Preface

Although I did not know it then, the journey of this doctoral thesis research began in January 2016 with my first trip to Uganda. I was an M.A. student at Tel Aviv University then, studying Social Work with specialization in Crisis and Trauma Studies. In addition, only a couple months prior I had begun to work for a socio-cultural organization that considered art[1] to be a catalyst for social change. During this first working trip to Uganda, I met with socially engaged artists and artistic entrepreneurs who were united in their firm belief in the transformative powers of art. In their opinion, art could change societies, eradicate poverty, create identity, and (re-)connect the individuals, families as well as communities with their cultural heritage and nature. All actors involved seemed convinced of the rightness of their endeavors, and although at the time I was not entirely sure what exactly they meant by art bearing the potential to *eradicate poverty* or by art *bringing sustainable and positive social change*, it sounded like something worthwhile investing my energies into.

In the months and years to come I would travel to Uganda regularly, and while I went about my work duties, I began to wonder whether art could keep all those promises and premises that were made in development agendas, by project writers and funders, and by individuals who occupied the space of socially-engaged art. Moreover, I began to recognize a pattern which subordinated artistic activities with and of people recognized as handicraft artisans who were framed as marginalized to the ultimate aim of overcoming poverty and inequality. In other words: art, especially ethnically marked artistic handicraft products, was considered as a catalyst for economic growth, which, according to modernization theory that continues to

1 Throughout this book, the terminology surrounding art will remain what Adele Clarke refers to as a "site of intense controversy and competition for the power to define and use" (Clarke et al., 2018: 75). This book is thus also a testimony of my search for situated concepts of art which resonate with the lessons learned from postcolonial thinkers who emphasize on the importance of empirically grounding concepts in the subjective realities of local conditions. As such, the terms used remain located in their temporality and the socio-cultural and political situatedness of this research. They do not seek to be a reference beyond these conditional particularities.

linger around in the realms of international development, would lead towards social change eventually, but not primarily.

In the logic of modernization theory, then, is not surprising that the responsibilities to bring about change remains with those who already live with the consequences of socio-economic inequality. Those who live in poor and unequal conditions need to work themselves out of poverty (frequently with the initial financial support of foreign well-wishers and their charitable activities that aim to equip them with allegedly needed vocational skills) – almost as if being financially poor was their fault to begin with – and certainly as if staying poor is the consequence of not working hard enough.

It was this prevalence of a single dominant narrative of poverty reduction that made me begin to wonder about the roles and meanings of art forms in Ugandan societies beyond its commodification, particularly for and among those groups and individuals who are considered to be *on the margins* and in need of (economic) empowerment. I further observed that especially those art forms which are conceptualized as "local art" at times, and "traditional" or "indigenous art forms" in other moments, were indeed contested objects, as their symbolic and factual meanings were negotiated with controversy and well beyond the disciplines of art history and anthropology. My motivation to pursue this research thus emerged from two angles: from the scientific angle my wish was to understand and reconstruct the associated meanings of those art objects framed as ethnically marked handicrafts in their local particularities and situatedness. Who shapes the discourse on functions and meanings of artistic handicraft products, how and why were my leading questions that acknowledge that artistic articulation is always political as well. As such, a critical study that considers power imbalances in the negotiation of meaning of (cultural) art objects and practices in the postcolonial realities not only contributes to the ever-growing body of academic knowledge. It also makes a case for the much-needed epistemic diversity and interdisciplinarity of empirical research.

From the practical angle, I was astounded by the lack of critical (self-)reflectivity and contextual work evaluation among development actors involved, who operated in the firm philanthropic belief of doing good. However, many did not interrogate the assumed sustainability of their projects, nor the conceptual assumptions about development, art, and society which underpin their work. In my role as project manager of the previously mentioned socio-cultural organization, I was part of this very system. And the more I questioned, the more I realized how knowledge production in development work – and, in consequence, decision making, authorship and, importantly, financial power – continues to remain with people like me: people from the Global North, who "aid" and "support" development in the Global South.

From a praxeological perspective my research deconstructs the epistemic assumptions that dwell on art in development paradigms and discourses. It further demonstrates how grounding them in the local conditions of artistic production

and meaning making counters the dangers of co-opting art through romanticized, paternalistic, or naïve clichés of rural African life and democratization through economic development, which ultimately hinder homegrown and situated development, and position handicraft artists and their art objects on the margins and in need of philanthropic intervention.

Throughout the research process of this Ph.D. project, I would come to understand that the meaning of those artefacts and their agency is strongly linked to cultural hegemony, questions of power, and subaltern articulation in contemporary Ugandan realities. Initially, though, I had no concept that could facilitate the linkages and interconnectedness between actors, actants, and discourses I encountered and understood to be of significance. However, as I proceeded, my attention was drawn to the civil society arena in which all those actors and actants meet, and to the discursive constructions of those who are referred to as the *communities* and *individuals in need*; the *master craftspeople* and *custodians of culture* spoken for rather than spoken to, and to their artistic products. This, I realized, was similar to the approach taken by Shelly Errington in *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and other Tales of Progress*. She writes:

> It was not the invention of primitive art nor its triumph in the Metropolitan that gripped my attention […], but what was currently happening, literally and symbolically, to the artifacts and lives of people who occupied the space of the "unmodern", the space of the "primitive", the "backward", the economically and symbolically peripheral, in the nation-state imaginaries that replaced the colonial ones. (Errington, 1998: xvii)

This book is the result of my Ph.D. research. In taking a postcolonial approach to qualitative inquiry, I acknowledge that my understandings of the research situation at hand is inevitably partial. Conducting research from a postcolonial perspective further means taking power relations at all stages of the research process specifically into account: empirically, theoretically, and ethically. First, this includes power relations between and within the actors in my research. Second, it includes hegemonic imbalances in knowledge production which I understand as a result of colonization and the application of western, meaning heteronormative, male, Anglo-European, epistemologies in inquiry that disregard other ways of knowing. Third, it addresses power asymmetries between myself, the foreign female, researcher, Ugandan colleagues from urban Kampala, important gatekeepers whom I depended on during the empirical part of my research, and the many people I met and spoke with, particularly those with whom I could communicate through language translation only. Despite constant reflection, as an individual I cannot overcome these structural asymmetries. But I can avoid reproduction. Therefore, the aim of this research is not to speak for other people on their (assumed) behalf, but to make a case for the

much-needed critical assessment of how development actors engage with a people and their material and immaterial heritage.