


Reconfiguring Acholi cultural dance: a visual arts mediation of Bwola dance in a performative space of Kampala city

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The art exhibition “Reconfiguring Acholi Cultural Dance: A Visual Arts Mediation of Bwola Dance in a Performative Space of Kampala City” (October 2022) by Stephen Gwoktcho was held at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. It was accompanied by dramatised poetry and a Bwola cultural dance performance. Gwoktcho et al.’s offering was part of the activities for the participants of the second African Urbanities Summer Institute project. The inaugural part of the project was held at the University of Pretoria in 2021 in Pretoria, South Africa, as part of the Andrew W. Mellon-funded project, “Entanglements, Mobility and Improvisation: Culture and the Arts in Contemporary African Urbanism and its Hinterlands.”

The location of the event, the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Art (MTSIFA), is significant to the history of Makerere University. In 1922, Makerere University was founded as a technical school at the site now occupied by MTSIFA, which also currently hosts the Institute of Heritage Conservation and Restoration. On behalf of the dean, Dr Amanda Tumusiime and the entire college management, guests were welcomed by Professor George Kyeyune, an artist and lecturer at Makerere University. During his welcome speech, Professor Kyeyune commended the event’s organiser, Stephen Gwoktcho, a visual artist, PhD candidate at Makerere University and a fellow at the African Urbanities Institute, for his efforts, energy and dedication. Professor Kyeyune’s remarks could not have been more accurate as the event showcased the richness and vibrancy of contemporary Ugandan art culture, serving as a captivating introduction to the arts and culture of the “pearl of the continent,” as Uganda is affectionately known.

Earlier, I referred to the event as an offering, because it presented a range of young and established local artistic talents. The first performance by third-year students from the university’s Department of Literature was inspired by the work of another African Urbanities fellow, Sophie Lakot, a poet and PhD student, whose research engages with the ways in which Ugandan poets conceptualise urbanity in their poetry. Participants were also treated to poetry performances

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by renowned local poets Hawa Nnanjobe Kimbugwe, Kagaayi Ngobi and the acclaimed poet and scholar, Professor Susan Kiguli, who is also part of the African Urbanities Institute.

The main performance was by the Watmon Dance Group, who performed the Bwola cultural dance originating from the Acholi group found in both Uganda and South Sudan in East Africa. As the Bwola dancers took to the stage and started performing, I took note of similarities between the dance and sound of the Bwola performance and the Morakana, a traditional dance performance of the Batswana of Southern Africa.

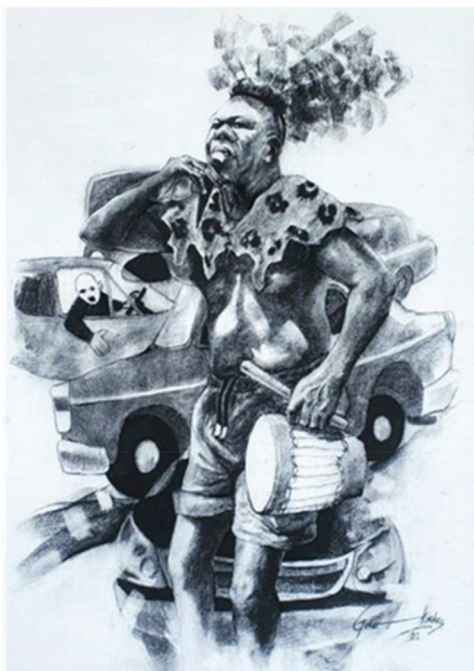
The curation of the event and artworks which formed part of Gwoktcho's exhibition were largely influenced by Gwoktcho's research into Bwola cultural performances for his PhD thesis. According to Gwoktcho, the art exhibition emerged out of the belief that cultural performances like Bwola dance can transform as they travel from rural to urban spaces and can mitigate employment challenges as more people in Africa embrace urbanisation (Collier 2016). His artworks powerfully capture continuities in dance practices as they migrate to new geographical and socio-cultural spaces, but also in how they acquire new meanings and social and political significance. In contemporary Kampala, Gwoktcho suggests, Bwola dance comes to reflect the unrelenting strife for survival of the urban hustler who negotiates and pushes against violent marginalisation resulting from neoliberal logics and practices of governmentality. Central to this hustling are the multiple crossings of cultural boundaries, the "borrowing and lending" as Gwoktcho calls it, the intermixing of disparate Ugandan cultural dance traditions such as the Acholi Bwola dance and the Buganda Bakisimba, in order to survive in a new environment. In his own words, his "study straddled two axes of investigations:" Firstly, it set out "to interrogate the emergence of a liberal rural and urban creative space by studying the subtle nuances that exist between the traditional Bwola dance and the variety being performed in Kampala city." Secondly, it sought "to examine the reconfiguration of Bwola dance and how it is negotiating the performative space and the socio-political hierarchy in Kampala City" (Gwoktcho 2022). Witnessing Gwoktcho embracing and centring his work in Bwola cultural performances is inspirational to me as a young scholar. It reminds me of Malidoma Patrice Somé's observation in his well-known study, *Of Water and the Spirit: Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (1995, 10), that "As long as we are not ourselves, we will try to be what other people are." Gwoktcho's work celebrates his Acholi culture and is grounded in the lived experience of Bwola dance performers in Kampala.

Gwoktcho notes that "although Bwola dance traverses the village and the city, it's traditional performance [in celebrating, commemorating, marrying, memorialising and mourning] among others is largely unchanged" (Gwoktcho 2022). This suggests that Bwola dance can now be found in both the rural and urban spaces, and its intangible social, communal and spiritual significance remains at its core. As a young African curator and conservator in the cultural heritage sector, I was finally witnessing a moment I had been searching for since I heard the word decolonisation in academia. For me, Gwoktcho's exhibition takes a step further into efforts of decolonising academia in African institutions of higher

learning. As James Ogude highlights, “epistemic reconstitution is impossible without taking recourse to banished or repressed knowledges of indigenous and formerly colonized communities” (2024, 9). Drawing on Ogude, I read Bwola dance not just as an example of “indigenous formations” that were subjected to “epistemic violence” (9). In Gwoktcho’s work, it functions as “a methodology and pedagogy of conversation” (9), as a transformative embodied cultural praxis that breaks down spatial and epistemological boundaries. By embracing and centring his work in Bwola cultural performances, Gwoktcho was able to share with us a sacred moment of the Acholi culture. Bwola cultural dance was traditionally performed and experienced in a rural setting during rituals associated with the presence of the Acholi King. Through his research and art, Gwoktcho brings Acholi cultural practices not only into the urban but also into the academic space. For the first time, this demonstrated to me that decolonisation can be tangible and measured.

Three artworks (*The Horn Blower*, *The Journey Southward* and *Getting Ready*) in the exhibition particularly stood out for me and inspired me to think deeper about what it means to be an African in an urban space.

In *The Horn Blower*, Gwoktcho employs a self-portrait as both subject and symbol, creating a layered visual impression of the horn as a versatile artefact of communication within Acholi communities. Through his stylised use of light and dark contrasts, textured surfaces and rhythmic strokes, Gwoktcho translates the sonority of the horn into visual form, allowing the drawing itself to “sound” with echoes of communal life. The work foregrounds the horn not merely as a musical instrument but as a cultural medium – historically used for summoning gatherings, marking rites of passage and signalling moments of crisis or celebration in rural Acholi life. By adopting a poetic approach, Gwoktcho draws parallels between the rural habits and rituals of horn blowing and the contemporary soundscape of Kampala, where honking cars have become a dominant form of urban communication. This juxtaposition situates horn blowing as both continuity and adaptation: a practice that transforms in its form but persists in its essence as a shared social language. As he observes, “Horn blowing and honking as a language in this context is envisaged as a shared habit and ritual. This particular creation supports the argument that [the] migration of people and ideas [...] colonize[s] new territories and minds, respectively. The representation of a culture may change its form with the environment, but its core value is sustained” (Gwoktcho 2022). In this way, *The Horn Blower* exemplifies how Gwoktcho uses portraiture as a reflexive and performative space. The work not only captures his own embodied engagement with cultural heritage but also demonstrates the dynamism of Acholi traditions in navigating new environments. The horn, therefore, becomes both a literal and metaphorical vehicle of migration – resonating across temporal and spatial divides, sustaining cultural memory while adapting to modern contexts.



The Horn Blower charcoal on canvas. 100 X 80 cm. 2022.

In *the Journey Southward*, Gwoktcho explores the notion of migration. He observes that,

migration has been part of cultural dance performances from the precolonial era to this day. Before dance groups like Watmon came to establish their homes in Kampala, dance troupes journeyed from the hinterlands to perform, especially in Kampala and other cities where the Government hosted its official or state functions. (Gwoktcho)

For *the Journey Southward*, Gwoktcho draws inspiration from Tony Park's (2017) photograph, *Walking the Dunes*, which depicts Himba women on the banks of the Kunene River. The photographer reflects on the community's life, survival skills, beliefs and how the Himba of Northern Namibia are coping in a modern world. Once again, this inspiration was close to home for me as the Himba are from Namibia, a neighbouring country to South Africa.



The Journey Southward Acrylic on canvas, 110 x 86 cm, 2022.

In *Getting Ready*, Gwotcho not only explores the migration of Ugandans from rural areas to urban spaces but also visually reconfigures the embodied aesthetics of Bwola dance within the medium of painting. His deliberate use of rhythmic brushstrokes, layered textures and recurring circular motifs mirrors the repetitive drumming patterns, rotational movements and collective synchrony characteristic of Bwola performance. This interplay of visual rhythm and cultural memory situates the canvas as both a record of social transformation and a performative space in its own right. According to Gwotcho, this migration “is attributed to the imagination of a place where limitless opportunities [are] present for self-fulfilment through interaction, employment and or creating employability by vending one’s talent.” The transposition of Bwola from its rural Acholi context into Kampala’s urban environment becomes both a survival strategy and an act of cultural resilience, rendered material through Gwotcho’s technique. As Wole Soyinka notes in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Soyinka 2019, 4), “Art is an integral part of the social environment.” Gwotcho’s wide-ranging themes and experimental methods exemplify this truth, showing how painting like dance functions as a site of negotiation where memory, migration and cultural continuity converge. Gwotcho wide-ranging themes and artistic styles exemplify how art is integral to our social environment as Africans.



Getting Ready oil on canvas. 60 x 90 cm. 2022.

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Notes on contributor

Mabafokeng Hoeane is a curator, conservator and cultural heritage researcher specialising in African cultural material. She holds an MA in Tangible Heritage Conservation and is currently pursuing a PhD in Visual Cultural Studies at the University of Pretoria, focusing on Zulu ceremonial beadwork and Izidwaba zenkomo, black pleated skirts worn by Zulu women during traditional rituals and ceremonies. She is a Mellon Fellow with the African Urbanities Institute.

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