

Bishozi Art Movement (BAM) in Bishozi, Uganda, January 2018

By Nema Vinkeloe, MA in Global Studies (University of Gothenburg) and board member of GADIP (Gender and Development in Practice)

In January 2018, I travelled to Uganda to participate in BAM, Bishozi Art Movement. BAM was conducted in cooperation with Bishozi National Organisation (BNO) and Bishozi International Program (BIP), active in South-Western Uganda and Sweden, and supported by the Swedish Arts Grants Committee and Makerere University. BAM presented “TABOO – a Swedish/Ugandan Gender Balance Project in an exhibition” at Makerere Art Gallery, 2-7 February 2018.

BIP and BNO

BIP was founded in Sweden by Annette Mirembe Rosati in 1997 to promote art and development in Sweden and abroad. She visited Uganda for the first time in 1999, and has since conducted many workshops with children, youth and adults in Kampala and Bishozi and other villages in South-Western Uganda; BIP has also invited women artists from Makerere University, Kampala, to Sweden for workshops and exhibitions. Bishozi Women Association was founded in 2004 to combat gender inequalities in the villages and to help women gain control over their lives. The development projects, initiated by BIP, have expanded to numerous neighbouring villages, and Bishozi Women Association and BIP founded Bishozi National Organisation (BNO) in 2015. BNO is non-political and non-religious, and presently has 13 branches. BNO actively works for cultural and economic development. The combination of adult education and income-generating projects has resulted in continuous developments, increasing the quality of life for the people in the villages, and especially for women and girls. BNO believes that education is the key to development and the way out of poverty. BIP and BNO have built a culture centre for women, a clinic, a church, school houses and facilities; drilled bore-holes in three villages; established adult education, a goat and a cow bank; and presently sponsor 85 students from primary school to university.

BAM

BAM was created by artist Annette Mirembe Rosati (founder of BNO and BIP), musician and composer Biggi Vinkeloe and filmmaker Neta Norrmo. BAM is a culture and communication project for cultural exchange through workshops, performances, exhibition and conversations in Uganda and Sweden. Together with Ugandan artists Dr. Lilian Mary Nabulime (sculpture) and Andrew Kivumbi (mosaic), BAM conducted workshops in South-Western Uganda in January 2018. Since Neta Norrmo left the project in an early stage, I was invited to participate in BAM and co-conduct the music workshops with Biggi Vinkeloe.

Annette Mirembe Rosati has nine years of education in Fine Art in London, UK, and Gothenburg, Sweden. After completing her studies, she has worked continuously as an artist and since 1993, she runs a private art school for all ages in Sweden. She considers artistic expression a multi-faceted language and a versatile tool for communication beyond words. Art is a tool that makes development possible. This life and art philosophy provides the ground and the energy for all her work.

Biggi Vinkeloe has completed eight years of studies in the fields of music, music therapy, sociology and psychology. Since the early 90's, she has worked professionally as a jazz musician, composer and music therapist. She has conducted workshops with adults, youth and children in many countries. Music workshops encourage playful creation and spark curiosity for new ideas. By singing, clapping and dancing, the group creates positive shared memories and experiences a sense of community. Music explores the spaces between people of all ages and all cultures.

Nema Vinkeloe has just completed five years of studies in the field of Global Studies, Global Political Economy, International Relations and Global Gender Issues. She also works as a freelance musician and singer since 2011. With BAM, she co-conducted the music workshops, and together with Biggi Vinkeloe, she initiated the cloth pad project for women and girls.

Åse Stolt is an audiologist, BIP activist and board member. She accompanied BAM as an observer and assistant for the art workshops.

Andrew Kivumbi pursued a Degree in Commercial, Industrial Art Design and a Master's Degree specialising in printmaking from Nkumba University. He is a lecturer at Nkumba University since 2004 and has participated in several group exhibitions in Uganda. With BAM, "it was an overwhelming experience to practically engage communities that are attempting art for the very first time for about one to two hours under my guidance as compared to a university setting. The artwork was uniquely exciting and captivating".

Dr. Lilian Mary Nabulime is Senior Lecturer and former Head of the Sculpture Department in the School of Industrial and Fine Arts (CEDAT) at Makerere University. She holds a PhD in Fine Art (Newcastle University, 2007); the research was on "The role of sculptural forms as a communication tool in relation to the lives and experiences of women with HIV/AIDS in Uganda". Her work uses everyday objects (such as for example soap, sieves, cloth, mirrors, metal cans, car metal parts, found objects) to embody the social agenda of disease and gender equality issues. Her art exhibits an environment that attempts to raise awareness and promote discussion as well as move the meaning of art beyond the visual.

BAM in South-Western Uganda

The landscape in South-Western Uganda is hilly with savannah vegetation. Most people are farmers and cattle keepers. BAM conducted six workshops in South-Western Uganda on the theme 'gender balance'. Around 700 people from the thirteen different BNO branches participated in the workshops on fine art, sculpture, mosaic and music. Each of the workshops were attended by 115 to 150 people; women, men and youth from 15 years of age. The workshops addressed and visualised traditional taboos for women; for example, traditional norms stipulate that women cannot ride bicycles, play football or whistle. These taboos were discussed and visualised using art, and the participants were encouraged to express their understanding of gender balance in their artwork. The workshops encouraged men and women, adults and youth to engage in creativity and cooperation together and in that way create positive, shared memories. The workshops sparked discussions on gender norms and cultural traditions, challenged traditional taboos and initiated the process of establishing possibilities for pursuing greater gender equality. I co-conducted the music workshops with Biggi Vinkeloe, where we explored Swedish and Ugandan songs and sang, clapped, danced and improvised together.

Music and art were used as the common language, since most participants spoke Runyankoli rather than English.

The workshops generated a lot of positive energy. Over 700 enthusiastic participants worked with drawings, paintings, mosaic, sculptures, singing and drumming. Art and music are universal languages, and by working together, artists and participants facilitate mutual learning experiences. With TABOO, BAM and the workshop participants of the BNO villages opened the possibilities to develop greater gender balance.

Exhibition in Kampala

The artwork created in the workshops, ranging from coal drawings, aquarelle and acryl paintings and mosaic work to sculptures made of wire and plastic bottles, were brought to Kampala, where an exhibition was prepared at Makerere Art Gallery. The opening of the exhibition was attended by around 70 people, including guests of honour, journalists and a representative from the Embassy of Sweden. Biggi Vinkeloe and I played at the opening, briefly recounting our experiences of the music workshops and presenting the pieces we had played for and with the participants in the villages. We played every day in the exhibition, in that way adding another aspect to the visual artwork. We engaged in numerous conversations with visitors of the exhibition, discussing culture, equality, human rights, everyday life, education and development. The exhibition received positive critique and many visitors praised the project as thought-provoking and inspirational.

The cloth pad project

My mother and I had a side project during our stay in Uganda; we wanted to conduct workshops and sew cloth pads for women and girls. For many girls and women, menstruation is a recurring problem, hindering their participation in society on the same conditions as boys and men. Menstrual pads and other sanitary products are expensive and not accessible for everyone, resulting in women and girls staying at home for the duration of their menstruation. This implies missing valuable time at school, eventually causing a considerable disadvantage for girls. In an effort to improve girls' and women's opportunities, we wanted to create cheap and easily accessible menstrual pads for the women and girls in and around Bishozi. Prior to arriving in Uganda, we had prepared fabric, sewing material, thread, patterns and one prototype cloth pad. We had tried the cloth pad at home, comparing it to a store-bought menstrual pad; they hold the same amount of liquid. In Bishozi, we mended a treadle sewing machine and started sewing cloth pads and talked to many women about our project. Together with Åse Stolt, we made all necessary preparations for the creation of a workshop for cloth pad production, making it possible for all women and girls in the BNO villages to eventually gain access to cheap and reusable menstrual pads. We sewed 50 cloth pads that we left in Bishozi, and showed the women how they can continue sewing on their own. We donated enough material to sew another 200 cloth pads. The project was received with great enthusiasm, and some women started sewing immediately. We hope that the production of cloth pads continues and that it may turn into an income-generating occupation for some of the women in Bishozi. Some of the cloth pads were brought to Kampala and were a part of the exhibition at the gallery, and provoked discussions around women's efforts for equality and equal conditions for men and women.

Concluding remarks / Impressions from Uganda

This project offered a great number of experiences and knowledge for me. It was my first visit to the African continent, and I am very thankful to have experienced the hospitality and openness of the Ugandan people I have met. Although the initial premises for BAM were altered, the project achieved its aims and I think all involved parts – participants and artists alike – have gained valuable knowledge and experiences.

Since their creation, BIP and BNO have worked for greater gender equality in the villages of Uganda. At Makerere University, there is a School for Women and Gender Studies, established in 1991 with the support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda stipulates the equality and protection under the law for all Ugandans, regardless of sex, age or ethnicity, and it prohibits gender based discrimination in all aspects of society. Yet, women continue to experience considerable obstructions and discriminatory practices; this is particularly visible in the villages on the countryside. It is thus vital to continue pursuing gender equality and to actively challenge gender roles and norms. My hopes are that BAM and the cloth pad project has, in however small way, contributed to the discussion on gender roles and traditional norms and to the efforts of pursuing greater gender equality on the countryside and in the cities of Uganda.