Chapter 2: Art, History, and Terminology

2.1 Introduction
Artistic Articulation in Uganda

The following chapter takes the empirical situation as the departure point for the theoretical discussion. After briefly introducing the current discourse on the meanings of art and craft in Uganda (chapter 2.1), the first part of the chapter begins with the elaboration on the establishment of the art school at Makerere College by Margaret Trowell (chapter 2.2), which marks the starting point of formal – and as such westernized – art education in Uganda (Kyeyune, 2003). The second part then emphasizes the nexus of artistic articulation, politics and (civil) society in Uganda (chapter 2.3). Here, I zoom out of the Ugandan context and discuss the Cultural Turn in international development and its consequences for the funding, framing and perception of art, especially in countries of the Global South. In the concluding part of this chapter (chapter 2.4), I zoom in again to the Ugandan particularities and discuss the implications of the literature discussion for this research project. I discuss this notion against the backdrop of Margaret Trowell's colonial heritage of reading and framing of art in Uganda. In keeping a critical perspective, I close the chapter by leaving the dominant strands of meaning making of artistic handicraft products. Instead, I turn towards the synthesis of art objects and social practices with civil society (Wendl, 2012), thereby marking the transition to chapter three.

The Question of the Meanings of 'Art'

Jointly with fellow artists and scholars from the Africa Cluster of the Another Roadmap School (ARAC), Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa and colleagues were unable to identify a "single indigenous African language apart from Arabic that contains any words which can be used to translate the English word 'art'" (Wolukau-Wanambwa, 2019b: 32). The word *art* and the concept of what art entails, they conclude, does not have a pre-colonial history in most African contexts. In their view this, however, does not mean that artistic expressions did not occur. Rather, its conceptualizations

and associated meaning making differed so much from the theoretical assumptions about art in European language, that using foreign terms remains an ill-match.

In a similar tone, Suzanne Preston Blier (2018) writes about how "core design features of African forms" (87) have a longstanding history of being imbued with larger sociopolitical features. African forms, whereby Preston Blier refers to clothing, jewelry, furniture, housing, or religious paraphernalia, thus "merge a range of values" (ibid). Approaching African art from the design components within the "larger African milieu", she continues, enables researchers, curators, artists and connoisseurs to see African art in the larger discourse, as a site of "ongoing individual and societal engagement, a liminal site of empowerment and play that addresses an array of political, moral, and other considerations" (Preston Blier, 2018: 89).

While their observations are similar, the conclusions Preston Blier and Wolukau-Wanambwa draw from their findings differ. Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa, alongside colleagues from the "Africa Cluster of the Another Roadmap School" emphasize that the terms art, art education and art history themselves cannot be denied their epistemological and conceptual groundings in European thought. The members of Another Roadmap School self-describe their work as a decolonial-project, which seeks to "de-naturalise the imposed exogenous vocabularies that are used to frame and hence to control creative expressions and their respective pedagogies in certain post-independence contexts, so as to create spaces where structural (i.e. epistemological) transformations might take place" (ibid, 2019b: 32; Wolukau-Wanambwa and Muwanguzi, 2015). They propose to cease the use of the word art, and opt to use the term "symbolic creative expression" instead (Wolukau-Wanambwa, 2019b: 32).

Unlike this approach taken from Wolukau-Wanambwa and colleagues, Preston Blier dwells on the multiple meanings of words that describe art and design to point towards the importance of considering related terms and concepts for the analysis of artefacts and their designs. She exemplifies this by referring to the Yoruba language, and shows how African languages possess an array of words that refer to aesthetic and design elements rather than to pictorial indications.

> [T]he term ọnà not only means 'design', 'pattern', 'shape', and 'art', but is also used to reference artistic embellishment, ornamentation, and beauty (Adepegba 1991). The same term, ọnà, is also found in the term for 'artist', ọlọ́nà, as well as for specific groups of the later— leather workers and embroiderers among these. The Yoruba have a further array of other terms that convey notions of design. One such term to mean design is ìrò, 'imagination' […]. Another design- linked term is ìmò, 'knowing'— specifically, that which one experiences firsthand, with one's own eyes. A related word, ìtumò (ìtú ìmò), evokes the unwrapping of (encoded) knowledge. (Preston Blier, 2018: 91)

Here, design is related to imagination and to forms of knowing, which are embedded into the roots of the words used to describe design. The Kiswahili word for design – *kubuni* – also refers to improvisation and invention, which, according to Preston Blier further emphasizes the linkages to the importance of imagination in design work (ibid). Knowledge about incorporated design patterns in pre-colonial African societies was reserved for key members of society, and at times continue to be accessible to cultural leaders and community elders only even today.

In Uganda, dominant concepts of art and formal art education are closely tied to colonial education; by and large through the work of Margaret Trowell, who was a British art educator, missionary, and founder of the first formal art school in tertiary education in East Africa. If the language of art, art education and art history are closely connected to the colonial era, then, consequently, power-sensitive must also consider the hegemonial power of language. Achille Mbembe (2021) argues for the need to *rethink Africa*, by which he means "to write the world from Africa or to write Africa into contemporary social theory" (28). For with decolonization, he argues, it became necessary to "detach oneself from the mental frames, aesthetic discourses, and representations that the West had used to put a stranglehold on the idea of future" (ibid: 44). To do so, Mbembe says, it is necessary to "rehabilitate endogenous forms of language and knowledge" (ibid: 44).

Thus, the word *art,* particularly in a postcolonial situation of inquiry, remains highly contested and at times problematic. And yet, Kerstin Pinther (2022) warns to reduce artefacts to mere evidence of colonial injustices. A reflective and contemporarily relevant history of art in Africa should, according to Pinther, "aim to take the historical and conceptual context of artistic production as a starting point" (32, my translation), which includes the application of adequate art-historical vocabulary. This cannot occur without critically assessing and replacing the coloniality of the artefacts' original assumptions, but also not without considering them

> as created works, as art, as archive and memory, as example of locally situated aesthetics and cultural practices and to be thought through all of their intrinsic complexities and mobilities and hence to be conceptualized through the sum of their potential meanings." (Pinther, 2022: 32, my translation)

But what makes art-historical vocabulary adequate? – Throughout the trajectory of this dissertational research, I meandered around the labyrinth of terms, seeking to find the most adequate terminology that would be precise enough to convey the complex and multilayered meanings of the objects I was discussing in a relatable way. From using the term *art,* I shifted towards *visual culture* and, succeeding, to *material culture*. While both terms, material- and visual culture, and the conceptualizations of creative and artistic expression they refer to, in and by themselves criticize the more rigid boundaries of the always contested concept art (Evans, 2010), they re-

mained unable to capture the aesthetic language, social, and political meanings of the handicraft objects that were becoming the focus of my research.

Initially I had been reluctant to use the term *craft* or *handicraft* with the aim of not reproducing a hierarchy between and among different forms of artistic expression – namely those art objects indigenous to what today is known as Uganda and other art objects that were not (Kyeyune, 2003). Eventually, and as a consequence of the inductive-abductive design of my research, I began to use the vocabulary that the people who participated in my research used – only to find that there was no coherence either. Rather, it appeared that the terminology and hence concepts applied depended heavily on the situated conditions in which they were used as well as on how (and whether at all) people identified with the art objects. During the interviews, the round-table discussions and in ethnographic conversations, *art* sometimes included so-called indigenous forms of creative visual cultural expression. At other times it included the performing arts, whereby the performative was convivial to the visual and both ephemeral rather than permanent.

The literature on art in Uganda suggests that, indeed, boundaries between the artforms are often artificial in regional contexts, particularly when referring to local art forms also referred to as indigenous (e.g., Kakande, 2006; Kasfir and Förster, 2013; Kyeyune, 2003; Littlefield Kasfir, 1999; Pinther, 2022). As described above, experts, scholars, and practitioners describe *art* simultaneously as colonial heritage and as endogenous. Some emphasize the importance to include handicrafts and spiritual practices as well as everyday objects into the definition of *art* (e.g., Kasozi, 2019; Kekimuri, 2019; Nakazibwe, 2005; Trowell, 1937, 1957), while others, particularly in recent years and from a broader perspective with regard to regionality, subsume all forms of creative expression under the terms creative and/or cultural industries (e.g., De Beukelaer, 2017; Jones et al., 2015; Oakley and O'Connor, 2015a).

In their decolonization project, Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa and colleagues of the "Another Roadmap School" agreed to aim to use the term "symbolic creative expression" (Wolukau-Wanambwa, 2019b: 32) instead of the word *art* as it is, they argue, more inclusive to many forms of artistic articulation. Because of this inclusiveness, however, at times it is too broad to grasp specific contents of importance for the reconstruction and analysis of the situation of inquiry. Therefore, throughout this book, I will use the terms used by the protagonists of my research, especially when terms in the empirical situation of inquiry indicate positionalities, respond to discourses, or assign roles to groups and individuals. I will do as such both in the theoretical and empirical chapters. Wherever needed, I will critically discuss those terms to not reproduce (colonial) injustices to artistic work. For it is not by accident that the creators of artistic handicraft products in the situation of inquiry are referred to as *producers, business people, professionals, craftspeople, master craftspeople,* or even as *custodians of culture,* but hardly ever as *artists,* unless in theoretical academic debates (see also chapter 6 and 8).