> leave you collapse?! Then, there is something fundamentally wrong with a person who has been taught how to create a product but cannot go further than that. That will mean there has to be another expert to come and teach them marketing. And then after that they will have to have another person to come and teach them selling, because the is different from marketing. So – when will it stop?! (Nuwa Nnyanzi, artist and art-entrepreneur, round table discussion 'Art in Intl. Development, 27/02/2019: 274–280)

In the debate another participant, who introduces himself as Philip Balimunsi, points towards the fact that what worked for Nuwa may not work for others who live with very different circumstances and who may not have the same objectives and initiative. While Nuwa mentions that he had been a trained professional working in the medical military system prior to his flight, that he had had a cousin who gave him some money, that he had met a supporter who took one of his artworks to the US, where he was "making connections with sponsors to support refugees in Kenya" (ibid: 271–272), and that he had had an aunt who at the time lived in Nairobi, owned a restaurant, and provided him a roof over his head, he does not link any of those factors with his success as an artist. It appears as if he does not recognize these aspects as supportive elements that impacted the course of his career as an artist. Therefore, maybe out of humbleness, maybe out of naïveté, or for reasons about which I can only speculate, he believes that after having received training, others should be able to build their artistic careers on that. After all, he had succeeded in doing so as well.

As trainers, Nuwa and Sserunkuuma are powerful and convincing because both tell their visions through their biographic experiences. Both are successful artists who travel abroad and who live well from their art. They are the living proof of the authenticity of the narratives they tell, and I met several people who told me that during the UNESCO (the *Strengthening* project) training, they were told to continue to work and push through hardship, and that it was because of the training they were able to gather new hope, continue with their work, or resume it.

6.4 Conclusions
Of Being and Not Being in Art and Civil Society

The NACCAU as an organization traces its roots back to 1994, the year in which the monarchies were reinstated as cultural institutions. With its restructuring in 2003, it became the National Arts and Cultural Crafts Association of Uganda. In its name it brings together art, craft, culture, and the aspiration to be(come) an association of national importance. Yet, it is also a member-based association whose activities by and large cluster around its main site of action, its crafts village. As a mem-

ber-based association, its objectives and positions with regard to arts and (cultural) crafts are negotiated among its members. In this inward orientation, the members find various strategies to organize and support each other, and to establish a culture of mutual support. As far as the findings of my analysis goes, this occurs in at least two ways: the first strategy is the engagement in the savings circle in which NACCAU members organize themselves in a smaller group with a strong sense of commitment to joint investments, facilitated by their engagement with artistic handicraft products. Jointly, they decide how to invest and whether a grant, e.g. for the purchase of handicraft products or raw materials. As such, individual investment choices are always also supported by the collective. The second strategy is followed by members such as Reste Kaddu Lwanga, who finds comfort and a sense of efficacy in being part of an association rather than being an artist/ dealer selling art on the street. Furthermore, she considers her shop as a space of mutual empowerment which serves as a platform for fellow visual artists. Informed by the incentive of having to make a statement against a government that allegedly neglects cultural practitioners, she finds the NACCAU to be a base for advocacy and for mutual empowerment whereby members and affiliated artists demonstrate appreciation for each other's talents, skills, and persistence.

However, those processes remain almost invisible in the NACCAU's outward orientation. As an association that strives to move ahead and hopefully evolve, the most prominent actors in and around the association strive to position its activities as pivotal for national economic development, poverty eradication, and, importantly, gender equity. Since its management senses a lack of recognition for its past achievements for the wider Ugandan society from the respective ministry in charge, its strategic and operational leaders have turned towards new allies to seek strategic and financial support. In this outward orientation, the NACCAU subsumes innovation, creativity, uniqueness, or variation of artistic handicraft products under the commercial value and marketability of products designed to suit the assumed taste of (foreign) consumers.

While this may be so, its leadership remains intrinsically motivated to use the empowering potential of artistic and creative expression and to use its agency to support artistic handicraft artists adapt their skills to contemporary styles and to safeguard what is understood to be the material cultural heritage.

The NACCAU and its members promote, in multiple and at times seemingly contradictive ways, societal change. This notion is shaped by external and internal forces, interests, by power dynamics as well as by the need of its members to make a living off of their (artistic) engagement. In the situation, the NACCAU manifests itself as an actor in-between, co-opted to consent by logics of a market economy dominated by foreign concepts of aesthetics, development agendas and notions of cultural tourism on the one hand. Yet, it is also an actor who facilitates the encounter of a culturally marked product and the tourist customer, which positions

the NACCAU members as powerful cultural ambassadors and intermediaries. It is those moments of intimate encounter, and the ability to move within and engage with multiple actors with specific interests that would allow for the NACCAU to promote the interests not only of their members, but also of the artistic handicraft producers and the positionality of artistic handicraft products in the nexus of art, craft, development, and (cultural) ownership.

Chapter 7: Crafting a Different Story
Independent Handicraft Groups in Rural Eastern Uganda

Jointly with Barbra Khoba Loyce and Dorothy Wanyama[1]

7.1 Introduction
Turning up the Volume. Focusing on Minoritized Discourses and Silenced Perspectives

> By not analytically reproducing the power relations of domination and instead offering analyses that represent the full array of discourses, we turn up the volume on lesser but still present discourses, lesser but still present participants, the marginalized, the quiet, the silent, and the silenced. (Clarke et al., 2018: 226)

In the previous chapters, I set the empirical scene of my research situation and then elaborated upon the challenges of local associations such as the NACCAU to negotiate their positionality in the discursive arena of power, action, policy, and symbolic meaning making. With this third and last empirical chapter, I now leave Kampala and its international, national, state, non-governmental, and business actors behind, with the aim of meeting those people who, until now, have existed only through discursive constructions in my research situation. This following chapter is dedicated to those who are referred to as producers, cultural crafts persons, master crafts people, businesspeople, custodians of culture, or, at times, artisans. Thus far I have either used terminologies applied in my empirical data or, more frequently, referred to them as handicraft artists. In doing so, I wish to follow the argumentation of local art scholars such as Kyeyune (2001), Sanyal and Kasule (2006), Nabulime and McEwan (2011; 2014), who seek to avoid the hierarchization of forms of *symbolic creative expression*. By doing so, they contribute to a situated conceptualization of Ugandan art.

1 The two women's contributions to the realization of this chapter are of crucial significance. Any presentation of the results in this chapter is an interpretive co-production our collaboration. Therefore, I consider this chapter to be co-authored by Barbra and Dorothy. For more elaborations, see the next page.

Yet, as previously stated, none of the handicraft artists referred to themselves as artists, crafts persons, or producers. Rather, they introduced themselves as people who make conscious and active choices in their lives, as people, who began to organize themselves as individuals after betrayal, who simply do *what they know how to do best*, people who continue the work of their forefathers as they have been taught, or people who perceive themselves as the backbone of a rite of passage. Their stories, interests, and motivations are diverse and unique, and while they all have an economic interest in pursuing handicraft work, I came to understand that for many of them, there is a lot more to their engagement with artistic handicraft production than it being a means of generating an income.

I wish to acknowledge that without the work of Barbra Loyce Khoba, who supported me as a research assistant with organizational issues, her language skills, and sharp mind, and whose family hosted me with the greatest hospitality, and the help of Dorothy Wanyama, who dedicated her time and was willing to share her knowledge as well as her network with me, the otherwise unheard and unseen positions and discourses of the actors in this following chapter could not have been considered in my research. Without them, my analysis would have remained within the scope of reconstructing "the major or master discourse[s] that usually trump[s] others" (Clarke et al., 2018: 226). For me, Barbra and Dorothy, although they did not write the following pages, are both co-authors of this chapter.

Turning to Overheard Positions

In my encounters with the handicraft collectives, it was referred to as "the UNESCO seminar", which is the term I will use as well. My idea was to meet with several collectives for a first conversation and then return to Kampala with my recordings and field notes. Based on the principle of theoretical sampling, my plan was to do some preliminary mapping before I would return to spend more time with one or two selected groups. Unfortunately, the second part of this plan could not be put into action. Due to Covid I ended my field stay early and would not return to Uganda for gathering more empirical data.

What I did not know when Barbra and I boarded the bus to Mbale was that Dorothy had already set up a tight schedule for our week together. Nor did either one of us know that my research would be the reason for a small family reunion (Dorothy is Barbra's paternal aunt), which we only realized after our arrival in Mbale as we entered Dorothy's handicraft shop. This coincidence had an impact on the relational dynamics of the days to come. Barbra's parents had invited me to stay in their home, meaning that I was a guest in the family twice at once; during the day it was Dorothy who hosted me, and in the evenings, it was her brother and his wife. During car rides, niece and aunt frequently engaged in conversations about the family, but also in discussions regarding faith, economics, or gender roles in contemporary

Ugandan society. Since we spent a lot of time in the car together – on our way to meeting groups, coming back from having met groups, trying to find a place that sold lunch at a late hour, and continuing the journey to meet with another group – these in-between conversations became very valuable to me, as they helped me to understand how these two women make sense of their world and how it differed from mine.

On our way, we got lost several times, and just when I had hoped that Google Maps would be our solution in finding our way faster, we got stuck downhill on a steep slope. It took the help of several people who were passing by to get the car back on a road that was drivable. During this week, I became aware of many challenges with regard to mobility, which I will summarize here as "getting market access", though it manifested itself in rather different ways than anticipated based on the conversations and interviews I had led in Kampala. I will get back to this issue as the chapter unfolds, as it is an element that has significance, among others, for materialities and aesthetics.

The field notes, Barbra's protocols, recorded verbal memos, and group conversations are thus the empirical foundation for the chapter to follow. Here, I will introduce two of the handicraft groups I met with in more depth. I argue that their group formations, facilitated by joint artistic work, should be acknowledged, among others, as civic engagement. Furthermore, I will particularly emphasize three non-human elements: the sociocultural element of *spirituality*, the non-human actant *materiality*, and *gender* as additional key element, which structure this chapter.

7.2 Gendered Spaces in Civil Society
Wickerwork

> So, I discovered one thing about my people in the village; these are people who moved their lives on a [sic] certain things. So, for the women it was basically weaving. (Interview with Jackie Katesi 18/02/2020: 46–47)

In the interview with artist Jackie Katesi, she proceeds to speak about the various meanings that weaving had for her grandmother – or rather, the meanings she assumed her grandmother had. Wickerwork and weaving are genuinely understood to be female activities in Uganda, although exceptions exist, which I will get to later. Uganda has a long tradition of wickerwork, including various types of baskets in multiple forms, sizes, shapes and functions, and mats (see also chapter 2.3.2). The floor of the newly rebuilt *Kasubi Tombs*, for example, is covered with woven mats called *omukeeka* (Muwanga Senoga, 2021).

Basketry is believed to be the oldest handicraft in Buganda and possibly beyond in the wider boundaries of what today is known Uganda. Maureen Muwanga Senoga

refers to basketry as an "Indigenous Industry" (ibid: 224), which reaffirms the difficulties in finding adequate terms that grasp meaning and functions of the artefacts and the people who make them. Baskets, depending on form and function, are either woven or coiled. Muwanga Senoga describes the coiling process as follows:

> Basket making begins at the centre, forming the base, and successive fronds are coiled around and around until the desired size is attained; each coil I stitched to the neighboring coil by cane or banana fibre. An iron awl is used to make the holes in the cane through which the end of the coil is tapered and stitched down firmly to the coil below it so that it should not be undone or untidy. (Muwanga Senoga, 2021: 245)

Image 7.1 illustrates the result of this rather technical description by showing how the cane holds the coil and the form. For Jackie Katesi, the act of weaving itself is symbolically loaded. During our interview, she demonstrates on video how to begin weaving a basket (Image 7.2). Meanwhile, she tells me how, in her opinion, weaving can teach us about life:

> So, when you're starting, just like in life, when you're faced with challenges, you're broken into pieces. But then you have to pick up the pieces and bring them together. So, when you weave – up-down – just like in life, you have ups and downs, bad moments and good moments. So, these are the bad moments [moves the fiber down] and good moments [moves the fiber up]. […] And these are still the bad and the good on top. So, when you look at this, it has a relationship with the one on top. […] So – why weaving?! I feel it communicates more to the people I want to reach out to. Why?! Just like I said: in life, when you're faced with situations you're broken down to invisible pieces, which we cannot see, but you can feel them. […] You get another part of yourself and you start weaving yourself – getting yourself back. (Interview with Jackie Katesi 18/02/2020: 444–459)

For Jackie, weaving is about the individual relationship between the artist and the material with which they are working. My encounter with her had been accidental. I had met her about a month prior to the interview at the workshop site of an NGO that seeks to prevent human trafficking and supports people (mostly women), who have been affected by human trafficking. Weaving, in Jackie's elaborations, has agency in communicating that the weaver is taking "me time" – as in the case of her grandmother. But its agency stretches beyond that. It is what could best be described as therapeutic. Jackie is a painter and a sculptor, with all her sculptures being created making use of mixed materials. In my situation, this differentiates her from the other socially engaged artists whom I previously introduced. In her individual artistic practice, she works with the same materials and techniques as when engag-

ing with groups in socially-focused art-making. She knows the character traits of the material and assumes that others are able to relate to the process similarly:

> To me I feel this communicates to my target group, to show them that despite having been trafficked, despite having been not empowered as women, with those issues you have handled, you can still build yourself up. […] I feel how these girls open up and their pain, their sorrow comes out as they share with us. So, they get relief and become better people, they hope for a better tomorrow. That's my weaving. (Interview with Jackie Katesi 18/02/2020: 476–483)

Image 7.1: Cane stiches of coiled basket.

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With those words still in my mind, I left Kampala, but amidst the myriad impressions, they quickly fade. However, on my fourth day in Mbale, when I meet with several women of a group engaged with wickerwork, I am reminded of Jackie's meaning making of weaving. The handicraft artists in this group mainly make mats and baskets, but also toys from banana fiber – balls and dolls – for children to play with. They live and work in Supa, which is located on the road from Mbale westwards in the direction of Pallisa.

Image 7.2: Weaving demonstration by "The Kalange" Jackie Katesi.

©Anna-Lisa Klages, 18/02/2020

At the time of my visit, the road to Pallisa is under construction to be turned into an asphalted highway. Wherever the pavements have been completed, the ride is smooth and fast; where it is still under construction, the ride is curvy, bumpy, and very slow. Looking outside the window, I see some of the costs the residents had to pay. The new road is wider than the ancient one; hence trees, sidewalks, roadside shops, and a few buildings had to make space for the new highway. Upon our arrival in Supa, several members of the group are already awaiting us. They have spread out their materials and some finished products on mats they had previously placed on the ground in the shades of a large tree (see also Image 5.9). Some have young children with them. The tree is about 10 meters away from the already asphalted road. There is thus enough distance between us and the road for the cars, bodas, and trucks passing by not to disturb us. At the same time, we are close enough to the road for it to remain in sight and for us to be visible from there, which, as I will learn, is a conscious decision. The tree stands on the premises of a church congregation. Its main building, the church, was constructed further inland and away from the street (Image 7.3). When working together, Suzan, one woman of the group, tells me that this is where they meet for work (Conversation with wickerwork group from Supa 27/02/2020). About twice a week, they come together for joint work. Through-

out the rest of the week, the women work individually in and around their homesteads. Like the other handicraft artists I have met and will meet during my stay in Mbale, they weave in their spare time and frequently in-between attending to their everyday chores and responsibilities. Coming together on two days of the week and on neutral grounds is a break with those everyday routines, an opportunity to socialize and learn.

Dorothy Wanyama, who, in reference to the UNESCO seminar considers herself as the "Eastern region coordinator in handcrafts", opens and closes every group meeting with a prayer (see transcripts). The prayer is always in Lugisu, and in two groups – the *imbalu* initiation uniform makers' group (see chapter 7.3) and the potters' group from Burukuru, it is also a political decision, as most members there are Muslims, as I learn in one of the car rides (field notes between 23/02 – 01/03/2020). By introducing herself as Eastern region coordinator of handcrafts and disclosing that the purpose of our visit is to investigate "what you learnt from the seminar, [how] it helped you, or [if] there are any gaps as well. Or do you still have some challenges. She [meaning the main researcher] will give you the details" (Conversation with wickerwork group from Supa 28/02/2020: 40–41), she very early sets the tone for the discussion to follow. I remain unaware of this introduction and thus only understand later why the response to my question on how members became engaged with making handicrafts could have been initiated with a reference to the UNESCO seminar from 2018:

> The question you have just asked – that – how did we learn how to make crafts? We thank God we had a seminar in 2018. And we were taught these things, we decided that 'let's go and put them in practice to come up with products.' (ibid: 69–71)

This emphasis on the UNESCO seminar is then repeated by Barbra, who translates my question, but directly relates it to again the seminar: "She wants to know when you started and how you started since you went to the seminar" (ibid: 78–79). Throughout the conversation, the seminar will remain a point of reference we return to frequently. Interestingly, the most important lesson taken from the seminar is the demand to teach more community members handicraft skills. It is interesting indeed because in most groups teaching others has been a core activity of the group since its establishment; the seminar thus taught them something they already did. Yet, in the conversations, many people referred to this aspect as a pivotal information taken from the seminar.

The seminar, in which the training manual from the *Strengthening* project was tested, took place in Mbale. Bruno and Nuwa had travelled from Kampala to Mbale to meet the handicraft artists, who were recruited by Dorothy Wanyama. During one of our car rides, Dorothy remembers how challenging it was for her to convince the

handicraft artists to attend the seminar. Some were excited, she told me, while others needed to be convinced, almost persuaded, because they had never spent a night away from their families, or in a hotel. They did not know what to expect and were suspicious (field notes from 26/02/2020). Given the hat makers' group members' experience with the *munjankole man*, I immediately believe that their skepticism may not have been misplaced entirely.

As we sit underneath the branches of the large tree, Suzan now begins to talk about how she learned weaving and coiling at the age of 35. A woman from the village taught her and other group members. The formation of the group was also the initiative of this woman, who is no longer present (meaning that she has passed away). While one group member says she was taught in elementary schools, most of the women were taught by other women. The social dimension of handicraft work, which facilitates conviviality and shared responsibility, is important for the group members. As I already mentioned in chapter 5, for the women in this group it is important to work in a public space so other women see them, as can be seen in Image 7.3:

> It is also to attract other members in the community to join us. So, once we are in a group like this, if somebody passes by and sees us, they are compelled to also join our group to also learn. […] We all need to work together to come out of poverty, because you will find your fellow woman badly off – she joins when she sees us. We fight to come out of poverty. (Sarah Akumu, conversation with wickerwork group from Supa, 28/02/2020: 281–286).

Unlike Suzan, who was taught in their home community, Winnie learned how to weave mats when living in a different region of the country. She tells how she initially worked in the swamps to harvest papyrus – *ensasa* – without knowing what exactly it was for. She was then encouraged to learn how to weave and knit mats "by some women who loved me so much" (ibid: 91). Among the *imbalu* initiation ceremony costume designers, the artistic work is, among other things, a generational responsibility; fathers teach their sons who are obligated to teach their sons as well (chapter 7.3). For the women of this group, learning the skills is less about a spiritual or cultural responsibility and more the consequence of social relations and activism. This also means that copying from each other is not considered something that should be avoided, but a sign of dedication and the willingness to learn more:

> For example, when making my mat, and I find my colleague is better than me, [I] am able to copy from the one who weaves more neatly than me. (ibid: 279–280)

Abigail, a third group member, emphasizes the advantages of copying, as she states the following in regard to the benefits of the UNESCO seminar:

> We copied from our friends – what they do. Because we initially went with these mats [points towards mats made from banana fiber mainly used to sleep upon], but when […] we came back – we started making new products such as those baskets, because we found them there; our colleagues in the training were making them. (ibid: 209–211)

Copying allows the women to learn from each other and to widen the scope of their knowledge and skills and to gain experience. They consider it one of the most important benefits of the group, and it is clear to the women that sharing ideas and skills means to "complement" (ibid: 275) each other. In our conversation, the women present themselves as a group of people who firmly believe that they can advance and improve their wellbeing only collectively by working together and sharing knowledge. Suzan specifies this even more when she tells me it is imperative for the group members not to be

> selfish in our knowledge but to share it with other people. […] Because we are unemployed women who decided to not just remain idle in our homes without any income. (ibid: 288–292)

Image 7.3: Wickerwork Women Collective from Supa, who have arranged some of their products for the photograph. With dried banana leaves (raw material for baskets, dolls, mats and balls) in foreground, and church in background.

©Anna-Lisa Klages, 28/02/2020

In the conditions of the local situatedness, community members depend on one another. Here, government is present mainly in its absence; national cultural or arts and crafts associations that advocate for their interests are far away, as are international or foreign NGOs. Handicraft artists thus need to be able to rely on their social networks, and joint engagement with crafting artefacts is one way to do so. Working together in a group does not mean that the productivity and output are most important at all times. During a malaria outbreak in their community, for example, the hat makers group decided to spend their joint savings on medication rather than on raw material. The women of the wickerwork group understand that only collectively they can move forward, hence positioning conviviality over short-term economic profits. With conviviality, I here refer to the conceptualization of Francis B. Nyamnjoh, who understands conviviality in the following way:

> Conviviality is recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete. If incompleteness is the normal order of things, natural or otherwise, conviviality invites us to celebrate and preserve incompleteness and mitigate the delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of completeness. […] Conviviality encourages us to reach out, encounter and explore ways of enhancing or complementing ourselves the added possibilities of potency brought our way by the incompleteness of others […], never as a ploy to becoming complete […], but to make us more efficacious in our relationships and sociality. (Nyamnjoh, 2017a: 341)

In the conditions of the group members' lived realities, this appears more sustainable. It helps them to establish and maintain their network of trustworthy allies, who jointly have more capacities than the sum of their individual skills. Drawing on Jean-Pierre Warnier (2009), who further argues that "a subject is always a subject-with-its-embodied objects" and as such, "identifying with a subject entails identifying with its bodily *cum*-material culture" (2009: 468, emphasis as in original), Nyamnjoh concludes that because of the interwovenness of subjects and objects, jointly they "draw on in the process of identification through mutual production, shaping and transformation" (Nyamnjoh, 2017a: 341). Working in a group that is connected through the joint artistic activities facilitates this conviviality, and it has the power to support the (re-)establishment of agency.

Sharing Knowledges and Conviviality

Becoming engaged with one of the three wickerwork groups I met with thus means to agree to the lived group values of sharing knowledges, acknowledging incompletion, and complementing each other's work. And while teaching others, and therefore partially sharing knowledge, was emphasized during the UNESCO training,

copying, in most other interviews and conversations I had, was met with a critical eye:

> And that's what we encourage [meaning to contribute to an "emerging global culture"], try to encourage […] Because that is not something I see everywhere when I look around, unfortunately they're not – they're more interested in – they don't want to be creative. […] No, they think whatever they have seen, which has been popular, it's what they should copy. Instead of being inspired by that. That's the most unfortunate part. Where does that come from? Intellectual-ness, just being lazy. Nothing goes intellectually. If you have the talent to draw, then create it, put two-three-four things together. But if you refuse to think, […] 'cause you have the ability to copy; go ahead. That's what you do. (Interview with Nuwa Nnyanzi 26/01/2020: 1217–1225)

Copying, for Nuwa, is synonymized with the unwillingness to think, to engage intellectually, and to put two, three, and four together. The two very different interpretations of the same practice reflect two ways of conceptualizing the self and the other – one leaning on liberal thinking and the other emphasizing mutual co-dependencies between the self and the other, which resonates more with conviviality as understood by Francis B. Nyamnjoh or, for example, *ubuntu*-concepts. As a philosophical concept, *ubuntu* is frequently summarized as *I am because we are* (a person is a person through other persons (e.g., Eze, 2020: 933; van Norren, 2022: 3) and is highly debated in the contemporary discourses on appropriating sustainable development to the complex and multiple realities of post-independence African countries in the twenty-first century (van Norren, 2022). *Ubuntu*, *botho*, or however it is called in local languages, is not only a philosophical concept, but also a "key value associated with African humanism" (Eze, 2020: 928). In a book chapter originally published in 2012 under the title *Ubunto/Botho: Ideology or Promise?*, and republished translated into German in 2021, Michael Onyebuchi Eze takes the reader through the contemporary debate on epistemological controversies regarding the question what makes a "human person" in a Bantu notion. In his recommendable elaborations on the controversies associated with personhood being subordinated to the society on the one hand and personhood as processual notion of becoming a subject within a society on the other, he conceptualizes the ethical implications of *ubuntu* as inclusive of the will to creatively engage with one another. "He has no *ubuntu/botho* means that he lacks humanity (not that he loses his humanity)," Eze writes, and continues:

> **Being a person through other people** strikes one as an affirmation of an otherness-dependent subjectivity. It entails recognition that one's humanity is constituted by the "other", with their differences and uniqueness. This otherness-dependency is not an abstract procedure; to be human, it is not sufficient to be in a passive relationship, but rather in a relationship of creative human engagement, as

> Metz and Gaie persuasively argue: 'in a typical African ethic, the **only** way to develop one's humanness is to relate to others in a positive way' [Metz & Gaie 2010: 275]. This means that if and when one's relationship to the "other" is not considered "positive", in a community where ubuntu is practiced, one's humanity comitantly depreciates. (Eze, 2012: 251, emphasis as in original)

Among the women of the group from Supa and the members of the hat makers' collective from Ishibira, individuality in handicraft activities is conceptualized as belonging to and being part of a group. The concepts of caring and of conviviality are here most present. If group members cannot sell, they make items for their homestead. If one or multiple group members are in need, joint savings are dedicated to whatever is needed most. If material is lacking, members meet to converse and share. Together, they demonstrate that they are "not idle women", and through defining themselves as group members who produce visible, material output, they subjectify themselves as belonging to a collective bigger than the sum of the individuals that comprise it.

Although the two wickerwork groups here are organized differently, with one (the hat makers' group) having a clear leader and the other one not, the techniques and materials used are not the only thing they have in common; they are also, by and large, female, as their activities are generally associated with female handicraft work, and their artistic results in measurable output that can either be used at home, be sold, or be rented out (for example for *kwanjula* weddings). They have a strong argument to legitimize their presence in public (for a more detailed analysis of how women groups establish themselves in the public sphere, see also Kasozi, 2019). With Michel Foucault, these actions and processes can be regarded as "technologies of the subject" and "techniques of the self" (Martin et al., 1988), through which he looks at subjectivity from both sides of the coin. First, he reconstructs how a particular governmentality acts upon a subject. Second, he considers how this very subject regards themselves as the object of their actions with the aim of shaping their own subjectivity. In doing so, they also position themselves with respect to various kinds of power.

By saying "we are unemployed women who decided to not just remain idle in our homes without any income" (Conversation with wickerwork group from Supa, 28/02/2020: 291–292), the women from Supa respond to the governmentality that acts upon them. By then positioning themselves as women "who decided to not remain idle in our homes", they shape their subjectivity as people who take responsibility and shape their lives. While they consent to the social order that executes hegemonic power upon them, they use their artistic skills to apply the techniques of self, which allow them to re-negotiate the hegemonic governmentality that discursively constructs them as needy and dependent. For Foucault, too, the question of subjectivity is a question of power and agency.

So, the need to establish market access can be regarded from multiple perspectives. Beside the economic interests, however, the needed access to a market is a result of the subjectivity the women (and few men) have established. However, it is also a push into the public, which they enter as a group, not as individuals. Per their public existence and visibility as a group, their activities become political, as they, quietly and by means of weaving, negotiate the silver lining between public and private according to their own terms, thereby pushing the boundaries of the governmentality that acts upon them and, possibly, questioning the social order.

Relating to Civil Society

In 1998, Aili Mari Tripp criticized most of the literature on civil society to be gender blind. In arguing with Carole Pateman, she stresses that "women cannot participate fully in public life without changes in the private sphere. Thus, the family is at the heart of civil society, and not seen as irrelevant or separate from it" (Tripp, 1998: 86–87). The subordination of many women in the private realm, she argues, holds inevitable consequences for the presence of women in the public realm. In 2019, Dorah Kasozi did not find significant changes to this situation, especially among women from rural areas with little or no formal education – meaning western style education. Engagement in women's groups, however, may still be tolerated and under the pressures of poverty is more easily accepted, especially when it involves activities associated as female activities (Kasozi, 2019). The conscious decision of the women from the wickerwork group in Supa to meet and work in public must be considered in the political nature that negotiate between public and private. For, as Tripp reminds us, these boundaries are but the current status-quo of cultural, social, juridical, and political constructions. In the late 1980s, women in Uganda, she writes,

> began to participate in large numbers in multi-purpose women's associations. […] The multi-purpose associations did not generally 'engage' the state unless provoked. Although their participation tended to cater to the needs of their members, they could under various circumstances become involved in local struggles over resources and power on issues that affected them. (Tripp, 1998: 94)

These associations were at times formalized and at other times remained informal. A little over ten years later, Ben Jones also argues that it is organizations and structures based on family and kinship obligations that are, among others, important sites of social transformation (2009). For the women from Supa and members of the hat makers' group, it is through weaving that they were able to establish a space of, for, and to themselves. Even if they do not have any raw material to work with, according to the group leader Isaiah (one of the two male members of the group), the hat makers' group still meets on Mondays to come together, discuss, and encourage each

other. The content of their activities, weaving mats, hats, and baskets (which can be both, woven and coiled, but in the women's group from Supa I only saw coiled baskets) as well as children's toys, is mainly considered to be a female activity in Uganda (Muwanga Senoga, 2021). One affirmative confirmation of this observation comes from a conversation I had at the very beginning of my research. In one interview I conducted with Assoc. Prof. Philip Kwesiga, he proclaimed that men,

> if they are so desperate, they can do mats. And if they are very, very desperate, they would do baskets. But it is very, very rare to find a man who would do a basket. Very rare. And again, the basket is for serving … So that would be the role of a … where you serve from. (Interview with Assoc. Prof. Philip Kwesiga, art historian and sculptor 29/08/2018: 200–203)

Kwesiga raises another issue related to hegemonic dynamics in the social order that has been lingering around throughout the results chapters – the issue of class. In Kwesiga's words, a superlative does not suffice to exhaust the level of desperation needed for a man to turn to basketry – for even if he is very, very desperate, baskets are for serving, and serving would be the role of a woman. Kwesiga hierarchizes handicraft products from a male perspective. Since their *traditional* craft, blacksmithing, has almost died out due to industrialization, modernization, and its heavy, hyper-productive machines, the next best thing would be to turn towards pottery, only then would they assume weaving (of course, there are many other handicrafts, but here I only refer to those mentioned by Kwesiga). And being very, very desperate, for Kwesiga, means that a man would assume mat or basket making only if all other attempts to improve upon his (economic) situation have failed. Involuntarily maybe, Kwesiga positions more typically female handicraft activities at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder. Women and their products, then, are structurally subject to intersecting dimensions of marginalization around gender and class, which here are to be considered alongside formal education (or the lack thereof) and rurality.

Artistic Handicraft Objects, Materiality and Aesthetics

> Only we don't have the material [enjulu- meaning cane fiber] as those that were planted by our forefathers have been destroyed due to land scarcity. Others sold the land where they grow, so we have remained with very few people who in turn – who have them on their land, and they also resorted to now just sell them. (Conversation with wickerwork group from Supa 28/02/2020: 345–348)

Materiality matters. The *imbalu* uniform is considered complete only with the fur of the Colobus monkey. The bamboo for the festivities needs to come from within the

Mount Elgon National Park because of its quality and the spiritual meanings of bamboo for the rite of passage. For wickerwork products, local customers usually prefer natural products for ancestral worship and polythene-based artefacts for everyday purposes. Polythene-based artefacts, such as woven bags made from polypropylene strapping band bags (Image 7.4), mats, or baskets made from polythene bags and gift-wrapping paper (Image 7.5) over bags from natural fibers, are considered more durable and modern. Foreign customers on the other hand tend to prefer natural fibers (or fibers they assume to be natural), which resonate with western trends on interior design that communicate rootedness with nature, coziness, and responsible cosmopolitanism, and who hence prefer an ecological touch to the products they purchase.

Project writers and product promoters in Kampala and in the virtual space frequently point to the ecological sustainability of the materials used – either because they are recycled or because they are made out of plant-based natural products, "readily available" and hence both inexpensive and not exploitative towards nature. The material texture of the products responds to different aesthetic preferences as well as to the purposes of the artefacts.

At the *Kasubi Tombs*[2], baskets have maintained their original material texture (*enjulu* – cane fiber and *obukeedo* – banana leaf straws); also, the techniques and the tools used have remained the same. At the *Kasubi Tombs*, it is considered essential that baskets in which gifts are presented are made with natural materials and colors (Muwanga Senoga, 2021). Furthermore, all offerings made are covered, usually by a second basket reversed on top. The naturality of the objects that facilitate the offerings are in harmony with the overall architecture of the *Kasubi Tombs*, and bear symbolic meaning, as Muwanga Senoga explains:

> The materials, technique, shape and uses of baskets signify respect, comradeship, beliefs and a sense of belonging and within the KRT [Kasubi Royal Tombs] they are found under a thatched roof that itself is derived from basketry skills. (ibid: 246)

The architectural design of the roofs of the *Kasubi Tombs* are also inspired by coiled basketry techniques. but in a different dimension. The process of reconstructing the tombs after a fire in 2010 has resulted, among other things, in the *Introduction guide to the preservation of Traditional thatching of the Buganda community in Uganda*,

2 For a detailed study of the symbolic meaning of handicraft objects at the Kasubi Tombs and the coiling techniques applied during their reconstruction, I refer to Maureen Muwanga Senoga's contribution in the co-edited volume Craft and Heritage: Intersections in Critical Studies and Practice by Susan Surette and Elaine Cheasley Paterson, titled Craft narratives from heritage sites in Buganda for the former. For the latter, I refer to Sébastien Moriset's *Introduction guide to the preservation of traditional thatching of the Buganda community in Uganda*, published by the UNESCO.

which includes the description of creating the 'inner rings' of the round ceiling in the shape of an "inverted basket shape" (Moriset, 2020: 11). Though much larger, they too are coiled, although the raw material here are reeds tied together with sisal rope. During my field stays, the plain *enjulu* baskets were frequently referred to as "Buganda baskets". One of the reasons is their close relationship with worship at the *Kasubi Tombs*, but also, as I have learned, their function in ancestral worship in people's homesteads (e.g., round-table discussion on 'indigenous knowledge systems', 28/02/2019). Another reason, especially in Eastern Uganda, for why they are called "Buganda baskets" is the lack of availability of *enjulu* – cane fiber – locally. It does not grow as readily in Eastern Uganda because the swampy areas needed for *enjulu* are few and land frequently privately owned.

Image 7.4: Woven Bag from Polypropylene Strapping Band

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During my meeting with the wickerwork group from Supa, I am told that baskets are important elements in ceremonial life – for the preservation of culture, for instance in weddings[3] and for everyday activities, such as smashing Matooke. It is in the irony of the subject matter that *enjulu* baskets are high in demand locally, however, scarcely made by the members of the collective, because of the not-so-readily availability of the materials needed:

> Only that we don't have the materials as those that were planted by our forefathers have been destroyed due to lands scarcity, others sold the land where they grow,

3 Meaning here introduction ceremonies, kwanjula, which is a traditional wedding ritual that originates from Ganda culture. Nowadays it is performed throughout Uganda

> so we have remained with very few people who in turn – who have them on their land, and they also resorted to now just sell them. (Conversation with wickerwork group from Supa, 28/02/2020: 345–348)

The hat makers' group mainly works with papyrus that is purchased in sacks of 2000 Ugandan Shilling each (at least in 2020). Papyrus, similar to cane, grows primarily in wetlands; Supa and Ishibira are not. The need to buy raw material – or at least some materials – is a common issue among the handicraft groups in Eastern Uganda. For the hat makers, the price of the raw material regularly results in a lack of material altogether. Market access, in this regard, does not begin with the question of where and how to sell artistic handicraft products. It begins with the availability of materials and the lack thereof, which itself is related to environmental changes and the mobility of people that increases the "flow of forms" (Pinther and Weigand, 2018) and of artefacts, I should add. This is true for both international and regional mobility.

Functional baskets either as household items or in ancestral worship aesthetically emphasize the materials used, and the technical skills applied in producing them. While in ancestral worship they facilitate the offerings that are an important asset to maintaining a relationship with the ancestors (see also round-table discussion on 'indigenous knowledge systems' from 28/02/2019; Muwanga Senoga, 2021), *enjulu* baskets in households are used for smashing Matooke or for cleansing nuts from dirt and cobble. Lidded baskets made out of banana leaf stalks (*obudeku*) and, nowadays frequently, polyphone bags apply a different aesthetics. They are used for storage of, e.g., rice or groundnuts (often, but not always peanuts), and have a decorative purpose as well. Their coils are much thinner in diameter, and designs are usually single colored (in a dark brown or black) patterns based on or resembling traditional geometrical decoration designs (see also Image 5.1).

Ceremonial baskets for introduction ceremonies can be plain *enjulu* baskets (for a detailed description about the function of *bibos* in *kwanjula* ceremonies, see chapter 2.3.2; Tumusiime, 2011). More frequently, though, they have an oval shape and a flat bottom. Rather than having a conical shape that becomes wider towards the top, specially made *bibos* (decorated *kwanjula* baskets) are coiled straight above one another. They have lids and handles, and they are predominantly designed in white with patterns in glossy gold, rosé, green or blue (see Images 7.5). Like other coiled baskets, *bibos*' foundational material is *obukeedo* (banana leaf straws). Unlike *enjulu* baskets though, the surface is made from polythene bag stripes, combined with glossy wrapping paper in gold, rosé, green, purple and/or blue (called *buveras)*. *Bibos* are an eye catcher because of their color and the reflections of the glossy wrapping paper; their colors symbolize wealth. In their symbolic communication, they remind of Christian symbolic aesthetics that established white as the color of purity and can be, I argue, understood as both a colonial continuity, by which the symbolic and economic meanings of modernity and civility shape the contem-

porary aesthetics, and as cultural appropriations of foreign influences, which are integrated into local customs and ceremonies.

In her article *The White Wedding*, Natasha Erlank reconstructed the evolution of symbolic meaning of Christian weddings in South Africa in the early twentieth century and concluded that Christian wedding ceremonies were used to proclaim

> the value of family life, and importantly, broader social networks as well as status-based associational life in an era of family disintegration. At the same time weddings were often a double-edged indicator of status through their references to sexual purity by means of white frocks. (Erlank, 2014: 29)

Erlank further observes that by the 1930s, Christian weddings had become the standard among black South Africans. According to Erlang, these developments must be understood as an act of self-empowerment, for black weddings were considered as "racial misappropriation" by white South Africans (ibid: 29). While this analysis is particular to the South African situatedness, in modern Uganda, the white wedding is also an element of Christian heritage. What the aesthetics of *bibos* in *kwanjula* ceremonies also display, however, is the integration of colonial elements into contemporary celebrations, which, in its visual and material components of *bibos*, are fused into the post-colonial realities. As Collin Hinamundi of the Daily Monitor, one of Uganda's national newspapers, observed, currently "introduction ceremonies have become marriages in some cases" (Hinamundi, 2021 [2010]: n.p.). Hinamundi associates this decision with the high costs of *kwanjula* ceremonies, leaving couples without the financial means to be able to afford a church wedding. As a consequence, many couples favor their *kwanjula* ceremony over a church wedding thereby altering and adapting the ceremonial customs, with *bibos* acting as a symbol and an expression of these developments.

The gifts presented in *bibos* are either lidded (the lid of the basket in the left image in Image 7.5 is laying just beside it outside the picture frame) or wrapped in wrapping paper that leaves the baskets visible but hides the content. In both cases, the content of the baskets remains invisible. *Bibos*, I learn from the women from Supa, are needed in large numbers – a man should present at least 30 *bibos* to the family of his future wife, filled with goods, which include "salt, curry powder, cooking oil, tomatoes, onions and other vegetables, fruits, bread, margarine, sugar, washing soap, paraffin" (Kaduuli, 2010: 42) and dresses (both for men and women) for family members of several generations. Nowadays *bibos* are frequently rented for the occasion, but their white and glossy interpretations remain absent from crafts markets and souvenir shops.

Images 7.5: Baskets from Polythene Bags and Gift-Wrapping Paper. Used in Kwanjula (also okwajula: Introduction Ceremonies) (left) and as Collection Baskets (right) at a Church in Kampala.

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Enjulu baskets are also rarely found there. Their material textures directly relate to the particularities of the situations in which they are used. It is not by accident that baskets used in more inward-oriented rituals, such as presenting gifts to the *deceased kabakas* during ancestral worship, are natural and reserved in design and patterns, while *bibos*, delivered by women who carry them on their heads visible to all attendants of the *kwanjula* ceremony, are laboriously decorated with glossy colors that obey to contemporary fashion trends.

Eco-Sustainability and the SDGs in Artistic Handicraft Production

Aesthetically disconnected to those two poles of a design/materiality spectrum remain baskets that can be found at crafts markets and shops. Here, the aesthetic expectations include tourist perceptions of African authenticity and an increasing ecological sensitivity that results in a wish for souvenirs to be not only culturally embedded and soaked with historical importance but also ecologically sustainable. These character traits cannot be separated entirely, but increasing awareness for climate change and, more importantly, the UN-SDG emphasis on making everything *sustainable* are significant in the outward orientation of associating meanings of baskets, as I will proceed to demonstrate.

In the conversation with the women from the wickerwork group from Supa, the main speaker, Suzan, explains about the different materials. This includes the information that they also use *buveras* – which here includes polythene bags and gift-wrapping paper. Suzan explains that they buy the plastic material at the market –

similar to the polypropylene strapping bands used for the bags they produce – the *buveras* because of their aesthetics and the polypropylene strapping bands because of their durability. My response to this information is a long-stretched "Oh!" Both Dorothy (DW) and Barbra (BKL) then quickly take the word, and specify that the use of plastic materials is actually re-usage and about protecting the environment. Suzan Echima (SE), though, did not say anything about protecting the environment. For me, in this particular moment, the information seems to be sufficient. I reply, "Oh, okay," and then return to the conversation about the materials, how much is needed and how it reaches there:

SE: *Now [for] the small one, you buy obuso [fibers] and knit them using the fivers and sue the obukedo made out of dry banana leaves. However, they are pulled [ripped] off before they are dry. [Points towards the bibo basket] We also use obukedo, then we buy the white material, sewing them together.*

ALK: *What is the white material, and also the golden material*

SE: *Those are buveras.*

ALK: *Okay. Can you tell me, what buveras are?*

SE: *They are polythene bags*

ALK: *Ooooh!*

DW & BKL: *And gift-wrapping papers. Polythene re-usage protecting the environment.*

ALK: *Oh, okay … It sounds like you need to buy a lot of material in order to make a basket like that?!* (Conversation with wickerwork group from Supa 28/02/2020: 146–157)

This little sequence of about 30 seconds demonstrates the disconnectedness between the Social Worlds of Dorothy, Barbra and me, and the Social World of Suzan. To Suzan, who is the artist and the creator of the baskets we are discussing, the functionality and corresponding aesthetics of the baskets are most important; they communicate their purpose in their form, their colors, and their patterned geometric designs. Dorothy and Barbra, however, are familiar with the importance of recycling and ecological sustainability in the marketing discourse. As the owner of a craft shop in Mbale, Dorothy regularly meets with foreign customers, and, after having interpreted my "oh", immediately re-positions the meaning of using plastic materials in handicraft artmaking as contributing to ecologically sustainable social change. Meanwhile, I am preoccupied with following my own agenda and finding

the next *relevant* question to ask. I am willing to easily accept the new information, even though in that very moment I have serious doubts that this statement is correct. I cannot reconstruct whether this "oh" was simply an utterance of surprise or whether there may have been disappointment in my voice when I said it. Whatever it was, it provoked the felt need among Barbra and Dorothy to further contextualize Suzan's statement into a direction that resonates with the goals of, for example, the *Strengthening* project (and hence the wider UN/UNESCO discourses) because here I am regarded as the person who does follow-up research on the impact of the UNESCO seminar. In doing so, however, Dorothy and Barbra address the discourse of sustainable development rather than to the discourses Suzan was addressing, which are more occupied with the functions of the products she was just showing me.

While Suzan's answer to my question was in Lugisu, then translated into English, Dorothy and Barbra did not translate their complementary statements back into Lugisu, which excluded Suzan and her colleagues from being able to further engage in the discussion. Later in the conversation, I specifically ask them to also translate side discussions we were having into Lugisu, but here I did not do that. I may have had my thoughts about the information at that moment, but did not share them, which also means that I did not allow for them to be deconstructed. The analysis of this little sequence makes the power dynamics at play visible. It exemplifies a means by which positions of independent groups are silenced in the situation at hand, especially when they do not confine to the major discourses and position taken in the situation. The products, however, remain firm in their communication and continue to articulate the (purposefully) overlooked position.

7.3 Negotiating Lived Culture
Imbalu Initiation Ceremony Costume Designers

For the encounters with the wickerwork groups whose work and positions I discussed in the preceding chapter, I traveled westwards from Mbale. The lands where the hat makers' group members live are dry lands. In the car ride before our meeting with them, Barbra looked out the window and commented the scenery, saying, "These people here really are poor, their land is so dry" (field notes from 26/02/2020). The Northern slopes of Masaba mountain[4] where Bubyangu parish, home to the members of the *imbalu* costume designers' group, is located, present themselves in different colors to us. Here, at almost 2000m above sea level, what I see most are shades of green.

4 Also known as Mount Elgon after the Elgonnyi tribe, who used to live in caves on the southern slopes. The Bagisu name is Masaba Mountain. According to Bagisu belief, it is the embodiment of the founding father, who came down to earth from the sky (Were, 1982).

I have come to the center where *imbalu* costumes are designed. Here, the center does not refer to the physical place where we have gathered for our encounter. The center are the men who possess the knowledge of making *imbalu* costumes, the spears, arrows and the knife for the execution of the circumcision, who are cultural and community elders who guard the knowledge of *imbalu* and guide through the ritual. They are an archive of the lived cultural heritage, both in terms of the material culture and the intangible cultural practices, and therefore, Bubyango parish here is referred to as the center of the "culture of the Bagisu" (Conversation with members of the *imbalu* costume designers' group 26/02/2020: 397–398). *The culture of the Bagisu*, or rather, the *imbalu* rituals of the Bagisu in Uganda and Kenya, have been subject to several studies, especially sociological and anthropological, from late colonial days until today (Heald, 1982; La Fontaine, 2004 [1963]; Makwa, 2021& 2012; Odutsa et al., 2019; Were, 2014), to name but a few. Common throughout the literature on *imbalu* is the attention paid to the wording used when talking about *imbalu* rituals, as they cluster around music and expressive dancing[5], expressed in terms such as "*khusina imbalu* (dancing circumcision)" (Makwa, 2021: 127, emphasis and brakets as in original) or "*samba imbalu ni kamani nga unusani* (dance *imbalu* with strength/energy like a man)" (ibid: 145; Heald, 1982: 18). Evans Nyongesa Odutsa, Beatrice Busolo, and Selline Oketch observe that "circumcision songs and dances pervade the whole ritual process", and conclude that men who do not participate in the rituals "do not have the same status as those who "danced" *imbalu*" (Odutsa et al., 2019: 590). Today, *imbalu* songs and the *kadodi* dance are "used as a major tool of mobilizing voters at all campaigning rallies" (Written exchange with Danny Nabende Wamakote, 28/09/2022) and have thus found symbolic impact in politics way beyond the rite of passage into adulthood.

Unlike scholars and researchers who specifically aimed at studying *imbalu* and its implications for gender roles (Heald, 1982; Khanakwa, 2016), those who investigated the role and agency of music and dance during *imbalu* (Makwa, 2012; 2016, 2021), or colonial and post-modern influences on contemporary developments (Odutsa et al., 2019), my focus was different in two ways. First, I was interested in the material culture, first and foremost in terms of the costumes worn by candidates, and second, it was through theoretical sampling and by following the route of the UNESCO *Strengthening* project that *imbalu*, and more specifically, the costume designers who dress the *imbalu* candidates, became a focus in my research. The more I learned about *imbalu*, its meanings for families and the community but also for cultural identity and its agency in politics, the more I wondered about the computability with the aims and the content of the *Strengthening* project. Because of its importance to many people who identify as Bagisu and the complexity of

5 At times also meant as stomping the ground/earth, which is associated with the bodily (and mental) strength of the candidate (Makwa, 2021).

the interconnectedness between music, dance, food, family, worship, and dress, in what follows I will briefly elaborate on the meanings of *imbalu*, exemplified with selected practices I learned about during my encounter with the costume designers that usually involve ancestral worship in one way or another. Proceeding, I will then discuss the costume and its role during the actual *imbalu* ceremony. In closing, I will return to Nelson Kasfir's (2017) take on African civil society and Antonio Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony in light of the processuality of the costumes as a material carrier of change, continuity, and self-determination.

Imbalu

Technically, *imbalu* means male circumcision. Socially, however, *imbalu* means building community, ancestral worship, the establishment and negotiation of norms and values as well as gender roles (Khanakwa, 2016). In a similar conceptualization, Odutsa and colleagues describe the functions of *imbalu* as follows:

> Among the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda and most African tribes, being non-technological societies, circumcision ritual plays a very significant role to its people. […] [I]t ensures the community develops a sense of confidence that they have in themselves through its traditional practices such as initiation rituals. Since every member of the community is practically involved, ritual serves to create a sense of unity. […] Initiation ensures that people of the community uphold the communal values and beliefs are re-enacted. (Odutsa et al., 2019: 587)

Furthermore, songs and dances performed during *imbalu* "educate, empower and play the role of transforming boys into men by telling them what society expects of them" (ibid: 588) and are increasingly politicized by having found their way into political rallies, among others (ibid). Independent of their age, male members of the community would remain 'boy children' until having *danced imbalu*. In her historical analysis of the impact of colonization on *imbalu*, Pamela Khanakwa (2016) writes that until the early postcolonial period any 'boy child' was not allowed to own land within the community nor was he allowed to join the *council of men* and become involved with politics at the local level.

Imbalu is not limited to the ritual of pen-surgery but includes a complex and strict set of rituals. They begin months prior to the actual ceremonial celebrations. Those begin with the child approaching family elders for them to allow for him to become a candidate, dancing and singing (and learning the dances and songs) in preparation. Closer towards approaching the zenith of *imbalu*, community members gather bamboo and ask for ancestral blessings (field memo from 9/02/2020) from Masaba Mountain. The candidates migrate to the swamps two times. The first time to fetch water for locally brewed beer (*buusera*), and the second time in close

timely proximity to the pen-surgery, to smear mud on their faces (which makes them look fierce) (Conversation with members of the *imbalu* costume designers' group 26/02/2020; Khanakwa 2016). The rituals also include the slaughter of a goat, and the candidate moving from the maternal family to the paternal family to receive blessings for their participation before they proceed towards the respective cultural grounds dressed in special costumes. It is because of those costumes that I initially became aware of the *imbalu* rituals. As I was following the traces of the *Strengthening* project back to Mbale, I learned that some of the members of the designers' group had also participated in the training executed in 2018. The information left me puzzled for several reasons. I wondered how costume designing (and blacksmithing of knives, bells, spears, and arrows) could be conceptualized together with the various interpretations of wickerwork activities, with doing pottery, or with beading. I further wondered how questions of standardization played a role here. Mostly I wondered how the logics of commodification and sustainable development as delivered by a depoliticized, humanitarian creative industries empowerment project would work alongside the understandings of cultural expressions here, among those who, borrowing from Bruno Sserunkuuma, could be considered *custodians* of Bagisu culture. Those local community elders, cultural and political leaders of the parish, whom Odutsa et al. (2019) refer to as *traditionalists* because of their beliefs about the centrality of *imbalu* for their individual and communal sense of self as well as the associated meanings of their artistic work.

Kumusambwa Kwe Mbalu – The "Spirit of Imbalu"

Imbalu, I understood within minutes of my arrival at the *center*, is very important to the costume designers. Upon arrival, I am told immediately about the importance of slaughtering a cow or a goat and about hanging its heart on a Nile tulip tree – called *kumusoola* tree by the members of the costume designers' group. *Kumusoola* is also the totem of a Bukusu (also Babukusu) clan. Furthermore, the

> kumusoola tree is an indigenous African tree, which is believed to be the strongest in terms of resistance to wind and storm, draught, attack by wild pastes, survival and all types of soils. It is also medicinal, and because of its strength and resistance to hard conditions, it is used for covering graves. The kumusoola tree is therefore looked as a link between the living and the dead. The young man being circumcised is being initiated into manhood and adult life full of challenges, and so he's expected to pick the character traits of kumusoola. (Written exchange with Danny Nabende Wamakote, 28/09/2022)

The Bukusu and the Bagisu are very likely to share a common history, for members of both people believe to have come into this world from Masaba (Were, 1982). For

certain they share a common culture (not only) of *imbalu*, including rituals, dances, music and costumes involved (Were, 2014). Tradition, customs, rituals, and language hence travel back and forth between artificially established country borders, hence a shared name for the *kumusoola* tree. For the men present, hanging the animal's heart into the tree is part of *imbalu:*

> There is one animal that must die, then they get its heart, then they put [it] on that tree called kumusoola. […] Everyone who passes will know they are going to circumcise a boy there, once they see that kumusoola with a heart of the animal on it, they just know they are going to circumcise a boy there. (Conversation with members of the imbalu costume designers' group 26/02/2020: 8–13)

The visible heart on the tree has an encoded communicative function to those who pass by as it informs about what is happening in the house stead. However, this is not the sole purpose of the heart on the *kumusoola* tree, and so Sulaiman Kanyike adds:

> To put the heart, it shows that – in any culture – the boy won't settle if you just circumcise minus putting the heart. And it also shows that the dead of the clan are seeing what they [the family] are doing. Because this is culture. The dead can also see that there is happiness in the home. (ibid: 16–19)

The ancestors of the candidate's family and the wider community, I learn throughout this conversation, are important actors all throughout the period leading towards the actual *imbalu* processes, also referred to as *xuwetsa imbalu* – searching for *imbalu*. The beer is brewed partially to please the ancestors, and resisting pain during the pen-surgery is imperative not only to becoming a man, but also for the family's reputation among the living and the dead and access to being able to reside among the ancestors in eternal life succeeding death. Ancestral blessings are thus essential, and a successful rite of passage partially depending on their goodwill. Hence, Muhamed Sande Odongo further specifies Kanyike's additions:

> The ancestors. And also, he was saying when the ancestors know that the ceremony is taking place, the ancestors won't disturb the boy getting circumcised, they will embrace it. (ibid: 20–21)

Danny Nabende Wamakote, a lecturer at the Mbale Campus of the Ugandan Christian University, is Barbra's father, my host during our stay in Mbale, and an individual with a lot of knowledge about customs, traditions, and the history of the Bagisu. After my return we keep in touch irregularly, and when I ask him about the meaning of the heart on the *kumusoola* tree, he has the following to add:

> Imbalu is believed to be a spiritual ceremony and spirits are believed to feed on blood; that is why the goat is sacrificed – to appease the gods and the late ancestors as to make the young man courageous and bold. The gods/spirits use symbolic communication via the heart of the slaughtered goat and it is the head of the clan who can interpret the message from these gods by looking at how the heart of the goat reacts, i.e. is the candidate going to be brave or not. (WhatsApp Interview with Danny Nabende Wamakote, 28/09/2022)

Imbalu, I observe, is a topic that moves everyone around. My meeting with the *imbalu* costume designers is lively throughout. Everyone present is engaged in explaining *imbalu* to me and discussing the importance of the rituals with each other – not only the costume designers and cultural leaders from the group, but also Dorothy Wanyama and our driver, Geoffrey Manana, are actively involved in discussing the importance of and problems associated with *imbalu*. Dorothy considers herself a devoted Christian; throughout the week we spend together we pray every morning in the car before we set off, we pray prior to every meeting and before we part after every meeting. Now she remains ambivalent about her opinion regarding the rituals; on the one hand she clearly distinguishes between herself and other people "who love God" (meaning the Christian god) and those who do not believe in it. On the other hand, she is in awe about the skills of the *umushebi* (circumciser), a doctor who did not go to school:

> You know, circumcising within seconds! By a doctor who did not go to school. It attracts everyone. Even these young boys and girls will run and follow the one going to be circumcised. – Except those religious people – for us who love God, we don't follow. We just take our boys to the hospital to circumcise. But those who don't believe in God must attend. (Dorothy Wanyama, conversation with members of the imbalu costume designers' group 26/02/2020: 50–53)

Later during the conversation, she returns to the special doctors without having attended formal education[6]:

> [Ahmed], he is the one I have been communicating with. He is the special doctor who knows how to do the surgery – without having to go through school [laughs a bit]. (Dorothy Wanyama, conversation with members of the imbalu costume designers' group 26/02/2020: 259–261)

In listening to those words, Geoffrey becomes agitated and firmly replies that taking the boys to the hospital means "killing culture" (Geoffrey Manana, driver, con-

6 Circumcisers do, however, receive training that follows a strict protocol. The training includes teaching about healing herbs that facilitates the healing of the wound post-pen-surgery.

versation with members of the *imbalu* costume designers' group, 26:02/2020: 54). In their study on post-modernist influences on the practice of *imbalu* initiation, Odutsa and colleagues (2019) conclude that religion, western education, technology, migration, urbanization and politics affect and change the ceremonial procedures and their symbolic meanings. In her reconstruction of the historical genealogy of *imbalu*, Khanakwa (2016, 2018) associates the developments that Odutsa et al. conceptualize as post-modern factors with colonialism. She elaborates on how Christian missionaries sought to move circumcision away from public cultural grounds they associated with immorality and into hospitals instead (ibid). My findings suggest both historical and post-modern factors are at work with regard to *imbalu*, as the quote above and the reaction upon it indicate. Danny, too, understands religion (both Christian and Islamic) and education to be the major threats to *imbalu*, as religious and medical actors "use schools and worshipping places as for demonizing the rituals accompanying circumcision" (WhatsApp Interview with Danny Nabende Wamakote, 28/09/2022).

While this may be so, manhood and manliness continue to be closely associated with how a candidate performs during *imbalu*. And so, all political endeavors began (and, according to Wamakote, still do) with a successful initiation, which in turn heavily depended on dancing, singing and the mastering the costume thigh bells (Image 7.6). And while the political and social meanings of dancing and musicking *imbalu* has been discussed elsewhere at length (Makwa, 2012; 2016, 2021), the costume and its associated meanings has, with the exception of Wotsuna Khamalwa (2012) and Pamela Khanakwa (2018), thus far received little scholastic attention.

Of Bells and Beads: The Imbalu Costume

> Culture as an idea is about how human beings teach and learn "proper conduct" within a specific setting. Through language and role models, humans learn how to behave from other beings, and this transmission of knowledge carries across generations. (Eicher, 2000: 59–60)

If culture is about teaching and learning proper conduct, then ceremonial dress is the articulated outward orientation of this teaching and learning. With regard to the *imbalu* costume, the bells – *bizenze* – hold this function.

> Uncircumcised men amongst Bamasaaba/ Bagisu have no respect accorded to them and therefore cannot hold any responsible position in community. To make community aware of your becoming a serious and responsible [man], you are supported to demonstrate this publicly and the young man goes round the entire community as the bells ring inviting the community to witness his initiation into manhood. Bells also help in demonstrating the skill of dancing, which was an

> attraction to young girls preparing to marry. When the boy is being circumcised, he is supposed to stand still, and so if he shakes or moves, the bells sound noise [sic] and that means he has failed the test of circumcision. Lastly, should he try to run away, then he can easily be identified. (WhatsApp Interview with Danny Nabende Wamakote, 28/09/2022)

In part because of *imbalu*, the Bagisu is "the community […] regarded as the most patriarchal and fearsome tribe in Uganda" (Odutsa et al., 2019: 588) – a phrase I also read in many newspaper articles. Heald (1982) associated *imbalu* with the control of anger, which made men fearsome to others. Odutsa and colleagues find her analysis falling short in that *imbalu* and the transition into manhood is more than about controlling anger. Rather, they argue, it is about is about teaching and learning how to become a *man* as expected from society. They understand for *imbalu* to be first and foremost as empowerment of boys, who, through dancing and musicking and by visually taking on a new costume, are encouraged to take an active role in shaping their families, communities, and society. Indeed, in Danny's elaborations, the bells communicate to family and community members. They inform about a transition about to occur. They issue an invitation for them to take part in the ceremony. In earlier days, the candidates moved from their paternal family home to the maternal family home, before proceeding throughout the community (Khanakwa, 2016). Although this has shifted and candidates move around less, the bells still inform the nearer neighbors and community members. During my visit in Bubyango parish, the costume designers eagerly showed me the various parts that make a complete *imbalu* costume. After some pointing to parts and a demonstration of a hat in the process of making (Image 7.7), it is decided that one of this year's candidates[7] who lives in proximity should dress for a demonstration (Image 5.2). It takes about twenty minutes until we can hear bells jingling; getting louder as the dressed candidate approaches us. The bells themselves are heavy, made from one piece of bent round iron plates formed into a semi-circle, convex both on the upper and lower half, and open to the side. Inside are marble-shaped pieces of iron that jingle whenever the wearer moves.

During *imbalu* (with the exception of pen-surgery), the initiates constantly move. As elaborated above, dancing is essential in *imbalu*. Candidates who dance wildly and agilely are believed to be better prepared for the pen-surgery, and the jiggling of the bells accompanies and emphasizes the stomping of the dancing candidates and the sound of the drums beating. In citing John Roscoe, who observed *imbalu* during the 1920s, Pamela Khanakwa writes about the interplay of the bells, dancing, and stomping:

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7 Eventually, the *imbalu* ceremonies of 2020 were cancelled due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic. During our meeting in February 2020, though, the virus had only begun to spread across the globe, and there had not yet been any reported cases in Uganda.

Three or four iron bells like cow-bells, strung around the right thigh so that they rattled as the wearer stamped to the rhythm. […] By stamping their feet and causing the bells to jungle, the candidates invite lookers to join in the dance and cheer them on during this important moment in their lives." (Roscoe 1924: 28, as cited in Khamalwa 2012: 366)

Image 7.6: Demonstration of iron thigh bells as worn by imbalu candidates during ritual.

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The bells thus not only issue an invitation for spectators of the community to watch but also to become part of the moment and co-shape the experience of the candidate. Combined with the cheering, the drums, and song, the candidates might transcend into a state of ecstasy which is associated with performers reaching a different, trance-like level of consciousness that allows for bodily experiences to be perceived differently.

The bells accompany the candidate and communicate to supporters and allies to join him and to become part of his rite of passage. They do, however, also control him, and give him away when he moves during pen-surgery, which Danny describes as *failing the test of circumcision*. *Imbalu* candidates wear bells around their upper thighs,

but also around their arm wrists and ankles, I am told, meaning that every move will be heard.

Alongside the bells, the beads – *kadaali* – are the second most important asset to the costume. As can be seen in Image 5.2, candidates wear many beaded necklaces around neck and shoulder. They cross both on the back and the chest of the candidate, and jointly with the bells, this part of the costume alone can weigh up to several kilograms (Khanakwa, 2018). I was surprised to see that the beaded necklaces are entirely of plastic. Jointly with the decorations of the hat and the handkerchiefs worn around the neck, their materiality and colors create a sharp contrast to the natural materials including leather, cowrie shells, sticks, and the fur of the Colobus monkey. Such developments are, in the UNESCO heritage discourse-dominated contemporary debates, often associated with a loss of cultural heritage (e.g., 2003 UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention or 2005 UNESCO *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* and succeeding debates, see, for example, de Beukelaer, 2017). During the round-table discussion in 2019, the question of materiality and keeping the "traditional ways" was debated controversially as well, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

Prof. Kizito Maria Kasule: I think his point, he has a point because what is happening is this; traditionally for example, you will find water in shrines [in a masilo, meaning the Royal tombs] in these clay pots and also in baskets and also in gourds. Today if you have been to the shrines and of course you have been there [all laugh] this is what you find there. You find plastic basins and jerricans. While in the past for example some of these dry herbs would be kept in gourds, today they are being kept in sacks, plastic or polythene bags. And this is where he is having a point. What is the intention of that?

Dr. Joan Kekimuri: *But that takes you back to the functional object.*
[…]

Prof. George Kyeyune: *I am saying that the ancestral way that is still progressing and changing because of interventions from European modernity, from Chinese products, adjustments are being made [laughter] and this has implications on – if we take the example of a ritual, even the ritual is changing, because of a-b-c-d. So it is that kind of transformation I am interested in and it has not been the same. And when we say Buganda artifacts, and it is fixed in a certain space and it has remained the same for thousands of years; I am interested in the impact of western intrusion, I mean modernity – and it has actually happened only that you are not paying attention to it.*

Dr. Joan Kekimuri: *No, I do pay attention to it. It has happened, but I argue that whether this object has changed from a clay pot to a plastic pot, within the context of the practice, the meaning at that particular time does not change.*

Prof. George Kyeyune: *Has always changed!* (Roundtable discussion on Indigenous Knowledge Systems, 01/03/2019: 618–647)

The three participants debate the question whether practices facilitated by handicraft objects change when the materiality and origin of the artefacts are altered. While Joan Kekimuri is convinced that the meaning of a practice does not change if a clay pot is replaced by a plastic pot, George Kyeyune believes the opposite to be true. He also emphasizes that cultural, artistic practices have always changed and refers to European colonization in the past and cheap Chinese products in the present. The debate, which circles around the question of authenticity and meaning making also includes the question of African bead art, especially when European glass beads are or were used (Oberhofer, 2018; Oehrl, 2016). However, Michael Oehrl and Kerstin Pinther and Alexandra Weigand (2018) remind that the flow of materials and ideas of form are much older than one might think; cowrie shells and carnelian beads, for example, "have been found in Celtic tombs in Central Europe, far from their source, as has Baltic amber been in Egypt" (Oehrl, 2016: 11).

In my initial conversation with the costume designers, we speak mostly about the meanings of *imbalu* and about the designers' struggle to keep the rituals and associated costumes alive, which is challenging also because "everything now it's about money here," as Sulaiman Kanyike puts it (conversation with members of the *imbalu* costume designers' group 26/02/2020: 37–38). In terms of the costume, we speak more about the leather belts, the hat, and the animal fur (which is a controversial issue around here). So, in my WhatsApp interviews with Danny, I specifically ask about the beads, which, according to the literature, are essential, yet were not specifically addressed by the group members I met. Danny refers to beads being another medium of communication with ancestral spirits and the gods. In addition, they allow for the elders to judge the dancing skills of the candidate:

> The way/style, which the candidate uses to shake the beads portrays the various dancing skills. The rhythm of these drums keeps varying at different times of the dances, thus [the] need to shake the beads to match each beat. […] Beads have since time memorial in Africa have been used [sic] in shrines as a means of communication with their gods. Elders are believed to have the powers to interpret messages depending on how the beads land when shaken and thrown to the ground. The movement and position of beads as the candidate dances can be used to predict whether the candidate will be brave or not. (WhatsApp Interview with Danny Nabende Wamakote, 30/09/2022)

No one among the independent handicraft groups I spoke with were preoccupied with the possibility of altered associated meanings of their products due to the integration of non-indigenous materials. Meanings of materiality were more associated with the aesthetics of the product (e.g., the tinsel on the hat of the *imbalu* costume, see also Image 7.8, or the glossy gift-wrapping paper for the *kwanjula* baskets) or with longevity (i.e., baskets made from polypropylene strapping band). It appears that alterations and adaptions are welcome, as long as they are being developed from within and not forced upon, such as the prohibition of hunting the Colobus monkey for the purposes of using its fur for the costume. As I previously mentioned, the fur of the Colobus monkey is an important asset of the costume. It is used for the cone-shaped hat, and the long hair of the black-and white fur of the animal sways back and forth, up and down, thereby following the rhythm of the dancing candidate. It is also used for the decorations of the two sticks the candidate holds in his hands, and on the leather belts, which are decorated with cowrie shells, seeds and plastic straws cut into little pieces and assembled hanging on the belt with the seeds and fur. For the members of the costume designers' group, in our conversation also referred to as "engineers, who were not formally trained" (conversation with members of the *imbalu* costume designers' group 26/02/2020: 394–395), it is imperative that "the animal must die" (ibid: 395), even though it has been prohibited by the National Government. The fur has since become very expensive because in addition, the poachers need to shoot the animal on Masaba mountain, which has been declared a National Park, making hunting illegal. Environmentalists also heavily criticize poaching and frequently report a drastic decline in Colobus monkeys, which is commonly associated with *imbalu* (but less with deforestation and environmental degradation) (Walukamba, 2020). During the UNESCO seminar, I am told, the trainers also demanded the designers to consider alternative artificial materials that could replace the animal fur:

> And you know government of Uganda they condemn killing that animal. We challenged those officers during the UNESCO seminar when they trained to train use to use sisal instead of this animal. Our LC5 Mr. Mujaasi said: "No, that animal – that animal must die for the circumcision." [Laughter] He challenged those officers and he said: "NO! NO! NO! It must die, we don't want you to kill it, this is our culture and that is our uniform. It is a very special uniform." So that is a very big brand. Because when they go in the forest to hunt it, the government at times arrests them for killing it. So, the culture is not balancing. (Sulaiman Kanyike, conversation with members of the imbalu costume designers' group 26/02/2020: 345–351)

While we are speaking about challenges of the group, the topic of the Colobus monkey is addressed with more urgency, and I am asked to promote their interests regarding the hunt elsewhere. Sulaiman, who speaks frequently, elaborates how ille-

galizing their activities affects the group and how my advocating for their interests might help to improve their situation:

> We make them [the costumes with fur] but we pray you help us that when we are making them, we are not in panic that we shall be stopped from making them by the legal authorities. That will help us a lot. Because with a legal document, you can invite us anywhere with our items and we come without anybody stopping us on legal grounds. (ibid: 365–368)

Image 7.7: Imbalu costume designers' first demonstration of unfinished costume elements. Mixed materials.

Image 7.8: Imbalu costume hat and upper part of costume from above. Traditionally made from Colobus monkey fur, here combined with contemporary elements such as tinsel in gold and blue, white and red and bulbs as well as the skull of a female black-and-white-casqued hornbill.

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The group's strongest argument is their culture. As individuals who possess the "generational heritage spirit" (ibid: 469), which is in their blood (687), they consider it as their duty to keep the ritual alive and to establish alliances with individuals as well as groups, organizations, and other actors (such as the government) who will, ideally, advocate their interests. And should they not actively support their interest,

then at least not execute their legal power as with the government, whose members appear to forget willingly about the poached animal. When I ask about the this, I am told that government officials who attend the *imbalu* ceremonies either do not notice or "don't even remember that we have killed the animals" (ibid: 371–372).

When asking groups about their challenges, their answers are varied. To some extent, however, they are similar. All groups talk about a lack of capital for investment to buy needed raw material (which is, unlike the story told on glossy project leaflets and websites, frequently not so readily available) for bulk production, so that when customers wish to purchase a larger amount of products, their interests can be met. The *imbalu* costume designers' group has additional ideas about how their challenges could be met. They wish for a workshop, where the costumes can be put on display, ideally with a price tag. A price tag fixes a price, which currently is frequently subject to negotiations. A full costume can be very expensive, 700.000 UGX (which is more than the average monthly salary of a public-school teacher), and many community members have little money. During the UNESCO seminar, the attending members were given some ideas for innovations, which, among others, resulted in the tinsel now decorating the hats of those who can afford it. Not many can, though, and thus it remains a struggle for the designers to gain some income with their work. Their own workshop, they are sure, would help immensely, and so would machines with which they could work faster.

When talking about challenges, I notice a change in the wording and narrations similar to the one I elaborated upon in chapter 7.2. While talking about the *imbalu* ritual, the costumes, the importance of the knife and other customs, rituals, and activities associated with *imbalu*, keeping the culture and with it the relation with their ancestors alive is central; after all, the rite of passage welcomes new members into the adult society. Every member of the designers' group is obligated to teach his sons, as three members, who in the original recording frequently interrupt each other, explain. Dorothy (DW) and Barbra (BKL) translate this sequence in the following way:

DW: *Yes, it [learning to make costumes] is compulsory to every son that is born in the family. It is like a spirit or taboo. It is just like how in every family for every child that is born is taken to school; immediately they start understanding. So, with this culture, even if the son went to school, they are still convicted by the spirit of circumcision and driven back home to learn these things.*

BKL: *So, just like taking a child to a government school in Uganda, it is compulsory that they must learn this. You must learn this, whether you like it or not. That's why it is living from generation to generation.*

DW: *So, whether you go to school, this is like a spirit that must drive you back home to do these crafts, because it is a generational heritage spirit.* (Conversation with members of the imbalu costume designers' group, 26/02/2020: 460–469)

When talking about the challenges, the need for additional hammers is named first. If there is another seminar, "machines to produce these tools [hammers] to ease the work and save time" (ibid: 542–543) would be of use. Secondly, the lack of capital is an important issue, for one group member, whom I call Ahmad Aheirwe, says, "We are financially constrained, thus cannot afford to make in bulk for wholesale or instant selling. We make a unit item depending on the availability of the order" (ibid: 559–560). In terms of vocabulary used, depending on the topic, the language applied changes. When talking about training their children, the men speak rapidly and cut each other off, using words that roughly translate to "spirit or taboo", "living from generation to generation", or "generational heritage spirit" to refer strongly to the associated meanings of the group members.

Once the artistic activities are regarded as a business, though, it becomes about optimizing the work, potentially industrializing at least part of the production process (thereby direct references to the iron bells are made), and the costumes become mechanical products rather than a vital aspect of lived culture.

Cultural Heritage: On Whose Terms?

In terms of challenges or things needed, the people with whom I spoke referred to tools that would help them. They did not speak about the lack of skills or the lack of a market for their products. But they did speak about high prices for the materials needed, and customers who do not have a lot of capital themselves. When following Odutsa et al.'s categorization, families whose children partake in the full *imbalu* ritual are among the "traditionalists", who "are the conservatives who have not been influenced by formalized education and Christianity. They undertake the ritual step by step, use traditional instruments and apply traditional medicine during the process of healing." (Odutsa et al., 2019: 592). Although Odutsa and colleagues' argumentation falls short of differentiating between the inevitable influence of western education and Christianity (as well as Islam) on all structural levels and a conscious decision to position the community's very own tangible and intangible cultural heritage above or alongside once forced and nowadays commonly established structures, their observations are important in the situation. While some community members Odutsa et al. categorize traditionalists as living in urban centers or in the diaspora, the majority continue to live in small villages. Frequently they are farmers who, in Barbra's words, are not poor only because they live on fertile land. In monetary terms however, they may have little income hence little to spare to spend on costumes.

The tinsel, the plastic beads[8], the straws, the light bulbs, and the handkerchiefs made from cloth are all fairly recent additions to the *imbalu* costume. Alongside the iron thigh and wrist bells, the leather belts with the cowrie shells, seeds, and, as controversial as it is, the long mane of the black-and-white Colobus monkey fur used for sticks, the hat, and the belts, the *imbalu* costume designers display the aesthetic acculturalization and adaptation of foreign materials to practices that build on traditional techniques. In a lengthy conversation with Kizito Maria Kasule about the conceptualization and the meaning of the word *traditional*, he told me that when talking about traditional crafts in the Ugandan situatedness, traditional does not refer to "old" artefacts[9]. Rather, it is to be understood as an asset to or a development of traditional aesthetics and techniques with contemporary elements that extend the original meanings of artefacts without disconnecting them from their historical roots. The pre-colonial traits continue to play an important role in contemporary objects, grounded in local aesthetics; therefore, traditional here does not refer to the age of an object, but rather to its situatedness in the continuity of cultural objects and artefacts being "vital" elements of lived culture, to borrow again from Nannyonga-Tamusuza (Voice memo from WhatsApp call with Kizito Maria Kasule 21/06/2021).

Thus, while the *imbalu* costume designs are constantly adapted depending on aesthetic preferences, availability of materials, and financial resources, I understood that the group members, who are, in their various roles, the backbone of the *imbalu* ritual, have a very clear idea about the importance and value of their work and are not willing to let actors from the outside (e.g., government or the trainers from the UNESCO seminar, development, and/or heritage agendas) determine what should be changed or how. Instead, they form alliances with organic and traditional intellectuals, such as with LC5 Mr. Mujaasi and their cultural leader, teacher, and archive, the *umukuuka* (see also chapter 5.2.7), who are members of the community and hence can relate to the importance of, for example, poaching the Colobus monkey.

Considering the importance of *imbalu*, its dances, music, costumes, cuisine, and practices of ancestral worship, as a rite of passage that qualifies men to take part in politics and family planning is for many individuals, families, and communities among the Bagisu, the aims of the *Strengthening* project, which sought to equip artists and artisans with additional skillsets to improve upon their practice and maximize benefits, appear to be a misfit. The focus of the project was economically oriented and focused on the mechanical enhancement of skills and ideas about

8 Barbra refers to them as "Chinese beads" (Barbra's observation protocol from 26/02/2020), and curiously plastic objects are frequently referred to as "Chinese items". They are frequently cheap and durable, though I frequently heard people say that food prepared and served from pots and plates made the traditional way simply taste better

9 For a discussion about the meaning of traditional in the Arts of Africa, see also Pinther (2022).

"what else to integrate into artistic practices". *Imbalu* on the other hand, is pivotal for the self-identity of a people, through which, by forms of ritual, dancing, musicking and dressing, community members negotiate the boundaries between self, family, and community, where the private is part of the public and vice-versa. It negotiates gender roles and hegemony as well as consent within.

The *imbalu* ritual powerfully displays the interconnectedness between material and intangible culture and supports the demand for an inclusive definition of art that regards music, dance, drama, and visual culture to be equally important elements of artistic and creative expression that are more than the sum of its parts. Here, the artistic practices alongside worship and culinary practices make part of a cultural practice that shapes the perceptions of the self as a member of an ethnic group and a community. With the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,* UNESCO member states acknowledge that

> The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2003: Article 2.1)

I already discussed the role of the UNESCO in my research situation (both in chapter 5 and 6). In doing so, I elaborated on the discursive power of the UNESCO and its conventions on the local discourse on cultural heritage (chapter 5.2.4 and chapter 5.3), as well as on the discourse of the economic potential of the creative industries (chapter 6.3). Among the *imbalu* initiation costume designers, the UNESCO itself is no point of reference. And still, with regard to the objectives of my research it is worthwhile to consider the (critical) literature on intangible cultural heritage and its linkages to sustainable development discourses and, more importantly, the political dimension of heritage preservation and management. The UNESCO definition omits any reference to the political aspects of intangible cultural heritage. Instead, cultural heritage is positioned within the realms of particular histories, relations to nature and sociability among community members. However, in the case of *imbalu,* cultural heritage is not only deeply political, as it establishes, maintains and negotiates hegemony within the community, but it is also a site of resistance that opposes the enforcements of alterations from the outside – whether due to missionization, education, medicalization, forms of aesthetics, or environmental activism (Khanakwa, 2016).

In their co-edited volume *Cultural Heritage and Human Rights*, Helaine Silverman and Dede Fairchild Ruggles (2007) address the important questions of who defines cultural heritage, who manages and controls its stewardship, and who benefits the most from it. "Heritage is a concept to which most people would assign a positive value", they write, and proceed in acknowledging that

> heritage is also intertwined with identity and territory, where individuals and communities are often in competition or outright conflict. Conflicts may occur over issues of indigenous land and cultural property rights, or between ethnic minorities and dominant majorities disputing the right to define and manage the cultural heritage of the minority. […] Heritage is by no means a neutral category of self-definition nor an inherently positive thing: It is a concept that can promote self-knowledge, facilitate communication and learning, and guide the stewardship of the present culture and its historic past. But it can also be a tool for oppression. (Silverman and Fairchild Ruggles, 2007: 3)

Imbalu promotes a particular form of community and demands members to play their assigned role in it. It establishes forms of inclusion and exclusion to varying degrees, depending on how individuals and families are willing to perform. Unlike the UNESCO approaches to cultural heritage, the tangible and intangible, including performative and discursive, elements that make *imbalu* are deeply rooted in political activity, making cultural heritage a site of civil society, rather than having civil society actors protect and safeguard cultural heritage.

Conceptualizing *imbalu* and with it the work of the *imbalu* costume designers' group within a framework of civil society from a locally grounded perspective rather than of cultural heritage within a UNESCO discourse allows for the consideration of the political agency of the material and immaterial culture and bears the potential to understand the meanings of artistic handicraft production and products beyond the enforced paradigms of economic development and the preservation of culture.

7.4 Conclusions
Moving beyond Major Discourses. Turning towards Overheard Positions

> *Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.* (African Proverb, as cited in Achebe and Brooks, 1994)

In an interview with Jerome Brooks, Nigerian writer, poet, and editor Chinua Achebe is asked about incidents or events that motivated him to become a writer. In his answer, Achebe first elaborates on his always existing interest in stories – ofthe stories told in his family, the Christian stories he learned at school and, as

he grew older, stories of adventure. In the interview he says that at first he did not understand that he "was supposed to be on the side of those savages who were encountered by the good white man" (Achebe and Brooks, 1994: n.p.). In succeeding he elaborates how in stories he read, he "instinctively took sides with the white people. They were fine! They were excellent. […] The others were not … they were stupid and ugly", he continues. Then, he turns towards the danger of not having one's own stories, exemplified by the proverb of the lions. Once Achebe realized that he did indeed not have a story, he tells Brooks, he *had* to become a writer and a historian, too.

In a similar narrative, Nigerian-American writer Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie gave her now famous TED-talk *The Danger of a Single Story* in 2009, in which, among others quoting Chinua Achebe, she rephrased the need to understand that, only by telling multiple stories about people, we can begin to grasp the complexities of their realities. Although she does not call it so, in her speech she describes a white hegemonic gaze upon Africans, who continue to be homogenized in spite of sharp and precisely articulated criticism from decolonial and postcolonial thinkers. She writes:

> So, after I had spent some years in the U.S. as an African, I began to understand my roommate's [at a U.S. university] response to me. If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved, by a kind, white foreigner. (Ngozi Adichie, 2009: n.p.)

The artistic handicraft artists I met tell multiple stories about their work. Through their work's agency they position themselves as engineers, doctors, businesspeople, hardworking women, or people who refuse to think of themselves as victims of a conman who deprived them of their savings. They tell stories of economic challenges, for sure. In addition, they also tell stories about people whose knowledge serves as archive for the cultural identity of a community, people who articulate their political interests, who form alliances, build communities, and recruit like-minded individuals, people who establish conviviality, and people who negotiate visibility and ownership of public spaces and who utilize their artistic skills in multiple ways.

With this third results chapter, my aim was to introduce a small selection of the many associated meanings about handicraft objects prevailing outside the dominant discourses in what today is called Uganda have with regard to artistic handicraft products. This introduction is selective as much as it is partial (Clarke et al., 2018) and incomplete (Nyamnjoh, 2017a), it is situated in the temporal, political, and societal pre-pandemic moments. Which conclusions, then, can be drawn from these fragmented stories, interpreted by translation by Barbra and Dorothy and analyzed

by me? What are the articulation possibilities of artistic handicraft practitioners in civil society, and what is the agency of their products? What are the roles of engagement with artistic handicrafts in Ugandan civil society, and how do they shape and co-constitute political articulation as well as authorship?

The two case studies I introduced and reconstructed, the work of two independent artistic handicraft collectives – one women's group engaged with wickerwork from the plains of Supa and one men's group who are the "engineers" of the *imbalu* initiation costumes worn by candidates on the day of their rite of passage. Throughout the pages of this chapter, I described how and where their associations with the creative work they are engaged with differ from major discourses around sustainable development and heritage production on the one hand and poverty reduction in form of economization of activities on the other hand. Ngozi Adichie argues that those who are in positions powerful enough make other people's stories "the definitive story of that person" (Ngozi Adichie, 2009: n.p.).

The *imbalu* initiation costume designers' group, for example, have what they consider to be a generational and cultural responsibility towards their families, communities, cultural leaders, and ancestors. Furthermore, *imbalu* is as much political as it is spiritual (and cultural). Their importance in politics and ancestral worship and their knowledge around the ritual and handicraft skills equip them with agency that allows them to push for their interests. In their work, Kamruzzaman (2019), Kasfir (1998a; 2017), Kleibl (2021), Mamdani (2012), Obadare (2011; 2014), and others have, in various ways, articulated the needs for situated and nuanced conceptualizations of civil society capable of capturing and understanding the relationalities and processuality that shape the public sphere in post-colonial African realities. The findings from the two case studies discussed in this chapter follow this notion. They exemplify the political dimension of cultural rituals and practices, which are frequently depoliticized by the heritage discourses used to reconstruct their symbolic meanings in the realm of "traditional African art" or "intangible cultural difference" that remain indifferent to time and historical developments (Pinther, 2022: 31). Furthermore, both case studies emphasize the need to also consider gender aspects (Tripp, 1998) and the agency of artistic and cultural expression as important non-human elements that co-constitute civic articulation. In this conclusion, I will thus return to and elaborate on both.

The Gender Dimension

When I met Richard Kawere, then CEO of UTA, he also introduced me to his female colleague, though not without informing me that she is a feminist. She, Aisha, he says, "is not like me. For me, I want equal balance of society" (Interview with Richard Kawere, CEO of UTA 11/03/2020: 404–405), meaning that feminists want to concentrate on "one side of humanity" (407) and therefore produce inequality. Nuwa

Nnyanzi tells me how there is no gender imbalance in African societies. Rather, he tells me, gender issues and structural discrimination of women is a western issue, exported into the world historically by colonizers and missionaries and currently by development agendas. Acclaimed novelist and critic, Arna Ata Aidoo seems to back this perception when already in 1986, she wrote, "Feminism. You know how we feel about that embarrassing western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from [North] America to ruin nice African homes" (Aidoo, 1986: 34). Clenora Hudson-Weems, too, argues that feminist thinking, also in forms of *Black Feminism*, fall short of being able to conceptualize the Africana women's realities into the established feminist paradigm. She writes that

> 'Black Feminism', is some Africana women's futile attempt to fit into the constructs of an established White female paradigm. At best, Black feminism may relate to sexual discrimination outside of the Africana community, but cannot claim to resolve the critical problems within it, which are influenced by racism and classism. (Hudson-Weems, 2006: 40)

She argues for the need for Africana women to be able to engage in self-naming and self-definition, inclusive of valuing what Hudson-Weems calls "the quality of Africana life" (ibid: 40). Like Tripp (1998), Hudson-Weems observes that Africana women may have different needs than those dominating feminist gender debates in other regions. Even more so, to "remain authentic in their existence", Africana women need to be able to prioritize their needs

> even if the needs are not of primary concern for the dominant culture. The ever-present question remains the same: what is the relationship between an Africana woman and her family, her community, and her career in today's society that emphasizes, in the midst of oppression, human suffering, and death, the empowerment of women and individualism over human dignity and rights? (Hudson-Weems, 2020: 17)

In leaning on Mahmood Mamdani and Ernest Wamba Dia Wamba (1995), Emanuelle Bouilly, Ophélie Rillon, and Hannah Cross conceptualize activism and mobilization beyond common theories of social movements that refer to "the idea of an overt, conflictual, disruptive, collective and organised action targeting the state and aiming for social change" (2016: 339), which allows to make meaning of the "ways in which they [individuals] commit themselves, resist or protest against oppression, and how precisely they respond to multiple oppressions where gender, class, racial/ethnic, and other power relations interlock." (ibid: 339).

Even before I left Kampala during my last field stay, it became apparent to me that the dimension of gender and assigned gender roles are a dimension of rele-

vance. When I met with the handicraft groups, I was reaffirmed in this observation; only one group included members of both genders, and in that group the sole male member I met with (though officially the group has two) is the initiator and leader of the group. Both case studies I presented in this chapter are groups that communicate their own narratives by means of their artistic practices. The women's group from Supa, though, are committed to conviviality in the understandings of Nyamnjoh (2017), whereby togetherness, complementation, and mutual learning are central. In doing so, the women, seemingly by the way, establish their visibility and a space in a public realm, which they fill according to their needs, facilitated through their artistic handicraft work, which is widely acknowledged as a female activity that allows them to inhabit the spaces they claim. Furthermore, by submitting to the governmentality of overcoming poverty through the commodification of everyday activities, the women can also establish themselves as subjects who are not willing to remain idle but are active, self-sufficient and, in consequence, more powerful.

It was and continues to be argued that village communities, small-scale formal and informal credit associations, and spiritual groups are too inward- oriented and as such detached from the state and the market to have an effect on public policy (Chazan, 1992; Mehler, 1999; Obadare, 2014; Omach, 2016). Tripp (1998), however, observes that "many women see their organisations as an alternative to the exclusions and marginalization they face in more conventional political arenas" (93), and continues to explain that

> after 1986, urban women began to participate in large numbers in multi-purpose women's associations (usually with income generation at the core of their activities) and in credit and savings associations. Most organisations […] involved a combination of activities that ranged from producing handicraft or other goods for sale to cultural activities (music, drama, dance), providing assistance to orphans or other people in need, […]and involvement in community self-help initiatives of various kinds, for example, buildings, roads, wells, and assisting rural women's groups with their skills. The women's groups would switch emphasis on various activities as the needs of the members changed and as new opportunities presented themselves. Men were more likely to be in single-purpose organisations such as co-operatives, sports clubs and burial societies. (Tripp, 1998: 94)

Tripp further states that the objectives of the groups, which she describes as processual and changeable, could, under various circumstances, turn towards local power struggles on "issues that affected them" (ibid: 94). Conceiving civil society more broadly, Tripp concludes, allows for understanding how "many of their struggles were intensely political and significant" (ibid: 94). In my conversation with the women's group from Supa it became clear to me that the symbolic meaning of their wickerwork emphasizes conviviality and visibility alongside the wish to generate

income. Their focus may be inward-oriented, but to me their aims seem far from apolitical. Their conscious choice of location, their favoring mutual learning over outdoing one another in design and artistic skills, and the choice to work jointly to *come out of poverty*, to me, should be considered as Africana womanist engagement in civil society.

In chapter 7.2, I further concluded that the artistic products of the women's wickerwork group from Supa keep firm in their communication and articulate positions that hence create a counter-moment to the cultural hegemony executed in the particular moment by Barbra, Dorothy, and me. In the situatedness of the group conversation with the women seated underneath the large tree and the need to overcome language barriers, they became non-human actants that did not submit to the narrative of sustainability and recycling. When elaborating on situated conceptualizations of art Kerstin Pinther (2022) informs about the n need to

> [kritisch] scheinbar universale Vorstellungen wie die des unbelebten Objektes […] zu hinterfragen, da Gegenstände auch in der Kategorie von Subjekten und als aktiv Handelnde wahrgenommen werden können. Neben den Bezeichnungen, dem Sprechen und Urteilen über die ästhetische Gestaltung von ‚Objekten' manifestieren sich die verschiedenen Kunstauffassungen auch im Gebrauch, zum Beispiel in besonderen Formen des Zeigens und des Displays von Artefakten. (Pinther, 2022: 11)

> critically question seemingly universal assumptions such as those of the uninhabited object, as objects can also be perceived in the subject category and as active actants/actors. Besides their names, the talking about and judging of the aesthetic layout of 'objects', the various conceptions of art also manifest in their use, for example in particular ways of showing and of the display of artefacts. (my translation)

Pinther here refers to an aesthetic *dispositif*, which direct a particular gaze upon objects, and that can be both more permanent in nature, for example in ritual or ceremony, or rather short term and situated in a particular moment. As such, the artistic handicraft products become allies of the women artisans who made them and do not submit to the positions posed upon their creators.

Cultural Expression in Civil Society

Equally gendered but entirely different in the aesthetic and symbolic communication of their art, associational organization, and demonstratively outward oriented is the work of the *imbalu* initiation costume designers. *Imbalu*, I concluded in the preceding sub-chapter, is as spiritual as it is political and cultural. Here, too, Pinther's elaborations on the aesthetic *dispositif* facilitate an understanding of the

agency of the *imbalu* costume in ritual; for her conceptualization not only allows for the artefact to direct the gaze upon it but also emphasizes the processuality of creative and artistic articulation, which attributes meaning to the ephemeral and temporal, meaning the situatedness of art in a particular moment, for example, in ritual or ceremony. As co-constituents of a particular moment, embedded in performance, they are capable of generating new themes of aesthetic and social (and political, I argue) practices. As such, they are actants in a web of complex relationalities that negotiate consent as much as they provoke counter-hegemony and become vital agents in civil society.

The fur of the Colobus monkey, to some an essential element of the *imbalu* costume that "has a special skin […]. [I]t has that design" (conversation with *imbalu* ritual costume designers, 26/02/2020: 108–112), to some a demonstration of the dancing skills of the candidates, and to others a custom that must be changed to protect the endangered animal, is one such moment where political and hegemonic powers are highly contested, and the social order in place is challenged. As the Colobus monkey has a long black-and-white mane, the fur follows the rhythms of the dancing candidate. To the costume designers, it is an important part of the costume, and the fur is used for the hat, the belt, and the two sticks the candidate carries and holds onto during the ritual (see also Image 7.8). The costume designers' group, among which cultural leaders and community elders, consider the animal fur as important element in ritual. In the conversation, the LC5, Mr. Mujaasi, becomes a point of reference in two ways; Mr. Mujaasi, a member of the community but also a politician, is a person with authority. As LC5, he holds the highest political mandate on communal level, and since he is a member of the community who knows about the meanings and roles of *imbalu*. In the conversation, it is through Mr. Mujaasi, who allegedly said "that the animal must die for the circumcision" (ibid: 347) that the group members receive recognition for their activities and are able to justify it. For it is a highly respected member of their community who publicly supports the killing of the black-and-white Colobus monkey for the sake of the costume.

In the elaborations, Mr. Mujaasi even went so far to "challenge those officers" (ibid: 348). To me, it ultimately remains unclear whether those officers are the government of Uganda (345) or "those officers during the UNESCO seminar" (346) – although the wording might suggest for them to be the latter rather than the former – but the words used explain where the alliances lay because it is "the" government of Uganda, "those" officers from the seminar, and "our" LC5 Mr. Mujaasi. To this end, Mr. Mujaasi not only legitimizes the killing of the animal and the use of its fur, but also, in the role of a traditional intellectual, becomes the spokesperson of the interests of the costume designers' group and their self-governance regarding subject matters revolving around *imbalu*. Neither the government of Uganda nor the officers from the UNESCO seminar, who had proposed to replace the fur with sisal instead, are recognized as holding authority over decisions made here. They provoke resis-

tance instead, and Mr. Mujaasi is a provider of authority for this resistance, thereby confirming their own authority, which they possess through their roles as artists who are the bearers of creative cultural knowledge and in possession of the "generational heritage spirit" (ibid: 469).

Regarding the adaptations and changes to the costumes they make, the uniform designers' group demand artistic and creative liberties, and their works are testimony to continuities and changes within the community, public, and political life, as well as the private and semi-private realm of family. The artefacts and objects that in sum make the *imbalu* costume should be understood and reconstructed with what Pinther refers to as their intrinsic complexities as "created works, as art, as archive and memory, as example of locally situated aesthetics and cultural practices and to be considered through all of their intrinsic complexities and mobilities and hence conceptualized through the sum of their potential meanings" (Pinther, 2022: 32, my translation).

Development initiatives such as the UNESCO *Strengthening* project favor conceptualizing artistic handicrafts from their particular positionality as entities that submit to their own agendas as set in their conventions. The *2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, which provides the theoretical framework upon which was built the UNESCO seminar in which Suzan, Sulaiman, Isaiah, and Ahmed participated, assumes that artistic handicraft artists lack professionality and artistic skills, which hinders the ability of their work to be successfully sold at an adequate price that allows for the artists to survive on their work. By means of equipping them with additional design, artistic, and marketing skills, the project writers assume that economic prosperity will be the consequence – provided artists keep "working hard" and learn to turn their creative potential into economic gains. Embedded in this conceptualization are agendas of poverty reduction and the safeguarding of the diversity of cultural expressions, which here are considered as creative industries that are possibly, but not necessarily, part of the cultural heritage of a nation-state.

The case studies of this chapter highlighted some of the multiple shortcomings of this attempt to "professionalize" "underprivileged women" while safeguarding "traditional knowledge" and harvesting the "economic potential" of the creative industries, which can make "up to 11% of a country's employment", and introduced some of the perspectives of the handicraft artists, who too often remain implicit in approaches to development. By proposing to conceptualize the creative and artistic work and engagement of the two groups from artistic, social, and civic perspectives as interlinked, co-constitutive, and interdependent, I demonstrated how art objects and artefacts participate in meaning making, while negotiating (but also affirming) concepts of community living, local aesthetics, gender roles, authority, and ultimately, development.