

Public Art, Dance, and Music and the Politics of Culture in East and Central Africa¹

Interview with Faisal Kiwewa of Bayimba International Festival of the Arts, Uganda

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Abstract

The interview that follows took place on Microsoft Teams on 22 May 2022. I have edited the transcript for length and readability. I asked Faisal Kiwewa to talk in some detail about the origin of the Bayimba International Festival of the Arts, its organisation and networks. I also invited him to discuss the Festival's continuing impact on participating artists and audiences as well as its influence on the creative arts. He noted the changed landscape for the independent artists; the creative industry's trend away from individual artist or small performing group productions powerfully limits the distribution and venue bookings' potential of indigenous creative artists. And importantly, Kiwewa agreed on Bayimba International Festival's lasting contribution to the creative industry and to an interregional East and Central African contemporary artistic culture.

Introduction

Bayimba International Festival of the Arts, the major activity of Bayimba Cultural Foundation founded by Faisal Kiwewa, has become an influential yardstick to measure the quality of creative arts from Uganda. It continuously presents a multi-disciplinary programme containing emergent edgy works and performances of national, regional, and international creative artists, which today take place at the Bayimba Centre on Lunkulu Island in Mukono, Uganda. For several years I have pursued performance work concerned with the propagation of African indigenous and contemporary performances in Africa and its diaspora.

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I became fascinated by the fervour of Ugandan artists for a festival that uses stage and open spaces to present diverse performing and visual arts forms including music, dance, stage and street crafts, paintings and photography, and video mapping, among other forms. In this interview, I was primarily interested in discovering what this edgy festival might insinuate about the state of the arts in modern-day Uganda, and in general, East Africa, along with its values, reputation, goals, visions and illusions today.

This interview took place on over Microsoft Teams between Faisal Kiwewa, Kampala Uganda, and Samuel Kasule, Derby, United Kingdom on 22 May 2022.

Samuel Kasule (SK): I want to start by talking about your background. Tell us who you are. How did you come into theatre?

Faisal Kiwewa (FK): I grew up in theatre. My parents were theatre enthusiasts and custodians of the Lubowa Zone community theatre group, in the Wakiso District, a suburb of Kampala here. So, being born and raised in a very culturally philanthropic family, I found myself on stage. But the first time I was on stage was in a Christmas performance when I was six years old. I was performing at the Afrigo Band studio space in Kampala because that's where we used to do our performances during Christmas or Easter holidays. I was studying at Police Children's Primary School and part of the school choir when I met music teachers like Mr Balikoowa. We learnt to sing and play instrumental music such as the African Music ensemble. But because I had started theatre performance very early, I got fed up with it and didn't want to study music and the arts but other science subjects. Nonetheless, I didn't find love for sciences, so I went back to the performing arts and joined a performing school, The Demonstration School of Music run by Fred Sebatta, Paul Kafeero and Chief Kabugo as a classical Kadongo Kamu music school. Afterwards, I joined a school for film and television (UFTI – Uganda Film and Television Institute) run by Mr Sengendo, to study film and television recording and production. It was during this time that I recorded my second album. But the turning point for me was Christmas 2005 when I was performing in Hoima (Western Uganda) and told my manager, "I think I am done with this". I was dissatisfied with being an artist who performed popular music. Firstly, it was too common, and you played what people wanted to hear; moreover, you couldn't be creative because you performed by miming a pre-recorded CD. Secondly, it was too expensive, and I could not afford the processes of working with a live production. There, I thought that there could be many more other musicians who would like to express themselves, but they didn't have money. At that time, there were about three live bands in Uganda – Baxmba Waves with Godfrey Lubulwa, The Afrigo Band, and The Big

Five with Julie Sessanga. There was also the Eagles group which was not really a music band. We had an upcoming band called Soul Beat Africa led by Herbert Kinobe, Michael Ouma, Jude Mugerrwa; and then Joel Sebunjo and the Sundiata Band. These were the new artists on the scene. However, it was difficult to work with the Soul Beat because they were busy – mostly touring at international festivals and working with Alliance Française centre, the French cultural group. I felt I could not have musicians of my own because I didn't have the money. However, I felt that since most music artists in Uganda did not understand the contemporary nature of live music, we needed to cultivate a new generation of artists who understood the live music genre, and the fact that collaboration between music, theatre and dance and fashion was possible. We also needed to cultivate a new audience which understood that live music was not about coming on stage with a pre-recorded CD but playing it live. That is why I started creating and developing the idea of Bayimba.

SK: How would you describe yourselves?

FK: I think if you put it in context, of course they're creatives and they focus on creating content. We support their processes sometimes by commissioning works to upgrade the level of content that was presented and ease the financial pre-production burden. I do appreciate and give complete freedom to the artists to create, develop and present their work the way they want it. So, maybe I can give you a background of where we were, and how I started Bayimba Festival, and that will give you an idea of who we are.

SK: Does that mean that the people you work with are more creative with what they do?

FK: I think if you put it in that context, of course they're creatives and commissioning work was to upgrade the level of content that was presented at our festival, as well as to develop their role as artisans or artists. But I think the reason why we started commissioning work was to upgrade the level of content that was presented at our festival. Maybe I can give you a background of where we were, and how I started Bayimba Festival.

SK: What's interesting is the way you described the performing arts scene in the period leading to 2005.

FK: There were so many initiatives during this period. I knew of people who were actively working with the Uganda Theatre Groups Association (UTGA), but its administration did not support youths and it was difficult to initiate dialogue. UTGA was very much interested in what one could describe as presence, that is, travelling to, and attending, international conferences and meetings. They were more interested in

who was travelling to which venue and how much they were going to earn from each trip. But you don't blame them because there wasn't much money in the theatre industry. So, it was a survival strategy, a way of keeping power, keeping a position and not being open to people so that they know what was going on. I don't blame them. It was a generational issue.

SK: So, is that what drove you away to start something new?

FK: Yes. I think for me what was significant in that process was the decision that I had to make because I had already observed some of my friends who had artistic backgrounds – mostly outside Uganda – who were doing festivals and running (performing) organisations. They were making mistakes in terms of being artists and the programmers. These are two different roles.

SK: Definitely.

FW: So, I said to myself, if I want to effectively run and achieve the goals, the vision and mission, this initiative that I am starting, I need to choose between two roles – I either serve the artist or continue to be an artist. To become a programmer and a presenter, I had to retire from being an artist. This has really saved me a lot of problems because I don't have to compete with the artists that I present. I don't have to compete in terms of headlining my own festival or performing because I don't have to be seen, or to keep trending my own stuff. This is one of the challenges that I find with some of my colleagues, including the new entrants and the young generation of entrepreneurs who are in this industry. They also find themselves thinking, "Oo, yeah, I can do what Faisal did. He is young and he has managed to become successful. I can be an artist as well as a programmer". They do not realise that there is a big conflict there.

SK: Hmmm. So, what you are doing is organising a space and a programme that gives groups of artists who come from different parts of the world, including East and Central Africa, Europe and the Americas, a chance to participate in a diverse festival. That means your programme is quite diverse.

FK: Yeah, its multi-disciplinary.

SK: It's about music, dramatic performances, dance...

FK: I think it's much more. I can explain to you how we looked at it from the beginning.

SK: Ok.

FK: When we started, the first programme of the festival was really huge in terms of giving an insight. I wanted to give a spectacle of what the

festival is going to be about. Many people were wondering: what do you mean you're going to have an arts festival for three days? What are you going to present? How do you mix passion with film? How do you mix music with theatre? How are you going to do it? Where are you going to find a stage or a space for all those things (events)? I was amateurish. I think I was about 23 years old, and I was trying to learn the business and also understand my own role, because I didn't study programming. I used my own artistic instincts to create the first programme. But I also used some of my network of artists – from Senegal, Switzerland, Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi. We realised that if we wanted to keep the festival programme sustainable – because we were not going to present the same artists every year – we needed to set a trend. It's a live event. It's a live performance festival. So, we set some guidelines: If you are coming to perform with a pre-recorded CD, you are not welcome. If you cannot perform live, you are not welcome. If you don't have content that relates to world music, you are not welcome. Of course, a new type of pop culture had just emerged, and we were now moving from being a specific individual cultural genre.

We realised that we had to invest in content. We had to find money to train artists so that at least every year we were premiering two bands. We could bring in artists from different disciplines. We introduced new forms of art that people didn't know about for example, street theatre, video mapping, sound art, and headphone disco. So, we were making sure that when we programme artists... for example, if we bring in an artist from places such as Germany or South Africa, they who would be in Uganda for a week or two before they are performing in the festival. Within the two weeks, we would request them to set up two makeshift studios and choose an artist they wanted to work with. Alternatively, we asked the local artists also to choose the visiting performer/group whom they wanted to collaborate with. Our idea was to cultivate the spirit to our local artists what happens in the world outside Uganda. How can they be motivated and inspired by these people whom they have heard about? In the end, they had a chance to work with international artists and that has really helped us to kind of create a new generation of enthusiasts, artists who want to work with others, artists who want to collaborate, artists who look forward to the festival because they know that they may have a chance to work together with a visiting artist. It has also helped us to have a much more diverse disciplinary content including performance and visual arts. There are young artists whom we premiered in 2010 as fashion designers....

After two years, we realised that as much as we were familiar with the city audiences, we had not tapped the upcountry artistic sources. We

could contact any artist in Kampala, but we did not know anything that was happening either in the Northern, Eastern or Western regions. We therefore took festivals to the regions in Gulu (Northern Uganda), Arua (North West Uganda), and Mbarara (Western Uganda). Although we were doing small versions of the same festival, the idea was to look for new artists and at the end of their training that could be up to two weeks, we would find new talents who would stage a live performance. A cross section of these artists has become national pop stars because they have got performing skills. We did this for five years between 2010 and 2015.

SK: That's true because I used to get reports from a few artists who were travelling to participate in festivals in Gulu and Mbarara. It's quite exciting.

FK: The festivals were very interesting because we needed to find people who could fit into our narrative. We engaged people like Godfrey Lubuulwa of Bakisimba Waives who were willing to be the tutors or to drive the whole process of training. We set up a programme called The Practical Artists, and artists related to it and it was really working. I invited another man who was a Street Theatre director in Holland to Uganda to come and work with young theatre artists for a year. His role was to train them, and to teach them to improvise and create pieces out of previously discarded materials. And you know, to create artistic objects out of recycled materials and all that stuff was fascinating. But then, the backlash was that we got too many artists. We also got too much content such that we had no space for it.

SK: Ok.

FK: We needed another strategy of keeping these artists who we had trained and who were creating content daily. We had to keep them engaged and to offer them more opportunities as well. So, we started another programme, another project called DADOA. DOADOA is a market. We call it the East African performing arts market where we invite programmers, other festival and venue owners, publishers, and anyone who is within the value chain of the performing arts. They come to Uganda every May, and they stay here for a week. Throughout their stay, they engage with the artists; so we programme activities for local artists to showcase their talent. The local artists are invited to stage 40-minute shows. And later, when it is time for the regional festivals, for example, Sauti za Busara (Zanzibar), Sawa Sawa (Kenya), ONGEA Festival (Kenya), or Amani Festival (DRC Congo), these venue and festival managers come to Uganda to find the arts at the DOADOA market. DOADOA also started something like a regional tour circuit. While all the artists want to go to the United Kingdom, the United States of America,

or China, they cannot get visas, they cannot get funding, and cannot even get gigs, since they have no booking agents. Therefore, by keeping them in the region and telling them that instead of travelling abroad, they can go and perform in Arusha (Tanzania), Kigali (Rwanda), Dar es Salam (Tanzania), and Bujumbura (Burundi), to earn money from the festivals. Some artists even travelled as far as Swaziland and Mozambique. We convince them that they will not be stressed about the process because they do not need visas and air tickets since the groups can travel by bus to the venues in East Africa. This has helped them a lot and it had picked up before the COVID-19 pandemic. So, this has helped us to keep many artists busy and engaged.

Of course, the introduction of new festivals now has also been one of the adds-on to the original idea of Bayimba. We educate. We programme, we present, we offer opportunities and platforms for the market for others to come and network and connect with other festivals and venues. Additionally, we try to cultivate support within the Eastern and Southern Africa region for everyone has an opportunity to travel around and show their artistic talents.

SK: Now I understand. That is different. I have read about that dimension of the festival and how it has developed. Yes, people talk about DOADOA in some of the online articles, but they do not state its origins. Why is it there? Is it because there is a pool of artists who are actively learning, training and workshopping because they have nothing else to do? What do they gain from the forum?

FK: But I think, yes, I think for me, I have observed some bottlenecks in this whole value chain... in this whole process.

SK: Yes?

FK: We realise that we have invested so much money in training artists. But we've not invested anything in training managers. People want those to manage them.

SK: What do you mean?

FK: It becomes a problem because you have this pool of content creators whom you are encouraging to create new materials. You're giving them skills to focus on their creative process and their craft, but you have not given them, you know, you've not... you have created an environment where, once they are in their creative process, there are other people who are managing the other elements of their creativity like marketing, management, bookings and tours, that stuff, and financing. And there are no people who do that.

SK: So?

- FK:** I think Makerere University is doing something to teach skills to the students in the School of Film and Performing Arts, but the students don't want to work with us. I engage artists. I do partnerships. We do workshops every year, but they do not want to participate in these activities. This is therefore the opportunity for them to learn. We give them places on our programmes, but I find it surprising because they don't even want to do the internships. I'm like, this is your opportunity to learn. When you've been learning theories for three years, this is the opportunity to come and work. Why don't you come and learn how the business operates? Instead, you find that the students coming from Makerere University, whether final year undergraduates or post-graduate students ... they do not want to do this work.
- SK:** I wonder how the undergraduate curriculum helps in skilling them for work.
- FK:** They can't even write a proposal. You want to ask them: How are you going to survive in the performance world? That's why they find themselves doing totally different things, you know. And of course, having a degree is profiling, but it doesn't add any practical value in the real world. So, they are educated but they are not able to meet the demands of the market. That's why we really want to intensify our workshops and apprenticeship placements. I think when we are settled here in our space, we shall focus on skills development. Our strategy now has changed from just being a cultural uplifting state culture. First, we want to focus on space. By space I mean developing our physical festival space whereby people can come at any time to create content. Secondly, we want to focus on systems and this issue arose when COVID-19 affected the communities because we were all caught off-guard. We had no idea how we were going to go through the last two years or the 'lockdown' without doing anything. At least other communities managed to have short lockdowns, but not Uganda. The lockdown in Uganda started from 20 March 2021 and ended on 24 January 2022. No one knew that you can actually earn a living without performing live with a physical audience. Artists had nowhere to go. They had no money. Therefore, it means that we needed to start thinking about setting up systems so that if we are caught up again in this pandemic mess, we are not going to be left without any resources. Although we have cultivated a hybrid audience, setting up systems is very important for the future. We have people who want to see physical things, but also, there are people in the diaspora who want to follow our work online, when it is happening. So, how do we keep leveraging on that process? How do we keep our audience in the diaspora and at the same time facilitate and satisfy a physical audience locally? The third point is on skills. It is about

developing skills not only for artists but also for communities, for managers, for everyone who is involved in the value chain. I think it will be really helping to support the foundation of what we've already built to strengthen it.

SK: You will be surprised how many people in the diaspora tap into Ugandan performances. There is an emerging audience which is willing to watch quality performances. Quality is what sells your art.

FK: Hmm. Yes.

SK: When will the festival take place this year?

FK: It starts on 24 August.

SK: Do you have a central theme for the festival?

FK: No. We used to work on themes. But now, every time we organise events we assess ourselves and we assess our efforts. We realised that themes are a kind of hindrance to the creative processes of the artists.

SK: Hmm.

FK: Because again, you have to remember that we don't create content. Therefore, why should we determine what artists have to create for us? Having central themes for the performances is a very dominant practice in Uganda. Community initiatives survive on themes, for example HIV and Cholera are common themes. Artists such as Fred Musisi Munagomba with his group and community of artists operate on themes because of the funders who commission their work. Unfortunately, because they work with themes, I believe they do not add any value to their performances. Of course, the message is passed on, but they are used by the people who fund them. The artists do not play any part in the creative process. They are not challenged to think outside the box because they wait for the funders to give them a theme before they start writing. In our context, we thought that it would be ideal to allow the artists present us with what they have created, as long as it's good art.

SK: I see.

FK: So, if it is good art we present it to the audience, and that's really what we work on. On one hand, this approach also gives us the opportunity to have diversity content. On the other hand, we learnt that we have a very experienced audience that comes to the festival to see new things; they want to see something that they can relate to. They are excited about what Bayimba is going to present to them because we do not advertise individual artists but diverse acts of performance. In our publicity, we state Bayimba Festival, not artist A, B or C, and the dates. People come because they know that whatever they see is good art. To Bayimba, this approach gives us the opportunity to present new ideas, new productions, and new works. The audiences consume every performance,

no matter who the presenter is, as long as it is good, and assess it in their own way. In fact, that is why we do not work with teams of performers anymore.

SK: Well, one of the issues I have talked about in my research is the way non-governmental organisations (NGOs) 'killed' theatre in Uganda. Yes, it is good for them to fund community or applied theatre activities but what about the other creative arts that existed before they came on the scene in the 1990s?

FK: Yes, but I think there is a generation of what I would call the outfits. For instance, if you engage with the work of Judith Adong, the dramatist and film maker who wrote *Silent Voices*, you will find her work inspiring. I don't know whether you have read or seen some of her works.

SK: Yes, I have read some of her work. I have read *Silent Voices*.

FK: Well, she has retired from producing work. She said, "I'm not doing this anymore because everyone does not appreciate my work. I put in a lot of effort, but artists are lazy". She was frustrated. She went back to Gulu to build a house and live on her own. And then, there is Deborah Asimwe. I've worked with her. We set up the Kampala International Theatre Festival together.

SK: Alright.

FK: I don't know whether you've heard about it. We started it in 2014.

SK: Yes, I have read about the festival.

FK: Well, like me, she has also moved from mainstream theatre because it is very complex, very detailed, very huge and expensive when it comes to organising a production. In the beginning, I thought about us mixing theatre with the festival, but Bayimba did not have its own space where people could come and experience theatre in its entirety. So, we decided to have a specific theatre festival and I left. Deborah Asimwe transformed the organisation into Tebere Arts Foundation. This is what she is doing, and she is good at it. They are pushing it and championing it further to give it a different direction, a different concept because they have a few people who are talented.

SK: Hmm.

FK: There are about three other actresses working with Asimwe, trying to do some good theatre, but for me the challenge they face is what I would describe as either a sector or sub-sector development perspective. What I mean is that they are very much into their dot-com (.com) community. They are just comfortable with their own pals, you know, their own friends, or WhatsApp group. Do you understand what I am talking

about? Although they want to do good work, they are kept in an audience that does not allow them to envision a cultivated community.

SK: So, is it a niche community?

FK: Hmm.

SK: What would you describe as the most significant changes that have taken place over the last five years?

FK: In 2017, to mark ten years in existence we published a book titled *Voices: Reflections on Art and Culture in Uganda*. We wanted to respond to two main questions: What have we achieved? How has the industry changed? The latter was not based on what Bayimba has done but it focused on how the industry has transformed in ten years since we launched Bayimba Festival. One thing we realised was that there has been a lot of entrepreneurial activities within the industry. I call it the industry, because I think we need to think about the arts as a business, we need to view things from an entrepreneurial perspective. Also, we need to think about sustainability.

SK: It is an industry – a creative arts industry.

FK: There are a few other artists who shared our vision and who started trying out cutting edge ideas that have transformed the industry. Across Kampala City, their various bars host live music and entertainment. Of course, COVID-19 has hit us much more than other industries because entrepreneurs have resorted to other avenues to earn a living. So, it is going to take us sometime to go back to where we were before the pandemic. But I wouldn't say that we have changed anything because change is something that is positive, and we have contributed to the vibrancy of the industry. We have influenced concepts and initiatives, and championed new ideas. Although quite often it is difficult for people to accept that you are influencing reforms, we supported young entrepreneurs, inspired policy and institutional reforms. As a festival, we have inspired new festivals.

So, when you go to most of the entertainment spaces, restaurants, bars – there is live music, they have live theatrical performances and/or screened performances at the centre of their entertainment programs. Managers of venues of book poetry live-staged poetry readings. There is a narrative being told that the idea of a venue is influencing new ideas on space because, I think, when people realise that Bayimba has got this whole space, which they are developing into a cultural hub, they think they can also invest in other places because it is a good idea. We don't want to have one cultural hub and we don't want to have one National Theatre. We want to have spaces across the country so that people – young children, and the youth, your average audience – can experience

creative entertainment at their doorstep. We have educated stakeholders and young artists. We have developed a music curriculum for teachers because we realise that many music teachers, despite their paper qualifications, do not know how to teach music. Some may play music instruments, but they don't know how to teach them.

SK: Really? That's interesting. How has the festival changed since you started it ten years ago?

FK: We have invested significantly in skills. Our annual budgets have been running between 1.2 to 1.8 billion shillings; almost half of the budget is devoted to arts education. The focus is on young creative artists, musicians and theatre performers. We have really laid the foundation and now we just want to strengthen our position, to consolidate our programmes and activities, and also to focus on developing our own space.

SK: That's a lot of work. One of the points I wanted to explore is your activity of programming the festival and securing a space on Lunkulu Island. I imagine that this is not just for performance. There is the tourism aspect.

FK: It's cool. It's local tourism.

SK: I thought about it as cultural tourism.

FK: Yes, cultural tourism. But it is also ecological tourism. We are very much focused on the climate and the changes that we observe as a world. And I have just written a climate change manifesto for festivals and performing artists. I am the driving force behind it. I look at what we can do about the carbon foot and the mess that people leave behind after every festival. We are really looking at how we can reduce on the footprint, the movement, and the plastics. How do we keep the space green but still have it serve the purpose of its existence as a festival venue? These are some of the things that we are championing. Our master plan is very much based on local materials, recycling, and recreating.

SK: Uh, hmm.

FK: We are looking at how we mitigate these factors and still develop the place to become the epitome of cultural spaces.

SK: What's going to be the new era for you?

FK: The new era? We want to be a reference point when it comes to, you know, what one can do with the space, Lunkulu Island, and how you can do it. The point is about inspiring and maybe influencing or cultivating young entrepreneurs who are taking that path. And it is about the new generation of creators to think not just about what they are doing but also the functionalities of their creations. It's also about the behaviour of the

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artists and the audience. Our strategy is to influence changes in the industry.

SK: Thank you Faisal Kiwewa.