is what excites the men." (Nanyonga-Tamusuza, 2006:72). Lead singers are women and together with the instrumentalists demand the attention of the audience 'winning their admiration', and the latter flock to the stage to reward them with money.

Similar to what Tricia Rose observes about the performance of rap music in America, the Ugandan audience is a partner in the performance discourse. (1994: 163-66) Spontaneity is shown by the constant change of humorous dance song tunes, most of which have social, historical or sacred significance. C. Kleymeyer comments that 'the impact of these performances lie ...with the symbolic potency of making one's voice heard in a public space' (1994: 29). The act of performance engages performer and audience in a democratic dialogue and can engender aspects of resistance, particularly with the disenfranchised community. People will turn to different forms of cultural expression to make their voice heard, using the body, voice, words and actions. While most women performing in indigenous languages focused on male sexual exploitation and sexuality, it is arguable whether (western educated) female dramatists, such as Zirimu and Mbowa who used local and foreign language mediums, attempted to appropriate indigenous popular performance genres, styles and forms. Zirimu (1976) states that the formation of Ngoma Players, the first Ugandan group performing in English, was inspired by the earthshaking dance performance of a group of children that included three brothers who "really danced like an earthquake . . .to the point of lifting people out of their seats" (*nga bazina ne wotudde nosituka*). These women began to use indigenous forms as a means of counteracting the European dominated theatre and performance forms in Uganda. The loosely scripted musical plays can be identified with the birth of a new expressive form that asserts gender equality and Ugandan centred performance forms. Women



characters within these plays, for example, in Zirimu's *Keeping up with The Mukasas* (1965) and *The Family Spear* (1973) are able to assert their rights, sexuality and humanness through liberal dialogue hitherto unseen in Uganda.

Women's expression of resistance reaches its climax in Mbowa's *Mother Uganda*, and her performance in *Maama Nalukalala* (1995), the Luganda version of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1986), the first official translation of a Brechtian play into an African Language (See Viv Gardner 2005: 175-188). The great breakthrough in the staging of resistance in popular theatre occurred in 1989 when Mbowa represented the voices of the Ugandans who had stayed at home during the years of oppression, and of women, in a radically different way from that of male popular theatre practitioners. The images and voices in this play are defiant, at once patriotic and romantic about their nation, identity and culture. The scenes in *Mother Uganda* depict songs, dances, and instrumentation that interface to project a community attempting to unite around Mother Uganda whose efforts are sabotaged by her son. The critical significance of Mbowa's *Mother Uganda and her Children* lies in the way it interrogates the post Idi Amin/post-Obote 2 events that have witnessed the abuses of human rights. It is about mothers representing resistance, the country crying out, women who are *stayees*, and it is also about ethnic consciousness. For example, in one scene when the woman comes to ask her husband for money to buy food he beats her up. She escapes to her parents-in-law's home and returns with her mother-in-law, but her husband this time physically abuses his mother, Mother Uganda, and tears up her clothes that symbolises the Ugandan flag. He argues that since he paid bride price his wife should not demand for money for her upkeep. Mbowa, therefore, appeals to everybody to respect Mother Uganda, human rights, women's rights and ethnic consciousness. The setting and themes of the play are similar to that of male playwrights of the time but the women characters are stronger, and they take leading roles. Mbowa does not draw solely on singular Ganda popular performance idioms but excavates nation-wide ethnic popular performance forms, which in itself is an act of resistance. Mbowa, herself born of mixed parentage of a migrant Munyarwanda mother and a Ugandan father, shows no conflict of identity, but captures the violence and brutality of ethnic conflicts. She depicts the ironies and pains of the gun culture as it develops in postindependent Uganda, particularly the pains of women as they witness their sons turning guns on them, and more specifically destroying their own homes. We should note that, for ethnic reasons, apart from festivals, performances in indigenous languages, especially in Buganda, resisted scenes which staged songs and dances from other ethnic groups. Until Idi Amin came to power, apart from Byron Kawadwa, experiments in this area were left to English language performers and directors. Mbowa can therefore be regarded as the first major female

performer to voice resistance in postIdi Amin Uganda.

Mbowa's work is similar to that of her contemporary, Zirimu, who sought to provoke through her theatre practice. Both Mbowa and Zirimu, and other women who perform in male companies, have been able to deliver their messages because they have either been economically independent or remained single, or both as is the case with Mbowa. It is worth noting that they started their work outside the discursive space of the National Theatre, a colonial space dominated by Europeans. Zirimu's views on the relationship of theatre with society, her concept of *obuntubulamu* (humanness), and controversial debates on gender issues, are set out in her published critical essays, plays and poetry (for example see Ngoma Newsletter N.L. 6/76). She sought to assert herself in a still predominantly male world, and constantly challenged the view of society on the position of women by creating positive female characters. Preeminent in her thematic concerns is the changing role of women. Zirimu, nicknamed the 'Dare Devil', staged conscious-driven performances addressing issues of identity, gender, ethnicity and nationalism. When the present writer interviewed her in 1980, soon after her appointment as Uganda's High Commissioner to Nigeria, she remarked, "I will make our embassy the maddest and I will take everybody by storm". Zirimu's writing and work in experimental performance can be located within a network of contestations and discourses that enable her to transgress the boundaries of gender. Zirimu was the first Ugandan theatre artist to acknowledge the link between performance, audience response and performance reviews (Zirimu, 1976). Truth, humaneness, and harmony in society underline the means by which theatre artists like Zirimu propagate the creation of a:

Meaningful, cohesive [post-independent] community, in which the individual is free to express the self and develop what is within him or her, a community in which the individual feels important, accepted, wanted and valued." (Zirimu, 1977)

In the *Family Spear* she focuses on the conflict the ritual of sex sacrifice in the relationship between Birungi and Muwesi, her father-in-law, a ritual which allows her father-in-law to sleep with her before her husband. The strong minded women and sturdy characters in her writing symbolically displace the image of women as sexual objects held by men like Muwesi. At the root of the conflict is the ritual sex sacrifice expected from Birungi, which allows her father-in-law to sleep with her before her husband. Nakidde, his mother, the most progressive woman in the homestead, rejects both her husband demanding this right, and Muwesi's aunt's insistence on the old ritual of the young brides renewing the sexual powers of their aging father-in-laws through ritual sex. Birungi's dilemma would

be shared by various members of the audience but her strong personality helps her resolve the conflict. Muwesi's rejection of the family spear symbolizes the rejection of retrogressive traditional rituals. Both here and in the most popular of her published short stories, 'The Hen and the Ground Nuts', Zirimu challenges the stereotype concept of 'woman' by presenting her alternatives in Nakidde and Birungi. Their strong-minded and sturdy characters symbolically displace the image of the sexual mettle in women expected by Muwesi's father. In this play Zirimu addresses the question of gender, seeking to propose a different role for women in postcolonial Uganda. *When the Hunchback Made Rain* (1975), just like the other works of Zirimu, demonstrates that the only hope for the reinstatement of moral sanity depends on a few brave individuals who will be able to lead the communal voice against retrogressive customs and tyranny.

There has emerged no single female director or stage performer, after Rose Mbowe and Elvania Zirimu, though it is possible to see a variety of performers responding to everyday issues in the *Kadongo Kamu* genre, which draws on the traditional *Abadongo* forms and styles. But this theatre form is still synonymous with male performers, who continue to control its production and focus on themes, and visual narratives that favour a patriarchal audience. Nevertheless, in the style of oral and performance tradition of *Abadongo*, they narrate the socio-political problems of their communities, the impact of modernity on culture, poverty, women and children's abuse, and ethnic consciousness.

Ugandan women's participation in performance impacts on contested normative discourses of gender and sexuality. While participating with male artists, they have challenged sexism expressed by men and asserted their rights to equality in all sectors of life. Voices of women highlighted above reveal some knowledge of the relationship between performance and resistance, particularly evident when combating the 'madness' euphemistically referred to in Uganda as *Oboteism* and *Aminism* that describe the systems that developed in the respective regimes of Obote and Amin.

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