

**More than just Musical Plays: Intersections of Politics and Folklore in
Byron Kawadwa's Theatre.**

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Abstract

A lot has been written about Byron Kawadwa's work and its contribution towards developing and Ugandanising the Kampala theatre scene and bringing into it a critical element - Kawadwa was a playwright, actor and director, and Director of the National Cultural Centre, whose play, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko (Song of Wankoko)*, represented Uganda at the Festival of African culture (*FESTAC 1977*) in Nigeria. This paper attempts to explain why since independence, Byron Kawadwa is the most significant playwright in Ugandan theatre, and what makes his contribution distinct as both a playwright and director.

Introduction

Rose Mbowa, writing in *Bayreuth African Studies Series* states,

"Byron Kawadwa forged theatre in Uganda into a modern and politically relevant form, whose impact was stronger and more immediate than theatre in English" (1999: 244-5).

Byron Kawadwa practised theatre beginning in the pre-independence period through to the height of Idi Amin's reign. He was born in 1937, a time when no formal theatre, in the Western sense, apart from expatriate drama based on classical European and Indian drama, existed in Uganda. In an interview with the present writer Wycliff Kiyingi (2006) noted that his play, *Pio Mberence Kamulali* (1954), satirising postcolonial chiefs, was the first 'formal' indigenous play to be staged in a community centre.

Kawadwa was murdered by Idi Amin's State Research Bureau agents in 1977, a year marked by the largest celebration of African Arts in Lagos, Nigeria. Through his work as playwright, director, actor, teacher, and administrator – appointed Artistic Director of the National Cultural Centre in 1973 - and co-founder of Kampala City Players Kwadwa was able to create a distinctive contemporary Ugandan theatre.–As well as contributing to the creation of a new theatre genre, 'musical plays', which drew on the communal experiences of the audiences, Kawadwa influenced the whole content of ethnically based popular theatre in Uganda.

Historical Context

In order to understand the development of Kawadwa's theatre I have to contextualise it within Uganda's political history. Following the arrival of the Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries in Buganda, in 1877, religious wars broke out forcing changes of power in the royal palace. King Mwanga II violently killed Christian converts opposed to his reign. Although the victims were originally "Baganda Martyrs", with time they have come to be perceived as Uganda Martyrs and, as Ronald Kassimir notes in "Complex Martyrs: Symbols of Catholic Church Transformation and Political Differentiation in Uganda" (1991: 357-382, the only tangible national symbol. By 1950, a cross-section of the community had started agitating for independence from colonial rule. At the constitutional Independence in 1962, Apollo Milton Obote was the first Prime Minister of Uganda specifically because of the fragile ethnic alliance between his Uganda Peoples Congress (UPC) and Kabaka Yekka (KY), literally translated, the King Only, a party headed by the Kabaka (King) of Buganda. Unfortunately, the alliance soon became a prey to the evils of ethnicity and religious differences climaxing in the crises of 1964, 1965, and subsequently the Kabaka's Crisis and Battle of Mengo (1966). The 1966 invasion of Mengo Palace by government forces and the 1967 Republican Constitution that replaced the 1962 independence constitution signified that political freedom had ended, as had cultural leaders' power and privileges.

In the intervening period between 1966 and Idi Amin's coup in 1971, theatre artists such as Robert Serumaga, Wyclif Kiyingi and Byron Kawadwa expressed their anguish at the repressive republican government of Obote through staging artistic performances. Serumaga and Kawadwa experimented with traditional folk forms using them as symbols to signify the discontent in society. Amin's barrage against

imperialism, and the sense of 'state adulthood' he blindly effected among Ugandans, through his declaration of the 'Economic War', indirectly affected theatre and church institutions. For instance, both the Anglican (1977) and Roman Catholic Church's (1979) centenary celebrations of the Baganda Martyrs were largely sponsored by Amin. This cultural revival – music, dance, drama, and traditional games, the Baganda culture at the arrival of missionaries' pageantries - inadvertently legitimised the use of indigenous performance genres as weapons of resistance. For, under the pretext of criticising King Mwangwa's brutalities performers implicitly protested against Amin's brutalities. Where Amin's terror temporarily alleviated ethnic differences, making people more Ugandan than before, the second Obote-UPC (1980-1985) government's sectarian killings renewed ethnic hostility and a politically motivated theatre.

Kawadwa and Theatre

Between 1969 and 1975, Kawadwa wrote and directed a number of plays based on Ugandan folklore, political and social experiences. These include *Serwajja Okwota* (1966), a translation of Moliere's *The Miser*, *Sitakange* (1969), *St Lwanga* (1969), *Makula ga Kulabako* (Kulabako's Beauty, 1970), Wole Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero*, *Mitaafu* (1970), *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (Song of Wankoko, 1971), the latter three musical plays were in collaboration with the music composer, Wassanyi Sserukenya. In these plays, Kawadwa underlines familial and cultural virtues and communal strengths as the best means of challenging anarchy. In his plays, written before Idi Amin's ascendancy to power, historical facts are invested with literary significance and up-dated for purposes of contemporary relevance. Through a combination of dialogue, songs, actions and other aspects of oral performance, the plays incorporate politically defiant comments.

For Kawadwa, foregrounding and asserting his Kiganda identity inspired his theatre practice. He used the royal institution as a metaphor to criticize the political status quo because within the context of which he worked his audiences could identify with the institution. The abolition of the Buganda kingdom made it easy to draw on it for inspiration without the playwright jeopardizing his personal security. Further, the palace setting was easy to use as a platform for criticism: Baganda political intrigues had been widely duplicated in national politics, therefore, while the plays may have feudal themes they draw implicit parallels with contemporary events. *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, *Makula ga Kulabako*, and *St Lwanga* highlight the political and cultural consciousness prevalent in

Buganda beginning around 1966; they also emphasise familial and cultural virtues as well as communal strengths as the best means of challenging tyranny. *Serwajja Okwota* is “a proverbial title, the story of a lean, hungry dog that came to warm itself by somebody’s fire but drove the owner and usurped the space all to himself” (Mbowa, 1994: 123-135). The comedic content of *Makula ga Kulabako* is graphically illustrated by the elderly fisherman, Semuvubi, a rich and verbose suitor who would be rejected by Princess Kulabako in preference for a poor but good-looking palace dancer. Whereas *Makula ga Kulabako* raises no direct political issues, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, informed by internal Baganda political intrigues, draws parallels with contemporary national events. The play has had four major productions – 1971, 1977, 1989 and 2006. While there have not been any structural and major ideological changes, for historical reasons successive directors have adjusted its ideological thrust to address contemporary socio-political conditions. And, although by 1989 Uganda was experiencing a political transformation from military dictatorships to the National Resistance Movement’s grass-root ‘no-party’ politics, the play’s views on politicians are still relevant.

Significantly, in Kawadwa’s plays, characters that appear self-centred and oblivious to the needs of other people symbolise the connection to destructive indigenous spirits of possession. John C. Sekamwa (1990) describes the act of possession in Kiganda indigenous rituals as a deliberate plugging of the human speech chords of the medium, and the total invasion and involuntary occupation of the individual by the spirits. In this state, the medium is transformed into a ‘non-being’; if the spirits are hostile, or free lance (*emyoyo gi nakyeyitize*), they may use him to harm or abuse his audience. However, the presence of ‘good’ spirits will influence his role as act as a counsellor, judge, seer and philosopher of the community. Hence, understanding the relationship between the individual and society, the ruler and the ruled, Kawadwa articulates the cracks in these relationships through the trope of madness and possession. In *St. Lwanga*, Mukajjanga, King Mwanga II’s chief executioner, is the first creation of a type of character that becomes central in his plays. These characters, for example, Semuvubi in *Makula ga Kulabako*, and Wankoko in *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, appear possessed or entranced, oblivious of the reality of their surroundings. Madness, exemplified by attributes such as retribution, *schadenfreude*, fickleness, treachery, the ‘bandwagon phenomenon’ shared by many Ugandan communities, is identifiable in the themes of these plays. Christopher Wrigley (1996) underlines these traits in the character of the Baganda

when he hints at the political intrigues in the King's palace stating, "the royal court was a place of peril as well as opportunity" (239).

These plays represent Kawadwa's social and political concerns while at the same time demonstrating his comedic and satirical skills. I will examine *St Lwanga* and *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* in detail to show how politics, religion and ethnicity affect the community; in addition, the essay will show Kawadwa's creative use of indigenous folklore, performance and history of Uganda.

St. Lwanga

Lord Fredrick Lugard, incensed by King (Kabaka) Mwangi's belligerent attitude wrote in his diary,

"For my part I *detest* both having him here, or going to him. I have never made blood-brotherhood as he wished. We are on the best of terms but he is a murderer, and a public and open Sodomite – a mean despicable brute, and a notorious coward." (1959. p, 234)

This statement sums up Lugard's impression of King Mwangi when the former arrived in Uganda in 1889 as the representative of the Imperial British East African Company. Buganda was engulfed in religious conflicts as confirmed by Mbowa (1994) when she states, "the period between the arrival of the missionaries in 1877 and the Buganda Agreement of 1900, was a period of intense power struggle between the chiefs and the king, Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Moslems, and of course, the British." The after effects of the religious wars included the partition of Buganda and the division of political offices in accordance with religious beliefs. *St. Lwanga*, the historical play written to celebrate Pope Paul VI's visit to consecrate the Uganda martyrs' shrine at Namugongo in 1969 (Kassimir, 1991: 357-382), depicts Mwangi's reign, highlighting the forces responsible for sparking off the holocaust that culminated in the burning of fifty boys on June 3, 1886. Apart from its purely religious relevance - focusing on the period of the execution of Christian converts in Buganda between 1885 and 1889 - the play analyses the background to the politicisation of religion in Uganda. The conflict is between Katikkiro (Prime Minister) Mukasa, *Abaami* (chiefs) and *Abataka* (clan leaders) manoeuvring to keep their positions on one hand and Mwangi with his young warriors on the other. Caught in between are the Christian missionaries and their converts. *St. Lwanga* places Mwangi in the context of the political intrigues of the time, therefore, emphasizing

the religious factor in Ugandan politics. The massacres were the cause of Mwanganga's deposition that resulted in the religious wars of 1886 to 1889.

At the time of the Christian executions Mwanganga's *abapere*, the "tarnished" (John Iliffe, 2005) or vigilantes, so called because of their anti-social violent behaviour, eroded the influence of the old traditional chiefs. These young and arrogant gangs caused chaos in Buganda and "spared no one except themselves" (M.S. Kiwanuka, 1971: 198-201). The clan leaders plundered and humiliated by *abapere*, their privileges as trustees of traditional religion eroded by Mwanganga's indifference to *lubaale* (spirit worship), confronted the king with their grievances. Kawadwa depicts Mwanganga as a victim of his own nature, of political machinations of his father's old chiefs, religious rivalries and colonial political conflicts. Mwanganga II's interest in women was in doubt since he did not father a child until he was twenty-nine. His homosexual practices - opposed by European missionaries, Christian converts and Baganda elders alike - were a source of conflicts. Balikuddembe, the chief page (servant), thought to be a turncoat by Mwanganga, expresses society's concern at his amorous exploits:

Balikuddembe: In our language, we describe some actions as shameful, immoral, filthy.... I am sure, my lord, you know the circumstances in which these words are applied Some of these foreigners may not have some of these concepts in their customs. Therefore, my lord, we should not emulate them wholesale...lest your behaviour embarrasses people. (St. *Lwanga*, p. 11)

By judging his morality, Balikuddembe, "*omuddu obuddu*" (p. 12), a mere slave to Mwanganga, invokes his anger and pays with his life.

Mwanganga, driven by the desire to be master in his own house and protect the sovereignty of his country, engages our attention in a soliloquy in which he debates alternative routes to end the political crises in the nation. Living in fear of losing his political power, his ambition threatened by the increasing influence of the "Bloody Whites" in his palace, he avenges himself by killing the pages. In the final scene, the ugly humour contrived by the actions of the guards singing, dancing and brandishing their weapons - spears, sticks and machetes - around the burning converts underlines the gruesomeness of the scene which echoes Uganda's experience under both Amin and Obote 2 regimes. Kawadwa could not have known what was to happen when he wrote the play in which scenes provoking the violent past of Buganda equates with the present. For instance, Kassimir (1991) notes the "tragic irony" of martyrs

on contemporary Ugandan history. Worth mention here is the 1984 Namugongo Massacre in which the government deployed soldiers in Namugongo where both Protestant and Roman Catholic martyr's shrines are located. By the time they left, they had not only killed the residents including the Rector of the Anglican Seminary but had desecrated a local mosque where they butchered pigs looted from local farms.

Kawadwa does not treat the story of the martyrs fanatically but engages us in a balanced assessment of the conflicts (religious and political) which led to the massacres. Moreover, as Mbowa states, "Kawadwa's view of history is revisionist in the sense that he rejects the British colonialist version of history, but he also ascribes the decline of the Buganda monarchy then and now (1966) to the failure of African political leadership" (Mbowa, 1999). Mwangwa and the martyrs are presented in contrasting positions for while some people consider Mwangwa as worthy of compassion others draw similarities between him and Idi Amin. In the light of contemporary politics, martyrs are symbols of unity as well as models of sacrifice. For, just as Kawadwa constructs the martyrdom symbol into what Kassimir (1991) has described as a relevant "model of self-sacrifice" and resistance in a contemporary Uganda steeped in political violence, so do many Ugandans as evidenced in President Yoweri Museveni's comparison (in 1986) of Mwangwa's despotic rule to the lived violence of recent regimes. At the celebration of the martyrs' centenary in 1986, he called the martyrs an inspiration to Ugandans especially because of their role and as Kassimir states, as "resisters in the face of tyranny and as activists for human rights".

Oluylimba lwa Wankoko (Song of Wankoko)

A political satire, *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko* is committed to revolutionary struggle. The success of the play depends as much upon the understanding of the political narratives of Uganda as on a shared understanding of the oral performance traditions, so that the dialogue between them transforms the play into a contemporary folktale. For instance, when I worked with Sserukenya on the 1989 production, music rehearsals were an opportunity to interrogate indigenous popular performance forms, not to rehearse performance into fixed roles but to "harness" their creativity and positive exhibitionism.

Whereas the Idi Amin years were characterized by decrees and *Legal Notices* Milton Obote's first UPC government was identifiable with "Documents" and "Declarations", a trend similar to the movements in Tanzania and Zambia at this time. *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko* is a response to

the post-independent crises sparked off by Uganda's first Prime Minister, Milton Obote's attempts at socio-political engineering. The *Move to the Left* (Peter Willets, 1975: 278 – 299) in particular is a suite of proclamations that aimed to make Uganda a republican state and give it more socialist leanings. By 1970, Obote's aggressive marketing of socialist polities, which were in sink with his allies in Tanzania and Zambia, had already alienated a cross-section of the population particularly because they threatened indigenous cultural values. Aimed at introducing self-reliance policies and uplifting the underrepresented commoners, the policies exacerbated the relationship between Ugandans from the northern regions and the rest of Uganda. In the play, Kawadwa depicts a government at odds with traditional institutions. He presents an ambitious commoner whose campaign for change in all aspects of life does not carry the community. Wrigley has argued that in Buganda there was no strict class society, therefore, as Wrigley states, "large numbers of individuals were constantly climbing or falling off the ladder of power and status" (1996: 239). When the play was staged at the Second African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos in 1977, Amin's regime had reached its apogee and he was desperately clinging on to power. His government was under threat from freedom fighters whose abortive invasion via Tanzania had resulted in mass arrests, 'disappearances' and public executions (firing squad).

In this play, Kawadwa conveniently uses the colonized Buganda state, Buddu, Wankoko's (the Cock's) place of origin, which has both political and social significance in Buganda as the analogy for Uganda. Separated from the rest of Buganda by the river Katonga, it was "the last major addition to the territory of the pre-colonial [Buganda] state" (see Wrigley, 1994: 218) but has both political and social significance in Buganda. Wrigley notes that in "post-colonial politics" there has been disagreement between Buddu and the rest of Buganda because as Wrigley states, "it was the largest district to be assigned to the Catholic party in the early colonial settlement; and was then in some degree alienated from the continuing Protestant ascendancy" (218-219). The political alliances between Muslims and Protestants (1888-89) formed to fight the religious wars during Mwanga's period had relegated the Roman Catholic converts to Buddu. Apart from historical differences, Buddu supports the Democratic Party (DP) whose membership until recently has remained predominantly Roman Catholic; and in some quarters it is regarded as anti-aristocratic. Consequently, while superficially, the confrontation is between "*banaBuddu*" (p 6) - residents

of Buddu County - and the rest of the Baganda community, at the national level it represents the confrontation between feudal institutions and republicanism. Therefore, when Wankoko uses a regional Luganda dialect, *LunaBuddu*, Kawadwa is playing with linguistic variations to echo ethnic differences.

The plot centres on Barungi, a beautiful princess from a foreign country, Tooro, resident in the palace. Imagining *olubiri* (the palace) as the *ekibuga* (urban centre), or, a pre/post-colonial post as a contested space separated by social, military and political boundaries, Kawadwa represents the palace as a political island in the country. It is a place where the working classes, such as Wankoko and Nkwale (the Partridge) his companion, can define their identity, and engage in discourses of their consciousness. When Wankoko and Nkwale come to pay homage to the king, the palace workers joyfully welcome their arrival because their liveliness breaks up the monotonous chores of the palace workers. Nkwale symbolises hangers-on, similar to members of the General Service, Special Service (intelligence services in Obote and Amin governments), and the Special Forces, (a paramilitary police wing in Obote's governments). Wankoko, rejecting the submissiveness of the workers, remonstrates with the palace guards, an offence that leads to his arrest. Prince Suuna saves him with the hope that he will woo on his behalf Barungi, a beautiful princess from Tooro. Suuna is shy, and Wankoko becomes indispensable to him as a go-between. Wankoko takes advantage of this friendship to further his own career in several ways: first, by wooing Barungi for himself instead of Suuna; by using Suuna's trust to insinuate himself into the workers' confidence, thus gaining administrative ascendancy; and lastly, by ousting Suuna from his father's favour. The King disowns Suuna and expels him from the palace. Barungi, who from the beginning has been suspicious of Wankoko's ambitious designs, follows Suuna to the forest and returns to the King determined to expose Wankoko's treachery. The King orders Wankoko's arrest, pardons Suuna and sanctions his wedding to Barungi. After his arrest, the guards tie Wankoko with ropes and evict him from the palace.

Wankoko dominates the play right from the beginning when, at his entrance he immediately provokes a quarrel with a member of the audience accusing him of disgracing indigenous cultural and religious values. The audience, distracted by a sharp exchange of voices, turns to see a stout, fierce, unshaven man, wearing a tattered coat and carrying a small bundle of his belongings. He marches to stage centre and brings life to the chorus with a single command, "*Kale tutandike*" (Let us start, p, 1)

following which act he animates the chorus; even frivolously dancing with some of the women. At this point, the “initiate audience” (Martin Banham, 1990) will know that in the past Wankoko’s type brought relief and humour to the palace as clowns, with the privilege even to tease (with reserve) royalty without provoking their wrath. In this scene, Kawadwa details the sequence of movements in the stage directions to underline Wankoko and Nkwale’s provocative attitude. Dissatisfied with the applause at the end of his performance, Wankoko unashamedly demands more from both cast and the audience.

Wankoko: (*Inviting everybody, including the audience to clap*) I am grateful for this reception. Nevertheless, please, give me a more befitting welcome:
(*Olujimba lwa Wankoko, p, 1*)

Both men are intent on undermining the King’s power and his glorification by the commoners. Through Wankoko’s character, the play establishes a link between past and present, a connection between absolute monarchical rule and political dictatorships. He embarks on his mission, first, by scorning a guard who attempts to restrict his freedom of speech:

Wankoko: (*Cynical*) I was merely noting the admirably beautiful tyranny pervading this palace.
(*Olujimba lwa Wankoko, p, 8*).

This defiance culminates in the song, “*Ffena Twenkana*” (We Are Equal, p, 9), restating his belief in equality and social justice. The song not only undermines the notion of collective allegiance to the King but also belies his opposition to undemocratic institutions. In performance, there is a disjunction between the words of the song and his gestures, movements and voice inflections. He rejects the submissiveness of the workers, remonstrates with the palace guards and they arrest him on felony charges relating to his disrespect of the King.

Kawadwa draws parallels between Suuna’s temporary banishment to the forest and the experiences of the exiled King Mutesa II, also a former President of Uganda. Barungi, suspicious of Wankoko’s ambitious designs, is determined to expose the latter’s treachery. Once the King knows the truth, he pardons Suuna, orders Wankoko’s arrest, and sanctions Suuna and Barungi’s wedding.

The audience’s ability to engage and identify with Kawadwa’s play depends on the performer’s portrayal of the characters and use of

gestures; in addition to this, is his employment of the trope of madness to explore the gendered and ethnic politics of resistance. Wankoko, whose origins are dubious, fits his name. Whereas elsewhere Wankoko snubs the guards, dismissing their assumption that every name must belong to a clan, on this occasion using the title song, "Wankoko" (p, 1) relates the origin to his relentless search for trouble spots. Like the ferocious cock, Wankoko claims to use his over-grown claw to expose and eliminate "political" trouble spots. He boastfully sings, "...okusimbula ejjindu...buli omu aba ssanyu lye," ('The moment I disengage my claw, everybody is joyful', p 1). The initiate audience may note the associations attached to the claw as a lethal weapon or a phallic symbol. Since only full-grown cocks may possess a sharp claw, Wankoko's statement indirectly refers to his survival instincts. In the 1989 production, Wankoko (Stephen Luswata) stuck two thumbs (claws) on either side of an actress to emphasize the character of Wankoko, and the image of the claw. In addition, the claw relates to Wankoko's rhetoric in which lies his power in the play. There are two possible explanations for Kawadwa's choice of this name. First, the—name originates from the Luganda proverb, "Wankoko by'azaala bye bimumunula", which literally means, "What Wankoko produces serves as his ransom". Second, he may have been drawing on the humour contrived by the corrupted version of Sir Keith Hancock's name (the Chairman of the 1955 Buganda Constitution Committee) by the Baganda. As noted by D. A Low in *Buganda in Modern History* (1971: 118), Luganda has no "H" sound; therefore, "Hancock" became "Wankock" or "Wankoko" meaning chicken, thus creating an amusing pun.

The play illustrates Kawadwa's exploration of folklore to confront authoritarian political regimes. In an interview with the present writer in 1991, Margaret Macpherson observed that while basing the action of the play on snippets of Baganda fables and their dramatisation, he alludes to two apparently deluded post-independent rulers, Obote (1962-72, 1980-86) and Amin (1972-79). Wankoko's search to articulate himself in the world as both subject and citizen takes him on a journey (through a series of political struggles) that ends in banishment into exile, away from the country where only the privileged by birth may enjoy the fruits of independence. His confrontation with indigenous power structures as well as his rupture with tradition evokes specific cultural memories of resistance and uprisings against oppression and exploitation. The play deals with the relationship between the ruler and the peasant ('common man'). It shows that theatre can rehearse revolutionary changes although

Wankoko's revolution aborts and the palace goes back to routine, the workers having forsaken his "re-imagined" shared communal society. His understanding of the oppressive indigenous institutions is at the heart of his cosmetic reforms but the motives are self-centred. At the root of this conflict are the concepts of *ekitiibwa* (decorum) and *obuntubulamu* (humaneness), prerequisites for communal respectability in Buganda. Although he is initially courteous, Wankoko shocks the community by his blatant self-seeking and disrespectful behaviour, thus highlighting the contrast between the feudal traditional government of the kingdoms and the brashness of the Obote government. He is indifferent to court ethics and will be decorous only if he stands to profit from the situation, thus evoking critical remarks from the guards and workers alike. The guards' response to Wankoko's offensive behaviour (quite normal in Buganda, but implicitly offensive to other people), is a statement questioning his identity, that seems more snobbish to an egalitarian society than to an aristocratic one, "*Ya'ni oyo baaba? Ye ngamba mwana w'ani oyo?*" (What is his family background? Whose son is he? p, 19). Similar to 'political lunatics' of his type, Wankoko uses Nkwale to propagate his revolution. Nkwale, small, fast, and seemingly slippery, is the *muleebeesi* (cheerleader), his co-bandit, praising him at every turn and silencing the opposition.

By targeting "*ennaku*" (hardships, p, 8), which implicitly refers to various forms of communal oppression and poverty, Kawadwa identifies with the shared destiny of the audience. The essence of Wankoko's argument is the need for collective action against oppression currently dominating the workers' lives. He expresses disgust at the workers' submission to tyranny that, as Nkwale alleges, is spreading throughout the palace like "*obuloolo*" (fowl flees, p, 19). Nkwale swears to confront and quash tyranny like "*ttingatinga enyiga mugoya*" (a steamroller pulping the blind worm, p, 19).

The Political Scene

Act I Scene Four, referred to as 'the political scene' by the original cast, is a key scene in the play because it provides the structure and ideational link between feudal and republican governments and peace and anarchy. Kawadwa's most cogent expression of his opposition to political dictatorship, it alludes to *Move to the Left Pronouncements* including the *Common Man's Charter*, *The Nakivubo Pronouncement* and *Document No. 5. The Common Man's Charter* (1969) was the first document of the series of five and was meant to address the 1966 events,

particularly attacking feudalism, tribalism and colonialism. *Document No 2* proposed The National Service (1969); *Document Number Three, The Move to the Left* or *The Communication from the Chair* (1970), created a unified Civil Service. *Document Number Four* or *The Nakivubo Pronouncement* (1970) announced the nationalization of all imports and exports, a 60 per cent control of oil companies, banks and mines, *Document Number Five* or *Proposals for New Methods of Election of Representatives of the People to Parliament* (1970). The latter introduced proportional representation or what he called 'three plus one', a method of election requiring a candidate to stand and win elections in his own constituency plus three others in the country (see Willets, 1975: 278- 299). At their launch, the government banned all political parties apart from UPC.

Wankoko's performance parodies political rallies as he constructs a narrative that reveals his scheming skills and enables him to persuade the chorus to join his revolution. His speech draws on contemporary political catch phrases, clichés, euphemisms and slang to make the message immediate to the audience and insinuate the empty rhetoric of contemporary leaders. Each utterance is a subversive political statement or "*pokopoko*" (p 19) awakening the audience to the real meaning of their oppression. Nkwale, insultingly referring to the workers as "sweepers, window cleaners, and the suffering lot" introduces Wankoko as their comrade "*ekitangaala ky'enjuba evaayo*", (the new dawn, p, 19). The Wankoko who appears to address the workers is a transformed character, callous, determined and uncompromising but looking like a political prophet as, for instance, when responding to the workers' ecstatic welcome he states, "*buli omu mugudde mu kifuba*" (Everyone, please accept my warm embrace, p 20), an expression for a symbolic collective embrace to canvass their support. He shows a cunning understanding of crowd politics that enables him to exploit an occasion at once. His verbal skills and cynical humour carry the day as he sees factionalism as the cause of their agony and uses the lemon grass straw broom, the symbol of their misery, to persuade them that their salvation lies in collective action. His argument is that while a child may easily snap a strand of grass, but strung together (to form a broom) they are strong; so a tyrannical ruler will fail to break a united workers' body. However, his motive is selfish, since he really wishes to gather the power in his hands, as we discover when he reads an already prepared document, which he purports to be "*Ekiwandiiko ekisooka*", (Their First Memorandum, p. 23). Wankoko asks the workers to endorse the memorandum and tells Suuna that it is a

collective palace workers document. It levies a tax of which he is to get the largest percentage as workers' leader; he appoints himself in charge of all palace appointments irrespective of the status of the worker; he levies a tax on the first salary of all newly appointed workers to meet his clothing allowance. For all his rhetoric about the workers' humanity and right of choice, his solutions to the workers' misery are farcical. He promises to supply them with "*Byekwesewa*" (p. 22) (a strong insecticide comparable to DDT, popularly used in the sixties to fumigate homes) to treat head lice, to dig wells in their courtyards, and tarmac paths leading to their houses and the wells. *Byekwesewa* was cheaper and stronger than DDT and the audience would be familiar with this insecticide. In this context, Wankoko's reference to an insecticide is double-edged. On one hand, it is an insult to the workers (who unfortunately miss its implication) because Wankoko is imputing that they are dirty. Using physical force, persuasion and rhetoric, Wankoko 'terrorizes' the workers into accepting his propositions.

Wankoko: Plenty of things (wealth or positive changes) are on the way. Ok. All those who are ready to work with me, please put up your hands. (*Most workers do not respond*) Did you hear what I said? (*Wankoko barks at the workers*) All those who say, **yes**, put up your hands.

Chorus: (*Only two or three workers raise their hands*)

Wankoko: (*Furiously, as he forcefully stretches the hands of the ones who have hitherto resisted giving him support. He commands them in Swahili and Luganda*) Everyone, hands up. *Juu* (Up). Both hands up.

Chorus: (*They all raise hands*)

Wankoko: Good. Well done. (*Cynical laughter*) Thank you for supporting me.

(*Olujimba Iwa Wankoko*, p. 24)

Music

The syncretic aesthetics rooted in the indigenous travelling popular performance traditions - the kinetic elements of music and dance - underpin the structure of the play. Call-and-response song (see Devon Boan, 1998: 263 - 271) frames the structure of interaction between Wankoko and the Chorus. Moreover, whereas in *Makula ga Kulabako*, music is topical and used emotively to express ordinary human desires

shared by the key characters, in *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko*, it is crucial in the thematic development of the play. Aesthetically, music and dance help Kawadwa to achieve dramatic unity and is an essential part of the whole. Songs performed by Wankoko himself or with the workers, and by other characters like Suuna are part of their action. "*Ffena Twenkana*"—dismisses social classifications in the community and "*Omuntu Muntu*" (Man is Man, p, 25), contrasts man with beasts and calls for equal treatment. "*Ffe Basajja ba Kabaka*" (We are the King's Men, p, 3), expresses allegiance to the king; "*Bamukwate*" (Arrest Him), illustrates the fickle nature of the workers (crowds) because they disown him after their support earlier in the play. "*Bakajjeeko*" (He has been deposed, p, 10), performed on the first occasion of Wankoko's arrest, and "*Wankoko Togasa*" (Wankoko, you are useless), sung towards the end of the play are again demonstrations of the unreliable nature of the crowd; workers celebrate Wankoko's downfall despite the support and praise accorded him on earlier occasions. "*Bamukwate*", (Arrest Him, p, 10), performed immediately after Wankoko's arrest, signifies society's verdict on Wankoko and politicians of his type. It is a litany of what Wankoko rejects as "*okuvunnama*" (feudalism, p, 25). Here, apart from raising questions about Wankoko's origin, the Chorus condemns his anti-social behaviour.

Chorus: His Majesty is 'husband' to us all.
That is why we kneel and prostrate when greeting him...
Why we never squat in his palace....
Whose son is he, he who is so disrespectful?
Where was he born....
We have a great inheritance... a strict code of conduct that the elders
taught us... The woman who sits indecently (with her legs apart or
crossed),
Brings poverty to the homestead.
A woman must never whistle...
Those are our customs.
So, who is this fellow to controvert them?
Arrest him. Lock him up-
(*Oluylimba lwa Wankoko*, p, 10)

Wankoko exposes his true character when he leads the chorus in the song, "*Ffena Twenkana*", a demand for equal rights.

Wankoko: Listen, we may not be like the Boss, but in this world, we are all equal. Why should a man...with brains...be oppressed... Why should a pretty woman be oppressed? ... If I were to die now, what would become of me? What would become of you if you were to die? What would you

tell God? What profits would you take back to him? What have you profited from the talent of a brain he gave you? ...you have sacrificed it... You have allowed yourself to be abused.... You are despised... You are exploited.... Who wants to go on living like this? (*pause*) This is my proposition: We are all equal.

Chorus: Yes. It is true. Let us all be equal.

(*Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko*, p, 9)

A good example of Kawadwa and Sserukenya's use of music is best articulated in Act I Scene Four when Wankoko after addressing the workers, teaches them "his" song, "*Omuntu Muntu*". The song urges the restitution of human dignity, and leadership with a human touch. Wankoko argues that unlike other animals, reptiles and birds, they share a common heritage for, their mothers, like his, suffered birth pangs; they speak, get angry, and experience hunger. In addition, since the physical features, behaviour, and status of insects, beasts and birds, differs from that of human beings the latter merit better treatment from politicians. Therefore, he urges the workers to wake up to their plight, wake up to reality, identify the cause of their oppression otherwise, they will all perish out of their own folly. The chorus of workers gradually transforms into caricatures of beasts, birds, insects, and worms as it sings the refrain, "*Ekiwuka*", (*The Insect*, p, 25). It is at once a collection of figures (masked figures) as well as a bunch of rebellious workers responding to Wankoko's impassioned statements.

Wankoko: Listen, no one was born to suffer; to be exploited by his fellow man. Are you human beings? Are you birds?

Chorus: Noo.

Wankoko: Are you Beasts? Are you Insects?

Chorus: Noo. We are human.

Wankoko: True. You are human beings. You are men and women. (*Breaks into a jig. The workers join him and they all dance to celebrate their liberation from tyranny*). Therefore, let us have change. Feudalism is old-fashioned. We must eradicate backwardness, corruption and bribery, nepotism, and beggary. Support Wankoko and you will be rewarded with wealth.

(*Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko*, p, 25)

John Conteh-Morgan (1994) comments that in traditional African drama, “[M]eaning is not prosaically represented in words alone but...finds “objective materialization” in movement, gesture, and sound” (p 12), are applicable to the production of this play. Throughout this performance as elsewhere in the play *Wankoko*, seemingly possessed, acts like a cock - pecking, clawing - and intimidating both the chorus and the audience as he draws freely from current physical gestures of contemporary politicians. However, these may differ from production to production. For example, during production that followed the 1989 liberation war *Wankoko*'s militaristic tone and posture was comparable to present day performances of political leaders. In drawing parallels between *Wankoko* and contemporary military leaders' behaviour and gestures, Kawadwa is attempting to reconstruct the audience's memory. Yvette Hutchison (2005) underscores this when she states, “Memory and history are important because they are the means by which we contextualise ourselves, both as individuals and nations, in relation to the past, and thereby define the future.... how these ‘memories’ are constructed and reconstructed defines whom we are, or become....” (354-362).

To take the extreme view shared by some Ugandans particularly during the period of ethnic strife, this song reflected the North-South divide, whereby the Bantu ethnic groups from Southern Uganda, treated the Acholi, Langi and Lugbara, and other people from the northern region as the ‘other’. In Luganda, a Bantu language, *abantu* (people/human beings) is plural while *muntu* (a person/human being) is singular. The opposite of *Muntu* is *kisolo* (singular) / *bisolo* (plural), meaning beast, a generic as well as derogative terms used to refer to people from both Northern and Eastern Uganda. While it may be speculative, the subtext of these words may have sparked off the conflict between Kawadwa and the state.

Kawadwa's relationship to Ugandan ethnic values (political, moral and aesthetic) raises questions about the adoption of ‘non-traditional’ political models and cultures by politicians as well as sections of the community. While he does not escape the critical problems that arise from writing plays focused on Buganda, Kawadwa makes an effort to distance himself by his attempts to explore syncretic performance forms, comment on political leadership, evaluate the role of religion in the community, and redefine Ugandan popular performance.

In conclusion, this paper has shown that Kawadwa, believing in equal rights for all Ugandans created a theatre that critically responded to

the problems caused by the European encounter, beginning in 1870s. He constructed a theatre tradition rooted in indigenous performance forms and borrowing aspects of European theatre elements. Kawadwa's stated aim was to "encourage by all possible means, the growth of an indigenous theatre through oral research, encouragement of playwrights, production of original plays either in vernacular or English – our National Language – and conduct workshops in ... theatre" (Byron Kawadwa, 1973). In following this agenda, Kawadwa built the foundations of a true Ugandan theatre. Finally, by challenging the credibility of revolutionary men in effecting change, Kawadwa favoured constructive criticism against empty revolutionary rhetoric.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for awarding me the Small Grants in the Creative and Performing Arts (2006/7) that made this work possible.

² Since Kawadwa wrote all his plays in Luganda, the English translations in this paper are my own.

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