

pressions of directed thoughts and ideas to convey particular messages, or whether they are also agents capable of acting, facilitating and negotiating meaning. This becomes particularly important considering tendencies such as the so-called NGO-ization of art, whereby culturally or artistically oriented NGOs, cultural institutes, embassies and private foundations – usually from countries of the Global North – are important actors for the local discourses on artistic articulation, the topics they address as well as the meaning making associated with it (Labadi, 2020b; Stupples, 2011; Toukan, 2010).

Particularly when linked with development initiatives and agendas, artistic handicraft making and art objects in Uganda are frequently ethnically marked as being ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ art with associated expectations regarding their design. In addition, they are simultaneously co-opted by notions of poverty eradication and women empowerment, and their meanings and purposes submitted to the commodification of cultural expression – a process that led towards Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer critically referring to cultural production as “culture industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002 [1944]), and which has, after the adoption of the 2005 *UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* resulted in a plentitude of programs and initiatives that seek to “harvest” the economic potential of the creative industries for economic growth, especially in countries of the Global South (Abisuga Oyekunle and Sirayi, 2018; De Beukelaer, 2014; De Beukelaer, 2015; De Beukelaer, 2017; De Beukelaer and Vlassis, 2020; Jones et al., 2015; Oakley and O’Connor, 2015a; O’Connor, 2010 [2007], 2011).

This complex juncture of multiple discourses and collective actors that compete for their way of making sense of artistic handicraft production mark the departure point of my research and the situation of inquiry broadly defined. They have led towards the development of a set of research questions I will introduce in the following sub-chapter. They guided me through the messy process of meandering through and making sense of the research situation that empirically unfolded in front of me, and whose results I am presenting and discussing on the pages and throughout the chapters to come.

## 1.2 Research Question and Aim of Research

Based on my own observations of the use of artistic handicraft in (international) development work and by collective actors such as foreign and local NGOs, associations and socially-oriented artists, and the literature study on Art in International Development as well as on conceptualizations of African Art History(ies), I became interested in understanding how the associated meanings of artistic handicraft production are constructed, in which discourses, elements and human as well as non-human actors and actants partake in this construction. At the same time, I wanted

to know who is being excluded from this process, how those excluded understand and relate to the situation, and how scientific knowledge production relates to processes of inclusion and exclusion. The ultimate aim of my research is to contribute to the decolonization of knowledge production; both, in theory and in practice.

With this I return to the two angles of motivation that pursued me to conduct this research in the first place: from the academic perspective I aim to empirically reconstruct how theoretical knowledge production is shaped by particular discourses, actors, and actants who willingly or unknowingly favor particular positions and ideas over alternative, minoritized yet equally important perspectives. In doing so, I argue for the need of epistemic diversity in academic work, which acknowledges its disciplinary partiality in spite of its interdisciplinary approach. Furthermore, the case studies of my research demonstrate some of the mechanism currently at work in international development that often operate based on assumptions rather than on empirically grounded indicators.

From the praxeological perspective, my research serves as an example of how well-intended interventions can shape artistic practices and their associated meanings among the various actors. It further shows how those associated meanings travel and are, at times, reproduced even in places where other forms of meaning making prevail. Much as international development agendas shape and inform the artistically oriented development actors and practices, local perspectives and associated meaning making too frequently remain overseen and overheard. The praxeological aim of this study is to visibilize the dynamics that dominate in the research situation, which continue to neglect the situated roots of artistic practices and as such hinder the possibilities of epistemic and practical decolonization. It is a plea for critical reflectivity, which in the realm of development work by and large continues to focus on the *other* rather than on the self.

Having chosen for an inductive-abductive research approach and to work from a power sensitive perspective, I needed to remain open, flexible, reflective, and curious at all times. I thus developed the focus of my study over time and based on my earlier empirical findings, which I used to generate more questions. Those new questions and insights then directed the subsequent field stays and the subsequent in-depth analysis of gathered data.

What stayed throughout was the objective of reconstructing the linkages between nowadays endogenous and culturally associated forms of contemporary visual artistic articulation and socio-political alterations situated in the postcolonial realities of Uganda in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, the final research question that guided my inquiry reads:

How is contemporary artistic handicraft production situated in Ugandan civil society?

Alongside this main research question, I developed a set of sub-question that helped me to stay focused on a number of issues / aspects / elements of particular

importance in my research situation broadly conceived. Hence, these sub-questions, too, are the result of a lengthy iterative research process marked by the processuality of inductive data gathering and analysis to more focused and at times deductive triangulation, further interviewing and gathering of secondary data and succeeding analysis. They are as follows:

- Who are the collective actors and social worlds who construct and negotiate the meanings of artistic handicraft production and products in Ugandan civil society?
- Which discourses impact the meaning making processes of artistic handicraft production and products, and how?
- What are the articulation possibilities of artistic handicraft artists in Ugandan civil society?
- What is the agency of their products?

By addressing, discussing, and finding (partial) answers to the research questions, my aim was to critically examine the role of contemporary artefacts and the production processes thereof, which are often addressed representing traditionality or ethnicity (or both). By analyzing their agency and production processes I ask whether they should, rather, be also conceptualized as intimate and vital elements of living for the people who make them but also for those who use them in everyday living, in worship, in rituals and ceremony, as well as for aesthetic pleasure. By analyzing how so-called development actors transform artefacts into souvenir art, I aim to reconstruct the dichotomy that limits both; the consideration of the objects for their artistic, cultural and social value from a critical perspective, and the expansion of the debate on endogenous forms of civil society by considering the agency in doing civil society beyond pre-set boundaries of state and public realm through the consideration of the many spaces in-between, some of which include art making.

In light of the increase in and multiplicity of global crises, with this dissertation I re-emphasize on the importance of situated understandings of the meanings of creative articulation beyond the premises of growth and prosperity for all, beyond depoliticized notions of humanitarian aid through empowerment, and the (re-)primitivization of a people and their forms of visual articulations that limit both: the academic theoretical and epistemological knowledges of art in development and development practice that too frequently reproduces – albeit unknowingly and unwillingly – power imbalances and dependencies and hinders the actual development of homegrown solutions, interventions and, importantly, failures, and as such decolonization.