

**Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance: Transforming  
Orature and Musical Traditions in Henry Wassanyi Serukenya and Byron  
Kawadwa's *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (Song of Wankoko)<sup>1</sup>**

Samuel Kasule  
*University of Derby, UK*

**Abstract**

This article examines *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (1971) as a foundational example of Ugandan musical theatre/opera rooted in Baganda orature, performance idioms, and political history. Drawing on Luganda linguistic categories of composition and performance—*okuyiyya*, *okuyimba*, *amazina*, and *ennyimba enganda*—the article argues that Byron Kawadwa and Henry Wassanyi Serukenya created a distinctly Ugandan operatic form that cannot be understood through Western aesthetic frameworks. Using textual analysis of the original manuscripts, ethnographic interviews with surviving performers, and the musicological examination of solfa-notation and indigenous ensemble practices, the study demonstrates how the musical play synthesises instrumental extemporisation, call-and-response vocality, dance-music interdependence, and dramatic narrative. Set against the political turbulence of post-independence Uganda, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* emerges as both a cultural innovation and a vehicle for political critique, articulating Baganda philosophies of *obuntubulamu*, interrogating tyranny, and reimagining communal identity. The article further situates the work within a broader Ugandan operatic tradition alongside Mbabi Katana, Warugaba, and Mukiibi, while highlighting the FESTAC '77 performance as a moment of cultural misrecognition and resistance. Ultimately, the study positions *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* as a multivalent performance text that transforms indigenous aesthetics into a modern theatrical form capable of expressing political dissent and cultural memory.

---

<sup>1</sup> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30817/0161.apr0223>

There exist several distinctive dance, music and song forms, and instrumental performance within the Baganda tradition, each with its own defining concepts that translate into opera practice. These concepts are the fundamental aspects of drama, opera/musical plays, and other genres of the theatre. In providing insight into the performance dimensions, they may offer a way of understanding the general organisation of musical plays and performance experience in Uganda. Since the musical play/opera that is a focus of this discussion is created by Baganda artists, a more complex question to ask would be: What does the construction of these musical plays/operas and the situations of their composition and performance communicate to us about the Ugandan composers? How could one observe and interpret them? What new meaning is created in developing a Ugandan/African indigenous musical play/opera? As the following discussion will demonstrate, my analysis builds on the premise of an understanding or awareness of the culture and language, the metaphors and symbolism that define the interactions between the people, and the nature of relationships that exist between the composer, the subject of composition, and the audience. To avoid being trapped in the problem of generalisations about performance in Uganda, it is better to narrow down the discussion from theatre in Uganda to performances rooted in one homogeneous cultural area, Buganda in Uganda's central region. This chapter will seek to outline the Baganda concepts of composition, performance and writing which influence writers and composers like Kawadwa and Wassanyi Serukenya; secondly, it will provide a reading of typical musical theatre and principles of the Baganda indigenous song and music performance; thirdly, it will offer a reading of *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko* based on Byron Kawadwa and Henry Wassanyi Serukenya's original manuscript<sup>2</sup> and a recording of the performance, directed by Elvania N. Zirimu at Festac '77: The 2nd World Festival of Black Arts and Culture in Lagos, Nigeria.

I chose Buganda because I speak and write its indigenous language, Luganda. The Baganda musical play or opera, informed by multiple disciplines and ways of performance, has no single theory about its creation, presentation and interpretation mutually constitutes diverse disciplinary performances: music or instrumental performance, dance, drama, and song. In this paper, music refers

---

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Robert Matovu Kawadwa for granting me the permission to copy this score and use it in this paper. I am also grateful to Ken Sabwe Serukenya for giving me access to the archived musical scores and a recording of the production of *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko* which I directed at the National Theatre in August 1989.

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

to the instrumental sound while music text refers to, or means, the songs or lyrics. Whereas the composer Wassanyi Serukenya and the playwright Kawadwa collaborated on two musical theatre/operatic works, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (Song of Wankoko) (1971) and *Makula ga Kulabako* (1970), *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* will serve as paradigm of performance through which this discussion will develop. In an interview on Bukedde Television (14/08/2017), Wassanyi Serukenya informs us about how Kawadwa invited him to collaborate on the first theatre project. Kawadwa said, "Since you are a composer and I am a playwright, let us collaborate on a theatrical production."<sup>3</sup> When they wrote *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, Kawadwa and Wassanyi Serukenya still held that the Ugandan post-independent political system was capable of change and could support the rights of its multiethnic inhabitants.

Between 1966 and 1972 when he was 'disappeared' and murdered by Idi Amin's State Research agents, Kawadwa and his contemporaries were under the surveillance of the state security operatives possessed with assessing the rising radical activity of performing arts. Many Baganda musicians turned to their cultural values and heritage for inspiration; thus, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* musically illustrates a self-conscious expression of ethnic pride often evident in post-colonial Baganda music ensemble works and folklore. Most notably, within this period, in addition to Kawadwa, the number of Baganda dramatists and musicians had significantly intensified, and their rhetoric challenged political and social systems imposed after both the 'desecration' of the Buganda Kingdom in 1966 and Idi Amin's 1972 *coup d'état*.

For the Baganda artists, the issue of Buganda's heritage in the evolving political environment was a key argument, particularly, how theatre should express it. Kawadwa's political involvement affected *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* and his career in theatre. He had a passion for expanding his views on the injustices of the people and theatre and it was one of the approaches he used to advance his ideas. Although in pursuit of this objective to show the injustices against Ugandans, Kawadwa would often temper the rhetoric of his voice, his edgy artistic approach

---

<sup>3</sup> Through collaborative work with Henry Wassanyi Serukenya, we wrote and directed the musical play, *Zinaalirawa?* at the Uganda National Theatre in February 1984. Again, in August 1989, working with Wassanyi Serukenya, I directed *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* (Song of Wankoko) at the Uganda National Theatre. Both productions gave me an insight into his processes and practices of composition. Most importantly, both experiences also made me understand Kawadwa and Wassanyi Serukenya's interdisciplinary composition and creative styles.

and profile as a political activist caused Ugandan government officials to rank him as a dangerous extremist. In fact, knowledge of how his activism led to his brief imprisonment during the 1966 Buganda crisis informs our reading of his operas and their ideological roots; it proves that his interest in national politics preceded his work for the National Cultural Centre. As I have written elsewhere, Kawanda and Wassanyi Serukenya's approach which infuses the play with a feeling of activism and helps to delineate their rhetoric as royalists resonates with the Baganda travelling musicians' practice. Kawadwa and Wassanyi Serukenya, who were devoted intensely and visibly in creating performances that would support its existence, adopted the philosophy of *abadongo* or indigenous Baganda travelling musicians, and the palace musicians, who previously through song, would seek more complex dialogical ways of sustaining their cultural identity.

### **Concepts of Baganda musical plays/opera composition and performance**

In the homogenous culture of the Baganda, key words and phrases describing acts of composition and writing include *omuyiyya* (sing.; *abayiyya*, plur.) composer, *omuwandiisi* (sing., *abawandiisi*, plur.), writer, *omuzinyi* (sing.; *abazinyi*, plu.), dancer, and *abagoma* (plur.), drummers or ensemble players/instrumentalists. Acts of writing and performance are described as *okuwandiika emizannyo* (to write plays), *okukuba bivuga* (to play instruments), *okuzanya* (to play), and *okuzina* (to dance). *Okuyiyya ennyimba* (to compose songs or music), which can be regarded as a tradition of composition, existed before the introduction of Western education whereas *okuwandiika* (to write) came into use following the introduction of Western-style alphabetic writing and education. When Western performance was introduced in Uganda, Luganda speakers began to use these terms in a new context: *okuyiyya ennyimba* referred to composing music and song, mostly unscripted, while *okuwandiika emizannyo* related to writing plays, although most times these were either unscripted dramas or written working scripts that allowed the performers to improvise. Today, *okuyiyya* may be approximately conveyed in English by "to compose", often an oral (indigenous) musical text, or to compose in a Western formal style using staff-notation or solfa-notations. In the context of this discussion, *okuyiyya* constitutes methods of expressing song, instrumental musical, and poetic ideas by means of extemporisation, improvisation, among others, usually by an individual or a group of people.

There is no equivalent word for opera in Luganda or any other Uganda language, so, Kawadwa in creating the neologism 'musical plays' (see Kasule 2009) must have observed that the best approach was to present it as a musical play embracing dance, music, song and drama. Therefore, reclaiming opera in this context envisages an entangled process by which Baganda notions of performance such as *okuzanya* (to play) and *okuyimba* (to sing), *okukuba ebivuga eby'ekinnansi*,

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

(playing indigenous instruments), *oluyimba/ennyimba* (song or libretti), *omuzannyo* (play), *ebitontome* (recitations), and *amazina* (dance) underline the view of opera as a conjunction of a Ugandan multivalent performance practice. Remarkably, the inability to translate some African/Baganda concepts and aspects of performance into European languages reflects the African theatre scholar's frustration with the problem within African performance scholarship of using Western concepts and expressions to describe African performance.

In my view, a significant Baganda performance form is *ennyimba enganda*, the traditional folk songs, which are usually accompanied by *amazina amaganda*, folk dances and vice versa. These present an important convergence of the Ugandan song, instrumental music and dance culture.<sup>4</sup> They are expressed through questions of (embodied) performance, lyrics, movement, memory and creative embellishment. In its call-and-response performance technique, the performer from Buganda is always endowed with artistic creativity through practice, spontaneity, and participation. The significance of the song and dance performance is not only in the recreation of a Baganda song or dance with identifiable characteristics of style and form that cross lines of genre, but it also allows the individual artists to occupy a different location in relation to the audience. By watching the traditional folk song or folk dance, the audience participates in the performance process as it observes or witnesses the singing and dancing in the performance space. In fact, it is common for members of the audience to participate by dancing, clapping and singing. Musical theatre/opera, like the Baganda performance tradition that presents a deliberate intersection between performance forms and the continuous transformational process, is strongly demonstrated in the individual song leaders, primarily in the voice, the chorus, which is sometimes the audience, the instrumentalists, the dancers; these are overarched by the performer's moving body and its physicalness.

In the context of this discussion, *okuyiia* constitutes methods of expressing song, instrumental musical, and poetic ideas by means of extemporisation and improvisation among others, usually by an individual or a group of people. Indeed, Ssalongo Tamusuza's discussion of Baganda instrumental performance

---

<sup>4</sup> This is reflected in Ssalongo Justinian Tamusuza's comments on the principles observed by indigenous composers when he suggests that for the composer or director, it is important that "the dancers dance in relation to the music", and "dance in beat with the (form of the) music" while also "observing the climaxes or the anti-climaxes in relation to the meaning of the text". See Sam Kasule (2013) "Playing and Performance in Uganda: A Conversation with Professor Justinian Ssalongo Tamusuza (Interviewed by Sam Kasule at Makerere University, Department of Performing Arts and Film on 27 March 2013)", 10 – 17, volume 7, Number 2, pp. 10 - 17

(2013), which echoes Gerhard Kubik (2010) who conceptualises Baganda indigenous instrumental music as blending extemporised instrumental and voice parts, concerns indigenous instrumental performance with the demands of spontaneity and extemporisation that mark its difference from Western music. Tamusuza demonstrates his exploration of Baganda performance with reference to the practice and professionalism of the *abadingidi* or tube fiddle players:

One way you can acknowledge that those performers know what they are doing is by understanding how a performer, travelling with his tube fiddle,<sup>5</sup> joins the ensemble and plays as if he has been part of the group some time. All he does is to twist the tuning pegs, and then he is already in tune or playing in harmony with the rest. (14)

For Tamusuza, music performance in helpful terms begins with the notion of ensemble playing, for while playing in an ensemble,

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). (15)

In the foregoing comments, Tamusuza underlines further the knowledge behind Wassanyi Serukenya's opera composition practice. Within the ensemble of instrumentalists, the vocal part is just as likely to share a structural relationship with the instrumental versions, but with no fixed musical texts in order to allow the musicians to extemporise.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, especially starting with Kawadwa and Serukenya, *abayiyya* (composers), *abawandiisi* (writers), *abazinyi* (dancers), and *abagoma* (drummers or ensemble players/instrumentalists) started working together on a single theatre production. Kawadwa and Serukenya's post-colonial musical plays/operas apply these old rules of composition. *Makula ga Kulabako* and *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* express the compositional, aesthetical, and transformational aspects of the musical performance culture that demonstrate the way in which Kawadwa and Serukenya's creative imagination articulate in the

---

<sup>5</sup> These include - *amadinda* (xylophone), *engoma* (drums), *entenga* (royal court drums), *entongooli* (bowl lyre), *endingidi* (tube fiddle). There are five different *endingidi* in the ensemble – *eggaya*, *olufuula*, *olutamba*, *ekitamba* and *akatamba*.

<sup>6</sup> The ability to extemporise is a mark of excellence in Baganda music performance.

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

face of a variety of political and social processes thrown forward by, in my view, some of the manifestations of (post)colonialism and post-independence.

In this article, I explore how musical theatre/opera has been continuously built on the above orature and performance techniques throughout the post-colonial and post-independence period. Reflecting their own life and that of their Ugandan audience, Kawadwa and Serukenya shape the performance into a form that illustrates their concerns and promotes their values. I suggest that *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko's* potential as an opera exists, in part, because of the collaborative nature of the performance, the nuanced Baganda songs, their style of modulation and extemporisation of instrumental music, and the dance traditions that intersect and inform the musical play/compositions. John Ssekitooleko Ssempeke, one of the musicians in *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* and *Makula ga Kulabako* suggests that the compositions underscore what was Kawadwa and Serukenya's priority—that the music be imbued with personal, spontaneous energy.<sup>7</sup> They allow each performer to contend with the word, song, music texts, and dance in a style that is most idiomatic to their personality as artists and their approach to performance.

While there are underlying distinctions between music, dance, dance songs, and dramatic performances, there are crucial ways in which the processes of the performance of opera and drama are in dialogue and rely on music and dance forms. There are no written music manuscripts for the instrumentalists, so, textualization, or lateral textuality where context is relevant is paramount. When the soloist calls the tune of a song that is known to the performers and the audience, s/he will be relying on the instrumentalists, using their skills of extemporisation, to respond in line with the learned forms and styles of their individual instruments. In the scenes where dancing takes place, diverse artistic activities on stage include people performing the dance while other members of the cast clap, hum, shout and ululate. This resonates with Okot p'Bitek's observations about indigenous performances among the Acholi in Uganda when he states that song texts are non-scripted but performances which are dynamic and fluid are always accompanied by instrumental music (p'Bitek: 1986: 35). For Kawadwa and Serukenya who were both Western trained, the sensibility in their compositions is still predominantly governed by Baganda narratives; they infuse Western textualization into their scripting, writing in a loose manner that can be adapted and re-adapted depending on the context of performance. Unsurprisingly, in *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, the consequence of the indigenous practice or theatrical expression that resists the construction of a fixed performance text is transformed to contemporary 'operatic' performances. From

---

<sup>7</sup> Comments made by John Ssekitooleko Ssempeke in a conversation with me. (1 September 2024).

within music, songs, and dance songs, this dramatic text articulates alternative discourses which may be aimed at disrupting social codes, subverting unpopular laws, re-inscribing new forms and styles or asserting the performers' rights to artistic license. The content and meaning of the songs in *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* are philosophical as well as witty, and they aim to entertain, inform, and remind the people about the distinctive cultural values that mark their identity.<sup>8</sup> The musical play/opera is complicit in expressing post-independence government oppression, practices of curbing human freedom and cultures, consciously and defiantly reflecting Uganda's post-colonial theatre. Further, in writing the script, Kawadwa reminds the audience of the historical differences between Buddu, Kooki counties and the rest of Buganda before the nineteenth century because they are keen on using the opera to extend Baganda-inspired musical nationalism to express a Baganda aesthetic.<sup>9</sup>

### **Musical theatre and principles of the Baganda indigenous song and music performance**

Musical theatre or opera is rooted in the critically important Ugandan traditions of music, dance, and song. Because it has been continuously built on those same orature techniques during the post-colonial and post-independence period, it shows how Ugandan theatre today continues that tradition. Ugandan composers who, like Kawadwa and Serukenya, shared a fascination with Ugandan indigenous vocal and instrumental music styles and forms were Solomon Mbabi Katana, Cosma Warugaba, and Christopher Mukiibi. Mbabi Katana's *The Marriage of Nyakato*, using Lunyoro, spoken by the Banyoro of Western Uganda, blended Western music styles with multiple indigenous ethnic dance, music, ritual and song forms and styles including from Buganda, Bunyoro, Acholi and Lango. Warugaba's *Omuhiigo* opera in Runyankore language (Western Uganda) combined Western music styles with Banyankole dance, recitation, music and song performance forms and styles but was not as complex in style as *The Marriage of Nyakato*, which like Kawadwa's *Makulaga Kulabako* is a story of joy and love.<sup>10</sup> Mukiibi's musical play, *Kikwabanga*, like Kawadwa's plays used Luganda, but again, it was not as complex apart

---

<sup>8</sup> When the play was first performed in 1969, the Kingdom of Buganda "no longer existed as an entity within Uganda", having been abolished by the Apollo Milton Obote-led Uganda government in May 1966.

<sup>9</sup> For further details concerning the position of Buddu in Buganda see Elliott D. Green, *Ethnicity and Nationhood in Pre-Colonial Africa: The Case of Buganda*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> See "Action Notes", *Africa Today*, Vol. 15, No. 4, *Realism and Romanticism in African Literature* (Aug - Sep 1968), 31-32.



### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

from dance, ritual and song; the instrumentation only used drums and the string ensemble constituted of bowl lyres and the tube fiddles. Although Mbabi-Katana's opera score sheets of *The Marriage of Nyakato*, *Omuwalajjana Kintu* and *Kabiito* (1969) have been lost, he was perhaps the most prolific Ugandan composer.

Reflecting their own life and that of their Ugandan audience, Kawadwa and Serukenya shape the musical into a form that illustrates their concerns and promotes their values. Their multivalent qualities translate these performance forms into a complex shape that worlds the theatre/contemporary performance in complex and extraordinary ways. The two operas, *Makula ga Kulabako* and *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, express the compositional, aesthetical, and transformational aspects of the musical performance culture that speak particularly of the way in which the creative imagination articulates in the face of a variety of (post)colonialism and post-independence political and social processes. Crucially, the consequence of the indigenous practice or theatrical expression that resists the construction of a fixed performance text is transformed to contemporary 'operatic' performances. Music, songs, dance songs, and dramatic text articulate alternative discourses which may be aimed at disrupting social codes, subverting unpopular laws, re-inscribing new forms and styles or asserting the performers' rights to artistic license. While there are underlying distinctions between music, dance and dramatic performances, there are crucial ways in which the processes of the performance of opera and drama are in dialogue and rely on music and dance forms.

#### ***Oluyimba lwa Wankoko (Song of Wankoko) (1971)***

This article offers a reading of how this musical play/opera may be understood as "musical plays", the designation Kawadwa gave them, in particular, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, which I view as a creative effort in a genre that is more Ugandan than it might seem at first to the outsider or non-initiate viewer. In the original manuscript of Kawadwa's first musical play/opera, *Makula ga Kulabako* (1970), performed by the Kampala City Players, he describes the play as 'omuzannyo ogulimu ennyimba n'amazina (a play with songs and dances).' (1970) The title of the second musical play/opera, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, which as the name suggests, is Wankoko's story narrated in song, underlines further the centrality of the song, linked to the long history of the earlier discussed Baganda/Buganda indigenous performance form, *ennyimba enganda*. It further attests to the popular image of the song as a central symbol of the Baganda indigenous performance culture.

*Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, written in seven scenes, takes place in the palace sometime during the period immediately after Uganda gained independence from Britain on 10 October 1962. It starts outside the palace when Wankoko,

in the style of a traditional storyteller, walks from the audience to the stage to start “his song” or narrative. Wankoko is accompanied by his friend, Nkwale. Wankoko’s name, referencing a personalised cockerel in Baganda folktales, suggests a mean and selfish character, while Nkwale is the Luganda name for the partridge, a lean and small wild bird. Wankoko, with revolutionary ideas, comes to the palace with Nkwale, and canvasses the support of palace workers promising them freedom from tyranny and the bringing about of a revolution. Wankoko wins the favour of the shy crown prince, Suuna, who enlists Wankoko’s help to win the heart of Omumbejja (Princess) Barungi from Tooro but who is resident in the palace. He gets overambitious and succeeds in convincing the Kabaka (the King) to banish his son, Omulangira (Prince) Suuna, from the palace as he plots to win the princess’s heart for himself. Events however take the opposite turn. When Wankoko’s ambitions are discovered by the King through the brave Barungi, Suuna is brought back to great celebrations and reinstated.

The Chorus includes indigenous singers, dancers, palace visitors/workers, and supporting instrumentalists who also double up as *abakozi b’omulubiri* (palace workers). Other key characters in the palace are Omumbowa Omumpi (Short Palace Guard) and Omumbowa Omuwanvu (Tall Palace Guard), and Omukazi (The Peasant Woman), whose generic names enabled Kawadwa to reshape their relationships in each scene, allowing their behaviour and projection to change against the musical play’s changing settings. The generic names either reflect the characters’ personalities and class, or shape their relationships with each other, and the audience. In *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko*, however, there are divergences in Kawadwa’s use of ethnic stereotypes, which indicates that he used the play to challenge the essentialised views of Ugandan audiences. This is particularly evident in his treatment of Suuna’s engagement to Barungi. Barungi speaks Rutooro, a Bantu language spoken by the Batooro from Western Uganda. Tooro, like Buddu, Wankoko and Nkwale’s home county, was one of the symbols of “otherness” in Buganda. Kawadwa’s knowledge of the Baganda as ‘tribalists’<sup>11</sup>, however, could have obliged him to cast Barungi to reflect a complex and valuable human relationship. Additionally, he may have observed the complexities of the multi-cultural culture, as practiced in royal palace communities as a solution to the narrow-minded Ugandan society. The staging of scenes portraying ordinary people, *abakopi*, authentic peasants or palace workers in historically accurate situations

---

<sup>11</sup> See M. Twaddle, “Tribalism in Eastern Uganda”, in P. H. Gulliver (Ed.), *Tradition and Transition in East Africa, Studies of the Tribal Element in the Modern Era*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 345.

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

usually found in royal palaces pre-1966 is reminiscent of the realistic theatre presentations of the period.

*Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* called for a cast of around fifty artists and dancers and an ensemble of twenty-five musicians. When Kawadwa and Serukenya came across gifted artists, they persuaded them to join their performing groups; for instance, to produce *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, they engaged *abagoma*, *abalere*, *abatongooli*, and *abadingidi* (drummers, flutists, bowl lyre and tube fiddle players). Whereas these actors, musicians and instrumentalists were knowledgeable in the indigenous music traditions, they were not professional in the Western sense<sup>12</sup>. For performances, the cast featured artists knowledgeable in the indigenous music traditions, and they had a full range of instrumentalists. For the 1977 'Festac '77 production, the instruments included: the stringed ensemble composed of *endongo* and *endingidi* (bowl lyres and tube fiddles), *amadinda*, the 12 key xylophone, and *akadinda*, the royal 17 key xylophone, *baakisimba* drums, *entenga* royal drums, and *endere* (reed flutes) ensemble. A set of *baakisimba* usually includes two drums, *mbuutu* (a large, conical double-membrane hand drum, and *ngalabi* (a long single-membrane-hand drum with an open bottom. In addition to *baakisimba* drums it featured *entenga*, a set of twelve royal drums tuned like the Baganda *amadinda*. The *Entenga*<sup>13</sup> ensemble, royal drums previously restricted to the Buganda King's palace, which contains 12 drums was "graduated in size and tuned to specific pitches" and played by 6 drummers.<sup>14</sup>

The novelty of the musical play/opera created much of its appeal, especially the exquisite 'Overture' that is primarily a set of variations on Wankoko's song, written for the ensemble and the chorus, which aimed to evoke the environment of the King's court. The music compositions mirror the Baganda indigenous performance, within which every instrumental music composition is grounded in song. The voice is the primary instrument of the Baganda and the intersection of instrumental music and song in Buganda is underlined by Kubik's observation concerning "the composition process and the relationship between

---

<sup>12</sup> Kampala City Players was an amateur drama club, so most of the artists were not professional indigenous musicians and actors in the Western sense but had day jobs and they only rehearsed in the evenings after work, and on weekends. Some of the instrumentalists and dancers were part of the National Museum group of demonstrators and former court musicians.

<sup>13</sup> See Anderson, L.A I, "The *entenga* tuned-drum ensemble" in Klaus Wachsmann, *Essays for a humanist: an offering to Klaus Wachsmann*, Spring Valley, N.Y.: Town House Press, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that *amadinda* is the key instrument in Buganda on which the tuning of other instruments is based.

instrumental parts and melody.” (2010a: 284) This is true of Serukenya’s compositions and compositional processes. He was adept at all Baganda indigenous ensemble instruments including the *endere* (flute), *amadinda* and *akadinda* (xylophones), *engoma* (drums), *engalabi* (long drum), *entongooli* (bowl lyre). As an individual who had mastered the xylophone, his work demonstrated distinct and sophisticated composition rules associated with Baganda music, which enabled him to construct and recreate the various parts played on the xylophone. The knowledge and skills of indigenous instrumentation that mirror the practice of the players and composers, which Kubik observes in his research, particularly on the xylophone, were transferred to his composition practice.<sup>15</sup>

*Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, as a musical reflection of Ugandan politics, history, and culture, is also a dramatic rendering of the ethnic division in Uganda and a spin on the fractures within Buganda’s consciousness, particularly concerning the class system inherent in Buganda society. Interestingly, in creating dramas that suggested how Buganda culture informed contemporary views in Ugandan theatre, Kawadwa’s *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* shows fractures within the Baganda/Ugandan community as characters try to decide if they should endure the divisions that exist within society. Whereas by the end of the play a more integrated palace community (or nation) emerges to reject Wankoko’s views of social equality, diverse views that would engender a revolution have been planted. Embedded in Wankoko and Nkwale’s interchanges are aspects of their distinctive music and songs, all based on shared rhythms of expression signified by the drums and string ensemble. The vocal and instrumental compositions make exceptional key shifts and unlike Baganda folk songs, a selection of the songs have a four-part harmony.<sup>16</sup> Serukenya made extensive use of Baganda music instruments specifically drawn from the royal court ensemble. They underlined the drama using different time signatures (mixed meter). While mostly relying on recurring motives, a key feature of the folksong in Buganda, the musical play uses recitations and declamation, and exceptional vocal modulations or key shifts for female parts. These were all vital features of what Kawadwa the playwright wanted from Serukenya, specifically, to collaborate on a script that seemed to depart significantly from

---

<sup>15</sup> The composition for the ensemble, the Chorus and the dancers illustrate Kubik’s discussion of his study of the intersection between Baganda *amadinda* (xylophone) composition, song and dance. (Also see Kubik, 2010a: 277)

<sup>16</sup> According to Kubik, “In *amadinda* and *akadinda* music no improvisation is allowed. The only variation normally used there is dynamic in the widest sense and results from emphasis given to certain notes or note groups. This accentuation, of course, is not prearranged. The musicians follow entirely their feeling.” (2010a: 68)

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

conventional modes of dramatic expression in Uganda, whose transformations would accentuate its difference as a Ugandan 'opera' or musical play. All these approaches communicate their intention to create specific effects appealing to the audience's expectation of a performance relating to Buganda's indigenous culture. The sense of newness created a lot of the musical play's appeal, particularly the amazing opening scene, which Wassanyi Serukenya scored for the ensemble of drums, strings, flutes and xylophones to suggest the area of the Kings court in the palace where the *abagoma ba Kabaka* performed for the King. (See **Figure 1**). Kawadwa and Serukenya assumed that the music was universally known to the audience. In the play script, Kawadwa does not explain how the music is to be performed; moreover, one cannot assume that in the Western sense, the musicians are in the orchestra pit because in Baganda courtly practice, *abagoma ba Kabaka*, following the palace etiquette, are always seated in front of the King. All these directions reveal the writers' aspiration to produce specific effects attractive to the audience's expectation of a new exciting performance. They highlight the awareness with which Kawadwa endeavoured to depict realistic interpretations of palace life in Buganda.

Kawadwa and Serukenya presented what they considered to be realistic representations of indigenous Buganda musical practices, dance and rituals for Ugandan audiences, aimed to present authentic representations of life in the Kabaka's palace and in Buganda. The other Ugandan-inspired operas, Warugaba's *Omuhiigo* and Mbabi Katana's *Marriage of Nyakato*, informed by knowledgeable characteristics of the Bunyoro, contemporaneous with the *Makula ga Kulabako* and *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, also attempted to convey a definitive image of Uganda's culture and musical practices. As well as being more attentive to their social and political environment, ordinary and royal palace music styles and compositional conventions, Kawadwa and Serukenya continually turned to Western styles to expand the musical play genre and to communicate its possible meanings. They made use of various stock symbols, which referenced Baganda culture, from string and drum ensembles to the insertion of popular jazz music in *Makula ga Kulabako*. According to Ssekitooleko Ssempeke, the disbanded professional court musicians, expert instrumentalists and composers who formed the ensemble players mentored and influenced Kawadwa and Serukenya on how to advance their musical skills and introduce innovative approaches to composition.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, the inclusion of these musicians helped them to ensure that there were references to familiar forms that audiences needed to understand the musical plays.

---

<sup>17</sup> John Ssekitooleko Ssempeke in conversation with me, 1 September 2024.

### A Close reading of *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*

The play encompasses the most extraordinary collection of musical styles and instrumentation, portraying the range of modern Baganda (Ugandan) musical experience. Wassanyi Serukenya undoubtedly had a wide knowledge of Baganda indigenous musical styles and forms, and most of the music score shows the proficiency to shift through several styles of expression. The original script contains Serukenya's compositional ideas that are also reflected in other musical compositions.

Figure 1

Key plan of the songs

Scene I

Character (s)

Song

Wankoko

"Wankoko" (F# Major)

Nkwale

"Twajja babiri"

Wankoko, Nkwale and the Chorus "Efe tumulya mu ngalo" (G major)

Scene II

Wankoko

"Ffena twenkana"

Chorus

"Asibibwe"

Scene III

Chorus

"Bakatugyeeko"

Suuna/Wankoko

"Gwe Barungi"

Barungi

"Chaali Suuna"

Scene IV

Wankoko

"Omuntu muntu" (F Major)

Scene V

Barungi

"Ha, Ensi"

Barungi

"Suuna tusonyiwe"

Scene VI

Suuna

"Kabira kange"

Chorus

"Gwe, gwe gwe, gwe, Wankoko togasa" (C

Major)

As I discussed later, the vocal music scores reveal rich and varied ideas. The spoken dialogue is blended with virtuosic solos that are sometimes lengthy but aimed at highlighting the vocal prowess of the main characters such as Wankoko, specifically with performing the indigenous folksong. Sometimes it is the

## *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

confrontational dialogue that transforms into confrontational exchanges in song, particularly between the Chorus and Wankoko. My conversations with the dancer, Ssalongo Kato and the musician Ssetitooleko Ssempeke<sup>18</sup>, both of whom participated in *Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko* and *Makula ga Kulabako*, reveal that Kawadwa and Serukenya did not write music scores for the instrumentalists, but melodies were played on the xylophone to enable most of the cast to learn the songs. Traditionally, the Baganda, like other people in Africa, did not score the music but the song leader sung the lines which they would repeat and memorise. This is demonstrated in Wankoko's song, "*Erinnya lyange nze Wankoko* (My name is Wankoko)" (Figure 2) discussed below, where Wankoko is teaching the Chorus his song. He repeats the lines and even calls for instrumental accompaniment and clapping. There are notable critical aspects of vocal and instrumental performance, specifically relating to the ambiguous boundaries between the vocalists and the instrumentalists in Buganda since within this musical tradition, unlike Western orchestra players, most instrumentalists always play and sing together with the Chorus.

In Kawadwa's original manuscript, selected songs including Suuna's song to Barungi, "*Gwe Barungi* (You, Barungi)", Nkwale's song, "*Ffe basajja ba Kabaka* (We are the King's Men)", the Chorus' last song, "*Kasooka weeyita omugezi Leero yukuzudde* (Once you thought you were so clever, but now we have exposed you)", and Wankoko's signature song in the "Overture", are scored on solfa-notation. For the rest of the music, Kawadwa and Serukenya wrote lyrics, sometimes incorporating musical expressions. Interestingly, within Wankoko's song, "*Erinnya lyange nze Wankoko* (My name is Wankoko)" and the Chorus' song asking Barungi for forgiveness (for siding with Wankoko) (Figure 2), the lyrics are combined with musical signatures indicating vocal expressions, suggesting Kawadwa and Serukenya's unorthodox scorings.<sup>19</sup>

### **Scene I**

While the stage is still darkness, the opening bars of the four bars of the "Overture" are played on the xylophone by three players seated on the opposite sides of the instrument.<sup>20</sup> These are later joined by the flutes and the

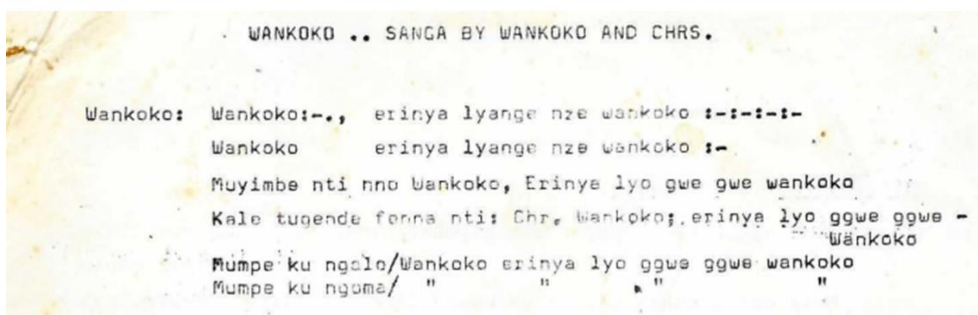
---

<sup>18</sup> Interviewed at the National Theatre Kampala, 1 September 2024.

<sup>19</sup> After 1977, however, Serukenya scored some of the songs on solfa notation and staff notation.

<sup>20</sup> According to Kubik's description of the xylophone players, "*Omunazi* [is] the one who starts. *Omuwawuzi* (the one who interlocks) and *Omukoonezi* (the one who picks

drums. When the instrumental movement ends, Wankoko who has been sitting among the audience suddenly stands up and provokes a quarrel with a member of the audience. Then he commands the musicians and the chorus to start the performance, “*Kale tutandike* (Let us start)” (*Oluyimba*, 1)<sup>21</sup>. From the low part of his melody, Wankoko repeatedly sings his name, “*Wankoko. Erinnya lyange nze Wankoko. Wankoko* (Wankoko. My name is Wankoko. Wankoko)”. The example below shows the opening lines of Wankoko’s song which forms part of the “Overture”.



“‘Wankoko’ ... *sanga*<sup>22</sup> [sic] by Wankoko and Chorus”

Wankoko: Wankoko :-., my name is Wankoko :-:--:-  
Wankoko my name is Wankoko :-  
All of you sing, Wankoko, your name is Wankoko  
Let’s sing together: [Chorus:] Wankoko; (sic) your  
name is – Wankoko  
[Wankoko:] Clap for me/[Chorus:] Wankoko, your  
name is Wankoko  
[Wankoko:] Drum for me/[Chorus:] Wankoko, your

---

the lowest inherent pattern duplicating it on the two top keys of the instrument.” (2010b: 145)

<sup>21</sup> All page numbers refer to the pagination of the original unpublished Luganda (main) manuscript of *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*. However, the manuscript only indicates when music, songs and dance are performed because all the music is contained in a separate manuscript which Robert Matovu Kawadwa allowed me to copy as well. In the discussion, references relate to the points where they appear in the main manuscript.

<sup>22</sup> This is a Luganda translation of the verb sung.



name is Wankoko.

Serukenya composed the “Overture” for *engoma* (five drums), *entenga* (twelve drums), *endere* (five flutes), *endongo*, an ensemble of *endongo ne ndingidi* (four bowl-lyres and four tube fiddles), *amadinda* (one set of a 12 key xylophone) and *akadinda* (twenty-two key xylophone).<sup>23</sup>

The first bars of the first movement of the “Overture” that lasts two minutes are played; the section starts with the xylophone, followed by the flutes, then the drums. While the stage is still in darkness, when the instrumental movement ends, Wankoko repeats his act of who has been sitting among the audience suddenly stands up and provokes a quarrel with a member of the audience. Then he commands the musicians and the chorus to start the performance, “*Abange tutandike* (Friends let us start)”. The opening four bars of the “Overture” are played on the xylophone by both *omukoonezi* and *omwawuzi* seated on the opposite of the instrument. From the low part of his melody, Wankoko repeatedly sings his name, “*Wankoko. Erinnya lyange nze Wankoko. Wankoko* (Wankoko. My name is Wankoko. Wankoko)”. Wankoko’s declamatory style in the opening scene is highly expressive and is usually intended to catch the attention of the audience and provoke their response. The song in a call-and-response style builds on the traditional Baganda (folk)song style. It starts with eight bars that establishes his key (F#) and invites the chorus of palace workers to respond repeating lines that underline his identity. The melody ends on the words, “*Muyimbe nti nze Wankoko* (All of you sing: My name is Wankoko)” to which the chorus of palace workers respond, “*Erinya lyo gwe, gwe Wankoko* (Your name is Wankoko)”. (1) He ascends to a higher note as he describes his identity and the origin of his name, while the chorus repeatedly sings affirmations of his name, “*Wankoko. Erinnya lyo gwe, gwe Wankoko.* (Wankoko. Your name is Wankoko)”. In their response, the Chorus’ melody builds to the top of their range on the phrase: “*Wankoko, Wankoko... Kale tunakulaba embiibya gwe Wankoko.* (Wankoko, Wankoko ... We are waiting to see your signature dance style).” As he uses body gestures to illustrate his behavioural characteristics which he cites in his melody, the Chorus accompany their lines with hand gestures blended with Baganda Bakisimba dance movements. Throughout this section, Wankoko’s melody and the Chorus’s response build to the top of their range, emphasising “Wankoko” and “*tunakulaba*

---

<sup>23</sup> According to Kubik “The comparative ease with which one may transcribe this music after having learned to play it explains itself also through the fact that both *amadinda* and *akadinda* music are composed. There is no improvisation, and the image as played can be written down as exactly as it is necessary to preserve the compositions for ever.” (2010a: 59)

*embiibya*<sup>24</sup> (We are waiting to see your dance style)" at the end of the call-and-response. Wankoko moves on to tell them about aspects of his character and the nature of his mission to the palace. Over the course of the next phrases, Wankoko changes the tone as a way of highlighting key issues in his message. Starting from this point, the audience is made aware that Wankoko serves as the people's conscience that voices the concerns of the workers and others who are oppressed. The breadth of Wankoko's range arranged through idiomatic expressions and phrases in brief, virtually secco recitative, shows the anxiety of a man who views the freedom of the workers and society in general are threatened. When he finishes singing his introduction, Wankoko defines his identity as an 'insider outsider' who originates from Buddu; the audience and the cast would know that Buddu, formerly part of Bunyoro, was conquered and colonised by the Baganda. He invites them to share his meal of roasted groundnuts, and soon the palace workers warm up to his presence.

Shortly after Wankoko finishes this song, his friend Nkwale comes to the stage. After a humorous introduction he is angered by some of Nkwale's insulting comments about his behaviour, so, he challenges Nkwale to convert them into song:

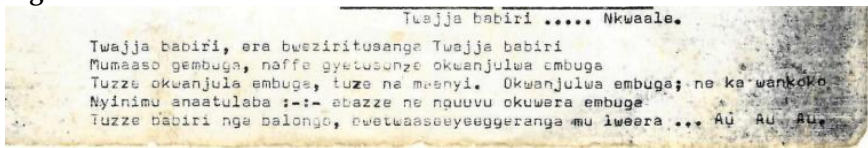
Wankoko: *Kale luyimbe* (Ok, I dare you to sing it).

Nkwale: *Kale ka nduyimbe omusajja oyinze kunsomooza* (Ok, let me sing it. Stop daring me).

(4)

Nkwale starts the song, "*Twajja babiri* (We travelled together)", which is accompanied by the bowl lyre ensemble.

**Figure 3**



We're fellow travellers, together we experience hardships and struggles

We've come to the palace to pay homage to the King

---

<sup>24</sup> Although literarily this idiomatic expression *mbiibya* means a dance style, sometimes it is used to reference either one's performative style or behaviour.

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

We come with vigour and determination; we've come to be  
introduced to the King's court; with the tiny Wankoko

The King will be impressed :- :- (sic) we come with vigour and  
determination

Like twin brothers we travelled across the great Lweera swampy  
plain river ... *Au au au*.

The song articulates Wankoko and Nkwale's feelings and the aim of their mission coming to the palace – to pay homage to the King. Nkwale and the Chorus's performance of "*Twajja babiri*", a song that describes the nature of the bond between the two travellers, marks Kawadwa and Serukenya's strategic choice of song that underlines their creativity and further defines the play's form and style.

At the end of Scene I, following Wankoko's multiple statements to convince the Chorus that they are willing to do any type of job in the palace, Nkwale starts the song, "*Efe Tumulya mu Ngalo* (We are fed by the King)" in the key of G major to demonstrate their commitment to the King and illustrates his power of the people. (5) (See **Figure 4**) Once again, the stage directions show that Wankoko, Nkwale and the Chorus sing and dance, together just like they did at the end of the "Overture".

#### **Figure 4**

| FFE TUMULYA MU NGALO |                                                                          |       |                  |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------------------|
| Boys                 | Ffe basajja ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               | Girls | Ye .....         |
|                      | Ffe basajja ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       | Ye .....Ye mwe   |
|                      | Ffe basajja ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       | Ye .....Ye mwe   |
|                      | Ffe basajja ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       |                  |
| Girls                | Ffe bazaane ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               | Boys  | Ye ....., Ye mwe |
|                      | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       | Ye ..... Ye mwe  |
|                      | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       | Ye ..... Ye mwe  |
|                      | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       |                  |
| All.                 | Ye .....: Wologwa wendigwa (OT)                                          |       |                  |
|                      | Tetwaakula kunyomwa nga Sseppiki buli avaayo agyeefumbiramu              |       |                  |
|                      | Amanyi gaffe gatuli wamu olwempisa buli avaayo asema nyinimu             |       |                  |
|                      | Omusaayi gwaffe gusaayingiramu Biya Gwa Ttamiro lya nanyinimu            |       |                  |
|                      | Abantube obawembejja nga bbuli buli avaayo amwanirizaamu                 |       |                  |
|                      | Musajja wakusiimwanga nga nkuba oyo etonya neesirisaamu                  |       |                  |
|                      | Naffe kwekusiimanga nga entemu eyo ekalidde neefukibwamu. Ye .... Ye ffe |       |                  |
| Boys                 | Ffe basajja ba kabaka ffe tumulya mungalo                                | Girls |                  |
|                      | Ffe basajja ba kabaka ffe tumulya mungalo                                |       | Ye ..... Ye mwe  |
|                      | Ffe basajja ba kabaka ffe tumulya mungalo                                | Boys  |                  |
| Girls                | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               | Boys  |                  |
|                      | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       | Ye ..... Ye mwe  |
|                      | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       | Ye ..... Ye mwe  |
|                      | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka ffe tumulya mu ngalo                               |       |                  |
| Boys                 | Ffe basajja ba kabaka (ffe tumulya mu ngalo)                             |       |                  |
| Girls                | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka (ffe tumulya mu ngalo)                             |       |                  |
| Boys                 | Ffe basajja ba kabaka (ffe tumulya mu ngalo)                             |       |                  |
| Girls                | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka (ffe tumulya mu ngalo)                             |       |                  |
| Boys                 | Ffe basajja ba kabaka (ffe tumulya mu ngalo)                             |       |                  |
| Girls                | Ffe bazaana ba kabaka (ffe tumulya mu ngalo)                             |       |                  |
| All.                 | Ffe tumulya mungalo.                                                     |       |                  |

Boys: We are the King's men, we do his bidding

Girls: Ye (Yes).....

Boys: We are the King's men we do his bidding

We are the King's men we do his bidding

Girls: Ye (Yes) ..... Yes, certainly you are

Boys: We are the King's men we do his bidding

Girls: Ye..... Yes, certainly you are

Boys: We are the King's men we do his bidding

Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding

Boys: Ye..... Yes, certainly you are

Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding

Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding

Boys: Ye..... Yes, indeed you are

## *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding  
Boys: Ye..... Yes, indeed you are  
Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding  
All: Ye ..... We'll lay down our lives for you  
We were not born to be abused like the communal cooking pot  
Our strength is rooted in our good manners (decency), everyone  
supports the master  
Our blood has absorbed so much beer - blame the Master's love of  
beer  
He is incredibly generous and welcoming  
Like a cooking pot boiled dry that is refilled we appreciate his  
generosity  
Boys: We are the King's men, we do his bidding  
Girls: Ye (Yes).....  
Boys: We are the King's men Wedo his bidding  
We are the King's men Wedo his bidding  
Girls: Ye (Yes) ..... Yes, certainly you are  
Boys: We are the King's men we do his bidding  
Girls: Ye..... Yes, certainly you are  
Boys: We are the King's men we do his bidding

Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding  
Boys: Ye..... Yes, certainly you are  
Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding  
Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding  
Boys: Ye..... Yes, indeed you are  
Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding  
Boys: Ye..... Yes, indeed you are  
Girls: We are the King's maids we do his bidding  
All: We do his bidding

### **Scene II**

At the beginning of Scene 2, the Chorus comes on stage dancing *Amaggunju*, the Butiko (mushroom) clan's ritualistic dance usually performed by a group of dancers known as *Bannaggunju*.<sup>25</sup> *Amaggunju*, which before the abolition of the Kingdoms would only be performed in the palace, contrasts with the Baganda *Baakisimba* Nankasa dance performed across the play. Unlike the *Baakisimba* dance, the male dancers emphasise different parts of the body in *Amaggunju*. It is characterised by a

---

<sup>25</sup> See Damascus Kafumbe, *Tuning the Kingdom: Kawugulu Performance, Politics, and Storytelling in Buganda*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018.

mixture of grotesque body movements by the men who, while rhythmically pounding the stage, lean slightly forward and stretch their torsos and hands backwards. Meanwhile, the women's movements are slow and graceful. During the performance of *Amaggunju* fewer instruments are involved. They dance to the beat of small and large drums while singing the *Amaggunju* song: "*Gano amaggunju ssebo, gano amaggunju agazinibwa ab'obutiko* (This is *amaggunju*, sir, *amaggunju* that is danced by people of the mushroom clan)." While there are basic movements relating to the drum beats the dancers creatively respond with improvised moves as well. Sometimes the men dance facing each other while at other times they dance around in a circle. Women are always in the centre of the dance space.

As soon as the dance stops, the workers, including Wankoko and Nkwale, start their daily chores. The opening of this scene, just like the others already discussed include dance, music and song, which confirms the centrality of orature in the study of African opera. Indeed, it resonates with Kubik's observation that, "'African music" in an extended sense also includes "dance"', and that they are "intimately linked aspects of the same cultural complex". To me, we have to include dance, music and other features of orature in the study of African opera. (2010a: 9)

The tonality of this scene develops into angry cadential patterns when Wankoko is seen to denigrate palace etiquette. Following this unique choreographed dance performance at the beginning of the scene, the conversation between the guards and Wankoko and Nkwale unravels their fractious relationship. Wankoko, in asserting that his personality cannot be threatened by palace living conditions and hardships challenges the Omumbowa Omumpi who, similar to other palace workers has tolerated them. He tells him that instead of mourning they should have fought against the hardships and oppressive systems.

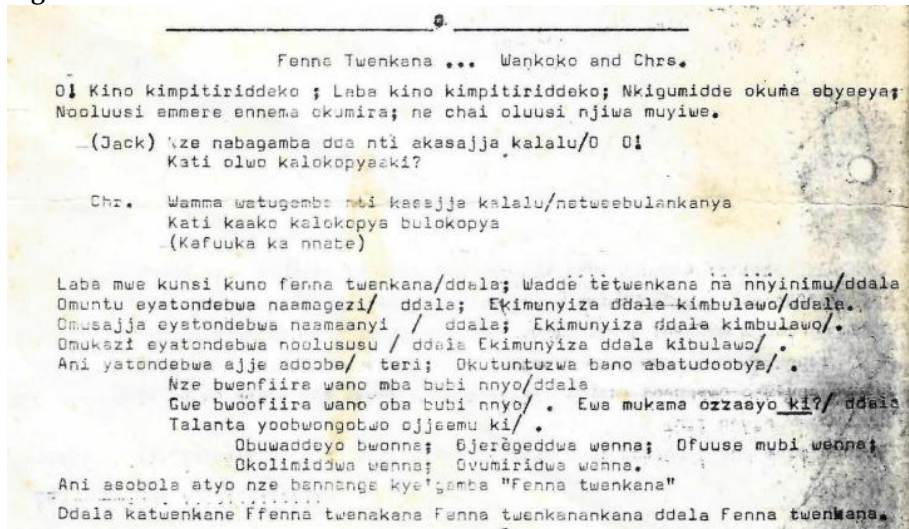
*[B]wezinansiiwa wakiri nazitakula. Nenzikolako ng'obuyinza bwebulagira; nenzifufugaza. Mwe mwenyini mwandibadde mwazikolako dda! Anti temumanyi kigambo kyebayita buyinza. Muteekwa okumanya obuyinza era negyebuwa.*

If hardships cause my body to itch, I will scratch them. I will deal with them according to the law; I will quash them. [...] You don't know the meaning of the word, power. You must understand power and where it lies.

(10.)

Although they are aware that they have got to be alert to the tyrannical behaviour of the palace guards, Wankoko mutters a loud complaint, "*Lino linaaba ffuggabi* (This is tyranny)," (p. 12) which provokes the wrath of Omumbowa Omuwanvu. Asked to clarify his comment Wankoko sarcastically states, "*Nze mbadde ntendereza obulungi bwe ffuggabbi obuli muno* (I was just admiring the beautiful tyrannical practices in this place)." Finally, he states, "*Buli mukozi yenna wano twenkanankana*.(In this palace all workers are equal)." (13) During the commotion, as he throws away his broom in disgust, Wankoko starts his declamation and the song, performed in a recitative style like that used by Baganda raconteurs of poetry, in which he presents the palace as the root of exploitation, tyranny, and conservative cultures:

**Figure 5**



*"Fena Twenkana (We are all equal)"*

O! this is intolerable; Look, this is intolerable; I have been tolerant for many seasons; sometimes I fail to eat; sometimes I fail to drink my tea and just pour it on the ground.

(Jack) Remember I warned you that man is mad/[Chorus:] O O! Now, what is he babbling about?

Chorus: Indeed, you told us that the man is mad/we ignored you  
Now he is just nattering

Wankoko: Look here, listen to me, in this world we are all equal/

Chorus: Certainly;

Wankoko: We may not be equal with *nnyinimu*<sup>26</sup> (the King)/

Chorus: Certainly;

Wankoko: A person gifted with brains/

Chorus: Certainly;

Wankoko: Should not be oppressed/A woman endowed with a good skin/

Chorus: Certainly;

Wankoko: She should not be oppressed/Who was born to suffer?

Chorus: Nobody;

Wankoko: To be terrorised by these oppressors?/

If I died now I will be in a sorry state/

Chorus: Certainly;

Wankoko: If you die now, you will die in a sorry state/What would you take back to God?/

Chorus: Certainly

Wankoko: What have you gained from your talented brains?/

You have wasted all your brains; You have been cursed and abused;  
You have become ugly; You have been cursed; You have been  
abused;

Who can endure these conditions? This is what I say: "We are all  
equal"

Chorus: That's true. Let's all be equal. We are all equal. We are all  
equal. Let's be equal.

Despite resistance from The Woman, who reminds the Chorus of her earlier warnings that he is a madman, Wankoko continues with the sung outbursts which he punctuates with the statement, "*Mu lubiri wano ffena twenkana*. (All the workers in this palace are equal.)" (12) All activity stops as the Chorus gathers to watch and listen to Wankoko's performance of resistance. Wankoko repeatedly sings, "We are all Equal", a message to the palace institutions that they should stop their tyrannical practices. Some workers appear emboldened by his stand and respond singing, "*Kale ka twenkane* (Let us all be equal)," while others are opposed to his move to upset the status quo. Once the Chorus understands Wankoko's thrust of argument in this song, they excitedly respond: (*Ddala, ddala kale ka twenkane; ffena twenkana* (Indeed, let us all be equal; We are all equal." (12)

---

<sup>26</sup> *Nnyinimu* literally means the head of the house, but the Baganda also use it to refer to the King.



### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

Yet still, Wankoko accuses them of imprudence, stupidity, and dumbness, and calls on them to reflect on their plight.

In the song, this transformative way of thinking has shifted him from the countryside stranger to an ideologue who promises to build a dialogue between the workers and their oppressors. At the end of the song, Nkwale and Wankoko once again annoy the place guards when they squat in the palace courtyard, an act that breaks the palace customs. At this point, Kawadwa and Serukenya insert a song, "*Bamukwate* (Take him away and lock him up)," (14) in the key of F#, which allows the time needed to tie ropes to Wankoko's hands and move him offstage. (See **Figure 6**)

As noted earlier, Kawadwa and Serukenya juxtapose several Baganda styles of music and orature in order to portray the fractious relationships in the palace, such as that between the palace workers, Omukozi Omukazi (The Female Worker) and Wankoko and Nkwale in Scene IV; apart from the palace guards, Omukazi is the only character who openly criticises Wankoko. The subsequent musical chaos comes to a climax as the Chorus watches Wankoko being taken away by the guards. They all turn their anger on Wankoko as the object of their disillusioned hopes and anguish. As they are arrested, the fickle group of palace workers shout, "Arrest him, arrest him." (14) The second scene ends with the fickle Chorus disavowing Wankoko's behaviour and singing "*Asibibwe* (Lock him up)", a song condemning him to prison because of his opposition to the palace (and society's) cultural norms. *Asibibwe* consists of proverbs, sayings, and idioms that underline Baganda customs and culture. (See **Figure 6**) They sing fast recitative and rapid moving rhythms, accompanied by dance movements. Ostensibly, to project a sense of static embedded cultural norms, or merely a binary of us and them, the lyrics of *Asibibwe* are embedded with cultural norms and values codes from the past. The sequence of images used aim to manipulate the audience's memories of the present to the past and back again, and raise ideological questions, through iconography.

### **Figure 6**

ASIBIBWE

Mumukwaate, Mumunyweeze Mumutwaale, asibibwe X 2  
Bamukwaate, Bamunyweeze, Bamutwaale asibibwe - a a  
asibibwe Asibibwe Asibibwe Asibibwe - Asibibwe  
Atutanye okujooga.

Ye Mwana waani oyo atalina mpisa  
Avirawa oyo atamanyi mpisa  
Ne buonnyonyole ebiseerabyo bifa  
Bifiira bweereere - A.A. Bamukwaate bamusiba  
Bamujjeu abonerera - Anetukyaamiza obana.

Ffe wano tweekula tweekenneeya  
Empisa tweekula zitweeripye  
Abakadde baatugamba munjogera nti

1. Omukazi asitanye nba akuba bwaavu  
kale nno baatukuutira ekirala  
Omutanda ayitibwenga baffe  
Kyetuva tunu buuzi nga tufukamiddeko -  
Kyetuva Tutasitamenga mu nyumbaye -

Kale ate yaani oyo? D C

CHWWS

2. Nti omukazi ebyopiwa tabyessako  
omulenzi Seppiki tekombwamu  
Seppo nga olusatabaala naagwa eri  
nyazala amaasga nyabo ayabba  
buli bba Mwana lwatuuha

Ezo Zonna mpisa za Nsi zisaanira ddala

Kale ate yaani Oyo ?

Arrest him, bind him, take him away, lock him up  
Let them arrest him, let them shackle him, let them lock him up  
- a a  
Lock him up, lock him up, lock him up - imprison him.  
We've had enough of his spiteful behaviour  
Whose child is he, he who is ill-mannered?  
Where was he born, he who is ignorant  
our customs?  
It is useless explaining anything to him  
He seems to pay no attention to any  
advice  
It is a waste of time talking to him.  
A. A. It's a waste of time. Arrest him. Go and lock him up.

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

Let them remove him so that he suffers the consequences of his  
foolishness – he could be misguiding our children  
In this land our culture is to scrutinise everything  
We observe our *empisa* (norms and cultural values)  
Through their sayings our ancestors tell us:  
A woman who squats brings poverty *in* the home,  
They insisted that the King is husband to all of us  
It's the reason why we kneel and prostrate ourselves when  
greeting and paying homage to him.  
It's why we never ever squat or sit carelessly in his palace.  
So, who is he? DC  
A woman never whistles  
A boy never licks a saucepan  
It brings him bad luck and death on the battlefield  
Cousins should never be in a love relationship  
A mother-in-law must never gaze directly at her son-in-law  
Dare it and all hell will break loose  
All these are customs highly valued by us  
So, whose son is he who dares violate them?

Kawadwa and Serukenya's perspective is to create the play as a homage to Buganda, documenting the past through present performance. To do this, they access a specifically Baganda oral (performance) idiom – the grandmother's storytelling or conversational style that involves passing on knowledge and being funny at the same time.

One way of contextualising the world that produced cultured Baganda subjects, such as the palace workers, then, is to explore the root of the idiom these workers used to make sense of their world. Throughout the song, Kawadwa and Serukenya use idioms, cite sayings and proverbs to connect the text with references to Baganda tropes. Take for example the notion of *empisa* meaning politeness, decency that the women refer to in the songs, *Asibibwe* and *Efe tumulya mu ngalo*. On one hand it means decent behaviour but on the other it clearly refers to Baganda cultural values. The song also references *obuntubulamu* (humanness), which was central to the building of a strong cohesive Buganda nation, society and strong families. However, in post-independent/post-colonial Uganda multiple ethnic discourses of nationalism and equality, it might have struck people as outdated. *Obuntubulamu*, which is used interchangeably with *obuntu* (human decency), came to mark who the Baganda were, or believed themselves to be. Further, there are several references to codes of conduct regarding the relationships between women and their sons-in law, which signify the code of ethics that prevented incest, and even respect for

authority. If these meanings were lost on the non-initiate audience in attendance, then the prince's expulsion, a peasants' rebellion against the Kabaka (King), and a commoner causing harm to a member of the royal family in the subsequent scenes forced them to consider the Baganda perspectives of these potentially inflammatory subjects.

### Scene III

This scene is spectacular for its qualities of song, dance, expressive gestures and setting, representing another aspect of the palace. It starts when the Chorus is performing *Amaggunju* dance accompanied by heavy drumming. When the guards bring back Wankoko to the stage with his hands tied, the palace workers celebrate his apprehension with a jig, singing, "*Bakatugyeko* (They have arrested him, they have taken him away from us)". (See **Figure 7**) Kawadwa and Serukenya construct the Chorus' response to Wankoko's arrest as an accompanied recitative with a fast tempo, although they label it a song, *They have arrested him*, accompanied by dance movements. Similar to *Asibibwe* (*Lock him up*), through the Chorus, Kawadwa and Serukenya in this song attempt to contextualise the Baganda cultures and customs linked to the relationship between the ruler and the ruled which are central to the maintenance of the ideas of socio and political order and stability. The accompaniment of the drums and xylophones form an undulating chromatic melody that suggests the movements of the guards who are fighting to tie Wankoko and drag him off the stage.

### Figure 7

Chorus: It's great, they have taken him away from us :-:-. We are very delighted. It's true they have taken him away :-:-. We're very happy  
It's great they have taken him. They will make him eat banana plant roots where he is gone, O. They have taken him away :-:-. We're delighted. It's great, they have taken him away from us :-:-. We're delighted. It's true they have taken him away. They'll even feed him on banana plant roots where he is gone

Chorus Leader: He is always causing havoc with his endless rattling  
Instead of learning the rules and following palace orders he engages in gossip  
He's always gossiping; alleging that we are all equal.  
Should we be equal to his King? :-.. *Wa!* :-: (Never! :-:)  
They have taken him away from us etc.

To express their displeasure and hatred for Wankoko, the Chorus uses a diminutive pre-fix "ka-", which describes something or someone small, while questioning his agitation for equality: "*Kadda mu kufuma, bambu twenkanankana / Olwo twenkane ne nyinimu?: -.*" (sic) They sing in unison, and their dance movements create a sense of triumphalism as if to convince the audience and the chorus that the expulsion of characters like Wankoko is the best strategy to create peace in society.

Wankoko convinces Prince Suuna that he is a victim of circumstances. Suuna who plans to use Wankoko as a go-between in his relationship with Barungi orders his release, much to the consternation of the guards and the Chorus. Whereas Wankoko is hated by the people, to Prince Suuna, as long as he remains unpopular in the palace, he is the best agent. Following a brief encounter with Barungi, Wankoko asks Suuna for a song he could use as a message to Barungi. At this point, Wankoko begins his role as Suuna and Barungi's go-between. Suuna gives him his composition, *Gwe Barungi*. (See **Figure 8**) In return, Barungi sends her love message through her song, *Kyaali Suuna* (See Figure 9); both are love songs with contrasting cultural ethnic origins.

**Figure 8**

GWE BARUNGI From Supa to Barungi Thro Wank.

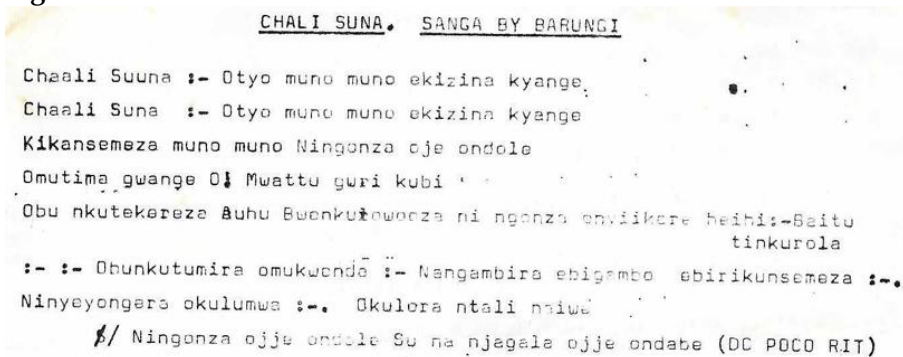
m m .i d d .d d/d  
Oli omu ati ansuza ssehissere:~:~:~  
Oli,omu,ati,ansuza ngulumba :-:- :-  
d .r r .d l .l l .l  
Oli omu ati ansihya ndaaga :-:-:-  
Gwe Barungi (:~? ?  
Buli lwenkulaba nfuuka ekirala  
Olwo nojogeza ebitateredde  
Buli byenjogera mbitabula neerinyalyo  
Gwe Barungi  
Kati nze olwensonyi ezimpitiridde  
Kyenvudde mutuma mutabani wenju  
Ajje akulabe bwooyimiridde  
Gwe Barungi &  
s .l l .s r .r r .r m .s r .m d .d d .d m .d m .m m .s  
Empisa zo ssi nyangu kuzuula mu luryo lwaffe luno olulangira twepanka  
nnyo  
Nze simanyi oba nneewulira nnyo ha naye bwemba ntyo nkusaba ojje  
onyimizeeko  
d m .r r .d l .l l .l  
Era onkomeko oba nneewulira nnyo  
d r r r d l t d d  
Ndyocke ntuukane naawe ngulubya. Back to @ and end at &

You, Barungi (From Suuna to Barungi)

You are the one and only who makes me spend sleepless  
nights :-:- @  
You are the one and only who makes me have restless nights :-  
:-:-  
You are the one and only who makes me uncomfortable :-:-:-  
You, Barungi (:- < >)  
Whenever I see you I change into a different person  
You cause me to speak incoherently  
All the words I say are mixed with your name  
You, Barungi  
Since I am very shy  
I have sent you a messenger  
To bring my greetings &  
You Barungi  
Your behaviour and decency are very rare; it can't be found in  
our royal lineage  
Hopefully I have not shown any arrogance, but even then,  
please come and pay me a visit  
Chastise me if am too arrogant  
So that I can be like you

([instructions to the actor]- Back to @ and end at &)

Figure 9



Chaali Suuna (Darling Suuna) - Sanga (Sung) by Barungi  
Darling Suuna :- Thank you so much for my song  
Darling Suuna :- Thank you so much for my song  
It has made me so happy. Please come and visit me  
My heart, O! It desires you all the time

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

Let me tell you every time I think about you I feel so happy,  
when I see you *hei hi*:-  
You sent me a messenger :- he told me words that made me  
laugh :-  
They made me long to see you :-  
Please, come and visit me, Suuna I want you to come and see  
me (*DC POCO RIT*)

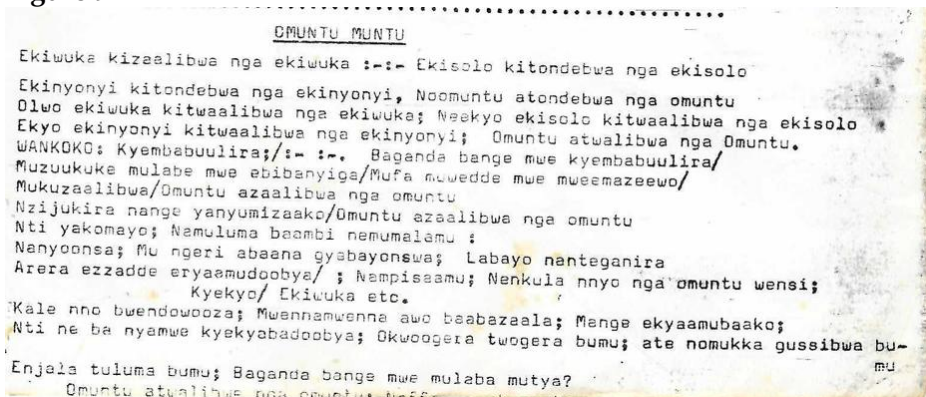
It is interesting to view the scripting of the original 'score' of the song written for a non-Western music literate Chorus. Here, Barungi's song, measured in its tone, is accompanied by the xylophone. Subliminally, at least, the scene questions whether what the Baganda see as an outsider (and what was predominantly a Baganda audience), may be as astute morally as the Baganda themselves and worth a Muganda prince marrying. Persistent questions about kingship and tyrannical rule are markedly throughout Scenes II and III, and Kawadwa and Serukenya reharmonise some of them through song (solo and the chorus), declamation and recitatives presented by characters at different points. For example, the characters Omumbowa Omuwanvu and Omumbowa Omumpi who never sing, or Omukazi, who attempts to distract both Wankoko and Nkwale's agenda during a scene when they are working in the palace courtyard. After this scene, the key signatures between the xylophones and the chorus of palace workers begin to conflict, and the entire act appears to break up until the very end.

### **Scene IV**

In Scene IV, the cunning Wankoko schemes and is appointed by Suuna to be the head of the palace workers. He manipulates Nkwale into gathering the workers in the palace courtyard on the pretext that he has an important message from Suuna. When on Wankoko's entry Nkwale states, "It seems you are the most suitable and only person on all our minds," Wankoko responds: "I am very touched by your trust, and I embrace you all in appreciation." But in his speech, he makes toxic statements mocking, demeaning and rebuking the workers before promising them changes to their health, living and financial conditions. For example, he promises: "*Enzizi zibali wala, zijja kusembezebwa ku lusebenju lwamwe* (We will provide water in your courtyards)." Additionally, "*Oyo yenna akozeka ekinkumu mukifo ky'okuwandiika erinnyalye ajja kuyigirizibwa asoboe oliwandiika.*" At the same time, using metaphors and idioms that present him as the ideal saviour, he states: "*Nze mugenyi. Ndi kitangaala, ndi njuba. Mbamanyi muli bantu, mulina okwerowooleza, awatali kubakakatikako kintu kyonna.*" (35) He concludes by asserting that "I have come at a most opportune moment. I am the sun that gives off light; I am the star that guides travellers through

the night.” Wankoko plays the part of political leaders with a socialist conviction of the time. The climax of Scene IV that seems a diabolical version of Old Major’s speech in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, is Wankoko teaching the workers the political song he labels *oluyimba lwange* (my song), titled “*Omuntu Muntu* (Man is Man)”. (37) The song is an attempt to express, with the greatest musical simplicity, emotions of anguish, rebellion, and anger which the people had learnt during the colonial period and the years following independence. Singing in the key of F Major, Wankoko delivers a musical statement demanding equal treatment for the peasants. This is the most dramatic and philosophical writing in the entire musical play/opera. The accompaniment highlights the intrigue and foretells the impending doom. With the self-conscious use of the Baganda folk song style underlined by dance movements as an exploration of the new Ugandan history alongside radical views of Kawadwa, Wankoko’s song, *Omuntu muntu* (Man is man), projects a critical provincial vision of Buganda, pushing music past its usual borders, linking it to a cultural and political sphere since Kawadwa and Serukenya composed not simply the new Uganda but the post-Milton Obote’s government Uganda. (See Figure 9) In “song” and dance, Buganda is connected to a worldwide political culture where *ensi*, the world, drifts in while *omuntu*, man, is a stranger, unreliable and unknowable. Wankoko’s lyrical journey continually returns to themes of betray, mistrust, predestined fate and struggle.

Figure 9



### *Omuntu Muntu* (Man is Man)

An insect is born like an insect :- An animal is created like an animal

A bird is created like a bird, Man is created like man.



*Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

An insect must be treated like an insect; And an animal should be treated like an animal

A bird should be treated like a bird;

Man should be treated like man.

*[Everyone sings this chorus]*

Let me tell you; / :- :- . My brothers listen to what I have to say/  
Wake up and see the tyranny and oppression/You are dying out slowly/

At birth/man is born like man

I remember my mother told me/man is born like man

Chorus: Man is born like man

That she was close to death; Mine was a painful birth  
She breastfed me just like all babies are breastfed; look, she  
looked after me; Taking care of a troublesome baby/she took me,  
cared for me throughout my childhood; I matured like a man in  
the world;

That's the truth/

*[Chorus:]* An insect etc.

So, this is what I think; All of you were born; what happened to  
my mother; is what your mothers also went through; All of us  
speak the same language; We all breathe the same air; We suffer  
from hunger; Fellow countrymen, what do you think?

Let man be treated as man, birds as birds, insects as insects, and  
animals as animals.

*[Chorus with Wankoko: An insect etc.]*

Wankoko: Are you insects?

Chorus: No.

Wankoko: Are you animals?

Chorus: No.

Wankoko: Are you birds or men?

Chorus: We are men.

Wankoko: Certainly, you are men! That's what I know. So,  
fellow countrymen, let us reexamine our lives. Let slavery be a  
thing of the past.

Let us get rid of poverty, ignorance and disease.

Let us get rid of beggary and bribery.

Let us abolish all forms of exploitation of man by man. All I  
ask for is simply your support

To achieve all this - give Wankoko your support

To ensure for yourselves happiness and prosperity

give Wankoko your support. Whatever Wankoko gets will be  
all yours. Whatever Wankoko has is all yours.

Chorus: Indeed!

[Chorus with Wankoko: An insect etc.]

The choral response here and in other scenes where the Chorus participates in the performance of the call-and-response musical ‘games’ and dances with Wankoko, confirms what Antoni Pizà has observed about the differences between Western music and African traditional music, that it “features modal structures, as opposed to Western tonal structures” and it “does not rely on a central “tonic” note or chord.” By contrast it contains a “series of repeating patterns or modes that can be used to create different melodies and harmonies.” (2023: 5)

### Scene V

In this scene Wankoko acts as Suuna’s messenger while at the same time he betrays him and starts befriending Barungi. After Suuna sends Barungi flowers as an expression of his love, Wankoko decides to start sabotaging their relationship by commenting on her manner of dress; as a custom of the Batooro, she covers her head. He states, “*Omulangira brakwogerako [....] Nti mu mutwe mwandiberamu ebbwa. Mbu ogibirirako ki?*” (46) Barungi’s response is to criticise Suuna and the cruel world in the song, “*Ensi eno* (It is a funny world).” From this point, Wankoko, as he expresses in a monologue, determines to take Barungi for himself:

Wankoko: (*Eri abalabi*) *Omuze gwange gwatutakula nga nkoko, ezza waayp, olwo bwenetakula ng’ezza ewaginayo erifunaddi. Katonda omukisa agukuwa lumu luti, bwotogubakirawo, wesanga okutte mu lyampiki. Barungi ndi wakumwagala n’oluviri ndwagale, nabuli kooza konna akali ku mubirigwe. Suuna atuuse okumufuuwa mu Ngombe. Eno yenjawukana yaffe. [...] Barungi [...] magalo yoka yenamunzijako.* (48)

Wankoko: (*to the audience*) My character, like the cockerel, is to scratch for food. Like the cockerel, I direct the food to myself otherwise I will lose out. God always gives you one chance and if you don’t grab it, you miss out. Now I have got the beauty of the palace, Barungi, I will not let her go. I will love her and treasure every part of her body. Suuna can forget about her. This is the end of us.

Following this monologue, he visits the King and alleges that Suuna is plotting to overthrow him. Suuna is arrested and exiled from the palace, leaving Wankoko to continue with his plot of becoming Barungi’s lover and the most powerful man in the palace. The musical play/opera’s reference to political turmoil seems clear, since Kawadwa constructs Scenes III

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

and IV to be an extensive contention over what Wankoko, Nkwale and the group of workers and other residents in the palace believe the “Kingdom” signifies and represents for the people (Baganda).

#### **Scene VI**

Several issues from the first three scenes return in Scene VI, but they are transformed in several ways through music, dance, and movement. The conflict between Wankoko’s radical ways and the Chorus’ conservative perspectives resurface, are unresolved and offer a continuous variation of political perspectives, also represented by Wankoko and Suuna, which the workers assert in song. Scene VI, is where Kawadwa jumps ahead of time, referring to yet another risky topic; the escape of Buganda King Edward Mutesa II from Uganda following the attack on the Lubiri palace in May 1966, and his projected future return to Buganda/Uganda. These actions incriminate Kawadwa and Serukenya’s opposition to Milton Obote’s government. In this scene, Kawadwa appears to offer an alternate reading of alleged ethnic rivalries between the Baganda and other national groups since Barungi from Tooro Kingdom is the one who visits and saves Suuna from permanent banishment from the palace. *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko* was Kawadwa’s best illustration of manipulation and deception, taking characters of innocence and naivety such as Barungi and through song transforming her unbearable but inspiring experience. She sings, “*Onsonyiwe nze Suuna* (Suuna, please forgive me).” (See Figure 10)

#### **Figure 10**

Suna Tusonyiwe ..... Barungi

O! :-:-:-. Onsonyiwe nze Suna nalimbwalimba Wankoko oli

O! Onsonyiwe nze Suna okulimbwalimbua Wankoko oli

O! :-:-:-. Onsonyiwe nze Suna okulimbwalimbua Wankoko oli

O! :-:-:-. Onsonyiwe nze Suna okulimbwalimbua Wankoko oli.

Leba kati gyewajja wajja wa eno! :- :-.

Omweana atamanyiire kutwanlibwa otyo :- :- :-.

Leba ekibire :- :- . Kirina ekitiinisa:-/.

Nze nkitiina siyagala okibeemu

Leba Waggongolo :- :- :- . Leba na Ssessota :- :-:-:-.

Leba ebiwojjolo :-.

Obaddeyo otyo eno:-:-:- Ejjudde ntiisa

Kyenavanga mpawamuka mutulo twange nga bino byebimpawamula

Kyenavanga mpulira nga siri bulungi nga bino byebinkola bityo

Kyenavanga ndoota nga engo ekutwala:-. Ayi bambe ..(6)

O! Onsonyiwe nze omumbajja Barungi waabwe

O! Sonyiwa nazo abantu beekikaakyo kyonna

O! Onsonyiwe nze omumbajja Barungi waabwe

O! :-:-:- Sonyiwa nazo abantu beekikaakyo kyonna

Abantu kaakati bayagala gwe

Oli wankoko tokwabatiisa

Kandi nyooze Aukwooye okufasika

Twarabire ebivise biswazeza

Twakuwalanira mu butamanyo oba kyeakyo :-:-:- Tukolimirwe :-:-:-Tukolimirwe

Leba embuura embi gyetwakusuulemu

Leba embuura embi gyetwaakuteekemu

Leba embuura embi gyetwaakusuulemu

Leba embuura embi gyetwakuleetamu .....Suna Tusonyiwe Collapse.

*"Suuna Tusonyiwe (Forgive Us Suuna)"*

O! :-:-:-. Suuna, please forgive me I was misled by that Wankoko

O! Suuna, please forgive me I was misled by that Wankoko

O! :-:-:-. Suuna, please forgive me I was misled by that Wankoko

O! :-:-:-. Suuna, please forgive me I was misled by that Wankoko

Look at this place, what kind of place is this? :-:-.

A boy who is not used to this type of treatment :-:-:-.

Look at the forest :-:-. It's scary :-/.

It scares me. I don't want you to stay here.

Look, a centipede :-:-:-. Look, a large snake :-:-:-:-.

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

Look, butterflies :-.  
How have you managed to survive here? :-:- This is  
a fearful place.  
It was these frightening things that kept me awake  
It was these frightening things that made me feel  
unwell.  
That's why I had nightmares dreaming that you were  
being attacked by a leopard:-.

*Ayi bambe!* (O my God)  
O! Please forgive poor Princess Barungi  
O! Forgive all those people in your family  
O! Please forgive poor Princess Barungi  
O! Forgive all those people in your family  
Now everyone loves you  
That Wankoko doesn't frighten them anymore  
I want to see you again  
Let us forget all that is past  
We were wrong to hate you and cause your  
banishment  
There was no just cause for your banishment  
Let's be cursed for our wrongdoing; Curse us :-:-:-;  
Curse us  
Look how we landed you in a mess  
Look how we landed you in a mess  
Look how we landed you in a mess  
Look how we landed you in a mess ..... Suuna, forgive  
us.

Towards the end of the scene that resonates with the late King Muteesa's narrative<sup>27</sup> of his escape from Uganda, Suuna sings "*Akabira kange* (My grove)", which romanticises the woods as his place of comfort and security.

### ***Enkomerero y'omuzannyo (Finale)***

The opera ends in the key of C Major with the Chorus singing "*Gwe, Gwe, Gwe* (You, You, You)" to the accompaniment of "*Gwanga Mujje*" rhythms/melody and concludes with dancing to the instrumental Baakisimba Nankasa beat. Through this song, the Chorus "accuses Wankoko of betrayal and demonstrates the people's rejection of his evil plans. There

---

<sup>27</sup> Mutesa II Kabaka of Buganda, *Desecration of My Kingdom*, London: Constable & Co. Publication, 1967.

is a curious musical juxtaposition of the song with the traditional Baganda community emergency drum sounds, “*Gwanga mujje* (People of the Nation, Come)”. (See **Figure 11**) Traditionally in Buganda this was the call raising the alert for people, no matter what they were doing, to grab weapons to join the army and defend the nation against or, as an alarm signalling the presence of danger in the community. Interestingly, although this was written in the original script, following Kawadwa’s murder, it is neither reflected in latter versions of the scripts nor the performances.

That the opera ends with the Baganda drum signals that mobilises the community either to do communal work or go to war seems anomalous at first, as it is not always used for entertainment. However, it is a signal to the knowing community to arise and resist oppression. From the perspective of Baganda identity, perhaps Kawadwa and Serukenya aimed to propose a strategy for liberation. Even if audiences did not notice this nuanced musical connection, the “solid” drumming and declamation of “*Gwanga Mujje*” in the Finale signified the difference between tyranny and freedom, the will to fight, and a belief in indigenous cultures and customs. The final musical and instrumental performance of the musical play/opera present the recognizable rhythmic motif of the village drum, known to people in Buganda. This scene further underscores how every detail of plot, theme, and music in *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* references some aspect of Baganda life, culture and history, as if Kawadwa and Serukenya invested everything into a particular theatrical work, presenting Baganda political history and beliefs, combining tom-tom drums with Western orchestral instruments. Their ability to draw on multiple threads of orature and present these as potential sources for composing and structuring a performance that voices Baganda identity is extraordinary. They certainly knew not only the best musical and song forms and styles but also the dances, and even the most theatrically challenging sections of their musical play/opera show an ability to juxtapose and move through many styles of theatrical expression. The last section also reveals Serukenya’s particular fascination with the drums, for as Ssekitooleko Ssempeke informed me, similar to the *Amaggunju* dance, the song and dance is exclusively accompanied by an ensemble of *Bakisimba* drums. The commitment to the King seen earlier recurs and in this context the men as well as the women swear their allegiance to the King: *Ffe basajja beggwanga; Ffe bazaana bbe ggwanga*.

### Figure 11

## Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance

GWE GWE GWE GWE GWE GWE GWE GWE  
 s s s s s s s s  
 m s m s m s m s  
 d d d d d d d d

s s d d tta. te; tta. s. m. d; d d. s. d; d d. ta., ta d. ta d. dd m. tta. d. dd  
 Kaseoka weyita omugezi leera tukuzude tukugude mu pultani togasa Wankoko  
 togasa

Engoma gwanga mujje :-:-,

d, d d. sta., tata s. s s ( d; d m. s. )  
 Togasa osana kweenyimvelwa (Gwanga mujje) Chr. With drums  
 m m m d. ta d. ta ; ddd m m s. d d, d d s ta ; tata. ta, la  
 :-:-. la be omukuusa omubbi wamu Gwanga mujje :-:-; simanyi gwe weyita ni gwe  
 d; d m s

ta, d d. s ta. ta, d d. s ta.  
 (girls) Watulimba dda (Boy) Watujooga dda  
 (do) Watuwaabuula (do) ta d. d d, d d 1 .1 .1, d 1 ; m m  
 Osana osale :-:- Twakugukamu kati  
 m m m, m m ; d d  
 d d d, d d ; s s

Men d. s 1 ; 1 1 .1 m  
 Ffe basajja be gguanga  
 Women Fe bazeana be Gwanga  
 Men Ffe basajja be Gwanga  
 Women Fe bazeana be Gwanga  
 Men Gwe mulabe we Gwanga  
 Women Gwe mulabe we Gwanga  
 Men Gwe mulabe we Gwanga (Pick up speed)  
 Women Gwe mulabe we Gwanga :-:-

1; 1 1, d ; 1 1 ; d ; 1 1 1 d d t-d t-m d'  
 Gwamirwe Gwamirwe Gwamirwe GWE GWE tta-ta-ta-ta GWE  
 s t-d t-m t-t-t-t s.  
 m t-s t-d t-t-t-t m  
 d m s d m s t-L d'

You, you, you, you, you, you  
 First of all, you think you are clever; today we have  
 discovered your (evil) plan  
 Wankoko, you are useless  
 (The drum signal) People of the nation, come :-:-.  
 You are disgusting, you need to be isolated and rejected.  
 (Drum signals – People of the Nation Come ) (Chorus sings with  
 drums)  
 Look at him – a hypocrite, a thief. People of the Nation  
 come :-:-; Who do you think you are?  
 Girls: You deceived us  
 Boys: You mistreated us.  
 Girls: You humiliated us.  
 Boys: You have to pay back. We found you out.  
 Men: We are the nation's men.  
 Women: We are the Nation's mothers.  
 Men: We are the Nation's men.  
 Women: We are the Nation's mothers.  
 Men: You are the Nation's enemy.

Women: You are the Nation's enemy.

Men: You are the Nation's enemy.

Women: You are the Nation's enemy.

To consider Kawadwa and Serukenya's mastery of the musing, song and dance practices of Buganda is an invitation to reflect on the exceptional ways in which theatre performance became the most obvious form of resistance in Uganda's post-independent era.

Significantly, as *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko* demonstrates, music texts and instrumental music central to Baganda culture became a focal point of the cultural resistance among the Baganda since dance, music and song represented what was meaningful to the Baganda but imperceptible to the political leaders. In song, Kawadwa and Serukenya deliberately use Luganda with expressions that allude to cultural values and philosophies that are unpopular with the political regime. Political observers, confronted by performances in Luganda, instrumental sounds, movement, songs or dances, could recognise the significance of the spectacles but were not sure what they meant. Serukenya underscores this point when he states that the decision by Idi Amin's generals to choose *Oluylimba lwa Wankoko* to represent Uganda at Festac '77, demonstrates how at this point, they were oblivious of the meanings embedded in the play.<sup>28</sup> This resonates with the following extract taken from a recording of the performance in 1977, part of the introduction written by Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu which was read by the announcer to the audience before the performance:

"Why does Mr. Wankoko the revolutionary fail? [...]Who betrayed Wankoko? Who is betraying Africa? Why do Africans sabotage the African struggle for freedom? Is Africa ready for change? If it is ready for change, have the revolutionary leaders taken the trouble to educate and prepare Africans for the inevitable change?"

Unsurprisingly, in order to transcend political oppression, these writers had found ways of transforming Baganda idiom within songs and instrumental music so much so that Wankoko's recitatives excited Amin's army generals enough to

---

<sup>28</sup> For the Lagos Festac Festival, Kawadwa delegated the production and directing responsibilities to the experienced director, Elvania N. Zirimu who made diverse revisions to the staging (and choreography) of the play.



### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

pick the play to represent Uganda at the festival.<sup>29</sup> *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, which extolls the traditional royal institutions and Baganda orature as spectacular and mysterious also endorses the philosophy of freedom and revolutionary change. As true revolutionaries, Wankoko and his friend Nkwale serve as a warning to those false leaders who choose to prioritise their individual needs, ignoring the suffering individual such as the palace workers. Kawadwa, like traditional travelling musicians (*abadongo*), reinforces the image of leaders who were an antithesis to images of African freedom fighters, and the Baganda philosophy of *obuntubulamu*.

### **Conclusion**

*Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* stands as one of the most ambitious attempts to reimagine indigenous Baganda performance traditions within a modern theatrical framework. Through its intricate layering of song, dance, instrumental music, recitative, and dramatic narrative, the musical play/opera demonstrates how Baganda orature and performance vocabularies—*okuyiyya*, *okuyimba*, *amazina*, *ebivuga*, and *ennyimba enganda*—can be transformed into a contemporary operatic form without losing their cultural integrity. Kawadwa and Serukenya's dramaturgy is grounded in the lived experiences, idioms, and expressive practices of the Baganda, yet it is also shaped by the political turbulence of post-independence Uganda. Their work reveals how performance becomes a site of negotiation between tradition and modernity, between cultural memory and political critique.

The musical play/opera's political resonance is unmistakable. Through Wankoko's rhetoric of equality, the palace workers' ambivalence, and the coded references to the 1966 crisis and the exile of Kabaka Mutesa II, the work articulates a subtle but unmistakable critique of authoritarianism. The FESTAC '77 performance further underscores the paradox of political misrecognition: Amin's generals selected a play whose subversive meanings they could not decipher, demonstrating how indigenous performance can conceal resistance in plain sight. In this sense, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* exemplifies the strategic opacity of African performance traditions, where meaning is layered, coded, and often accessible only to the culturally literate.

Moreover, the musical play/opera affirms the centrality of music and dance as repositories of Baganda identity. The use of *entenga*, *amadinda*, *endere*, *engoma*, and the full range of palace instruments is not merely aesthetic but ideological: it

---

<sup>29</sup> The political leaders and their military/police institutions always targeted people staging cultural dances and music since drums being used to send out signals, and dances encouraged people to congregate and plan rebellions.

asserts the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge systems at a moment when political power sought to suppress them. The dramaturgical structure—moving between recitative, ensemble singing, declamation, and dance—creates a performance ecology in which the boundaries between music, drama, and ritual dissolve. This multivalent form allows the work to speak simultaneously to cultural pride, political anxiety, and communal aspiration.

Taken together, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* demonstrates how the Baganda performance imagination—rooted in orature, dance-music interdependence, and indigenous philosophies of *obuntubulamu*—can be reconfigured into a modern operatic form that speaks with clarity to the political anxieties of post-independence Uganda. Kawadwa and Serukenya's achievement lies not merely in their revival of palace aesthetics or their mastery of indigenous instrumentation, but in their ability to transform these cultural resources into a dramaturgy of resistance, one capable of unsettling authoritarian power while affirming communal identity. By weaving together recitative, declamation, ensemble playing, and choreographic idioms, they create a theatrical language that is at once historically grounded and radically contemporary. In this sense, *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko* stands as a testament to the resilience of African performance traditions and their capacity to articulate dissent, memory, and aspiration. It invites us to reconsider opera not as a European inheritance but as a capacious form through which African artists continue to negotiate the shifting terrains of culture, politics, and belonging.

## References

- Action Notes. 1968. *Africa Today*, Vol. 15, No. 4, *Realism and Romanticism in African Literature* Aug. - Sep., pp. 31-32.
- Anderson, L.A.I. 1977. "The *entenga* tuned-drum ensemble" in Klaus Wachsmann, *Essays for a humanist: an offering to Klaus Wachsmann*, Spring Valley, N.Y.: Town House Press.
- Elliott, D. Green. 2010. *Ethnicity and Nationhood in Pre-Colonial Africa: The Case of Buganda*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kafumbe, Damascus. 2018. *Tuning the Kingdom: Kawugulu Performance, Politics, and Storytelling in Buganda*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Kasozi, A.B.K. 1984. *The Social Origins of Violence in Uganda*, Montreal; Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Kasule, Sam. 2013. Samuel Kasule, *Resistance & Politics in Contemporary East African Theatre: Trends in Ugandan Theatre since 1960*, London: Adonis & Abbey, 2013.

### *Intersection of Opera and the Traditional African performance*

- Kasule, Sam. 2009. "More Than Just Musical Plays: Intersections of Politics and Folklore in Byron Kawadwa's Theatre", *African Performance Review*, Volume 3, Issue 2-3, 39 – 58.
- Kasule, Sam. 2013. "Playing and Performance in Uganda: A Conversation with Professor Justinian Ssalongo Tamusuza (Interviewed by Sam Kasule at Makerere University, Department of Performing Arts and Film on 27 March 2013)", pp. 10 – 17, Volume 7, Number 2, pp. 10 – 17.
- Kasule, Sam. 1985. *Zinaalirawa?*, Unpublished.
- Katana, Solomon Mbabi. 1956. *The Marriage of Nyakato*, Unpublished.
- Katana, Solomon Mbabi. 1967. *Omuwalajjana Kintu*, Unpublished.
- Katana, Solomon Mbabi. 1969. *Kabiito*, Unpublished.
- Kawadwa, Byron. 1970. *Makula ga Kulabako*, (Music composed by Henry Wassanyi Serukenya), Unpublished.
- Kawadwa, Byron. 1971. *Oluyimba lwa Wankoko*, (Music composed by Henry Wassanyi Serukenya), Unpublished.
- Kubik, Gerhard. 2010. *Theory of African Music, Volume II*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Kubik, Gerhard. 2010. *Theory of African Music, Volume I*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mukiibi, Christopher. 1978. *Kikwabanga*, Unpublished.
- Mutesa II Kabaka of Buganda. 1967. *Desecration of My Kingdom*, London: Constable & Co. Publication.
- Okot p'Bitek. 1986. *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values Studies in African Literature*, Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya.
- Piza, Antoni. 2023. *Listening to The World: A Brief Survey of World Music*, New York: The City University of New York.
- Twaddle, Michael. 1969. "Tribalism in Eastern Uganda", in P. H Gulliver (Ed.), *Tradition and Transition in East Africa, Studies of the Tribal Element in the Modern Era*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Serukenya, Henry Wassanyi. 1969. "Omuntu wa Bantu (A man of the people)" interviewed by Sanyu Robina Mweruka on Bukedde Television, 14/8/2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fwx5jSnSAM>
- Warugaba, Cosmas, *Omuhiigo*, Unpublished.

### **Interview**

- Ssempeke, John Ssekitooleko at the National Theatre, Kampala (Uganda), 1 September 2024.
- Ssalongo Kato, Interviewed at the National Theatre, Kampala (Uganda), 1 September 2024.

# Appendix

## FFE TUM'ULYA MU NGALO

DOH = G

♩<sub>1</sub>

ff

|   |        |          |         |        |         |       |          |        |       |
|---|--------|----------|---------|--------|---------|-------|----------|--------|-------|
| B | d ., l | : l ., l | l ., l, | : l m, | d ., l, | : l l | r , ., m | : m    | D.C 3 |
| T | Ffe ba | sa-jja   | ba Ka   | baka   | ffe tu  | mulya | mu       | nga-lo |       |
| S | m ., d | : d ., d | d ., d, | : d s, | m ., d, | : d d | t , ., d | : d    |       |
|   | s ., m | : m ., m | m ., m, | : m d, | s ., m, | : m m | r ., m   | : m    |       |

♩<sub>2</sub>

|                |    |       |       |       |       |       |        |      |       |
|----------------|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|-------|
| S              | d  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — ., m | : s, | D.C 2 |
| A <sub>1</sub> | Ye | ..... | ..... | ..... | ..... | ..... | ye     | mmwe |       |
| A <sub>2</sub> | s  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — ., d | : m  |       |
|                | m  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — ., s | : d  |       |

♩<sub>2</sub>

ff

|                |         |          |         |       |         |       |        |        |       |
|----------------|---------|----------|---------|-------|---------|-------|--------|--------|-------|
| ♩ <sub>1</sub> | s ., r  | : m ., m | m ., m, | : m d | s ., r, | : r r | t ., d | : d    | D.C 3 |
| ♩ <sub>2</sub> | d ., t  | : d ., d | d ., d, | : d s | d ., t, | : t t | f ., s | : s    |       |
|                | Ffe ba  | zaa-na   | ba Ka   | ba-ka | ffe tu  | mulya | mu     | nga-lo |       |
|                | s ., fe | : s ., s | s ., s, | : s m | s ., f, | : f f | r ., m | : m    |       |

♩<sub>1</sub>

|                |    |       |       |       |       |       |        |      |       |
|----------------|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|------|-------|
| ♩ <sub>2</sub> | m  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — ., t | : d  | D.C 2 |
|                | Ye | ..... | ..... | ..... | ..... | ..... | ye     | mmwe |       |
|                | d  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — ., f | : s  |       |
|                | s  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — ., r | : m  |       |

Ye

|  |    |       |       |       |       |       |   |     |          |
|--|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---|-----|----------|
|  | d  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — | : — | Wo       |
|  | s  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — | : — | : — ., m |
|  | m  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — | : — | : — ., d |
|  | Ye | ..... | ..... | ..... | ..... | ..... | — | : — | : — ., s |
|  | d  | : —   | —     | : —   | —     | : —   | — | : — | Wo       |
|  |    |       |       |       |       |       |   |     | : — ., s |