Between Home and International Scenes. Sarah Ndagire's Way to World Music

Linda Cimardi (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg)

Abstract: *While most of Ugandan artists that reached international fame within world music are male singers and instrumentalists, in this chapter I focus on Sarah Ndagire, a female Ugandan singer based in the UK, and discuss how she developed her style, repertoire and career by establishing local as well as international networks. Ngadire gathered a variety of musical influences and inspirations as well as experiences in live music performances of several genres. Her music itinerary also developed through the fruitful cooperation with Ugandan musicians and sound producers and international collaborations for recording albums and performing on tours. Her repertoire includes interpretations of traditional songs as well as new pieces that she locates within world music with a Ugandan and African inspiration. In this chapter, I examine the various aspects of Ndagire's leadership by analyzing her background and training, musical production, career, international networks and cooperation projects with male musicians and studio producers; furthermore, I consider her position in the African diaspora and cosmopolitan approach to her work. Finally, I argue that her cosmopolitan sensibility, capacity of connecting with various artists, flexibility in moving across musical boundaries and effectiveness in shaping her own career are key factors defining her leadership.*

Keywords: *Uganda, Sarah Ndagire, female artist, traditional and world music, cosmopolitanism.*

In Uganda the professional music field is dominated by men, although female performers are also there. From traditional music to popular genres, almost all instrument players and the majority of solo vocalists are males, while female performers are also solo singers, but mostly dancers and background or chorus vocalists.[1] Because of this gen-

1 The gendered pattern marking music professionalism in Uganda has not been a direct focus of ethnomusicological scholarship so far. However, the male predominance in instrument playing and solo singing and female participation mostly in dancing and (chorus) singing emerge in contributions that analyze gender in performing traditional repertoires (Cimardi 2013 and forthcoming 2023; Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2005), as well as in works examining gender mainly through the lyrics of popular music songs (Lutwama-Rukundo 2008; Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2002).

dered structure of music professionalism, very few women have leading positions in bands or as soloists, especially in world music. Sarah Ndagire is one of them. A singer experienced in traditional repertoires of Central, Western and South-Western Uganda, Ndagire assimilated the model of great African artists and gathered experiences through performing in various bands to build an international career within and beyond world music. She navigated various aspects of traditional performing arts through her personal re-elaborations as well as through collaborations with different musicians and music producers. Her talent and creativity have been internationally recognized and, thanks to them, she moved to the UK. From her transnational position between Europe and Africa, she continues to shape her repertoire and stage image that appeal to both global and local audiences.

I encountered Sarah Ndagire's music in the early 2010s, when I was researching Ugandan traditional repertoires in relation to gender. A traditional song, 'Katitira', which I had recorded from elders in Bunyoro, was also broadcasted by domestic radio stations in Ndagire's adaptation. From that track, I got interested in discovering more about her music and artistic work as a female performer. In 2012, thanks to the networking done by some friends, I was able to contact and meet her in Kampala, at the café of the Ugandan National Theatre, a place central for the performing arts of the country and that Ndagire knew very well. After that first stimulating meeting, we have kept connections through social networks, until 2021, when in the mid of the Covid-19 pandemic, we had a long online video conversation. Then we continued our exchange through social networks and emails and, in summer 2022, I presented her my ideas at the core of this chapter, in particular the concepts of women's leadership and cosmopolitanism, and she read the first draft of this text and commented on it with insightful remarks.

Exploring Ndagire's career, musical production and self-positioning on the global music scene allows to reflect on the conditions and forms of women's leadership and agency, as well as on womanhood, Africanness and cosmopolitanism of musical artists in the present post-colonial time. In this chapter, I first locate Sarah Ndagire within the gendered structures of Ugandan music professionalism and then proceed to retrace her personal path as an artist in Uganda and abroad by presenting her interpretations and elaborations of local traditional arts as well as her popular and world music songs; finally, I explore how she mediated her music and public persona on different stages and for diverse audiences. Throughout this discussion, I have a twofold aim. On the one hand, I attempt to present the form(s) of female leadership that Ndagire impersonates by exploring different strategies and approaches she adopted in interpreting, elaborating and getting inspiration from Ugandan traditional repertoires adjusted to different audiences and contexts, as well as by establishing and nurturing transnational artistic networks. On the other hand, I want to shed light on the ways she articulates, stages and represents her African identity in international contexts and how she conjugates womanhood in her music and life. I interpret her work and career in the framework of cosmopolitanism understood as a way of negotiating (musical, cultural, aesthetical) meanings and I argue that this cosmopolitan sensibility, together with her capacity of connecting different artists, flexibility in moving across musical boundaries and effectiveness in shaping her own career, are key factors defining her leadership.

Gender Structures and (Traditional) Performing Arts in Uganda

In present Uganda, a gender differentiation in music professionalism sees men as the totality of instrumentalists and the majority of solo singers, while women are solo singers more rarely than men and mostly background vocalists and dancers. This pattern marks to varying degrees both the wide domain that we could label as "traditional" repertoires and the similarly ample category of popular music, as well as the in-between fields of neo-traditional popular music (i.e. the genres like *kadongo kamu* that developed since 1945 from traditional playing techniques and musical structures applied to new instruments and ensembles; see Kubik 1981) and world music (or world beat, understood as a broad category, including repertoires from the Global South adapted for an international audience mostly from the Global North).

If one moves away from the Europen-derived notion of "music" to adopt the wider concept of "performing arts", which covers the Ugandan understanding of the complex formed by instrument playing, singing, dancing and acting,[2] it becomes possible to investigate the role of gender in artistic performance on a more veritable basis. The gender differentiation hitherto shaping music professionalism in Uganda is historically grounded in most of local traditional performing arts, from the royal repertoires of Central and Western kingdoms to xylophone music of the Bakonzo and Basoga. In the past, women were not supposed to play instruments[3] because of their purported physical weakness or the risk of ritual contamination that their bodies were considered to carry.[4] In mixed gender call and response songs, such as those used to accompany dancing among the Banyoro and Batooro, the soloist led the performance and enjoyed great agency, freedom of expression and independence in shaping the content and tone of the vocal component. These qualities are associated with masculinity and in the past precluded women from doing the same, rather reserving them positions as chorus singers. On the other hand, because of the absence of a leading dancer, dancing offered occasions for a more equal expression to men and women. A similar equality marked storytelling, where both men and women could be main narrators and acting the story's characters. In the last decades, several factors – such as the development of a national

2 In Uganda this complex is commonly known as MDD: Music, Dance and Drama.

3 However, there are some notable exceptions to this general ban on women to play musical instruments: the widows of the king of Buganda could play some particular royal drums and, in the past, Huma women of Western Uganda played the trough zither (*nanga*), which is today in use just among Basongora women also based in Western Uganda.

4 My research interlocutors in Bunyoro and Tooro (Western Uganda) proposed different motivations related to the female body to explain why women are not supposed to play instruments, in particular royal instruments. Similar explanations in neighboring Buganda (Central Uganda) support the fact that women generally did not play instruments there either (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2005). This kind of explanations also resonates with an extended literature tackling the issue of women being prohibited to play instruments worldwide, as reported by Doubleday 2008. However, it should also be noted that research on musical instruments has long ignored female musicians, usually because they were active in the private sphere instead of the public one, or considered them the exception to exclusive masculine instrument-playing, as Iva Nenić (2019) showed, especially for *gusle* playing in Serbia.

system of school education and festivals, the dissemination of semi-professional ensembles and of women's clubs throughout rural Uganda, the influence of African and extra-African models of female musicianship and success in music – have contributed to the erosion of the patriarchal structures modeling traditional performing arts, especially for what concerns singing. However, the influence of those customs is still significant in instrument playing, which although not a taboo for females anymore, can still be perceived as inappropriate to women.

Sarah Ndagire's first encounters and experiences in the field of artistic performance reflect this gendered bias. Indeed, she has never learnt to play any instrument and she still considers that to be one of the major impediments to developing her career more independently (Sarah Ndagire, interview, online, 29 April 2021). On the other hand, she had various experiences in acting, dancing and singing during her childhood and teenage years. In primary school, she embraced acting in the school club and, later, she sang in performances of traditional repertoires in her secondary school as well as with church choirs, although acting remained her main focus of interest during school years.

Traditional, Popular and In-Between: Sarah Ndagire's First Musical Experiences

The variety of genres and scenes in present Uganda can be retraced in Ndagire's training, early artistic experiences and later musical production. In the plurality of music scenes of contemporary Uganda, traditional repertoires can meet popular genres derived from the Global North halfway between experimentation through neo-traditional popular music, neo-traditional folk music and world music, while church music and classical music also contribute to a heterogeneous musical landscape. If traditional repertoires, characterized by unamplified live performances, are mostly the domain of school festivals, semi-professional groups and specialized traditional musicians, popular music is today mostly digitally composed in studios and performed in lip-synch on a played-back base.[5] Neo-traditional popular music genres like *kadongo kamu*[6] seem to lose audiences, but neo-traditional folk music, intended as new compositions inspired by traditional styles and at least partially produced in the studio, enjoys popularity, especially among middle-aged listeners. This is, however not comparable to popular music stars' success, both in terms of incomes generated and dedicated audience, mostly composed by youth (Schneidermann 2020). World music is mainly produced for a foreign audience by a few Ugandans based abroad, the most famous being the recently disappeared Geoffrey Oryema. Church music, in a variety of different expressions, is practiced and listened to by heterogeneous

5 Joe Tabula (2015: 12) locates the beginning of the dissemination of reggae and African American popular music genres like hip hop in Uganda in the early 1990s. These two genres had a significant impact on Ugandan popular music and stimulated the use of digital technologies in music production. As noted by Asaasira (2012: 163), "the fusion of a variety of music elements in Ugandan popular music has made it difficult to clearly categorize it [in specific genres]", but reggae and hip hop were soon indigenized by major artists, like Chameleon, Bebe Cool and Bobi Wine, who started emerging in the 2000s (Mbabazi 2012).

6 On *kadongo kamu* see: Kasule 1998 and Ssewakiryanga and Isabirye 2006.

audiences and finally classical music attracts only a niche public (Basoga 2012; Sandhal and Cooke 2006).

As I mentioned above, traditional and church music were part of Ndagire's training through her participation in traditional singing and acting in school as well as in different church choirs. When she was in her 20s, one of her friends in a youth center in Kampala insisted that she sang solo for a special performance; though reluctant, she finally accepted and her interpretation was very appreciated. People commented that she "had been hiding" her voice and talent and now needed to use it. Gaining confidence in her singing potential, Ndagire also started to perform outside the church choir and sang some famous hits. During the 2000s, as she worked for different Ugandan radios,[7] she had access to their sound archives, whose albums she could listen to and study. Furthermore, Ndagire and some like-minded friends researched music from other African countries and she found her inspiration models mainly from South and West Africa, in Miriam Makeba, Angelique Kidjo, Mory Kanté. By then, Congolese and especially South African artists, like Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Brenda Fassie, Lucky Dube and PJ Powers, were very famous in Uganda. PJ Powers' song 'Jabulani', the first one that Ndagire interpreted solo in a band, became one of the models of the music she wanted to do, a sort of Afro-pop fusion. Remembering how her musical taste and style took shape, Ndagire recounted:

> I loved the traditional rhythms and songs and I also liked the Western [ones]… So, I always wanted to find the way of combining them, because I find people who play traditional instruments, our traditional music… they play that [genre] alone, those playing in bands, you know for instance in jazz bands, they are playing that [genre] alone. So, I can't say that's where it came from, but from the beginning I started writing a few songs and, whenever I write a song, I think of a traditional song and… [that] I could add this to it… Then a friend of mine had a studio at the Lutheran Ministry… so I went there… and that's how it started (Sarah Ndagire, interview, Kampala, 8 February 2012).

For her own musical production, Ndagire was not interested in local popular music, digitally produced in studio usually on standardized rhythmic bases, but she wanted to record and perform with real musicians combining Ugandan instruments and rhythmic models with broader external influences. Ndagire would later develop this inspirational vein in her solo production of neo-traditional songs and world music, while during the 2000s she collaborated with established bands in Kampala as a singer. Some of these were very popular in the Ugandan capital city, like Light Rays Band, Big 5 Band, Percussion Discussion Africa group, Misty Jazz Band, Soul Beat Africa Band and the famous Afrigo Band. She also worked and established connections with professional musicians who would later collaborate with her for her songs and albums. The 2000s thus were fundamental years in providing her with experience of performing live a variety of

7 Radio Uganda at first, then Capital Radio for a short time and finally Dembe FM.

repertoires, from jazz to *soukous*,[8] from *kidandali*[9] to traditional. These experiences in bands playing different genres live contributed to Ndagire's stylistic eclecticism and prowess on stage.

Figure 1: Sarah Ndagire with Miriam Makeba in 2008 at the Uganda National Theatre in Kampala. Ndagire performed before Makeba at the Warid Kampala Jazz Festival, when this picture was taken. Used with permission of Sarah Ndagire.

8 *Soukous* is a dance music genre, derived in the 1960s from Congolese *rumba*, which had a wide circulation and success across Africa. The term is sometimes used as a synonym of Congolese *rumba*, especially for the *soukous* production from the 1980s onward, and in this sense was also used by Ndagire in our conversations.

9 *Kidandali* is a broad style category more than a circumscribed genre, it is played by Kampala-based bands combining the initial influences of *kadongo kamu* and *soukous* with jazz, traditional Ganda music and popular music.

Female Leadership and Solo Singing

According to sociologist Karin Klenke (2011: 4), the concept of leadership is usually still understood through the old masculine paradigm established in the Global North and based on power, control and authority. However, in the last decades research has started to consider alternate forms of leadership in different historical, geographical, social and cultural settings and the extensive literature available nowadays presents very different definitions of leadership. Klenke (2011: 7) underlines that the analysis of the context is fundamental in order to understand leadership forms, because "[i]t is context that shapes the process of leadership". In particular, while considering the context where female leadership emerges, culture and gender are inescapable elements establishing the possibilities, shaping the expressions and posing the boundaries of the forms in which female leadership can articulate (see the Introduction to this volume).

As described above, music professionalism in Uganda is mostly dominated by male artists, especially for what concerns instrument playing, while other performing arts constitute spaces where female performers have relevant roles and can even be soloists, in particular dancing, acting and, progressively since the 1960s, singing. Because the liberty, autonomy and reference role in solo singing were considered male prerogatives and related to an idea of leadership that was gendered as masculine, it was through a slow process, involving transformations of both gender notions and performative settings, that solo singing opened up to women. Nowadays, female solo singers are mostly active in the genres of popular music and gospel, but also in traditional ensembles, while in the domains of neo-traditional popular music and world music male vocalists prevail.

This is the context in which Ndagire's career and work emerges as outstanding. After the experience with the famous Afrigo Band,[10] Ndagire started her career as a solo singer and her choice of creating and performing in the genres of neo-traditional and world music was an uncommon one for a female artist. While popular music or gospel are recorded in studio with a music producer, neo-traditional and world music require live playing and recording. Thus, building a career in these latter genres demands much more effort and ability in creating networks and nurturing collaborations with numerous (male) instrumentalists. Working with musicians from the Kampala circle that she knew thanks to their co-participation in various bands, Ndagire explored local traditional repertoires, created neo-traditional songs for both the local and global audiences interested in world music and also a few pop songs. The decision to pursue a career in solo singing, not so common for female artists, and doing it in a musical field that is both more international and challenging than other possible musical paths seems to be recurrent in other examples of female musical leaders. As Nenić (2019) has shown for Serbian female folk instrumentalists, female musicians pushing against the constrictions and customs of the established performing arts system usually need to search for work and career possibil-

10 Founded in 1975, Afrigo is the oldest Ugandan band in the field of popular music. It was fundamental in the development of *kidandali* but also navigated several other genres, from jazz to *soukous*. Damascus Kafumbe (2013) dedicated an article to the development of Afrigo's musical style and adopted the band's self-identifying term *semadongo* ("master of many big musics") to describe it.

ities also outside their country, but can eventually turn this situation into an advantage for their artistic explorations and creations.

Through her music, social adaptability and resilience, Ndagire expanded her connections abroad and was able to tour Europe to record and perform and in 2011, she was granted the Exceptional Talent Visa for UK, where she is still based. Obtaining this visa – granted to international artists considered strategic for UK, based on their merits and achievements evaluated by the British Art Council – was a great acknowledgement for Ndagire on both the artistic and personal level. Indeed, such a visa is given to very few artists and African performers able to move to Europe using such document are very rare. While the development of a global market for world and traditional music has stimulated the emergence of new work opportunities in the Global North for performers from African countries, being able to out-migrate remains very difficult for them because of the several strict criteria to meet in order to obtain a visa for Europe (which is very telling of global power imbalance). Pascal Gaudette's (2013) analysis of what he calls the "*jembefolas*' path", i.e. the pattern of emigration and global mobility of *jembe* players, is useful for understanding the adversities met by many African artists active in world music. Gaudette illustrates the challenges for *jembe* players in building an international career, in particular at the crucial moment "when one must attempt to increase one's mobility beyond the confines of the African continent" (2013: 303). This "critical junction" in the *jembefolas*' path is normally faced through establishing and cultivating personal connections of friendship, family and marriage, which help (financially, burocratically, logistically) the musicians to obtain a visa and settle in Europe. Ndagire, on the contrary, was granted the Exceptional Talent Visa on the basis of her artistic achievements only, not through the help of family or friends, although it was similarly her self-confidence, perseverance and exceptional capacity of networking that guided her first steps abroad for tours and recording and it was this international recognition that allowed her to make the transnational jump from Uganda to UK.

Ndagire's work, international career and public persona as a solo female singer establish her as a leader in her field. However, her leadership role is not conjugated following the old masculine model, but it manifests through other values and characteristics, which I explore in the following section.

Musical Production and Performance in Uganda and around the World

Overall, Ndagire's musical production can be thought of as addressing three main types of audience: the non-expert listeners from the Global North interested in traditional music from Africa, the Ugandan audience loving contemporary renditions of traditional music and the international public following the new releases in the field of world music. Ndagire's flexibility in navigating various musical styles and adaptability in recording for different audiences are skills that she deployed in building her international career and emerge as characteristics of leadership.

In collaboration with other Ugandan professional performers, Ndagire has recorded four albums of traditional music and folk stories from different parts of Uganda with the

Swiss label Face Music.[11] These albums reflect Ndagire's competence in the repertoires and connected languages from Central, South-Western and Western Uganda, a flexibility that she acquired thanks to her family background and education.[12] Most tracks are interpretations showing mild transformations if compared with historical field recordings of the same songs or other pieces of the same repertoires.[13] An example of this kind of interpretation is her rendition of the Ganda traditional song 'Okufa' ('Death'), which is connected to storytelling and describes what is left behind when someone passes away.[14] These four albums are mainly directed to an international audience, which is most probably not specialized in music from Africa but interested in traditional music as not popularized in the form of world music.

Other among Ndagire's pieces are re-arrangements of traditional songs, where the lyrics and main tune remain unaltered but the instrumentation is enlarged with the addition of digital parts, the tempo accelerates, and different traditional songs or new songs in traditional style can be linked together. This kind of elaboration is usual in Ugandan traditional songs as performed by school and semi-professional ensembles, except for the digital instrumentation; however, this latter element is common in neo-traditional folk pieces recorded in studio and intended for local audiences.[15] An example of this type of music production is 'Katitira',[16] the traditional song from Western Uganda that I heard on the radio in 2012 and that I also recorded in elders' renditions and saw performed at school festivals. Through Ndagire's performance, this traditional song became popular

11 For two of these albums she collaborated with Pedson Kasume and the Ensemble Xpera – *Traditional Music from Uganda Vol. I East Africa* (2006) and *Traditional Music of the Bantu Women and Folktales of Baganda Women from Uganda Vol. I East Africa* (2006) – and for other two albums with Israel Kalungi and Lawrence Lubega (Ensemble Pearl) – *Traditional Music from Uganda Vol. II* (2010) and *Traditional Music of the Bantu Women of Uganda Vol. II* (2010).

12 Ndagire's father is from Buganda (Central Uganda), her mother from Nkore (South-Western Uganda) and she attended secondary school in Bunyoro (Western Uganda).

13 The transformations cover both the vocal and instrumental components of these renditions: Ndagire's voice emission is quite polished compared to the more "natural" vocal style of historical recordings and the chorus is sometimes harmonized with a second voice instead of being simply at the unison or with male and female voices at octave distance; the accompaniment is sometimes realized by an instrument other than the traditional one or seldom comprising secondary melodic lines besides the main one. In comparison to the contemporary practice of traditional repertoires in the school festival and by semi-professional groups, but also by Ndagire herself in tracks like 'Katitira' – which involve a wider elaboration of the traditional material in terms of adding second voices, blending different songs and enlarging the instrumental accompaniment – the transformations in Ndagire's interpretations in these records can be considered quite conservative.

14 An excerpt from this song can be listened to at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-4LWPoi1yk&ab_channel=FaceMusicSuisse (accessed 6 August 2022). 'Okufa' is from the album *Traditional Music of the Bantu Women and Folktales of Baganda Women from Uganda Vol. I*, http://www.face-music.ch/catalog/tradmusicug_album02.html (accessed 6 August 2022).

15 I analyzed similar processes of elaboration and digital arrangement of vocal repertoires from Western Uganda, as well as the composition of pieces in "neo-traditional" style, in Cimardi 2017.

16 Ndagire made different versions of this song, including the one considered here that is a medley with another Nyoro song, 'Nalyana': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5HbcmjmqqI (accessed 6 August 2022).

nationally, showing how arrangements of traditional material made in studio are among the forms of interpretation of traditional vocal music favored by Ugandan audiences.

'Train' is the piece giving the name to Ndagire's second album (2007), which includes elaborations of traditional songs (for instance 'Okunde nyowe', 'Nyamijumbi') as well as pop pieces (like 'Melody'). 'Train'[17] presents some features that might sound "traditional", but it is actually a new song. Here, lyrics in English (only very few words in Luganda are used) describe the role of the singer as a travelling train disseminating "songs and rhythms" of her people. The accompaniment is characterized by Ugandan traditional instruments, the xylophone and flute, besides bass and percussions created in studio; male vocalists, recalling South African *isicathamiya* singing style, interpose with the solo lines and a female chorus answers to the solo in the refrains. This kind of piece is addressed to an audience wider than the national one, a community of fans interested in world music. Following the pattern described by Thomas Turino (2010) for the dissemination and popularization of Zimbabwean *mbira* music in the world music market, in this kind of Ndagire's songs elements from traditional musics of the world are adapted and hybridized in order to be both familiar and exotic for the "cosmopolitan aesthetics" of listeners in the Global North.

Besides her flexibility and capacity of performing different musical styles to attract diverse audiences, Ndagire has built her career on skills of networking and cooperating across cultural and national borders. She gained these competences through to her collaboration with producers and performers in Uganda as well as in Europe, not following established music market connections, but thanks to her ability to bring together and cooperate with musicians of different backgrounds.

Her songs 'Katitira' and 'Train' are included in the four albums that she recorded as soloist and released with the Ugandan label CD Baby, which also distributed them.[18] For these projects, she collaborated with two Ugandan sound producers, Jude Mugerwa Lukwago and Kaz Kasozi, who are not particularly focused on world music productions, but have mostly worked in other music genres. Ndagire and their experiences met in a creative intersection between traditional repertoires and style and popular genres and their different approaches and backgrounds combined to create original pieces, most of which are directed to listeners of world music (Sarah Ndagire, interview, Kampala, 8 February 2012). Their productions have not involved major record companies in the world music market, but have been entirely Ugandan productions and the records' promotion has been based solely on Ndagire's and the producers' connections and networking.

Ndagire does not have a stable band, but collaborates with different musicians depending on the project on which she works. Although she has lived in UK for some years now, she records in Uganda because there she finds musicians able to understand what she wants as accompaniment in terms of style and rhythmic patterns, moving across local, regional and pan-African styles, like *kadodi*, *baakisimba*, Congolese

17 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuLuQBU3Qqw&list=OLAK5uy_kjGmVioHG_VEgRN_lgOa79q3JlmoQRM-o&index=3 (accessed 6 August 2022).

18 The four albums realized with Baby CD are: *Katitira* (2006), *Train* (2007), *A Taste of Uganda* (2012 – collecting pieces also released in other albums of hers) and *Sim Sim* (2015).

rumba, and *taarab*.[19] So, for instance, she can choose a good guitar player experienced in *rumba* among her former collaborators and have an easy, immediate and quality musical exchange for her accompaniment intended to be recorded. On the other hand, her numerous musical performances and tours in Europe and in the USA are usually accompanied by European and American musicians. It is easier to hire them and adapt pieces drawn from her varied musical production than to travel for tours with the many Ugandan musicians who took part in recording her albums, let aside the challenges that Ugandan citizens face when applying for visas to countries of the Global North. The European musicians with whom Ndagire tours are skilled professionals but usually not versatile in some styles or instruments that she chose for the recordings, so they adapt the accompaniment from the records (Sarah Ndagire, interview, online, 29 April 2021). This kind of adaptation is common in the field of world music for performers that do not have a stable band and allows artists like Ndagire to perform more flexibly for European and American audiences. On the other hand, not having a stable band to rely on and build a repertoire with also implies some disadvantages, like splitting the creative and recording process from the performance experience. Compared to developing the composed pieces with the original instrumentalists, this requires further working on arrangements and adaptations, as well as considerable energy for creating and establishing collaborations with musicians and time for rehearsing with them.

With energetic versatility, Ndagire moves across different genres and musical and cultural collaborations with Ugandan and European musicians to calibrate recordings and live performances for disparate audiences and contexts. Acting as the agent of herself, Ndagire shows deep awareness of the various approaches needed as well as the capacity to manage these varied collaborations in order to build an international career, anchored to audiences both in Uganda and in the Global North. Her musical entrepreneurship is transnational and transcultural and based on her deep understanding of different cultural contexts and audiences. According to these, she mobilizes and then cooperates with varied musical teams for both records and concerts, which she develops and plans within an ever-expanding network of cooperating institutions, venues and events.

19 *Kadodi* and *baakisimba* are Ugandan traditional music and dance genres, the first one of the Bamasaba/Bagishu people of the East and the second one of the Baganda people of the Center. Congolese *rumba* is the popular dance music derived from Cuban *son* and usually also (improperly) referred to as *soukous* (see fn. 8). *Taarab* is a music and dance genre derived from the confluence of elements from Eastern and North Africa, the Middle East and India that developed particularly in the Swahili regions of Tanzania and Kenya.

Figure 2: Sarah Ndagire performing at Glashouse in 2010. Used with permission of Sarah Ndagire.

Africanness, Cosmopolitanism and Womanhood

Ndagire's being across borders and genres is reflected in the transnationality of her life – living in UK and visiting Uganda almost every year to perform and record, hence her position can be considered cosmopolitan. However, rather than cosmopolitanism understood in the most common meaning of a hybrid identity in-between different countries and cultures,[20] hers can be considered a mediating approach between disparate realities. During one of our conversations (Sarah Ndagire, interview, online, 29 April 2021), I asked her if she didn't feel at least a bit European, after so many years living in the UK. She said just a bit, in the practical mentality that she acquired as her own agent in planning, organizing and promoting her work and in her accent in English that is perceived as British in Uganda. But mostly she feels African and this is the side of her identity that she wants to present through her music and her image:

> … in my shows I wear African costumes, because that's who I am. I might sing an English song, I might sing in English… but actually I like to come out as an African, because it's who I am, it's what I like. It's also the difference in the industry sometimes, it's what

20 Cosmopolitanism as a paradigm has been used in postcolonial studies to explore the cultural, social and identity patterns established by the diasporic mobility that started with the colonization and slave trade and then expanded during the 20th century through the increase of travel possibilities, migrations and the parallel decline of the nation-state as an entity comprising homogeneous populations (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013: 64–67). This concept, often used to describe hybrid identities, has been put into practice and explored in multiple acceptations also in ethnomusicology, for instance by Feld 2012 and Stokes 2007.

> whereby you can stand out. And that's what I know best… it improves even my confidence… I'll come on stage and I'm dressed like that and I feel like yeah, it makes me even, you know, feel better about the shows (Sarah Ndagire, interview, online, 29 April 2021).

For Ndagire, Africanness rather than Ugandanness is a strong element of her identity, especially living abroad, part of the African diaspora, and she likes and draws confidence from that. In our conversation, she also noted that many African musicians after a few years in Europe abandon African attires and music styles, while she wants to stay true to her roots and her clothes of African fabrics made by African tailors reflect this, in her performances both in Uganda and abroad. Furthermore, she is well aware that her origins, the way she dresses while performing as well as the type(s) of music(s) she does, make her "special" in a competitive music market that values and commodifies difference. She also considers this as an advantage in presenting her artistic image in the performances and tours she does in Europe and in North America, which mostly cover small towns and villages, where, in comparison to big cities, people are not used to African music and design (Sarah Ndagire, interview, online, 29 April 2021).

Ndagire's conscious and deliberate display of and emphasis on the African elements in her music, stage appearance and self-promotion recall issues of exoticism and essentialism in world music. Ethnomusicological scholarship has considerably criticized the exoticism marking sound, representation and stage persona of Black performers from the Global South within world music, especially as a phenomenon connected to colonial imaginaries of the racialized Other (Connell and Gibson 2003; Feld 2005; Stokes 2004; Turino 2010). Literature in ethnomusicology has also discussed "strategic essentialism",[21] i.e. the act by marginalized groups of subversively adopting some stereotypes about them for pragmatic purposes, as employed for instance by African performers (Whitmore 2013) and Romani musicians (Marković 2015) to tackle the powerful world music market. Other contributions, like Anna Rastas' and Elina Seye's (2015) article on Africanness in Finland, have underlined the preference of artists of African origin to present themselves as "African" instead of by nationality while promoting their concerts or workshops. Although this self-description can stimulate generalizations and evoke essentialism, it is a marketing strategy usually employed by performers in the Global North to be visible within a complex cultural offer; furthermore, some venues where they perform also offer them the opportunity to challenge stereotypes about "African culture". While some features in Ndagire's self-positioning could be understood as essentialist and exotic, her attitude does not seem to be of "strategic essentialism", as it is among world music artists displaying stereotyped characteristics on stage to fulfill the audience's expectations. Rather Ndagire's self-positioning and (re-)presentation is a profound re-appropriation of what had become a stereotype, the African woman, the African singer. This re-appropriation is not naive but the opposite, it is a confident claim of her African identity in its external manifestations like clothing as something she equally owns and to which she belongs. At the same time, she acknowledges the commercial advantages of her stance because she is aware of the economic and power

21 The expression "strategic essentialism" was coined in the 1980s by Indian scholar Gayatri Spivak.

structures of world economy and music, and she uses the visibility obtained through her music and image to present different perspectives on "African cultures" as well as to sensitize about topical issues, as I discuss below.

Although her music is also known in Uganda and she led workshops directed to handing down Ugandan traditional repertoires to new generations, Ndagire thinks of her work more in terms of "cultural diplomacy", directed to presenting Africa and Uganda to foreign audiences. Ndagire has indeed participated in several projects and initiatives on multiculturalism in Europe, both as a performer and as a speaker and, on these occasions, she has introduced aspects of African cultures and discussed stereotypes with the participants. Also, given her activism as a cultural mediator, cosmopolitanism understood as a form of hybrid identity does not describe Ndagire's work and positioning. It is an alternate definition of cosmopolitanism, which I draw from Ulf Hannerz's work (1996), that I think can better represent Ndagire successfully crossing national, cultural and musical borders. According to Hannerz (1996: 103):

> [c]osmopolitanism is, first of all, an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It entails an intellectual and esthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. […] cosmopolitanism can be a matter of competence, and competence of both a generalized and a more specialized kind. There is the aspect of a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting, and reflecting. And there is cultural competence in the stricter sense of the term, a built-up skill in maneuvering more or less expertly with a particular system of meanings.

By defining herself as an African woman who mediates music, stories and representations of her country to mainly foreign audiences, cosmopolitanism does not connote Ndagire's identity, but rather her understanding and workings through and across national and cultural differences. As argued by Martin Stokes (2007: 17), although cosmopolitanism is a "messy and compromised" term, it is still a concept useful to highlight "the self-conscious exercises in musical exchange and hybridization" as well as "to alert us to agencies and cultural energies, to music and an active and engaged means of world making, not simply a response to forces beyond our control". On the specifically musical level, cosmopolitanism characterizes Ndagire's blending genres and influences by exercising her personal musical preferences and conveying her message and stances rather than adhering to world music unwritten rules of hybridity.

Several Ndagire's messages in her music and presentations concern issues related to womanhood and express a female point of view in a way that attempts to connect Ugandan/African experiences with European/North American ones. Indeed, female experiences and life stories emerge in several of Ndagire's songs, like in 'Sim Sim' ('Sesame'),[22] whose lyrics and music were written by producer Kaz Kazosi, in dialogue with Ndagire. This piece, which can be located between pop and world music, gives voice to the hopes and commitment of a woman selling sesame balls to be able to pay school fees for her

22 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvQpB7RoHdc&list=OLAK5uy_mhlDZHo_Z2SjK8rUEIl6320Y9wZzsX-6U (accessed 6 August 2022). This song is also the title of Ndagire's last album.

young daughter. Although stylistically and thematically this song represents contemporary Uganda, Ndagire understands it as traditional:

> … it is kind of a traditional story because it's talking about a story that all of us that went to school in Uganda have an idea about. It's the simsim balls.[23] Everybody who went to school used to love simsim balls but now, as adults, we are thinking: we love the balls but they didn't make themselves, someone made them… So 'Sim Sim' is a story about the woman who makes us lovely things that we used to like very much. That is kind of traditional… Then, I had a kind of vision that I'm telling this story under a tree and I've got people, we are sitting under the tree and I'm telling them a story… and that's how I think it feels a bit traditional because it has that idea that… you're listening, you're under a tree… (Sarah Ndagire, interview, online, 29 April 2021).

As in 'Sim Sim', in other Ndagire's songs women are the protagonists with their challenges, joys and hardships: love and couple troubles, inheritance rights, HIV-AIDS vulnerability, girls' education. On stage, Ndagire not only presents the topics emerging from her songs to both international and local audiences, especially when they do not understand the lyrics' language, but she also sensitizes the public to these topics and advocates, nationally and internationally, for more equality and rights for Ugandan women and girls.

Some of these problems – like inheritance rights not contemplating women and education that was not considered necessary for girls – are related to old customs in Uganda, which Ndagire, various associations and the Government are trying to overcome.[24] As already mentioned presenting her understanding of a piece like 'Sim Sim', Ndagire's relation with the traditional elements of her culture is dynamic and flexible, especially in relation to fitting in traditional canons about womanhood:

> I am very traditional because I would do many things that are traditional – the positive things, not the things that oppress me. Many of these things are not written anywhere, like [appropriate] clothes… Even if you are educated, it doesn't [completely] change you. I kneel down for my elders,[25] it's natural, I don't even think about it… because that's the way I was brought up. So I still uphold my traditional values that I think are positive… if I am married (I am not married now), of course I would do things that a woman does, like take care of my husband. But I wouldn't take care of him in a very submissive way, which is really terrible (Sarah Ndagire, interview, Kampala, 8 February 2012).

Positioning herself in relation to traditionalist attitudes and contemporary challenges and opportunities of being a female artist, Ndagire negotiates her position as a contemporary Ugandan woman, balancing between customary practices and present possibil-

23 Usually, sweet and tasty sesame balls are sold by women in the proximity of schools for pupils to buy as affordable snacks.

24 Her engagement in assisting women and fragile members of the society is also marked by her volunteering and contribution to the association Gaita Kukibi Widow and Elderly Network, which provides support to widows, elders, orphans and vulnerable children.

25 In many Ugandan cultures, kneeling in front of elders is considered the proper behavior for children and women, as well as for younger men.

ities. She is a single parent and, thanks to her education and artistic career, she is not economically dependent on a masculine figure as it was typical in the past, but she can provide for her two children. At the same time, her fame and public image as a traditional and engaged singer living abroad are appreciated by her family, which is proud of her (Sarah Ndagire, interview, Kampala, 8 February 2012). A dynamic relationship with tradition, not only in the musical field but also in gender matters is another key aspect of Ndagire's leadership, which does not break customs but negotiates them, by adopting elements that are positive in the present and leaving aside those that are negative, especially for women.

Conclusions

Maintaining fruitful connections with the homeland in social as well as in artistic terms, her Ugandan roots transplanted in UK, Ndagire locates herself in the African diaspora, where she promotes the knowledge of African, Ugandan culture through her music and image. Her music cannot be clearly located in a single genre, since it embraces traditional repertoires, re-elaborations, new compositions in traditional style, world music as well as some pop pieces. Because of this eclecticism in her musical production, her audiences are both Ugandan and foreign. Thanks to her mobility across Europe and Africa, she has established international networks of collaborations for her records, live concerts, multicultural projects and tours with both Ugandan and European musicians. She has been skillfully weaving these connections through cooperations, participation in bands, cultural projects in Europe, international networking and by acting as manager and agent of herself. Characterized by transnationalism and transculturalism, her approach to music, collaborations and audiences constitutes a form of cosmopolitanism forging her agency and establishing her as a protagonist on the Ugandan and world music stage. This cosmopolitan sensibility, together with her dynamic and flexible approach in dealing with her heritage in music and in gender issues are key factors defining her leadership.

Gendered structures in Ugandan music professionalism, on the one hand, and essentialism and commodification in world music, on the other hand, usually relegate women and African performers in marginal or disempowered positions. At the intersection of these national and global settings is Ndagire, who has been able to cleverly build and maintain her position, career and autonomy by turning what are often considered as weaknesses into strengths. Thanks to the manifold qualities that define Ndagire as a leader, she enjoys a success that very few other female Ugandan performers have obtained in the field of (neo-)traditional and world music.

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