



Art Practice as a Field of Articulatory Engagements

Fred Mutebi's Promotion of Barkcloth in Local and Global Networks

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Introduction

Although the established international art world tends to have a blind eye on contemporary art from Uganda, artists working in Kampala are highly aware of and engage actively with a wide range of local and international partners in their artistic practice. Some artists specialise in paintings for a select range of local clients, others cater for a thriving tourist market and an expat community. While some artists rely on their expertise of such markets and the requirements of their clients, others deliberately experiment in artistic forms and genres. In either case, they create links between different stakeholders, aesthetics and social spaces by means of their social and artistic practices, and they often function as important mediators between local and international individuals, representatives and institutions.

This essay presents a major project of artist Fred Kato Mutebi that involves a particularly high and diverse number of stakeholders, aesthetic traditions, entrepreneurial initiatives and social engagement. Known since the beginning of his career

as an inventive and experimental artist, university-trained master printer Fred Mutebi started some years ago to explore the ecological, technological, aesthetic, cultural, political, social and economic potential of barkcloth, a culturally significant material with a long tradition in Buganda. By promoting the production of barkcloth, facilitating training opportunities, opening up new creative markets, and emphasising the sustainability and cultural value of barkcloth, he successfully links different local, national and international discourses within his practice as an artist and as a social entrepreneur. I argue that Mutebi disposes of a particular mastery in creating moments that render possible articulatory practices, and he does so with regard to different conceptual understandings of articulation. On the one hand, he acts as a key mediator and communicator between stakeholders with different interests, languages and social practices. He foresightedly and diligently connects diverse seemingly unrelated social and discursive fields into a network that he oversees. Doing so, he links fields that are perceived as unrelated by most of the stakeholders involved in the project in order to work for his major vision, namely to increase the appreciation of barkcloth for its ecologically and economically sustainable features and to strengthen its marketability locally and internationally. Promoting historically seasoned African technologies and connecting them with aspects of neo-traditionalism and the revaluation of the ‘community’, he places a local product like barkcloth deliberately into the global discourses of sustainable development and global warming.¹ Barkcloth thereby functions as a jack-of-all-trades. It is an aesthetically and symbolically attractive material for artistic practice, it underscores and promotes Ganda cultural pride, and it is celebrated as an asset for social and economic development. The rhetoric of cultural and environmental sustainability offers key discursive strategies to promote its properties in the creation of new markets. It speaks to international audiences as an autochthonous product and to Ganda constituencies as both, a reflection of cultural identity and as a sublime gesture of protest against current national politics. Above all, it is a key means of articulation for Mutebi as an artist and social entrepreneur that forms part of a wider network he develops.

In the following, I first introduce my understanding of the term articulation that is inspired by theoretical and conceptual strands from linguistics, economic anthropology and political theory, followed by an extensive discussion of the different stakeholders and activities that form part of Mutebi’s articulatory practice. In our conversations, he never spoke of ‘articulation’ as being part of this practice. Nevertheless, it seems to be constitutive of his current involvement in barkcloth. Furthermore, it relates in instructive ways to his earlier and still continuing work as a printmaker.

The core argument of this contribution is that Fred Mutebi – as many other artists in African cities – has developed a particular repertoire of discourses and cultural as well as artistic practices that feed into a variety of markets and stakeholder interests. As articulatory practice, this repertoire enables him to secure, expand, and source quite flexibly from several economic contexts and constituencies and helps him to operate from a flexible and likewise reliable range of positions to implement his visions.

Articulation

“For me, I picked out barkcloth at university. For the time, I decided, now, to ... change the world. Because, I assessed: It’s a tree, and the world needs trees. And then I’m like: What makes it different from other trees? Because there are also other trees that could be even more important than that tree. But

1 The focus of this contribution lies not so much on the contingency of sustainability, but on the way articulation capitalises on such discourse, no matter if it is an “empty signifier” (Brown 2016) or not.

because those trees are elsewhere, they are not in my jurisdiction. But the more I promote this, the more possibilities I have to meet the other people. So, now I am driving the vehicle of the *mutuba* tree², but, also, somewhere along the track, there're some other people driving, other movements, you understand what I mean? [...] I am not saying Fred Mutebi has all the solutions, no! I am saying ... this is how I think. But I also want to work with the other one, the other one, and the other one. But I am also very selective. If I think you are not a better ... a good partner with me but a good partner with the other, I let you go." (Interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017)

Fred Mutebi formulated these reflections in an interview with me in Kampala almost a year after I had accompanied him to the fields and barkcloth artisans in Bukomansimbi. Already on our way to Buddu county in the year before, he had made full use of the time offered by the car trip in the early morning hours to explain to me his motivation, his vision, and how it relates to alarming phenomena like global warming. Although Mutebi had struck me as a very articulate personality at the very first encounter, I however only realised two years after the interview that this quote, in some ways, is a reflection about articulation in its many conceptual appearances. The decision to "change the world" is one that requires political articulation; the realisation that the *mutuba* tree is not only different from other trees but also within his own purview reflects an awareness for possible limitations in his economic agency; and his determination to connect with people "along the track" and see what these connections can generate demonstrates his ability to engage a diverse and changing selection of other people for his vision. He relies on connecting and de-connecting with them in a way evoked by the English term *articulation*, a loanword from French that is used to describe the joint that simultaneously connects and separates two elements.

While the theorisation of his agency lies beyond Mutebi's own interests, – he is a man of action – Mutebi's quote nevertheless inspired me to link theoretical concepts of articulation with his social and artistic practice in a way that acknowledges his talent and determination to create for himself a field of agency that relies strongly on articulation as a linguistic practice, as a social, economic and creative phenomenon, and last but not least as a political practice.

The term articulation has different meanings in different scholarly fields of research and theorisation. In the context of this contribution, four concepts are highlighted in particular. The first designates the connecting point between two elements that are autonomous but related to each other in a specific way, largely in the sense of the Latin term *articulus* that refers to a knuckle, the (anatomic) articulation of the arm or leg, but also to a knot (botanical), and a part or a section (of a talk/discourse). In temporal terms, it also designates a turning point (Menge and Pertsch 1994, 56). Articulation, then, is a joint that has two simultaneous functions; namely to connect different elements and by doing so, to emphasise their difference and (compromised) autonomy. It connects and distinguishes the upper and lower parts of a leg or arm that are connected but can move differently, or consists of the points where a door connects to the door frame. In an interview, Stuart Hall refers to an articulated lorry that consists of two parts that can be connected, disconnected and reconnected (Hall 2000, 65). More than any other theorist, Hall remarkably emphasises the temporal and historical aspect of such articulations – elements may be connected for a while and then separate into autonomous entities that reconnect with others at another moment in time (Hall 1996 and 2000).

This entangled relationship of seemingly autonomous elements was a key feature of Marxist-structuralist approaches to articulation by Wolpe (1972, 1980), Meillassoux (1972) and other economic anthropologists, which represents the second notion of ar-

2 *Mutuba* (*mituba* pl.) is the Luganda term for the ficus tree species that provides the bark which is in turn processed into barkcloth.

tication in this discussion. They described the dependence of ‘traditional’ subsistence economies on the globally operative and dominant capitalist system as one of articulation. Capitalist production modes only seemingly replaced other production modes (such as subsistence) and instead concurrently and often implicitly relied on the continuation of the latter, thus creating uneven relations of domination between and within these systems and among the various actors involved (see also Hall 1996, especially 31–33, and Hart 2007). However, such hegemonic dynamics remain unnoticed by the dominated group because the cause of their underprivileged position lies beyond their reach. While production modes like subsistence farming increasingly became dependent on the vagaries of global markets, the affected farmers remained unaware of this global entanglement and therefore were unable to foresee or even explain the reasons for their increasing poverty. Articulation in this Marxist-structuralist understanding thus emphasises the ubiquity and global entanglement of seemingly independent modes of production.

I claim in the following that Fred Mutebi not only identifies, but also creates, supports and partners in the “joint” and “knuckle” that connects actors and stakeholders from different fields with different interests. He facilitates temporary and long-term moments of connecting two or more actors into his diverse and ambitious project of barkcloth promotion, thus continuously creating new connections that together contribute to a functional and changing network of stakeholders, each with their particular role in the dynamic barkcloth system.

For this purpose, Mutebi makes use of his talent as a communicator and orator, which relates to a third and fourth notion of articulation, namely those derived from linguistics and political theory. To address select conversation partners and speak to them about the cultural meaning, the planting, harvesting, processing and marketing of barkcloth and those engaged in these activities means to work towards “chang[ing] the world”. Accordingly, talking to people about the potential of barkcloth to reach this goal goes beyond mere enunciation; it is an articulation. As Förster (under review) argues, articulation in a post-marxist and post-structuralist understanding does not just mean enunciation (*énonciation* with Foucault) because this would imply that it is subject to discursive power and hence rather weak in its potential for (cultural, political, subaltern) resistance (Foucault 1966; 1973; 1976). Rather, articulations are moments in which discourse is challenged or even potentially changed.³ As I argue elsewhere (Siegenthaler 2017, 187–189), this claim is backed in at least two ways by Chantal Mouffe’s and Ernesto Laclau’s understanding of articulation as, first, something that may but also may not be language-based (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 [1985]), and second, a practice that can emancipate itself from existing discourses to an extent that it triggers political awareness. In Mouffe’s and Laclau’s understanding, articulation constitutes the relation between powerful discourse and subjectivity; it is through articulation that subjects can either merge with or dissociate from dominant discourses, especially through collective action that generates new social formations (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 [1985]). In their understanding articulation is not only “any practice establishing a relation among elements”, but it does so in a way “that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 [1985], 105). Articulation therefore also is “generative” (Hall 2000, 68) and “performative” (Förster under review) – in being performed, it creates something new.

For this reason, articulation has two seemingly contradictory features. On the one hand, it subscribes to existing structures and discourses because it generates from there and depends on existing forms of communication in order to facilitate collective terms and values. On the other hand, articulation marks a point of distinction from the existing discourse while emphasising its dynamic connection to it (Hall 1996, 36; Hall 2000, 65) and therefore has the potential to question these very structures. This is why

3 Förster rightly argues that the reasons and mechanisms of discursive changes in the course of history are insufficiently explained by Foucault and structuralism more generally (see Förster under review).

articulation as a social practice always also is political in Mouffe's sense (Mouffe 2005, 2007). It reflects moments of (collective) political subjectivisation that triggers new discursive formations (Hall 2000, 68).

While this potential of articulation is certainly part of social practice, it bears particular significance for artistic practices that address and engage in social and environmental politics. This is exactly the case with Fred Kato Mutebi's current barkcloth-related engagement.

Fred Kato Mutebi

"It is a whole long journey ... [...] As long as you are earning from agriculture and you have issues of climatic change, it becomes *everybody's* responsibility to ensure that you mitigate it, you slow it down. That's one of the drive[s] in my art. ... I am a social critique in subject but I don't want to be critical without having a solution." (Interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017)

Fred Kato⁴ Mutebi was born in 1967 as a member of the mmamba (lungfish) clan⁵ and graduated in Fine Arts from Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts (MTSIFA) at Makerere University in 1992.⁶ He has gained an international reputation primarily as a printmaker, but already early in his career, he started experimenting with popular techniques like batik. Social engagement has been a fundamental part in his work, too, and the three fields of printmaking, social engagement and the exploration of easily available resources for artistic work are a core foundation of his activities.⁷ More recently, he started experimenting with local materials for printmaking like barkcloth and papyrus with the idea to eventually replace the Japanese and Chinese printing paper that is imported at considerable prices (interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017).

Coming from Kibinge, Buddu County in Masaka district which is reputed for the quality of its barkcloth, Fred Mutebi is familiar with the tradition of barkcloth production and its cultural and spiritual significance for the Baganda and their king, the *kabaka*. However, in recent decades, the mastery of barkcloth production was disappearing due to rural-urban migration of young men. On their search for employment in the city, they created a lack of apprentices and labour force in the agricultural sector and the barkcloth production in particular. Therefore, only few master *bakomazi* (barkcloth makers) like Paulo Bukenya Katamiira remain. Mutebi considers them crucial for transmitting their knowledge to a younger generation and revalidating barkcloth culturally and economically. Therefore, he has been engaged for several years now in reviving the appreciation of barkcloth, the professional training of *bakomazi* as well as in developing a barkcloth market nationally and internationally. He thereby convinces a diverse range of partners of the potential of barkcloth to solve a plethora of contemporary problems. First, the climate-friendly features of the *mutuba* tree that provides the bark prevent the

- 4 Kato is not an actual name but refers to Mutebi's status as the younger of a set of twins. This identity as a twin has important cultural implications that also involve barkcloth. Their discussion would exceed the aim of this contribution, but see Nagawa 2018.
- 5 The *mmamba* clan is one of the biggest and most influential among the fifty clans in Buganda.
- 6 Information on his biography, artwork and social engagement is available on his homepage <https://fredmutebi.org>. Accessed August 22, 2019.
- 7 His commitment to barkcloth production is not his first socially informed initiative. Already in 2007, he founded the non-governmental grassroots organisation *Let Art Talk (LAT)* to engage war-affected children in art classes in the north of Uganda where the LRA, poverty and AIDS had destroyed families, livelihoods and perspectives. Besides a therapeutic effect for the children, the workshop facilitates exchange between youth from the central and northern regions of Uganda respectively. These regions stand for a long history of cultural, political and economic difference and inequity.

soil from desertification. Second, the artisanal barkcloth production as well as the material itself are free of environmentally dangerous substances. Third, the cultural revival of *ebuyaffe* (things royal) after the reinstatement of the Buganda Kingdom in 1993 and the inclusion of Uganda's barkcloth in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 (originally proclaimed in 2005) has increased its economic potential locally and internationally, especially in the tourism and design industries. Such new industries based on artisanal skills can contribute to the well-being of local communities, an argument that also Mutebi puts forward. These are the three key pillars on which Mutebi explicitly builds his articulatory practice in the promotion of barkcloth. There is also a fourth pillar to be discussed later in this paper, namely the political symbolism of barkcloth in the Ugandan context. However, when discussing the qualities of barkcloth, the artist is less explicit about this last aspect.

In Mutebi's view, the planting of *mutuba* trees, the production and sale of barkcloth and its use in artistic and other fields of practice offers a solution to many of the current and future social and economic problems and contributes to the battle against environmental destruction and global warming. This encouraged him and his brother Stephen Kamywa to establish in 2012 the *Bukomansimbi Organic Tree Farmers Association (BOTFA)* in their home area with the support of the United States Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. The idea is to professionalise the cultivation of *mutuba* trees by offering an apprenticeship program in a workshop that supports and promotes community work (*kkomagi*) and *obuntu bulamu*, a philosophical concept of "harmonious living and sharing sensibility between people and nature" (Nagawa 2018, 345; with reference to Kasozi 2011). The Management Union of Trees International (MUTI) association further formalised these activities in 2016 with the aim to promote the environmental cause. It involves the regular and correct harvesting of bark, the growing of *mutuba* seedlings for sale to other farmers and the promotion of planting *mutuba* trees also in urban environments. As Nagawa (2018) states, this activism does not only transcend rural-urban binaries but also a cultural limitation to Ganda culture – informed by its long Ganda history, the cultivation of the *mutuba* tree is of national and international relevance, environmentally, but also economically.

Although based in Kampala and having travelled internationally, Mutebi has maintained a close connection to his family and the community of his birthplace.⁸ Without this rootedness and the knowledge about local history and social intercourse, it would have been impossible for him to gain the trust and reliability of his collaborators on site. On the other hand, this project strongly relies on the financial support of foreigners. Mutebi occupies precisely the mediating position between the farming community and the supporters/investors.

Barkcloth as Natural and Cultural Heritage: Between Discourses of Indigeneity and Sustainability

Barkcloth is made from the bark of a fig-tree species popular in Buganda, called *omutuba* in Luganda (*ficus natalensis*).⁹ The *mutuba* tree has many positive features which encourage Mutebi to promote its planting. It is "a native fig tree intercropped in small-scale farms", mostly among coffee and plantains (Nagawa 2018, 344). Its branches provide shade for

8 For a more detailed discussion of the rural-urban link in Mutebi's practice, see Nagawa 2018.

9 The tree is known also in Kenya and further south, but Baganda claim a particular tradition and quality in the processing of its bark.



these plants, its leaves fertilise the soil and the berries attract birds. The *mutuba* tree features two particularly outstanding qualities. First, it turns arid soils fertile as its roots conserve rather than consume the water. Therefore, it stands in contrast to plants like eucalyptus that perpetuate desertification by lowering the ground water and instead provides for fertile farming land even in arid areas. Second, it produces bark that can be removed and processed to barkcloth annually. When treated carefully, the tree recovers perfectly from the harvest and generates new bark for the next harvest. These two features of keeping arid soil fertile and producing barkcloth sustainably are the core arguments that Mutebi contends

Fig: 1 *Mutuba* tree in Bukomansimbi. The rounded edge below the branches derives from harvesting the bark.
Fiona Siegenthaler,
October 16, 2016.

for barkcloth as a sustainable material for Uganda and beyond. It is an effective measure against desertification while offering a sustainable alternative for other, damaging materials, including those used in the art sector. For instance, Mutebi argues that many canvases available today include plastic, a material that is made from non-renewable petroleum, requires an energy-consuming production and is not entirely biodegradable.

Although bark is also gained and processed in other parts of Uganda and Central and East Africa, barkcloth is considered typical for Ganda culture and is said to be produced since the 14th century, but the exact origins remain unclear (Nakazibwe 2005, 42–43). The bark consists of fibres crossing each other at right angles “as do the warp and weft of true cloth” (Kyeyune 2003, 44), and this texture also remains after the lengthy process of beating it into a thin cloth of typically about 8 to 10 meters in length and 3 meters in width. It has a long history which is especially related to royal life and ritual practices. John Roscoe mentions it in 1911 as an important part of clothing (Roscoe 1965 [1911], 403–404) and of royal bedding (*ibid.*, 406), but it was also used as architectural element in the Ganda hut (*ibid.*, 404; Kyeyune 2003, 45), as a room divider between the *ekibiira* (forest) and the public side of the royal tomb, as a tax contribution, and as a dowry in *okwanjula* (introduction) ceremonies.¹⁰ It is an important ritual material in context of birth, initiation and twin cults, and even its production is associated with spiritual power as the ‘music’ that *bakomazi* generate while beating it has a spiritual effect (Kyeyune 2003, 45). This is why *bakomazi* play a vital role in the material, symbolic and spiritual meaning of barkcloth and enjoy high esteem within and without the royal court. However, with the introduction of cotton by Arab traders and the enormous impact of proselytisation in the 19th and 20th Centuries, barkcloth underwent a negative symbolic transformation. Increasingly associated with ‘heathen’ rites and cultural practices, barkcloth was replaced by cotton as an appropriate material for Christians and Muslims, a process that was backed by the intensification of industrial production of cotton in the protectorate (Nakazibwe 2005).

Nevertheless, barkcloth continued to be associated with Ganda culture, and after the abolishment of the kingdoms, including Buganda, through Milton Obote in 1966, it even became associated with Ganda political dissent in the modern nation state.¹¹ In the meantime, it is mainly known as the material used to wrap the dead for burials and therefore has lost a lot of its prestigious reputation. Many young Baganda are not aware of the rich ritual and symbolic legacy of barkcloth in Ganda culture and have adopted an ambivalent and often even negative stance against it because of its association with death. As a result of these developments, the spiritual and social significance of *bakomazi* in Ugandan society faded, and the profession almost died out.

It is mainly through the re-introduction of the Buganda kingdom in 1993 that barkcloth regained popularity and esteem (Nakazibwe 2005, 298–324), resulting in its inclusion in the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008 (Nagawa 2018, 340).¹² It continues to be used for long-established rituals such as the coronation of the *kabaka*, but it is also being re-invented as both, a symbolic expression of Ganda identity in opposition to the current national leadership, and as a marketing item for the growing tourist and other industries.

The Uganda Museum, underfunded by government but a proud host of promotional heritage events, was recently gifted a particularly large piece of barkcloth in

10 The *okwanjula* ceremony is the most important step towards marriage and consists of the official introduction of the involved families and the negotiation of the dowry. The meaning and protocol of *okwanjula* have changed over time and nowadays tend to combine ‘traditional’, Muslim and Christian marriage practices.

11 It had been a symbol of political dissent already during the colonial rule and especially in the 1950s as a reaction to the deposition of Kabaka Fredrick Edward Muteesa II by the colonial administration on November 30th 1953 (Nakazibwe 2005, 210–218).

12 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/barkcloth-making-in-uganda-00139>. Accessed August 27, 2019.

occasion of an event co-organised by Fred Mutebi in collaboration with representatives of the *bakomazi* from Kibinge, with Dr. Venny Nakazibwe, a leading expert in the history of barkcloth in Uganda, and fashion designer José Hendo in October 2016. Tellingly branded *Bark to the Roots 2*, this event was supported by the US ambassador to Uganda and consisted of introductory talks, a demonstration of barkcloth production by the *bakomazi*, an exquisite catwalk of José Hendo's most recent collection, and booths informing the visitors about the role of barkcloth for product design and applied art.

Such events help to promote barkcloth as a contemporary asset. They reposition barkcloth as a modern product that relies on a long and proven tradition and simultaneously promote its potential for creative exploration and economic investment in a growing national economy. Moreover, the barkcloth market is particularly interesting for the Buganda Kingdom. Because its re-instatement was bound to the condition that it does not assume political functions but exclusively 'cultural' ones, the Kingdom cannot collect tax or other revenues from its subjects and hence must support itself in other ways.¹³ The markets related to cultural heritage therefore are of major significance for the kingdom and are reflected in the way it promotes barkcloth – the material most associated with its history and cultural importance. However, such promotion requires investment to an extent that Buganda cannot fulfil. It must rely on partners who recognise the economic potential of barkcloth, who identify with its tradition and who develop markets beyond Buganda. Mutebi's articulatory practice represents exactly such a mediating link.

Fig. 2: *Bakomazi* from BOTFA presenting their craftsmanship at the Uganda Museum, Kampala, in occasion of *Bark to the Roots 2*.
Fiona Siegenthaler,
October 14, 2016.



13 Nelson Kasfir (2017) traces in detail the complexities underlying such distinction between 'cultural' and 'political' fields of action of the Buganda Kingdom Government.



Fig. 3: Pillow covers made from barkcloth by Sarah Nakisanze's *Easy Afric* design company.
Fiona Siegenthaler,
August 27, 2019.

Barkcloth as an Economic Perspective: Networking and Mediation

Promoting the importance of barkcloth for environmental sustainability and Ganda culture, experimenting with it as an artistic material, and engaging in its development as a solution to ecological challenges are as much part of Mutebis mission as its promotion as a social and economic asset. Social entrepreneurship therefore is a guiding principle in his activities since the early 2010s when he started with barkcloth farming and community work in Bukomansmbi. As he says, “Part of it is to empower the farmer and the processors. So, the more options there is [sic] to use barkcloth, the more money will go to that.” (Interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017) A key element in this process is the establishment of a community-driven farmer association where the farmers, producers and traders of barkcloth are immediately connected to each other, without middlemen who tend to press the acquisition prices from the farmers in order to gain a bigger profit on the market. The institution of apprenticeships offers youth opportunities for both, an artisanal education and a reasonably paid professional engagement in their village as a viable alternative to moving to the city. Moreover, women in the village create bags and other items from barkcloth which they display for sale whenever foreigners visit BOTFA on Mutebi's invitation. Developing barkcloth as an economic asset, therefore, is not limited to its planting, harvesting and processing, but also to opening new markets – design markets as much as what we may tentatively call the beginning of sustainability tourism.¹⁴ Thus, Mutebi and the members of BOTFA create new markets with the purpose to generate new, sustainable and autochthonous resources of income in a marginalised village. Most importantly, the collective is in control of the value chain. With the model of community farming and direct sales, the profit goes directly back to the community.

14 With this term I suggest that sites of 'sustainable projects' are made accessible to visitors and tourists but may or may not comply with principles of sustainable tourism.

Part of this value chain is also a sustained collaboration with creatives such as designers and artists who use barkcloth as a working material. Developing pillow covers, wallets, coasters, storage bags for tea, and an impressive range of other products sold in the tourist and craft industry, artists and designers have found a pocket of income. PhD candidate and designer Sarah Nakisanze for instance collaborates with Mutebi in barkcloth research and sources the barkcloth produced by BOTFA for her *Easy Afric* design company and Lususu collection that she runs in cooperation with a team of women who produce wallets, pillow covers, handbags and other design items.¹⁵

The fashion industry has been so far one of the most prominent stages where barkcloth is being promoted as both a traditional and environmentally sustainable material and at the same time as one with great potential for further technological development. The most famous promoter in this field is Uganda-born and London-based José Hendo who collaborates closely with the farmers of Bukomansimbi and Fred Mutebi to harvest and produce “eco-sustainable” design based on exquisite qualities of barkcloth.¹⁶ Together with Mutebi and others, she explores new ways of dyeing it and making it more versatile for contemporary fashion design needs. She also experiments in developing new textures and combinations with other sustainable materials.

Fig. 4: Catwalk of José Hendo's fashion design collection at Uganda Museum, Kampala in occasion of *Bark to the Roots 2*. Fiona Siegenthaler, October 14, 2016.



15 See her homepage: <https://easyafricdesigns.com>. Accessed August 26, 2019.

16 <https://josehendo.com>. Accessed August 24, 2019. See (besides many other clips online) the informative video produced by CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/12/21/spc-inside-africa-uganda-fashion-b.cnn>. Accessed August 24, 2019.



However, Mutebi together with the *bakomazi* community does not only promote barkcloth as a material for artists and designers; he also started to promote it as an actual artistic item. Mastery in beating high quality barkcloth requires many years of training and skill. Mutebi has known many of the Bukomansimbi *bakomazi* since decades and is familiar with their particular signature production. He knows their individual preferences and specialisations and can attribute specific pieces of barkcloth to their creator. But normally, their names go lost once their products enter the market. Mutebi aims at maintaining the visibility of the barkcloth producers also after entering the market by labelling or perhaps also embossing their names in the barkcloth (Nagawa 2018, 351). This procedure would not only acknowledge the individual contribution of the masters to the excellence of Ugandan barkcloth but it also emphasises the exclusivity of the product, approaching it to the status of an artwork or special design piece which in turn opens up again new markets. Indeed, responding to a general trend of re-discovering indigenous aesthetic traditions, contemporary art initiatives and exhibitions in the last years included not only the work of artists who use barkcloth in their work such as Sanaa Gateja¹⁷, Xenson¹⁸ or Mutebi, but also work by master *omukomazi* Paulo Bukenya Katamiira himself. His work was included in the KLA ART Festival exhibition of 2014, for example (Serubiri 2014, 17–18).

An important economic aspect in Uganda is philanthropy and the dominance of foreign aid. Every visionary initiative in this country must rely on foreign supporters who often adopt the ambiguous role of philanthropist and investor likewise. This is also the case with Mutebi's project. One of his friends and most passionate collectors in the

17 For more information on Sanaa Gateja, see: <https://www.sanaa-gateja.com>. Accessed August 27, 2019.

18 For more information on Samson Ssenkaaba aka Xenson, see: <https://xenson-ssenskaaba.pixels.com>. Accessed August 27, 2019.



Netherlands, Ruud Boon, has been supporting him not only as printmaker in his earlier career, but also as a patron for his projects in his place of birth. As a chairman of the organisation *Children of Uganda/Kinderen van Uganda*¹⁹, he engages in programs to support child education. Funds raised by the organisation have, for example, sponsored the community hall that replaced the school after it was destroyed by a storm. He also engages in coffee and barkcloth production and export, and when I met him, he was busy attending a soccer tournament that his organisation supported as a pass-time activity for the village youth in cooperation with Ugandan youth chaperons.

Selling art to a collector in the Netherlands and collaborating with the same collector for a social engagement in his village and in the development of barkcloth production are linked to one and the same aim for Mutebi. He illustrated this for me by explaining the seemingly far-fetched connection between the growing barkcloth industry in Uganda and the reduction of floodings in the Netherlands: If the Netherlands experience flooding due to global warming, the collection with his work will be lost. In contrast, if the development of a sustainable barkcloth industry can contribute to slow down global warming, the Netherlands and its art collections will be saved (interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017).

This associative way of thinking fundamentally shapes Mutebi's success in promoting his project – connecting topics and people is deeply anchored in everything he does.

His invitation to a two-day trip to Bukomansimbi and the *mutuba* plantations offered me an ideal occasion to observe Mutebi's ability to mediate and communicate not only his ideas, but also between different people. He introduced me to his family,

Fig. 5: Fred Mutebi (right) with fashion designer José Hendo (to his right) and three farmers in the *mutuba*/coffee/plantain fields of Bukomansimbi. They are filmed for educational and promotional purposes.
Fiona Siegenthaler,
October 16, 2016.

19 <http://www.kinderenvanuganda.nl>. Accessed September 4, 2019.

Ruud Boon, José Hendo and the various projects he and his team are involved in. Generously sharing his time, his social connections, his car petrol and hours of conversation is in the nature of this artist, but he is also highly aware that this kind of social sharing is an investment that benefits his projects.

A gifted mediator between foreign scholars and patrons, political representatives, school directors and community workers, his family members, and international business partners like José Hendo, Mutebi represents a crucial knot in a wide network of collaborative support and business. Mastering all linguistic and discursive skills needed for such diverse constituencies and generously sharing his knowledge and network, he incorporates the perfect mediator between the many individuals and stakeholders in his network. He jokes around in Luganda with the village children, includes some Dutch terms in his conversations with his collector friend, and employs the vocabulary of the United Nations' sustainable development goals when speaking to new acquaintances from foreign embassies and NGOs. While adopting economic vocabulary when speaking to possible investors, he emphasises the relevance of cultural values and traditional knowledge when speaking to a social anthropologist and art historian like me. Doing so, he connects both different social actors and different projects with each other. A statement in occasion of his speech of gratitude for the donation of the new community centre may serve as an example: After Boon disclosed the amount of money collected for the new community centre, Mutebi proposed to release this money only once 5000 trees are planted – this is the number of children in the division. Directly addressing the school and village representatives attending the meeting, he added: “We *must* go ahead, with no delay, the clock is ticking”, and “trees translate into money”. Explaining to them that “[y]ou know there’s nothing you can give them [the Dutch sponsors]”, he encouraged them to “realise our plans and work!”²⁰ Indeed, while *mutuba* trees translate into barkcloth that produces an income through sale, there are also other ways of generating funds with trees. For instance, Mutebi encourages visitors and sponsors from abroad to plant a *mutuba* tree and adopt it by sponsoring 30US\$ of which a third goes into school fees for a local child, a third supports its family, and a third goes into administration. His pragmatic approach is unambiguous in this regard: financial support deserves gratitude, but the receivers must go beyond that and generate new ideas and projects.

Barkcloth as Subject of Collaborative Research and Education

Mutebi also seeks ways to use barkcloth for new products. To this end, he explores it experimentally, researching ways to give it different levels of strength, texture, colours and shape to make it viable as a sustainable alternative to environmentally threatening materials and as a local alternative to imported products. As a print master, printing paper is one of his main subjects of research. So far, he has developed largely two types of paper, one consisting of 100% barkcloth, whereby he partly re-uses material that is thrown away in the process of barkcloth production, and the other consisting of barkcloth in combination with various other materials such as papyrus which is also grown in Uganda. Another research strand is barkcloth as canvas. He works on improving its features in a way that it can replace imported canvas from Asia and elsewhere.

Mutebi's understanding of research and knowledge production is however not limited to his own experimenting with barkcloth for artists' material. In the contrary –

20 Quoted from my fieldnotes on October 16, 2016.



and this is a particular skill of his – he is highly aware how important it is to tap into knowledge from other stakeholders. A crucial constituency especially in the barkcloth farming and processing context are the elderly as transmitters of knowledge to a young generation, and Mutebi’s initiative to introduce an actual apprenticeship program overseen by the master *bakomazi* is proof of this awareness. But Mutebi also collaborates with other initiatives that strive to develop affordable objects and materials from local renewable resources. For instance, he had an exchange with an American cyclist who first was interested in developing bamboo bicycles that would be affordable for Ugandan buyers. He then also created a prototype of a bicycle frame made from barkcloth by stabilising the limp material with a particular glue developed in the USA. Mutebi sees a potential in this technology to produce chairs, notably not just the fabric to sit on, but also the frame, from barkcloth (interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017). He also teams up with artist friends to explore art and design products based on barkcloth – his studio in Kampala is home to several such prototypes.

Fig. 6: Fred Mutebi with a visitor in the courtyard of his studio and home in Kampala. He uses the dyed bits of barkcloth spread on the ground for his paper and canvas experiments.
Fiona Siegenthaler,
August 2, 2017.

Fig. 7: Fred Mutebi in his studio sitting on a rocking chair with a seating surface of barkcloth that he made in collaboration with an artist friend. Barkcloth is piled to his left and hand-made paper containing barkcloth lies to his right. The *mutuba* tree sap in the jerrycan between his feet is used as a remedy against ulcers.

Fiona Siegenthaler,
August 2, 2017.



It is speaking that while Mutebi is critical of Chinese or Japanese imports of art products to Uganda, he remains open for a potential future collaboration with researchers from these respective countries. In his view, there is no contradiction in emphasising the production of local and sustainable material while collaborating with international partners for its technological development. Rather, he sees such international exchange as a resource to learn, for instance, about Asian paper making traditions and explore their potential for local barkcloth paper production. In our interviews, he also expressed interest in collaborating with students from a European university for applied sciences to explore new technological possibilities with barkcloth (interview Siegenthaler and Mutebi 2017).

Mutebi wants to expand and intensify this research practice and especially the training and education on farming and processing barkcloth. For this purpose, he is developing an accredited instruction centre in Bukomansimbi that he currently describes as an “Indigenous knowledge innovation centre”²¹, where the coffee, plantain and barkcloth fields are located and where also a printmaking workshop should find its place. At the time of our interview in 2017, he was busy looking for partners and investors who

21 Quoted from my fieldnotes on August 2, 2017.

would help setting up workshop and residency buildings for the apprentices and visiting researchers. According to Nagawa, he also plans to set up an experiential museum on the site where visitors can learn about cultural values and rituals related to barkcloth and twinhood (Nagawa 2018, 349). It would educate about and harness Ganda culture, encourage material research and design education, and help to promote his barkcloth mission to a potential supporter base.

Fred Mutebi's Art and Political Articulation

Finally, there is obviously also a political aspect to Mutebi's work which corresponds to the conception of articulation as formulated by post-Marxist political theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. By inserting himself into the economic system and employing international discourses of sustainable development and global environmental activism as reflected in the United Nations' sustainable development goals, he creates new structures of particularly local interest: economic innovation, employment opportunities and a renewed acknowledgement and pride of precolonial heritage and knowledge. He merges environmental activism with a political conviction that there is little reason to rely on the government to change the economic and environmental situation in Uganda. Rather, he feels an obligation to take things into his own hands and, as he says, not only criticise but also offer solutions to the problems. Accordingly, his criticism is not one of outspoken and unidirectional protest, but rather a discreet articulation of an alternative that addresses many different stakeholders.

Interestingly, a similar observation was made with regard to his print work where political criticism is present but also "veiled" in a way that it speaks to a large range of potential viewers and clients (Kakande 2008, 228). Discussing Fred Mutebi's prints from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s in his dissertation, art historian Angelo Kakande claims that the artist, along with Bruno Sserukuuma, has "invented appropriate vocabularies with which they question the NRM's²² administration without being subversive, without attracting sanctions and without compromising their ability to sell their works" (Kakande 2008, 3). In his view, the idioms Mutebi uses are "instructive and insightful on how an artist can survive in a globalising market without being disengaged from debates on urgent issues such as bad governance and corruption which continue to haunt Uganda" (ibid.). He shows how Mutebi consequently created aesthetically appealing work that was at the same time subtly political, thus adopting a "strategy of indirection" by bringing "the political and the aesthetic together while avoiding to offend" his audience (Kakande 2008, 227). Using metaphors and symbols such as marabou storks or a group of bespectacled and bow-tied elite beer drinkers for corrupt politicians, and formal arrangements like disorganised groups of humans for political confusion, he makes political comments while packaging them into aesthetically attractive compositions and colours that secure him patronage. The same goes for his animal prints which may look simple and playful to viewers, but they also reflect his environmental concerns (see Kakande 2008, 244). A viewer needs some familiarity with the symbols used and their Luganda expressions to understand the full range of political criticism in the images.

In the case of his barkcloth engagement, Mutebi addresses other topics than corruption but nevertheless frames them in a global context, such as the revival of indigenous traditions in *ebyaffe* as a cultural asset in a globalised world, environmental activism against global warming, and the struggle against rural poverty through social entrepreneurship. As a result, he exceeds national politics and engages in political issues of both, local and

22 The National Resistance Movement (NRM) is the ruling party in Uganda, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni its leader.



global concern. Similar to his prints, his barkcloth engagement is political “without being subversive” or “attracting sanctions”. Rather, political articulation is expressed in his practice of communicating, networking, and connecting different fields as does the common notion of ‘articulation’. He creates joints between seemingly separate constituencies and thus links them with each other. His profiles and homepages in new media like Facebook and internet add to this networking and promotion as do other media like television. They help Mutebi to reach both a local and an international audience, art lovers, environmental activists, philanthropists, local artists and potential investors. Even interviews like the one I conducted with him are just one element in his practice of creating moments that allow for articulation between potential stakeholders and his project: By speaking to visitors from economically strong countries – including journalists and reporters –, he sensitises them for the value of his work and may gain them as investors, supporters or collaborators. They are an element in the network he develops, and he invests a lot of time and repeated hours of patient explanation in order to strengthen this field of action that depends on both, himself and his partners.

Fig. 8:
Fred Kato Mutebi,
Abannyunyunsi,
2005, woodcut,
16" (h) x 20" (w).
Courtesy the artist.

But the engagement with barkcloth is also political to an extent that a certain client base considers it an expression of Ganda pride and a silent defiance against current national politics. It stands for a reawakening ethnic pride on the one hand, and for a sublime protest against the corrupt national government on the other. Several young artists in Kampala wear hats, carry bags or create other items from barkcloth as a political expression of defiance against the gerontocracy of President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, his corrupt party members and the lack of lived multi-party democracy.

Mutebi himself was a keen supporter of the NRM for a very long time – like most Ugandans who were happy to see the decades-long civil war end and the revolutionary president re-build the foundations for foreign aid and new economic initiatives (Kakande 2008, 224–225). However, already in the early nineties criticism emerged as corruption had become a dominant practice. Mutebi did not only stop supporting the party in practice, but also increasingly expressed criticism in his art, albeit in a “veiled” mode as stated by Kakande. The prints speak to informed Ugandans with a politically charged symbolism while at the same time they appeal aesthetically to viewers and potential buyers unaware of this symbolism. They thus serve as both, political criticism and aesthetic pleasure – an observation that also applies to Mutebi’s engagement with barkcloth. It is interesting to interpret the political articulation in Mutebi’s prints as an anticipation of his more recent engagement with barkcloth which stands for a cultural identification with Ganda cultural heritage rather than the nation state. Mutebi’s decision to develop new technologies with traditional knowledge therefore has a political dimension that is driven by environmental activism, social engagement and political convictions that find themselves increasingly at loggerheads with current national politics.

Conclusion: Barkcloth Promotion as a Mode of Articulatory Engagements

Fred Kato Mutebi is a master in creating moments of articulation between himself and his partners and audiences. He discovers, practices and co-creates articulations in at least four notions of the term. The probably most obvious one reflects the connecting capacities of the artist between things, persons and discourses. He sees and analyses the connections between seemingly distant and unconnected phenomena in a globalised world, he reconstructs their interdependency and formulates them in the terminology of current discourses that dominate environmental activism and the UN sustainable development goals. He creates a logical argument for how barkcloth in Uganda can contribute to the solution of both local problems like unemployment and desertification and global challenges like global warming. He sensitises his visitors, collaborators,



Fig. 9: Teaching material created from barkcloth at the school of Kibinge. Fiona Siegenthaler, October 16, 2016.

colleagues and partners for the often invisible or unnoticed interdependency between regional or national economies and their wider global entanglement. While this ability is characteristic for many Ugandan and East African artists, it is unusually pronounced in Mutebi's very persona and the energy he invests in explaining the connections between different spheres of social life, economy, ecology, politics and creativity and how to solve complex problems by addressing them with the simple solution of barkcloth production. He does so by speaking to different constituencies in their most familiar languages, adapting to the individual settings and situations. He is creating an actual *Lebenswerk* in which one element cannot exist with the other – they all are going through an articulation by being singled out individually and at the same time put into context and inevitably linked to the other elements within his field of agency.

Listening to Mutebi when he speaks about his project, I was reminded of his Christian conviction not so much with regard to the content, but the way he talked about his mission. Like a priest he works toward convincing his stakeholders of the urgency of his mission by means of engaging in clear arguments, adopting a firm voice, and illustrating abstract ideas with concrete examples from everyday life. His is a skill of clarifying complex problems and at the same time convincing his listeners of the integrity and efficacy of his own engagement in solving them. This is one of his articulatory talents: He speaks in comprehensible terms of his project and thereby successively convinces stakeholders of different backgrounds. An essential element of his conversations are also questions. While passionately communicating his project and involving other individuals into his world, he is also a gifted asker. He asks his conversation partners specific questions for instance about technological history, engaging them as active contributors to the conversation and at the same time learning from them. Mutebi's practice goes beyond mere discourse: by engaging people in the conversation, he creates new situations and opportunities and develops an actual market with barkcloth at its centre. This is the performative and generative aspect of articulation as argued by Förster (under review) and Hall (2000).

In addition, Mutebi raises awareness of the power imbalance resulting from capitalist markets and the imminent extinction of long-standing pre-capitalist production modes such as the farming and artisanal production of barkcloth. His attempt at reversing this

history by re-introducing artisanal production and reaffirming cultural validation of barkcloth can be read as an attempt of Mutebi to re-articulate this relationship between capitalist and artisanal production in favour of the victims of globalisation. In the process, he does not only support the experts at the roots of the production – the farmers, the *bakomazi* and their families – but he also actively pushes the secondary markets that involve barkcloth such as those related to Buganda and its symbolic representation with barkcloth, those related to tourism and the expat community and their interest in buying fashionable items with an “ethnic” touch, those related to social entrepreneurship and job creation, and those that promote a “traditional” technology like barkcloth for contemporary, international and sustainable fashion and lifestyle. This secondary market remains closely attached to the actual site and people involved in the production of barkcloth and is geared toward directly benefitting and supporting the latter and their communities. In the spirit of fair trade, Mutebi attempts at keeping control over the intermediary traders to make sure that any income generated in the barkcloth value chain finds its way back to the farmers, the artisans and their communities. Accordingly, his practice is also an attempt at overseeing and identifying the key points in the barkcloth market in order to avoid unequal and abusive market structures.

Fig. 10: Soccer tournament in Kibinge. The tables in the foreground are covered with barkcloth.
Fiona Siegenthaler,
October 16, 2016.



He responds to the economic disparity between local agency and global dependencies. Accordingly, his practice can be understood as a response to the dependency pointed out by Wolpe, Meillassoux and others as key feature of articulation in colonial and postcolonial modes of production.

In this respect, Mutebi's re-articulation of the barkcloth economy can be seen as a political act that challenges hegemonic power structures. For Mutebi, barkcloth is a promise for the future with a meaning in the past, and it is clearly a future that should not rely on a dysfunctional nation state but instead source from other stakeholders and their individual contributions to benefit the producing communities. Mutebi's political interest in barkcloth therefore does not only consist of its symbolical representation of Ganda pride and a sublime statement of political defiance, but in its very materiality as a cultural, social, economic and political asset. As Margaret Nagawa summarises, "[t]he renewed sense of identity among the Baganda, Mutebi's mining of rich subject matter from such political circumstances, and his role in the revival of barkcloth production are instrumental in creating synergies among artists, art, place, and political positions" (Nagawa 2018, 348). His engagements for environmental, political, cultural, entrepreneurial and educational issues all are part of an articulatory process addressing different fields of agency. His work therefore – as did his earlier prints – is like a tool-kit offered to different audiences who can pick what fits best into their agenda while supporting Mutebi's vision. Establishing these points of shared interests and collaboration, Mutebi creates the foundation for a whole set of joints that relate elements to each other in direct or also indirect ways, thus generating a structure of practices and institutions that are flexibly connected to each other. This articulatory practice clearly exceeds the symbolical and representational modes of his prints and embodies the central principle of his and his partners' social and environmental engagement.

Fig. 11: Canvas experiments with barkcloth.

*Fiona Siegenthaler,
August 2, 2017.*



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