

IMPACT OF MULTIMEDIA ARTIST SYOWIA KYAMBI ON THE EXPOSURE OF AFRICAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL THEMES

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ABSTRACT

Background: The world is ever-changing and so is culture. We are living in a world where cities are bustling with a variety of people and there is more racial acceptance. However, in the same world, there are people who are racially ignorant and insensitive. There is also a lot of hidden history of horrendous past events and neo-colonialism is still a practice. As a people we still have a lot of growth ahead of us and that is where multimedia artists come in. Artists such as Syowia Kyambi are breaking barriers by speaking about these issues and enlightening people on historical, political and cultural themes. *Objective:* This paper aims to elaborate how Syowia Kyambi, a Kenyan installation and multimedia artist, is using her art to shed light on African themes. The research aims to elaborate how her work is teaching people about African cultural and political history, race and gender and how these themes connect the past and contemporary society. Analysis of her work shall be done to show how she achieves this. *Design:* The use of qualitative data obtained from desktop research was employed. *Subject:* It focuses on one sole subject, who is Syowia Kyambi. *Result:* The research revealed that Syowia Kyambi uses artefacts made of indigenous Kenyan materials to link the stories she gives with the place of origin. She also uses the artefacts in her performances and photographs to tell her stories and create symbolism. Emotions are a major part of her work as she believes in justice for all which is clearly seen in how she puts across themes such as colonialism. She aims to bring empathy and awareness of past and present African plights as well as educate the masses through installation and multimedia art. This distinguishes her and solidifies her impact as an East African artist.

Keywords: Multimedia, Syowia Kyambi, Culture, History

1.0 INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, art has been a major form of communication. Art is a platform that allows for passage of information and discussion of issues. Mediums such as installation art, paintings, music to performance art all allow an artist to communicate without as much as saying a word. This provides a power to an artist to tackle any issues, educate and even criticize.

Some multimedia artists such as Miriam Syowia Kyambi, are using their art to speak up and discuss issues that are ignored or rendered taboo. There is a lot of hidden history and past violent crimes that the colonial countries do not wish to take responsibility for. As time passes, all this history may disappear, especially with the local African resembling the normal European citizen, who is ignorant of the past.

The world is also evolving at a fast pace and many things are changing. Gender roles, family ties and sexuality seem blurred and are not discussed. The emotions that are hidden have no space in our daily lives and the hurt from the past is forgotten and gains no justice. Miriam Kyambi, aims to disrupt the peace of her audiences with her art, prompting them to think about all these issues. She uses African elements and processes such as basket making to relay her narrative and symbolism is key in her work. Her practice is one that portrays African issues to audiences through the globe, allowing for discussion and understanding.

1.1 Miriam Syowia Kyambi

Miriam Syowia Kyambi is a multimedia artist who works across installation, performance arts, photography, video, drawing and sculpture. She was born of a Kenyan father and German mother in 1979. She is based in Nairobi and her work combines both permanent and impermanent elements such as paint, sisal and clay.

Miriam graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 2002 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA. She also holds an MFA from Transart Institute and she also works as a curator. Kyambi has been the recipient of several awards and grants, including the Art in Global Health Grant from the Wellcome Trust Fund in the United Kingdom. She has exhibited her work in various countries such as Belgium, Finland, Kenya, Mali, Ireland, Sweden, Germany, Zimbabwe, France, South Africa and the US. Her work is held in a number of private and public collections. These include the Robert Devereux Collection, London, the Kouvola Art Museum Collection, Finland, the National Museum of Kenya and with the Sindika Dokolo Foundation.

Kyambi's work explores and questions issues on gender, race, constructed history, sexuality, colonialism and family. She examines how the contemporary human experiences are influenced by history. She collapses history into the contemporary by facing the complex emotions and hurt inflicted by colonialism. She engages the audience, enabling them to understand the links in the morphed now, asking the questions of what is remembered, what is archived and how the audience views the world anew.

Kyambi allows the viewer to participate in a dynamic process that leaves behind a powerful visual impression. She explores relationships and cultural identities, linking them to issues of loss, longing, race

and exploring women's roles in society. She tackles emotions that affect us that are not discussed freely in the African society. Kyambi often blends the contemporary with traditional knowledge thus her wide use of elements such as clay, sisal, beadwork and basket weaving. She also values collaboration and has collaborated with people in other disciplines such as photographers, artists, dancers and filmmakers.

1.2 Miriam's Works

Most of Kyambi's works purpose to make the audience reflect on the past and how it has influenced the present. It seeks to bring an understanding on the human emotions and mourn the past that has been forgotten. Miriam has an extensive line of photography, performance and installation art. Below are some of them.

1.2.1 *Fracture (i)*

Miriam's work, *Fracture (i)*, is a reference of colonialism, transformation and the contemporary situation currently. It is a performance piece. The performance starts with Kyambi in a sisal costume covered with a basket adorned with some beads. The figure makes its way to some pots filled with red paint and destroys them allowing the paint to flow. After the figure finishes their performance, they transform to a woman. The woman is named Rose by Kyambi. Rose becomes the main character and seems to be steeped in doubt.

Rose prepares for her day but she keeps failing to cope. As the performance continues, she keeps stumbling and falling as she goes through her day. She tries to clean up and reassemble the prior broken pots but to no avail. She is seemingly mourning the past. She finally faces the losses of the past and decides to give up the role she had created for herself. She then suspends the sisal costume net to a mirror that reflects the audience henceforth integrating them into the performance.

The performance has a lot to take from. The beginning of the performance has a figure dressed in sisal. The sisal refers to the colonial times and the beads refer to trade. The costume references the colonial sisal plantations that enforced limitations on the Kenyans as it took away their rights to establish financial security. This denied the ultimate power. The figure then destroys the pots full of red paint, a reference to blood. This symbolizes the destruction of culture and traditions during the precolonial times. It also symbolizes the destruction of self.

Rose references the move from rural areas to urban areas. Rose is an upcountry girl who moves to the city and is living a good life. She however deals with confusion and a loss of identity. She finds herself between rural tradition and urban modernity. By trying to reassemble the pots, Rose is trying to mend the past but when she cannot reassemble them, she accepts her feelings of sorrow and agony. By understanding them she is able to know who she is and leave the character she had made for herself behind.

Through this performance, Kyambi speaks on the destruction of culture and the dissolving of our heritage. She mourns the loss of our culture through colonial forces. She shows how this affects the contemporary person and creates a space for this to be addressed. Kyambi explains: "Acknowledging that destruction is a very important step in the reparation process. If you understand your history, then you understand the present-day relationships and circumstances better."



Fracture (i), Installation & performance, 8m by 14m, performance duration 2 hours 30 minutes The Kouvola Art Museum, Finland, 2011, WIELS, Belgium 2015, 49 nord 6 est - Frac Lorraine, France, 2015 Konsthalle Lund, Sweden, 2015, EVA Biennale, Ireland, 2016



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1.2.2 Kaspale

Kaspale, is a character Kyambi devised as a tool to intervene in colonial spaces and to speak about difficult subjects. The mask Kaspale wears resembles a historic Makonde mask in the MARKK Museum collection, which was created by an artist in colonial Tanzania to embody mindimu, the ancestors. It is usually worn during a dance that accompanies the reintegration of initiates into society after transformative seclusion. The name Kaspale is a German/ Swahili combination of the word Kasper and pale. Kasper is a German word while pale is a Swahili word meaning over there. 'Kas' was the prefix of a German word meaning trickster, joker, or shadow. Kyambi mixes the two words to create her own sheng (a fluid creole common in east Africa). She gives power to the character through creolizing the name as it creates a multitude, an unbeatable multitude that will be able to survive and morph over time. The Kaspale are tricksters who engage in satire and they call out authority when needed. They are the voice that speaks up when others cannot.

According to Kyambi 'Kaspale wears a Kaunda suit, a symbol of prestige and political resistance during the post-independence era, bearing also connotations of servitude in our contemporary times.

Made from mosquito netting, which is both protective and permeable, the suit's materiality evokes the ineffectual prevention of the colonizers' penetration across the African continent. The character's red finger paint, referencing ochre, generates the energy of power, traditionally used as UV and insect replant. The highlighted golden fingers, toes and mouth symbolize the speaker; holding the space for truth-telling.



Kaspale's Archive Intrusion / The Vortex (I-IV), Digital Collage Photographic Print on 310 gram Fine Art Paper, 122 x 78 cm / 122 x 62 cm Edition of 3. 2019.

Her photographs of Kaspale are in three different projects, the projects are Kaspale's Archive Intrusion, The Lab Intervention and the Lecture Room Intervention. Kaspale's Archive Intrusion includes postcards of archived photographs. The photographs were produced by zoologists, Julius Vossler and Dr. Franz Ludwig Stuhlmann in the early late 1800 and early 1900 during their time in Tanzania. Kaspale find themselves inside these archived photographs, disturbing the nostalgia associated with the photographs.

The work prompts the audience to ask themselves if there are any traces of colonial entanglement in their lives and if they have kept or collected any materials that relate to the connection between the colonial past and present. Kaspale allows the audience through his disruption of these archived photographs to add their narratives as well as self-reflect on their colonial past.



Kaspale's Archive Intrusion / Postcard Series, Postcard Paper, Edition of 10, 34.5 x 10 cm, MARKK Museum, Hamburg, Germany. 2019

Kaspale are characters who engage in social and satire. They call out authority. In the lab intervention and the lecture room intervention, Kaspale is present. The project takes place in MARKK Museums conservation corridors where the labs used to be and in MARKK Museums Lecture rooms. The labs were where classification took place in the early 1900s while the lecture hall is where first lessons on ethnography and race classification took place. By laying about, waiting, walking on top of the rails and tables, hopping about the basement corridors where the first practical lessons of race classification took place, Kaspale is able to intervene.



'Kaspale's Lab Intervention', Diptych / C-type Photographic Print on Acrylic, (size to be determined), MARKK Museum, Hamburg, Germany. 2019.



'Kaspale's Lecture Intervention', C-type Photographic Print on Acrylic, (size yet to be determined), Performed in the MARKK Museum, Hamburg, Germany. 2019

Kaspale is an ongoing project and most recently Kyambi was diving into the space of nyayo house which was a detention center. She wanted to commemorate the mothers who protested in 1992 for the release of their sons.

1.2.3 *I Have Heard Many Things About You*

This is a performance piece by Kyambi in which she does not speak. It was done in Bremen and was done to bring awareness to the Herero/ Namaqua genocide in Namibia. In this piece she was adorned in a national Herero day dress worn in Namibia in commemoration of the Herero/ Namaqua genocide and those who fought for the rights of the Namibian people a country which gained its independence in 1990.

Kyambi performed the piece in public, making a walk between the Übersee-Museum, through Doms hof via the Böttcher street to the Bremen City Gallery. She aimed to disrupt the public so that they could take a minute to think about their collective history especially Bremen's history with Namibia. Adorned in the Herero dress she dragged a veil of excerpts of letters and records from Chief Witbooi (c.1830 – 29 October 1905 one of nine national heroes of Namibia) and letters from German administrators engaging chiefs from different areas, constitutional resolutions, photographs from the Mohamed Amin Foundation of historical spaces in Namibia. She aimed to bring a moment of reflection to the past. Any audience interested in her was handed a flyer explaining the performance thus enabling them to understand what she was doing. According to Kyambi she wanted her art to make her audience ask themselves how they are personally contributing to situations. Her work demands that the audience see themselves in the 'other' and to recognize the struggle.



'I Have Heard Many Things About You' Performance & Installation. Sisal rope, weighing scale, archive footage (Mohamed Amin Foundation), sand from Namib desert, hero commemorative dress, gold string, fabric & black wool, 14 meters by 2 meters (irregular shape), Original performance duration 4 hours 30 minutes, Bremen, Germany, 2016

1.2.4 *What cultural fabric?*

The project "What Cultural Fabric?" was started in Mexico City in 2009. Kyambi aims to question what a national/ cultural fabric is. Through her research on Mexican history, she was looking into their cultural identity. This made her question what is the identity of Kenya. She asked herself why a country of 42 tribes is represented by a Maasai Shuka (blanket). The piece includes a shirt that belonged to her

mother. The piece is represented in photographs of this shirt. it becomes a fabric and could easily be mistaken for a gunia (Hessian cloth). According to Kyambi the gunia still permeates class and tribal divides. It symbolizes growth, referencing agriculture, construction and interior decorating industries among others. These photographs enable people to question identity and history, asking questions such as why do we need a cultural fabric, by whom and what for?



'What Cultural Fabric?' Print on Photo Rag Paper, (Size and price negotiable). 2010.

2.0 DISCUSSION

2.1 Clothing

Clothing is a major element in Miriam's artistic work. She uses elements of clothing such as business suits, nightdresses, underwear, domestic worker's uniforms among others. The articles of clothing are symbolic in nature helping to sculpture the characters in Miriam's stories. They also hold symbolic meaning an example being the Kaunda suit used in some of her performances. The suit in itself holds a lot of meaning as it stands as a symbol of business freedom. Many businessmen after independence would adorn it and so would the politicians as it showed that they 'were together with the people'. She also uses the Herero cloth from Namibia in the same symbolic manner.



'Between Us: Excerpt II', Installation (double sided mirrors, clothes, projection with wound, stocking, shoes, wig) and (optional performance). Dimensions Variable. Delfina Foundation, London. 2016.

2.2 Materials

Miriam is a multimedia artist. She uses a variety of materials in her performances and installations. She particularly uses a lot of materials that are indigenous, relatable and of African context. She uses materials such as sisal, hessian cloth, earthenware ceramics and even beads that can be considered quite African. The sisal costume she uses in her "fracture I" performance is even made in the traditional Kamba

weaving process that is used in making kiondo's. the use of these materials is usually symbolic and allows her to effectively pass on her ideologies.



'Portals: Houses of the Present Past', Hessian cloth, Christmas lights, sisal string, earthenware ceramic sculptures. Dimensions Variable. Karen Blixen Museum, Denmark, 2010,



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2.3 Human body

From her performances to her installations, humans seem to be at the core. She uses the human



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'Between Us: Chapter I', Installation & performance, double sided mirror, fabric, clothes hangers, metal buckets water. Dimensions variable. Performance duration: 2 hours 20 minutes. GoDown Art Centre, Nairobi, 2014.

body to transcend her messages. The use of the human body also allows her to move and connect with the audience. She uses her own human body as a vessel as in her performance installation ‘fracture I’. She also uses dancers in her work “between us” where through performance she is able to portray her message on social perception and gender issues.

2.4 Archived text/ photographs

As Miriam’s work aims to form a link between the past and the contemporary society, she uses a lot of archived text and photographs in her work. She reads extensively on archived history which is clearly exuded in her content. She also scans old photographs and text and incorporate them in her work. This can be seen clearly in her work. I have heard many things about you” in which she drags a veil that includes excerpts of letters and records from Chief Witbooi, one of nine national heroes of Namibia and letters from German administrators engaging chiefs from different areas. she also uses archived photographs in her installation work “Infinity: Flashes of the Past” where she displays historical photographic material scanned from the Nairobi National Museum’s archive department.



‘Infinity: Flashes of the Past’ Octagon shaped mirror, chain-link wooden glass frames and scanned archive photographs from the Nairobi National Museum Archive, 450 x 45 cm x 45 cm, Permanent Collection, Nairobi National Museum. 2007



‘I Have Heard Many Things About You’ Performance & Installation. Sisal rope, weighing scale, archive footage (Mohamed Amin Foundation), sand from Namib desert, hero commemorative dress, gold string, fabric & black wool, 14 meters by 2 meters (irregular shape), Original performance duration 4 hours 30 minutes, Bremen, Germany, 2016

2.5 Style

Miriam is a multimedia artist. she uses a variety of elements in her work. She employs the use of installation and performance to display and portray these elements. She focuses on the artistic genre of installation and performance as most of her work is 3 dimensional and some of her elements are semipermanent. She employs the use of photography to record her impermanent work as well.

3.0 CONCLUSION

Art is a platform for voices to be heard. Kyambi is a testament to this as she has used her art to

communicate. She has delved herself into African history, human emotions, racial issues and gender, using her craft as a haven for conversation on these issues. Being an African artist who has exhibited in many museums in the world, she is bringing thought to the African history, the violent misdeeds done in the past and how it affected the contemporary African. She continues to tap into the human emotions that are often overlooked and create an opportunity for these feelings to be mourned. Her permanent and impermanent art forms all tell a narrative of the contemporary African and connects the past to the present. Her installations and performances enable both Africans and foreigners to question their daily actions, meditate on current situations and comprehend their past. Creative and intelligent, Kyambi portrays a level of thought in her art that is remarkable.

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