

## Playing and Performance in Uganda: A Conversation with Professor Justinian Ssaalongo Tamusuza

(Interviewed by Sam Kasule at Makerere University,  
Department of Performing Arts and Film on 27 March 2013)

Ssaalongo Tamusuza is professor of Music and Ethnomusicology in the Department of Performing Arts and Film at Makerere University, Kampala. His early training was in Baganda music. He graduated in Music at Makerere University, and later obtained a Master of Arts in Twentieth Century Music from Queens University in Belfast before gaining a Doctorate in Music Composition from Northwestern University, Chicago, USA. Professor Tamusuza is a contemporary African music composer with a focus on blending traditional African folk styles with Western classical forms. He has taught music composition, theory and analysis at Makerere University and has also held a professorship at the School of Music at Northwestern University. He was the Artistic Director of the Africa95 African Composers Workshop in the United Kingdom, hosted by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Liverpool University in November 1995. Tamusuza first came to world attention through the Kronos Quartet, whose CD *Pieces of Africa* features Tamusuza's first string quartet, *Mu Kkubo Ery'Omusaalaba*. The CD reached No. 1 on the Billboard Classical and World Music Charts in 1992. He was commissioned by Kronos (for his second string quartet, *Twadaagana Ku Lw'Omwana*), the International Society of Contemporary Music, ISCM (Essen, Germany 1995), the Chamber Symphony of Princeton and the Richmond Symphony Orchestra of Virginia. In 1995, Tamusuza, together with the traditional Ugandan group, Abaana B'Engoma, composed a complete works, *Ektivvulu Ky'Endere*. His other works include *Ektivvulu Ky'Endere*, a chamber piece for flute, viola, prepared harp, marimba and maracas, *Abaafa Luli* for Woodwind Quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn and bassoon, 1994) and *Abaana Bange Na-Ka-Lwa* for Bb Soprano Saxophone, Electric Guitar and Marimba (1996), among others.

Professor Tamusuza's fellowships and honours include: Gwendolem M. Carter Scholarship for Doctorate in Music Composition at Northwestern University; Northwestern University, Fulbright Senior Award for Visiting Professor, Northwestern University; and British Council Fellowship MA in Twentieth Century Music, Queen's University of Belfast.

**Samuel Kasule (SK):** What language do you want me to use, Luganda or English?

**Justinian Tamusuza (JT):** I am trying to think as an academician, as well as an indigenous performer, since Western training has become part of my thinking. My responses will be in both Luganda and English; there are some concepts that do not easily translate into English.

**SK:** Did you learn indigenous music from *abadongo*?

**JT:** These were not *abadongo* [travelling musicians]. We owned several indigenous instruments, which people played whenever they collected for a drink. *Abadongo* were mostly found at *mbaga* [wedding] festivals.

**SK:** What is performance?

**JT:** Performance is about different ways of thinking about knowledge and life. When a performance takes place, there is text, music, dramatization or movement. I use music to refer to instrumental music and text to songs or lyrics. Music structure is important for it demonstrates the relationship between training and performance. The message is within the text. The way performers dramatize is through making movements or dancing in relation to the text. That way, one gains knowledge from a performance. The intersection between music, text and movement is extremely important if you are going to understand what is being performed. It is also more useful for you to know the source or origins of the performance, where it is coming from and the ritual that is related to it. It becomes more enriching if you [have] knowledge about all those aspects of a performance.

**SK:** Is it important to know the background?

**JT:** Yes. In order to understand a performance it is important to know its context and social function. Although the performance may not be in the original context, you enjoy it better when it is set in the indigenous ritual context.

**SK:** How do you define an indigenous performance?

**JT:** When is a performance (art) a 'performance' among the indigenous people? That is extremely difficult to explain. I remember, when I was young, whenever someone was given a drink of beer, he would become excited and as a result he would begin to sing and/or dance. Usually in Buganda, when you go to social functions and festivals such as *embaga*, performances start when people have been given something to eat and drink. For example, today, if you were to go to a village and slaughtered a bull, bought twenty litters of *waragi* (*walagi*) [local gin] plus an equivalent quantity of *mwenge bigere* [banana wine] and offer it to the villagers, they would stage a dance/music performance for you. This would continue until they have consumed all the drink and meat. Whenever people are excited they start giving performances - singing and dancing. Maybe for most of these people, eating and drinking calls for a performance. Unlike the Western setting where audiences and performers occupy separate spaces, in Ugandan/African communities, the audience-performer relationship is different since sometimes the audience become the performers themselves.

**SK:** How do you judge a good performance?

**JT:** I shall respond to that as Tamusuza, a Muganda (from Central Uganda) and an indigenous performer. I have said that traditional performance includes music, dance, text and movement/drama. While music means the instrumental sound, by text I mean the songs or lyrics. I judge each of these differently: a) Music - I consider the tuning of the instruments. For instance, do they work hand in hand [are in harmony]? What is the relationship between the instruments and the voice(s)? Don't the instruments and voice(s) go off tune?; Are the instruments tuned [to] the full range of the voices? b) Text: I consider whether the performers are communicating the message to the audience (listener). Is there a flow of knowledge and/or ideas in their text? Are they singing at random? c) Dance - There are several questions to ask with regards to dance. How are the dancers dancing in relation to the music? Are the dancers in beat with the music? What is the form of the music? What are the climaxes or the anti-climaxes in relation to the meaning of the text? Collectively, these influence my judgement whether or not the performance is good. However, I am only limited to what I know. I will not be able to judge something that is outside my ethnic group.

**SK:** How do you judge a good performance on *entoongoli/ndongo* (bowl lyre)?

**JT:** It is good that I am a skilled player of that instrument. First, there is what we call the tuning according to the Kiganda<sup>2</sup> scale - most people have come to say that it is an equidistant pentatonic scale – it is what I listen to first. [Second,] how is it related to the voice? Is it tuned too high or too low? Is it within the level of the person who is singing the text? Some people who play *endongo* find it very difficult to sing to the music so much so that they lose the beat or they sing off tune. How free are the performers in vocalising the word text so that the story flows? In addition, I pay attention to what we refer to as the right timbre of *endongo*. When you listen to a performance, you can judge that, although the tuning is right, the ‘beat’ may not be right. This is comparable to someone playing the drums – he may be playing the real *baakisimba* [large drum] with the correct rhythm *naye nga si lye ggono*<sup>3</sup> *liri ly’owulira eriva mu ngoma* [It is the same thing with *endongo* but that is not the microtonal sound elements or timbre that you hear from the drum]. In this case, *olina engeri gy’okwatamu enkoba ezo okuvugamu* -sometimes *kye bayita Katongole*. [In order to get the sound, there is a way to pluck the strings; some people call it Katongole]. When I play with S. S Busuulwa Katambula, another experienced indigenous performer, *tugayita matondo ga nkuba* [we used the concept, raindrops]. I am referring to the timbre as *amatondo g’enkuba ku mabaati, nto-nto-nto-nto-nto-nto-nto*. *Ogiwulira? Kye bayita okukabala enkoba* [similar to the sounds of raindrops on iron sheets - *nto-nto-nto-nto-nto-nto-nto*. As a performer/audience you just listen to the sounds. That is what they call it, plucking (or hoeing) the bowl lyre strings]. There is something I was talking about, *kyetuyita liiri* [What we call the linen touch]. *Oba onookigamba otya? Ne kabeera nga kwekugamba, akantu kootekamu liiri*. [I wonder how you can term it. What it means is – you play with a linen (delicate) touch; and with precision]. It is not early, it is not late, but it is just precise. *Owulira ng’omuntu akuba entunnunsi nga egenda* [It is as if the performer is tapping the beat of the song]. *N’ebigambo by’ayogera nga*

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<sup>2</sup> The language of the Baganda of Buganda is Luganda and their culture is Kiganda.

<sup>3</sup> According to Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2002:138), *ggono* is a ‘vocal style characteristic of Kiganda indigenous songs. The singers employ a nasal and throaty tone with vibration, usually produced by singing microtones at the end of a phrase.’

*teggwaamu* [the lyrics talk but the beat remains constant]. That way you know that it is a faultless performance. Nevertheless, at the same time, *bwoba ng'okuyimba tekuliimu ggono n'okunyooleza kuli* [if there is no timbre in the singing, not even any evidence of microtonal inflections], the way the Baganda do it, then I feel cheated. However, I still maintain that this interpretation must relate to my [Kiganda] instrument because when it comes to other ethnic groups, I cannot make a proper judgement of their professional competence.

**SK:** How do you judge *abagoma*, or a good performance by an ensemble?

**JT:** They must keep a steady beat or, in Luganda, *bateekwa okuba nga baku-uma entunnunsi yeemu*. Nonetheless, it cannot strictly be said that *entunnunsi* is very steady; if there is a slight change, it must be done at the same time. The second point is, *buli omu bwaba ng'ajjaye kye tusuubira* [is each performer deriving the right timbre from their instruments?]. Professionally, that is what I respect. *Kaakati, engeri gye bakwataganamu*, [the way they communicate with the ensemble is also very important]. *Abakubi b'ebivuga obutaba ba kiggala kintu kikulu nnyo* [Players must listen to each other]. Mind you, the listening is not only in relation to keeping time but in relation to also playing in tune. There is something that has really amazed me, *abantu bano w'obategeerera nti bamanyi kye bakola ensemble eyinza okuba nga yatandise dda, omuntu najja n'endingidi ye*. [One way you can acknowledge that those performers know what they are doing, is by understanding how a performer, travelling with his tube fiddle, joins the ensemble and plays as if he has been part of the group some time]. *Olwo anyoolako bunyoozi bw'ati* [All he does is to twist the tuning pegs, and then, he is already in tune or playing in harmony with the rest]. I am a professor of music but I cannot do it. You know the Western way of training, *omuntu n'amala okubakubira 'C', mwenna nemutuningira okwo; naye ono ay-ingirawo buyingizi* [when someone plays 'C', you are all expected to use it to tune your instruments; however, this player just joins the ensemble]. *Ka nkuwe eky'okulabirako, endingindi ettaano, okugeza nga – eggaya, olufuuula, ekitamba, akatamba, naye oli ajja buzzi, n'agamba nti, 'nze nkuba katamba', n'atuninga mu group ye gy'alimu* [Let me give you an example: there are five different *endingidi* in the ensemble – *eggaya, olufuuula, olutamba, ekitamba* and *akatamba*. However, a newcomer merely informs the performers the type he plays; before you notice, his fiddle is tuned so that they play expertly in ensemble]. It really baffles me. *Awo nno ntegeera nti bakolagana bulungi*. [That is when I know that, that is a successful performance because they play harmoniously.] *Ekirala* [Further], because I play drums, what really surprises me, *omuntu bw'akyusa text, n'ono akuba engoma*

*akyusa bukyusa*, naturally [If one person changes the text, naturally, even the drummer instantly changes the rhythms]. I have always done that but I have never understood the theory behind it. *Nakati kinnema. Oli bw'atandika okuyimba bw'ati, mpulira nti eyo baakisimba* [Even today, it is difficult for me to understand. The moment a soloist starts to sing, immediately, I sense that it is *baakisimba* or big drum rhythms], and I play those rhythms. *Bw'akyusa n'agenda mu kisoko ekirala, naawe ng'okyuusa* [When s/he changes to another variation, you change as well]. *Omuntu asobola okukyusiza ekisoko mu luyimba wakati* [It is possible for someone to change according to the way the text changes, and correctly too, through intuition]. *Olwo nange mmanyi nti, yes, abo obatyanga.* [Then I know I have to respect those performers]. If I had my recording of Sulayiti, you would know what I call a good performer. *Ye Sulayiti<sup>4</sup> nga abivuga bye byonna bibeera* in tune all the time. *Ate teyasoma.* [Sulayiti's instruments were always in tune. Amazingly, he never had any formal education.] He could not tell you how he achieved that perfect tuning. *Naye ng'akuwulira buwulizi n'agamba nti, 'aa aa, ekyo tekiteredde!'* *Era nga muwulira akayana nti, 'Naye ggwe, oyingira otya naawe?'* [The moment he listens to your instrument he would state, 'Aa, your instrument is out of tune!'] In fact, he would tell off a player making the wrong entry, 'My dear, why don't you ever know when to come in?']

**SK:** What can you say about the dramatization by the drummers?

**JT:** What guides *abagoma* [drummers] to dramatise are the dancers. *Era omusajja bw'aba akuba engoma atunuulira bazinyi. Singa ofuna omukisa* (chance) *okutunuulira ku mazina g'embaga* (wedding dance), *ebisoko abazinyi bye bakola, ebiyigiriza omukazi omugole* to a large extent *okutuukiriza emirimu gy'omumaka ng' omugole, ebintu ebyo bye bakola, omugoma abitunuulira wali ng'abazinyi babikola n'akyuusa engoma ng'agendera ku bintu bye bakola.* [Drummers always watch, and take their cue from, the dancers. If you ever get a chance to watch the *mbaga* dance, look out for the dancers' techniques or dance motifs, specifically, those that demonstrate to the bride various ways of performing their household (and bedroom) duties. The drummers simulate the dancers' actions.] Of course, the largest part of it is obscene *ate naawe engeri y'Abaganda ogimanyi nti* [as you know, the Baganda] we always hide obscenities, *naye nga* [however], we know it is there. *Oteekwa okuba nga ggwe (omugoma=drummer) okitegeera.* [As a

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<sup>4</sup> Sulayiti, who owned a large Kiganda ensemble group was one of the most accomplished professional players of the 1970s and 1980s.

drummer, you must know the nuances of the dance as well as the idiomatic expressions]. Let me give you an example: *Omuyimbi ajja kuyimba, 'Essalambwa eddene lyagala mbuzi ndaawo. Teri n'alikwatako. Ate ligyagalira mu bisubi'. Oba oli bw'ayimba, 'Sooda awooma nnyo, sooda awooma nnyo nga walagi'*"; *oyo aba ategeeza walagi?* [A soloist might sing, 'The puff adder wants a young castrated goat. You dare not touch it. You should take the goat to the bush'. Alternatively, if someone sang the following lyrics: '*Soda* (a soft drink) is delicious, *soda* is as delicious as *waragi* (gin)'. Does s/he really mean *waragi*?] No. there are deeper meanings. *Oteeekwa okuba nti ekyo okitegeera bulungi nnyo, n'olyoka otegeera oli ky'agamba. Oba nga muwala wa Sulayiti bwazina akatebe ku mbaga nga ategeeza nti ebintu by'omubuliri babikola bwe bati ne bwe bati* [If you want to understand the meaning of the statements you must have an effective knowledge of the idiomatic meanings of the lyrics. Another good example would be the way Sulayiti's daughter used to dance *akatebe* - a short dance routine in which the dancer uses a chair to demonstrate graphically a Muganda woman's sexual styles - at weddings]. *Okumanya nti performance ebadde successful owulira abantu baleekaanira waggulu nti, 'Yaaaa'*. [If you want to know that a performance has been successful all you need to do is listen to the loud applause from the audience - '*Yaaaa*.'] That way, *olwokuba nti* [because] the message is driven home you can say that it is a successful performance. In respect of *akatebe*, the audience always judges the performance. The success is not in the music but the acrobatics and dramatizations because there is no music or text to accompany the movements. I remember at my graduation, my father hired *abadongo* who performed two songs, '*Bamu-jjamu eccupa ya'mwenge Muganda*, [They drained a full bottle of wine from his blood] and '*Weetiye, weetiyyayo mpola*' [Shovel. Beware of the muck], which he sang. Some of the lyrics for '*Weetiye*' are: '*Weetiye, weetiyyayo mpola, weetiye tolizzayo enjoka. Muteesa bw'alidda tulikwata bwe kiti, kya mungalo. Erinnandi newankubadde kkulu lyakwokya / Nannyinimu akaladde, nga ggwe oseka*. [Shovel it carefully. Beware of the muck lest the worm stings you. Should Muteesa (the King of Buganda) come back from exile, we shall hug the fat ones / Hold it tight / He was scalded by the steam / He was scalded when he ate a full-sized roasted potato/ Look how he laughs because the head of the household is standing stiff and upright]. This was embarrassing because he was singing obscenities. For, '*Weetiye*' means, a man to play sex. '*Nannyinimu akaladde*' describes a man being erect. '*Erinnandi* refers to '*ekkazi ekkulu*' or an elderly woman; and '*Lya kwokya*' means to have sex with an elderly woman.

**SK:** Could you name some concepts of performance?

**JT:** Language is important in performance. Some of the concepts we use (apart from those covered earlier) include: *Enteera* (*a capella*); *engoma enteera* [*a capella* drums = drums with neither singing or dancing], *amazina amateera* [unaccompanied dance]; *entunnunsi* [beat or rhythm]; *ebiggu* – (simple time beat/tune) *oba engoma enkasa* [ritual drum style for god Mukasa]. *Kino bakigya ku lubaale* Mukasa. *Ebiggu bibeera mu kusamira oba* indigenous rituals; *atontomye bulungi*; *asengese bulungi*; *eggono oliwulidde*; *okukattala obukattazi* [This is derived from god Mukasa. Simple beats/tunes are played during ritual ceremonies; that is well recited; he has played it with precision; did you hear the timber in his/their voices (s) (bad singing without *eggono*).]

**SK:** Thank you.