

Paper Beads on the Move

Mobilizing Trajectories and Subjectivities to Shape Contemporary Art In Uganda

Dorah Kasozi

Beads cannot simply be viewed as nonrepresentational, decorative entities. In Uganda, the art of paper bead[ing] is empowering women economically while mobilizing new trajectories that reflect the intersecting and shifting landscapes of public space and private space to shape inquiry into gender relationships, art, art-making, and politics.

Yet paper beads tend to be placed in the broader category of craft, a socially constructed category that views beads as mere decorative objects used for “ornamentation on clothing and household objects” (Labelle 2005: 12), “deemed to be of less value and therefore ignored” (Aronson 1991: 551), and as a result assigned a low aesthetic status. In Uganda, the missionary, artist, and art instructor Margaret Katherine Trowell (1947)¹ similarly held that there was no evidence of representational art, regarding beadwork in East Africa instead as nonrepresentational art. She noted that “pattern-work chiefly of geometric form, [is] found worked out in almost every type of material” (Trowell 1947: 2) and argued that, although the craftspeople behind this art did not work in professional guilds, they were skilled, respected among their communities, and enjoyed privileges because they produced a kind of decorative art that was highly revered by local communities, applied on domestic utensils, and used as personal adornment, including the “masses of beads and metal worn on the neck, arms, and legs, show[ing] a tremendous appreciation of decorative values” (Trowell 1947: 2–3). These views persisted mainly because the power undergirding them was wielded within the epistemic modes of Western intellectual thought (Arowosegbe 2014) that favor a hierarchical classification of arts and crafts.

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However, by the late 1960s and 1970s the hierarchies of art and decorative crafts and their links to women’s exclusion from the art scene came under scrutiny. Western scholarship, particularly, started to take an interest in African art and crafts (Kellman 1996), yet at the expense of inquiry into aspects of aesthetic content, use, skill, material, and techniques. The George W. Harley Collection at the Peabody Museum in Cambridge, MA (Reswick 1972), the Culture and Decorative Arts of Africa collection in the Indianapolis Museum of Art (Ross 1976), the *African Beadwork: Traditional Symbols* exhibition at the Tambaran Gallery, New York (Reif 1991), all signaled the arrival of African beadwork into research, museums, and exhibitions. Although, due to the new scholarly attention to what had been called African folk art, beads began to figure in art exhibitions and research that focused on the beads’ aesthetic and technological quality, this general shift in African art scholarship has not extended to reviewing bead work as a means to change women’s sense of self and allow them to refigure their identities from within the constructions of public and private spheres. Yet as beads circulate, they combine and recombine through form, material, and processes, while exposing multiple subjectivities that undermine socially predetermined constructions to transform beads into “objects of inquiry with a life of their own” (Kakande and Kasozi 2016).

In this article, I examine the ways in which paper beads and the process of beading, implicated as symbolic conventions of the private, become the very means deployed by women to negotiate private and public spaces while overwriting normative conventions of these spaces to shape creative thinking in research and art. I engaged in ethnographic research in Kireka Banda, Zone B,² a suburb of Kampala, where I found women producing paper beads in their home spaces and selling their beadwork in the city. Using in-depth interviews and field observation, I reexamined paper bead(ing) processes and methods, materials and tools, and the sequence whereby women deployed their paper beads to tap into their artistic and cultural sensibilities to modify beads’ traditional definitions (Sciama and Eicher 1998) while producing meaning that points to the gap between beads as detached entities to beads

1 Some of the women who are part of Gateja Sanaa's Kwetu Afrika Women's Association in Lubowa, Kampala-Uganda. They are varnishing paper beads hanging on a wire string in an open space at Gateja's home compound.
Photo: Ruth Simbao



as research entities. This meaning illuminates notions of spatial mobility, where each paper bead-making stage becomes a means to question the boundaries of private and public spaces, and art-making addresses the links paper beads make in popular culture, media, and art. Furthermore, I trace these new connections in artworks by Gateja Sanaa that implicate paper beads in broader debates on gender, power, identity, and Ugandan politics to expand the margins of beads as craft, contemporary art, and research. This article deploys a multidisciplinary theoretical framework borrowing lenses from critical theory (Kopytoff 1986) and feminist and social theories of art (Gell 1998) to draw linkages that reposition beads as art and research through close reading, content analysis, and cross referencing.

PAPER BEAD(ING) IN UGANDA

Information on the history of paper beads is rather scanty. European accounts of the early twentieth century (Logan 2001, Lome 2016) suggest that paper beads were made from wallpaper offcuts that women rolled to make jewelry and curtain blinds. Classified among needlework parlor crafts, beadwork was encouraged to present an image of appropriately feminine behavior (Lome 2016). Women produced beads as a pastime, firmly fixed in the private sphere (Logan 2001), where the finished beaded products were a demonstration of talent to be displayed and used in the home. By 1917 the *Modern Priscilla*,³ a women's magazine, had started to print tutorials on making paper beads.

Available evidence suggests that Sanaa Gateja introduced paper beads to Uganda in 1990. Gateja is a contemporary Ugandan artist born in 1950 in Kisoro, western Uganda. His life is a journey itself, marked by travels across Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya, Japan, Italy, and London. These travels, he says, exposed him to diverse cultures, presenting learning opportunities that strengthened his resolve to explore African experiences and materials.

Gateja's paper bead(ing) journey, however, did not start in Uganda, although he worked professionally as an Assistant Crafts Officer at the Ministry of Culture and Community development in the 1970s. He first encountered beads in Mombasa, Kenya, where he operated Sanaa Gallery and worked as an artist and jeweler. In 1982, he moved to Italy, where he trained in interior design at

the Internazionale dell'Arte in Florence, and in 1983 he relocated to London and joined the John Cass College of Art (now the London College of Art and Design), where he received a City and Guilds diploma in gold- and silver-smithing in 1985. In London he also pursued an apprenticeship with an eminent Japanese jeweler, Tomazo Yashimoto.

While in London, Gateja⁴ acquired a large quantity of paper products that he kept at his apartment, including paper board cores from tissue paper, newsprint, magazine adverts, invitation brochures, and cards. He experimented with them and recycled them into materials for producing different forms of art: jewelry, tapestries and wall decorations, and wearable art.⁵ He experimented with collages, as well as assorted paper forms and shapes. He cut and refashioned the paperboard cores into interesting triangular shapes, which he discussed with his instructor at the London College of Art and Design. It was during one of these discussions that his instructor introduced Gateja to paper beads, which she said were made in a manner similar to the Egyptian technology of hammering and rolling iron to make tubes.⁶ Gateja took the beads back to his apartment and assessed them for similarities and differences with the forms he had built from the paperboard cores. He also researched the origins of paper beads and in the process learned that the beads emerged as a home craft during the Victorian era (1837–1901) and experienced a renaissance during World War II due to scarcity of materials. As Gateja explains, "I learnt that when people do not have anything, they will use anything around them to make adornments, which is very much like an African situation."⁷

Against this backdrop, when Gateja returned to Uganda in 1989, he popularized paper beads as prime materials for his art-making by taking them through experimental recycling processes. He currently operates an art studio, Kwetu Afrika Women's Association, in Lubowa, Kampala, and works with women who produce paper beads (Figs. 1–2) that he buys back in bulk. Through this paper bead-making project, Gateja has created opportunities for economic empowerment for many women, like Aidah Mukisa.⁸



2 Unpainted paper beads stored in a plastic sack at Gateja Sanaa's compound in Lubowa-Kampala, Uganda where the finishing stages take place. Gateja commissions different women to make the beads. He distributes the cut paper strips to different women, who roll the beads from their homes and later return them to him for payment. Photo: Ruth Simbao

PAPER BEAD(ING) ON THE MOVE: SHIFTS IN PRIVATE/PUBLIC SPACES

The context of mobility discussed here considers the ways in which women's paper bead(ing) practices mobilize new meaning. Where African art scholarship has tended to ignore women's creative sensibilities (Labelle 2005), in this section I examine women's paper bead(ing) processes, methods, materials, and spaces, focusing on the sequence through which women deploy their paper beads as a means of power and influence to negotiate and refigure public space, which is gendered as male, and private space, gendered as female, to demand new representation within the constructs that define women and beadwork. By virtue of its rootedness in the narrative of the everyday, women's beadwork taps into and opens up academic inquiry about daily living and surrounding objects (Kellman 1996: 37). Paper bead(ing) becomes critical in generating a way for women as creative actors and producers to elaborate and extend knowledge in which multiple narratives about the private and public can coexist to inform scholarly understandings of cultural dynamics. This knowledge exposes the multiple subjectivities of paper beads. In this context, paper beads are powerfully reconstructed as a means to comment on and critique practices that women might agree or disagree with, giving them the opportunity to

propose their own alternatives. It is within this context that paper beads illuminate notions of mobility to make new connections that shape scholarly debates on art, research, and gendered spaces.

Women's mobility in Uganda has been very complicated since the advent of the colonial period in 1900, which brought with it what was known as the "hut tax" regime. This tax obligation increased the tax burden on polygamous families, especially those that owned several homes. Many men, as heads of households, returned to monogamy to reduce their tax burden. While some women found themselves without "husbands" as a result (Tumusiime 2017: 58–68), others moved into the city—*ekibuga* Kampala.⁹ Kampala is the capital city of Uganda, which emerged out of negotiations over race, power, and colonialism and, by 1906, "had acquired different meanings that created new ways of being" (Nakanyike-Musisi 2001: 178). Traditionally the *kibuga* (city) denoted an administrative space of power, a male domain, characterized by modernity



3 Women assemble paper beads while seated on the verandah of their home in Kireka-Banda in Kampala-Uganda as their small children play nearby. As such, the women are refiguring their mothering identity from within the private space to participate in shaping their world. Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2016)



and Ajuna African Styles in 2004, among others. These organizations, operating under fair trade arrangements to sell women's paper beads on the global market, simultaneously enabled and transformed paper beads into research about women in economies, empowerment, and global politics. Beads then became a means to earn an income. It became common to find women as the sole providers and heads of households, challenging previous understandings of public and private space.

Private space has typically been characterized as a place for childrearing and homemaking (Elshtain 1993; Hansen 1992). In Uganda's patriarchal society, women who only work in the home doing domestic chores as wives and producing

and imperialism. On the other hand, the noun *kibuga*, derived from a Luganda verb *okwebuga*, also means "to move to and fro" (Gutkind 1963: 9), implying high mobility and, implicitly, issues of sexuality and power (Musisi 2001: 178). Here the multiple and fluid meanings of *ekibuga* combined to create sites of ambiguity. By 1906 Kampala had become a multicultural place, changing the lives of the many women who took control of their mobility and migrated to the city to participate in this public space.

The period leading up to the year 1986 is also very significant in the history of Ugandan women. It was marked by the turbulent regimes of Idi Amin Dada, Milton Obote, and Yusuf Lule, during which many men died in politically motivated killings and civil war. Many women were forced to become more independently creative in their economic survival as, "faced with hungry children whose fathers had fled or been killed, [they] moved into the cash economy" (Snyder 2000: 2). In 1989, in an attempt to revive an economic situation declining as a result of civil wars, Uganda introduced Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and neoliberal reforms through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Emeagwali 2011). These reforms engineered opportunities that oversaw several cultural brokerages and nonprofit organizations, including Beadforlife formed in 2004, Paper to Pearls in 2005, Hands of Action—Uganda,

food for their children are applauded (Bantebya and McIntoch 2006: 1). However, the rise of paper bead(ing) activities by women in this space registers a significant change in terms of gender stereotypes and enables a critique of gendered spaces. Such spatial restructuring helps expand the borders of normative conventions about the home. In essence, in extending the paid economy into the private realm, the home becomes much more than a stereotypically gendered location. This whole interpretation generates new meaning (Sciama, and Eicher 1998) that removes beads from the realm of mere decorative objects and positions them as objects that reflect women's perceptions of ways to negotiate and modify their daily routines. This became evident in an interview with bead-maker Acayo Rita, who works from home and sells her beads in the city, where I met her. As she explains, "I produce my paper bead-work from home on a daily basis as I also do my other chores like cooking and caring for the children. I am able to sell my beads in the city."¹⁰

4 Women gather under incomplete shelters to make paper beads. They sit together to make their bead work while chatting to bond, share ideas, and talk about their experiences. Photo taken in Gulu-Bardege.

Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2016)

5 Acayo strings her paper beads while tending to her small child. She is seated in her home in Kireka- Banda, Kampala Uganda. Where the home is conventionally constructed for women to nurture children, cook, and clean, in the photograph Acayo multitasks the child nurturing role with her paper beading business, showing how both experiences intersect.

Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2016)





6 Paper beads hang on a wire string in the interior of Acayo's home in Kireka, Banda, demonstrating how her home is demarcated, negotiated, and integrated as site for paper beads making—an income-generating activity. This challenges the way space is conceptualized to be much more than a location where the home is gendered as female and public space gendered as male.
Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2017)

7 Individual beads are carefully rolled by hand, using thin strips of paper. As such, women are physically engaged in creating the paper beads and the styles of the beads are highly individual.
Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2016)

8 With her hands, Acayo assembles beads on a plastic cord using a food serving tray in her home in Kireka-Banda in Kampala. The appropriation of ordinary household objects such as kitchen pots and trays for this business challenges conventional perceptions of particular domestic objects in relation to women and the domestic space.
Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2016).

Acayo was born in Tororo subregion in Eastern Uganda. During the 1990s, when she was at very young age, her family migrated to Kampala and became part of a sizeable group of women who were forced to move there to escape the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebellion. The women live in the suburb of Kireka-Banda and they make paper beads to sell in the city.

Walking through Kireka-Banda Zone B, I found a number of women making paper beads in their homes. Sitting on verandas and in sheds (Fig. 3) they made colorful arrays of paper beads in multitudes. Paper beads on wire strings hung in doorways and on clothing lines; other bead wires stretched from one home to another. The women sat in groups to produce beads while chatting and singing, while their small children played nearby (Fig. 4). Such experiences allow women to bond, to share ideas, and to talk about their experiences, providing an understanding of how private space is also a space for social interaction. During interactions with these women, I observed their routines and the ways in

which they negotiated domestic duties such as motherhood (Fig. 5) within the home, while spaces were demarcated, manipulated, and integrated as sites for the income-generating activity of paper bead-making (Fig. 6). As the women's actions transgressed normative gender dictates, paper beads became objects of inquiry that expose existing constructs even as they forge new ways of seeing such constructs.

Watching the women roll small strips of paper to make individual beads (Fig. 7), I became fascinated by this process of bead production. There is a sense of solidarity as the women form collective associations to mobilize paper materials bought from printing and stationery outlets in the city. Then, the bead-making process begins by plotting wedge-shaped strips on paper—manila, craft, or old magazines and calendars—with pens and pencils. These strips are cut using scissors or cutters. Placing the base of the triangular strip over a toothpick, skewer, or thin metallic rod, the strip is rolled manually, the women using their bare hands to





9 A collection of rolled paper beads, painted with a nontoxic paint pigment. The image shows design variations of paper beads in terms of size and colors within ranges of yellow, red, and blue. At this stage, the beads are ready to be assembled into accessories. Kireka Banda, Kampala- Uganda. Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2016)

10 The varnishing process: A woman dips paper beads into a varnish bath in a used butter container she converted into a varnishing apparatus. The image shows how kitchen apparatuses are appropriated for paper beads business. Kireka Banda, Kampala-Uganda. Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2017)

11 In purchasing this multistrand collection from women selling paper beads on the pavements of Ben Kiwanuka Street, Kampala, I learned that such multistrand beaded necklaces are among the most popular items sold. They are made by putting together several differently colored strands to come up with a necklace, and are in demand for their multicolored look; as such, they are in constant production. Beads worn by a model, photographed at Makerere University. Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2016)

work their way around the strip to ensure that its sides are tucked in and stay centered. The bead's neatness exhibits a distinctive rhythm that forms a visual signature identifying the maker as a master beader. A dab of nontoxic glue is placed over the tip of the triangle and seals snugly over the rolled bead. The beads are then slipped off the rods and strung on plastic string or yarn. For color, the beads are dipped into nontoxic paint before they are varnished.

The colors are either selected randomly or determined by a commissioning client's request. I observed some beads dipped directly into varnish baths in saucepans, large food dishes, and buckets so that the text on the paper strips is visible in the final bead. The appropriation of ordinary household objects such as kitchen pots for this business challenges conventional perceptions of particular





12 Women sell their paper beads from a pavement along Ben Kiwanuka Street in Kampala, Uganda. Many women have improved their lives through this trade. With the paper beads displayed on plastic sacks, the mother in the foreground, with her baby strapped to her back, negotiates with a customer. In this interaction, while the mother reproduces her role as a child nurturer in private space, her presence in the public economy recreates the static definition of the private and public space to produce shifts in the spaces a mother can occupy.
 Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2016)

domestic objects in relation to women and domestic space (Figs. 3, 8). Several thin layers of varnish are applied to yield a more polished look (Figs. 9–10). The strings of varnished beads are spread out in an open environment to dry (Fig. 1). They are later unstrung and stored in sacks (Fig. 2) for assembly into accessories, including necklaces, bags, and earrings (Fig. 11)

In terms of aesthetic appearance, paper beads are highly individualistic. Designs are created spontaneously through skills learned from peers, especially women who have trained at a beadwork cooperative. The women usually use a copy-and-repeat style of working, with variations in designs created through diversifying the shape, size, and pattern arrangement or by improvising color depending on market demands. For commissions, the women respond to the standard requirements. The women also indicated that multistrand beaded necklaces and spring paper bead bracelets are very popular and are repeatedly produced. The women were aware of the beads' quality and the need to finish them well. They were also aware that good finishing prompts buyers to commission more beads. Due to increasing demand, a paper-cutting business opened in Kireka-Banda, where the women take their designs to be cut in bulk.

These finished bead items are sold in the city street lanes (Fig. 12), while others are supplied to local craft outlets such as Uganda Art and Craft Village and Exposure Africa in Kampala. In other cases, paper beads are sold through cooperatives such as Meeting Point International, an NGO in Kireka that provides an outlet to sell paper beads on the global market (see Ssemutooke 2014) in the United States and England, where they enter a broader

multicultural economic circuit.

With global trade, the continually growing numbers of women engaging in paper bead-making for this market suggests that the assumption that beads are isolated objects needs to be reexamined. Simply through the sale of paper beads, women are actively constructing their lives. For example, Acayo refigures the social norm emphasizing the importance of male income to the household when she explains that: "The paper beads mean so much to me ... from them my children

cannot sleep hungry. I am able to pay fees for my children and rent since my husband left ..."¹¹

Implicit in this narrative is the understanding of how meaning is assigned to objects. In *The Cultural Biography of Things*, Kopytoff (1986) argues that the biographies of objects are deeply connected to social context as well as individual taste, and as such, the meanings assigned to objects change in relation to one's own position and reality. In terms of creation, consumption, and usage, the meanings associated with paper beads are never still (Kabiito 2010), as these meanings "dynamically shift through space and time, in and out of relationships" (Simbao 2006: 27). In this regard, beads possess no absolute value, but are relational according to circumstances, such that interpretations of their meanings are fluid, projecting different aspects each time the beads are produced, perceived, and used.

This contextualization provides insight into how personal accounts can illuminate nuances of mobility, especially how the values assigned to things are generated, maintained, or rejected. Kopytoff (1986) further argues that the sorts of biographies objects have are more deeply a matter of social context and individual taste and can move in and out of any given state. Moreover, objects are never still and thus are constantly changing. This transformation happens not only at the level of perception and contextualization, but also in their usage. This changeability in meaning produces such sensibilities—promoted by mobility—to reorder boundaries in the context of the object's use. The implication is that paper beads are meaningful to the women in relation to the

13 This dress by Sanaa Gateja has been on display at the Uganda Museum since 2007. Made of different shades of bark cloth stitched together with raffia, it is an example of what Gateja refers to as wearable art. He uses different shades of bark cloth and incorporates paper beads in the neck, sleeves, and hem. This artwork expands the margins of the boundaries of art, beads, and bark cloth.

Photo: Dorah Kasozi (2017)

14 Young women model Sanaa Gateja's wearable art at the Kenya Fashion Awards at Alliance Francais-Kenya in 2014.

Photo: Radek Art Photo courtesy of Sanaa Gateja.



constant negotiation of circumstances that they encounter in reality. Therefore, in contexts where beads remain largely marginalized as nonrepresentational entities, the beadwork in this study became the very means by which women tapped into their creative sense. The women, through their beads, wield power to demand new representation that express their own perceptions of reality. Bead(ing) becomes a component of broader visual and creative thinking in a way that allows the women to contextualize their status and position. In this the women extrapolate their growing design sense; by diversifying their products, they have been able to earn an income, pay rent or build houses, open businesses, and provide for their children within the emerging alternative discourse of being. Such a context places women at the fore in articulating the diversity of their experiences in expanding knowledge.

PAPER BEAD(ING) ON THE MOVE: VISUAL CREATION TO EXPAND KNOWLEDGE

In *Art and Agency* (1998), Alfred Gell draws our attention to the agency of objects as systems of social action. His thinking influences an understanding of the rich location that art occupies. He argues that artists can distribute elements of their selfhood within their art and at the same time displace culturally constructed

positions to forge new ways of seeing or resisting these positions (Kakande and Kasozi 2016) to mediate social agency. In this section, I examine how paper bead(ing) becomes a site that reflects existing constructs about beads and at the same time refigures them to illuminate alternative ways of perceiving such constructs to shape visual expression. I engage Sanaa Gateja's art and artistic practices, in which he references paper beads as the prime material in his art, to inquire and generate debate about issues of power, gender, and environmental protection. Through his artistic expressions he expands the margins of beads and art.

Although beadwork is sidelined in scholarship through the hierarchical classification of arts and crafts, Gateja's use of paper beads in his art allows him to tap into the beads' aesthetic properties, as well as their social and cultural meaning. "From an early age, the art of experimentation was already in my psyche, since I grew up around potters, weavers, and blacksmiths," Gateja recounts. His experimentation with common materials such as bark cloth¹² and beads not only allow him to interrogate worldviews that typically dismiss such materials as entities incapable of expressing ideas, he also recasts these materials as distinctive and culturally viable means to tell the African story.

Upon returning from abroad in 1989, Gateja settled in Kilembe, 500 km west of Kampala. He opened a jewelry workshop dealing in gold dust from the mines there. In 1990 Gateja abandoned the gold project and reverted to paper beads. He bought colorful wallpaper and used magazines imported in bulk from China and went back to Kilembe, where he started his first paper bead project in Uganda. Here he worked with women who he knew had the art of beading.

Gateja returned to Kampala in 1991 to





15 Sanaa Gateja
In Power (2017)
 Paper beads on bark cloth; 194 cm x103 cm
 Photo: Gateja Sanaa

16 Sanaa Gateja
Power (2017)
 Paper beads on bark cloth
 Photo: Sanaa Gateja



host the first-ever paper bead art exhibition at the National Theatre. He has regularly created paper-bead art installations and wearable art and fashion (Figs. 13–14) which he has exhibited in Nairobi, Berlin, and at the Edinburgh Museum in Scotland. His work also features in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Makerere Art Gallery (Fig. 9), and other prestigious public spaces around the globe.

As an environmentally conscious artist, Gateja makes his art through recycling and draws inspiration from his home city, Kampala—a space he calls a melting pot of creativity. He expresses his ideas with locally sourced paper beads, bark cloth, and fibers. He explores the tactility and mobility of the materials and their register in daily life, transforming them into art materials. In doing so, Gateja introduces variations that stretch the meaning of his materials, at the same time questioning the boundaries of classical art. His curious mindset allowed him to innovate by interpreting beads as stories that he captures through forms, outlines, color, texture, and patterns. This interpretation allows him to go beyond the boundaries of art and the perception of beads as merely decorative objects. By challenging such definitions in ways that spark new ideas, he produces art that engages in social debates. This is what gives Gateja’s art its edge.

The dominance of the human figure, particularly women’s figures, explains Gateja’s other source of inspiration. *In Power* (Fig. 15), for example, is a celebration of his mother, and it is also about the women he works with and their contribution to the Ugandan economy. This female figure, which he represents with circular, curvy, oval, rectangular, and semicircular shapes, allows him to build layered images, to work with associations of volume and form by deploying a method he calls “unit construction.” Gateja relates this method to architectural construction, sculpture, or jewelry-making, where a picture is formed in units that are assembled, superimposed, or juxtaposed to convey information. Gateja notes that this method allows him to distort and displace, at the same time unifying diverse material elements to shape his ideas and subject matter. In his large artworks on barkcloth, stitched with fibers and beads, Gateja uses cubist and historical African styles such as assemblage (Ebin 1985). This process involves not simply mixing materials but associating volumes, color, and motifs to make compositions. In all these endeavors, Gateja empowers paper beads to mediate the margins of art, further illuminating the spatial processes of mobility, in which beads are seen as a means of research and artistic inquiry.

GATEJA’S BEAD(ING) AS POLITICAL ART

On March 7, 2017, Afriart Gallery in Kampala hosted the exhibition *A Love That Dares* (Kakande 2017). Here, Gateja visually discussed the ways in which trade and migration traverse generations, creating new spaces that invite viewers to reconnect with their history. In this exhibition, Gateja used paper beads as art forms and materials stitched onto bark cloth to present *In Power* (Fig. 15), a visual representation of a female figure poised in an active standing position with her eyes wide open to suggest that the figure is farseeing. In this artwork, paper beads in hues of orange were used to discuss empowerment, critiquing the socioeconomic exclusion and marginalization that affect many women in Uganda. Of interest is the standing posture of the woman: “Her hands are not out, they are sort of humbled, she is in power,” Gateja notes. What is observed is the woman’s standing position, which is clearly distant from the domestic position in tradition. Aware of this reality, *In Power* relates to many women in Uganda who are upsetting the boundaries of the domestic grand narrative. *In Power* also reflects women standing on podiums and speaking openly about their presence in Uganda’s political, judicial, economic, and academic sectors (Tumusiime 2017).

However, Gateja explains that *Power* (Fig. 16), where paper beads are assembled in bold muscular shapes against a bark cloth support to visualize the image of a traditional male, is the depiction of a man as masculine. The dominant male figure is presented with wide ocular objects, its muscular, wide shoulders and chest draped in a costume whose weighty character is close to the royal costume in *The King’s Costume* (2017; Fig. 17) and *The Power Costume* (2017; Fig. 18). In these artworks Gateja depicts the power and authority of the *kabaka* (king) of Buganda. Pilkington Ssengendo,¹³ in his use of seed beads (*coix lacryma-jobi*) as textures in his painting, makes a similar statement. He visualizes the unfettered power (and authority) of the king in Buganda in his *Kabaka ng’Alina Obuyinza n’Ekitiibwa*



17 Sanaa Gateja
The King's Costume (2017)
 Mixed media
 This art work was exhibited at the *Ekifananyika Muteesa* exhibition (2017) at the Institute of Heritage and Conservation at the Makerere University Art Gallery in Uganda.
 Photo: Sanaa Gateja

18 Sanaa Gateja
The Power Costume (2017)
 Mixed media
 This piece was exhibited at a gallery in Holland.
 Photo: Gateja Sanaa

(What a Lot of Power and Majesty Has the King) (1999–2004) in which he constitutes beads as images, textures, colors, and surfaces to enrich the tactility of the work. Gateja explains that what makes the figure in *Power* masculine is the big head—the strength in its head with the mouth talking.

While Gateja seems to reproduce the view held in many African traditions that masculinity means to be strong, a leader, a family head, and a provider who has control over women's resources and relationships, he nevertheless questions the ways in which men abuse such power. Gateja responded to these political imperatives in the tapestry artwork *Change* (2010), at the Global Africa Project-Museum of Art and Design in New York, where he collaborated with New York-based artist Algernon Miller using former US president Barack Obama's campaign material to reproduce power as a masculine attribute. In *Power* and *Change*, Gateja is concerned with the ways in which men in power in Africa have caused suffering. Robert Kyagulanyi¹⁴ explores a similar theme in his song *Freedom* (2017), which echoes Uganda's recent violent past. In the music video of the song, the heavy deployment of the military during presidential elections to sustain those in power and the bill to remove the presidential age limit are critiqued as instances of abuse of power, dictatorship, and military brutality. In the video, paper bead necklaces arranged in the colors of the Ugandan flag (in the order red, yellow, and black) are worn by a male figure and are used to campaign for peace and to critique bad governance in the country.

Against this backdrop, the debate on power in Gateja's male figure and Kyagulanyi's use of paper beads to critique Uganda's political reality was productive. The hybrid nature of paper beads, their mobile configuration to move in and out of relationships, has allowed paper beads to permeate new territories and to express political discontent (Kakande 2008). This shows how spatial, semiotic, and material mobility is constitutive of paper beads. It reveals the beads' ability to morph and carry different meanings at different times.

The figure in *Power* (Fig. 16) is rigid, unlike the one in *Untitled* (2015) (Fig. 19), which shows a young girl whose subjectivity is captured through her shape, subtle feminine curves, and beads



worn around her waist to visualize the way traditional African women wore these beads to indicate rites of passage, entice one's husband (sexually), and for healing and rejuvenation.

Although born in Kisoro—south west of Uganda—at the age of five Gateja migrated with his father to Buganda. This is part of the migration he referred to in *Paths* (2016) (Fig. 20). The power of *Paths* comes partly from its scale and partly from its use of common materials, such as bark cloth and raffia fibers, in a new context. Just like the bark cloth wearable art displayed at the Uganda Museum (Fig. 10), *Paths* stretches the significance of bark cloth and its association with death in Buganda tradition (Nakazibwe 2005) into a piece of art. Gateja enhances *Paths* with white, circular bark cloth pieces stitched with raffia fibers that colorfully weave their way in dotted tracks to show how paths are interconnected.

Gateja produced *Paths* to talk about the rich cultural journeys in Africa.



19 Gateja Sanaa
Untitled (2017)
 Mixed media
 Photo: Gateja Sanaa

20 Sanaa Gateja
Paths (2016)
 Mixed media; 8 m
 x 2 m
 Photo: Gateja Sanaa

2016 and then traveling to the Institute of Heritage and Cultural Conservation at Makerere University in Uganda and the Städtische Galerie in Bremen, Germany. In these exhibitions, contemporary artists, using everyday materials, presented their perspectives on the multifaceted nature of migration (Kyeyune 2014). The exhibition presented an analogy of a bride in Buganda, where *Kabbo ka muwala*, is a Luganda phrase that translates as the “girl’s basket”—a basket usually filled with gifts that is presented to the groom after the traditional marriage. Metaphorically, the basket represents the expectations, hopes, and disappointments that come with marriage but also within the process of migration of people or objects. This exhibition also placed women at the forefront of storytelling (Simbao 2017: 28) to discuss issues of exploitation, displacement of people, objects, and cultures in East Africa and Southern Africa.

What is interesting about Gateja’s artistic journey in relation to paper beads as art (Kyeyune 2003) is the context in which he re-frames paper beads to reflect existing social constructions while at the same time engaging these beads to forge alternative ways of perceiving or resisting the constructions. By virtue of his use of beads to shape his art and art production, he transforms paper beads out of the fixed realm, where they are perceived as detached and isolated entities, to become research entities with a life of their own for knowledge accumulation (Kakande and Kasozi, 2016) in Uganda and beyond.

CONCLUSION

While established Western art history tends to relegate beads to the fringes of knowledge, I argue in this article that paper beads are diverse, transforming, and politically charged. In recognizing that paper beads specifically are not isolated, in their circulation through conventional notions of the private and public, paper beads shape and are shaped as socially viable means of power and influence (Stevenson and Graham-Stewart 2000). Within women’s social sphere, paper bead(ing) becomes a means for them to tap into their creative sense within the emerging alternative discourses of being to express their own versions of reality. In the process, paper bead(ing) exposes the contradictions of power, reflecting shifting boundaries as well as alternative views of private and public space. This only confirms paper beads’ flexibility and their ability to move

in and out of relationships where the beads mean different things in different contexts of space and time. Within such shifts is a multiplication of roles that beads can take on while overcoming conventions in which new trajectories are mobilized that shape Gateja’s art. Therefore, as subjects for research, as products, and as processes that articulate new subject positions in art for knowledge accumulation, as paper bead(ing) circulates in space and time, it has raised new questions and expounded on the complex nature of the mobility of arts and crafts in Uganda.



In Africa, everybody has a story to tell. Africa is the mother of the human race, so are our stories that are linked with the environment through travels, linked with objects and resources, linked with problems, troubles that we go through. Such a complex definition has framed Africa with multifaceted interpretations of a continent battered by political instability, economic and social marginalization, plus hunger, with all these forcing many to migrate. So these are not issues of Africa alone.¹⁵

This point was also echoed in the exhibition *Kabbo ka Muwala: Migration and Mobility in Contemporary Art in Southern and Eastern Africa*, hosted by the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in

Notes

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1 Margaret Katherine Trowell (1904–1986) was a missionary, artist, and art instructor who introduced collegiate formal art education in Uganda during the late 1930s. She is credited as having been the most dominant force behind the birth of modern art in Uganda when she started art education at Makerere Art School (renamed in 1995 the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Art of Makerere University). Most Ugandan artists have been trained at this institution.

2 Kireka Banda is a suburban town 11 km east of Kampala that grew out of a shopping center in the 1950s and 1960s. The continuous flow of migrants from northern Uganda, mostly of Acholi descent, has given this area its nickname of “the Acholi Quarter.” It is the home of many families, especially of women who escaped the 1990s Lord’s Resistance Army guerrilla war in northern Uganda. Most of these women are widows, refugees, and affected by HIV/AIDS, and they engage in paper bead-making in their homes to supplement their incomes.

3 A popular American women’s craft magazine, *The Modern Priscilla*, ran an article on how to make paper beads in its September 1917 issue (<http://www.thebead-site.com/pla-gram.html>).

4 Sanaa Gateja, interview with the author, October 31, 2017, Kampala.

5 Wearable art, also known as fashion art, makes statements and pushes the boundaries of creativity, generally conforming to no unifying aesthetic criteria. Gateja makes this art by recycling manmade waste materials, paper beads, fiber, and barkcloth to make tapestries (see Mutu 2016; National Museums Scotland 2014).

6 This method of rolling up paper to make beads is similar to the rolling-up technique of the earliest known iron artifacts, nine small beads securely dated to ca. 3200 BC found in two burials in Gerzeh, northern Egypt. These beads were made from meteoritic iron, shaped by careful hammering into thin sheets before being rolled into tubes (Rehren 2013).

7 Sanaa Gateja, interview with the author, October 31, 2017, Kampala.

8 Mukisa is one of the women working with Gateja. (interview with the author, October 16, 2018, place). She has said that “without the skills offered to me by Gateja, I would not have been able to make such beautiful crafts ... Today, thanks to him, I am able to feed my family” (New Vision 2015).

9 Ekibuga Kampala was a space that comprised the preexisting urban space of the capital of the Buganda state (the *kibuga*) and the surrounding colonial city of Kampala. See Nakanyike 2001.

10 Acayo (a pseudonym), interview with author, April 28, 2017, Kampala.

11 Sanaa Gateja, interview with the author, November 2, 2017, Kampala.

12 Bark cloth comes from the bark of the *mutuba* tree (*Ficus natalensis*). In Uganda, bark cloth has historical and traditional values as a link with the spiritual world, death, and the afterlife. For example, at last funeral rites in Buganda (the largest subnational traditional kingdom occupying central Uganda) when a heir is named, they are clothed in bark cloth. When King Muteesa of Buganda died in 1884, he was wrapped in 4,000 bark cloth pieces. See also Nakazibwe 2005, Robertson 2014.

13 Pilkington Nsibambi Ssendendo (1942–2015) was a contemporary Uganda artist, painter, and art teacher at Makerere University Art School. He advocated for the inseparability of arts from its community and nurtured an African modernism in which beads became art and research.

14 Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, known by the stage name Bobi Wine, is a Ugandan politician, businessman, entrepreneur, philanthropist, activist, musician, and actor. <https://youtu.be/8g0W9CIY5iM>

15 Sanaa Gateja, interview with the author, November 2, 2017, Kampala.

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