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## Tradition and Transition: The changing fortunes of barkcloth in Uganda

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### *Introduction*

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Scottish travellers, missionaries and colonial officials were among the first Europeans to visit east and central Africa. The objects they collected whilst living amongst those whose customs and traditions were so unfamiliar, form the backbone of the National Museum of Scotland's early ethnographic collections. These collections are tied into the complex historical relationships between Scotland and Africa, however, it is often the case that little was documented regarding the collectors particular collecting strategies or acquisition. In these collections is a type of cloth, barkcloth, a material which predates weaving and is probably the most ancient form of indigenous cloth. It is this cloth, which in the strictest definition of the term is not a textile as it is not woven,<sup>1</sup> which is the focus of my paper.

There is barkcloth in the Museum collections from several neighbouring east and central African countries. The earliest was presented in 1878 by missionary Dr Robert Laws (1851-1934) and throughout the 1880s and 1890s others were presented by missionary Reverend Alexander Hetherwick (1860-1939) from modern day Malawi along with barkcloths originating from what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia. This geographical spread is representative of barkcloth as the most common material for a range of uses in many neighbouring cultures during this period.

In this paper I focus on barkcloth from Uganda in east Africa, and in particular on its use by the Bagandans (in the kingdom of Buganda), the largest ethnic group in the country. Here, as Professor of Art Venny Nakazibwe has discussed, the meaning of barkcloth has been in a continuous state of flux dependent on change in the social, political and economic context.<sup>2</sup> My paper explores a century and a half of the Museum's engagements with this unusual material. It examines how the collections reflect and document the cultural status of barkcloth over the years to reveal how this non-woven fabric is 'woven' into the very fabric of the nation of Uganda. In particular I focus on the influence of external contact, from Swahili-Arab traders, Western missionaries and colonial administrators, which coincide with the period barkcloth began to enter the Museum collections.

Descriptions of the function of barkcloth and the local importance attached to the material are included in the first published accounts of European travellers and missionaries in the territory now constituting Uganda. Whilst these 19<sup>th</sup> century descriptions often reveal the value judgements of the author, as textile historian Sarah Fee has observed,<sup>3</sup> the importance of cloth

<sup>1</sup> J. Picton, and J. Mack, *African Textiles*, (London: British Museum Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>2</sup> V. M. Nakazibwe, *Bark-cloth of the Baganda people of Southern Uganda: a record of continuity and change from the late eighteenth century to the early twenty-first century*. PhD thesis, Middlesex University, 2005.  
<https://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/7008/2/Nakazibwe-phd.pdf>, 281.

<sup>3</sup> S. Fee, "Hostage to Cloth: European Explorers in East Africa, 1850-1890," *Textiles and Politics: Textile Society of America 13<sup>th</sup> Biennial Symposium Proceedings*, Washington, DC, Sept. 18-22, 2012, accessed 14 July 2016,  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/680/>, 1.

and the power of chiefly patronage in the maintenance and modification of clothing fashion and styles is clear.

Uganda, unlike neighbouring countries, continues to produce barkcloth to the present day. This has provided opportunities not only for this study to examine aspects of the cultural history of barkcloth but also to engage with contemporary Ugandan artists and makers. Many are working with this material in their visual exploration and expression of indigenous history, religion, politics and identity; themes through which the Museum's collection can be further contextualised. In May 2016 I visited Kampala, to reconnect with artist Sanaa Gateja who I first worked with during his artist residency in Scotland in 2014.<sup>4</sup> What I discovered is that barkcloth is a material which arouses strongly held opinions, a material which is driving community initiatives and creative energy, and above all, provides a dynamic link between past and present.

### *Barkcloth production in Buganda*

The cloth is produced by stripping lengths of bark from the mature mutuba tree, *Ficus natalensis*, which grow easily in this fertile central southern region of Uganda. After the removal of the bark the tree trunk is wrapped for protection, typically in banana leaves, which grew nearby, allowing another bark to grow, to be harvested again and again on an annual basis for up to 30 years. The stripped bark is cleaned of its outer layer, boiled or steamed, then beaten for several hours with a graduating series of heavy carved wooden hammers, causing the fibres to stretch up to five times in width and approximately one tenth in the length (Figures 1 and 2). The production of cloth from strips of bark is a skilled male occupation which was traditionally passed from generation to generation.



Figure 1 (left) Stripping the bark, Kibinge, May 2016  
Figure 2 Beating the bark, Kibinge, May 2016 © National Museums Scotland

<sup>4</sup> Gateja and Znja, *The Lubare and the Boat*, 2014

The origins of the production of barkcloth are unclear, and there are a number of myths surrounding its beginnings. In one story it is attributed to Kintu, the historical founder of the Kingdom of Buganda, who in the 12th century brought the species of tree and the people skilled in making with him.<sup>5</sup> Oral traditions maintain that barkcloth was originally worn only by the King, known as the Kabaka, and members of his court. However, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the Kabaka decreed that all his subjects should grow mutuba trees and wear barkcloth.<sup>6</sup> It was to be worn as in the royal court, by men, knotted toga style over one shoulder and by women, wrapped under the arms or around the waist. Whilst the Kabaka owned large plantations of the tree, households were also expected to pay tribute to him in barkcloth. Huge quantities of cloth were circulating the kingdom used in a variety of thicknesses not only for clothing, but also for screening and bedding and as a necessary element of all ceremonial and ritual occasions.<sup>7</sup>

### *Tradition and change*

In the opening chapter of his book on his explorations in the region John Hanning Speke (1827-1864) included a detailed description of *mbugu* (barkcloth). He was informed of its extensive use by his well-travelled Arab porter/interpreter Saim, who 'like the rest of the porters in the caravan, wore a shirt of fig-tree bark' in common with 'the people about the equator... [who] all wore this kind of covering'.<sup>8</sup> In the presence of members of the court of the Kabaka Mutesa I (1856-1884), Speke himself felt that he 'cut a poor figure in comparison with the display of the dressy Waganda' who wore, along with their tailored animal skins, beads and shells 'neat bark cloaks resembling the best yellow corduroy cloth, crimp and well set, as if stiffened with starch'.<sup>9</sup> As Speke described, Mutesa was 'scrupulously well dressed in a new mbugu' with beadwork necklets, finger and toe brass and copper rings... For a handkerchief he held a well-folded piece of bark, and a piece of gold-embroidered silk'.<sup>10</sup> His use of both materials may be understood, not only to communicate fusion of traditional and imported Arab styles, patronage at the highest level, but also as a symbolic indicator of political alliance and cultural change.<sup>11</sup>

Speke's account was written after Swahili-Arabs had established contact with the Bagandan people, which brought with it change in the religious and political structure of the kingdom; introducing Islam and Arab style dress, and as a consequence, changes in the use of barkcloth.<sup>12</sup> Swahili-Arab traders had for centuries traded along the eastern coast of Africa, with cotton textiles their main commodity being exchanged for goods such as ivory, spices, gold.<sup>13</sup> The expanding worldwide demand for ivory during the nineteenth century and the growth in the slave trade combined with ever growing competition for commercial markets on the coast encouraged these traders to extend their operations inland.

<sup>5</sup> Nakazibwe, *Barkcloth of the Baganda People*, 57-58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>7</sup> J. Roscoe, *The Baganda Their Customs and Beliefs*, (London: MacMillan and Co, 1911), 252.

<sup>8</sup> J. H. Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile*, (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1884), 154.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>11</sup> J. Perani, and N. H. Wolff, *Cloth, Dress and Art Patronage in Africa*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Nakazibwe, *Barkcloth of the Baganda People*, 111.

<sup>13</sup> Fee, *Hostage to Cloth*, 1.

By the 1840s there was a formalised trading route from the coastal port of Bagamoyo to Karagwe, a thriving centre of local trade in the Great Lakes Region. With the establishment of such new trade routes from the 1860s cotton cloth from India and America was accessible in all but the remotest areas and became the common form of exchange for goods and payment for services.<sup>14</sup> Scottish explorer James Augustus Grant (1827-1892) provides a vivid description of the diversity of trade in the markets of Karagwe. As he observed during his visit there in 1862, 'Trade items ranged from copper and salt brought by the people of Mpororo, tobacco from Nkore, painted matting goods from Rwanda, salt and iron from Unyamwezi, ivory from Bunyoro.'<sup>15</sup> His list of items traded also included 'bark-cloth from Buganda' indicating that this material played an important role in the regional economy. According to Weiss,<sup>16</sup> barkcloth, particularly from the Baganda and neighbouring Banyoro kingdoms, continued to possess greater prestige than coastal cloth, even though less durable than cotton. Cloth was also important in negotiation to secure alliances and to open up trade through gifts to leaders of finely woven cotton and silk,<sup>17</sup> and Speke listed '4 rich silk cloths' amongst his presentation of gifts to the Kabaka, demonstrating the role of imported cloth in diplomatic exchange.<sup>18</sup>

### *Missionary Contact*

This period of sartorial transition was recorded by Dr Robert Felkin (1853-1926), a medical missionary from the Church Missionary Society, who during 1879-80 became Mutesa's personal physician. He described *mbugu* as the 'national dress' of the Bugandans. Writing only eighteen years after Speke, he also observed that 'foreign dress is gradually making its way among the people, and Mutesa himself has quite discarded the native *mbugu* in favour of Arab and Turkish costume'. He goes on to provide further detail: 'The commonest article of foreign dress is the kanzu, or shirt of calico, which reaches down to the heels, and is secured around the waist by a sash or girdle. Kuftans or chogas, embroidered gowns of woollen stuff, and of various colours, are worn by the king and richer chiefs, while trousers, stockings, red shoes, and fezes have been introduced and are gradually spreading through the country'.<sup>19</sup> Felkin's interest in the indigenous material culture resulted in his collecting a variety of objects from Uganda which were presented to the Museum in Edinburgh in 1891, although no barkcloth was included.<sup>20</sup>

Imported cotton cloth gradually became increasingly available. As with barkcloth before it, over the years access to this imported fabric shifted from being the exclusive preserve of royalty to being in widespread use.<sup>21</sup> Just as Islam had a significant impact on Bugandan clothing practice,

<sup>14</sup> D. M. Gordon, "Wearing Cloth, Wielding Guns: Consumption, Trade and Politics in the South Central African Interior during the Nineteenth Century," in *The History of Consumption and Social Change 1840-1980*, R. Ross, M. Hinfelaar and I Pesa, eds., (Leiden: Brill. 2013), 27.

<sup>15</sup> J. A. Grant, *A Walk Across Africa: Or, Domestic Scenes from My Nile Journal*. (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1884), 255.

<sup>16</sup> B. Weiss, "Northwestern Tanzania on a Single Shilling: Sociality, Embodiment, Valuation," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 12., No. 3 (1997), 350.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon, *The Objects of Life in Central Africa*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Speke, *Journal of Discovery of the Source of the Nile*, 286.

<sup>19</sup> C. T. Wilson and R. W. Felkin, *Uganda and the Egyptian Soudan, Vol. 1*. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1882), 152-153.

<sup>20</sup> The Felkin collection of ninety three objects from Southern Sudan and Uganda which included weaponry, domestic utensils, basketry and beadwork was initially loaned to the Museum in 1891 and subsequently transferred after purchase by the Museum into the permanent collection in 1908.

<sup>21</sup> Roscoe, *The Baganda. Their Customs and Beliefs*, 227-228.

the establishment of Christian missions too changed attitudes towards and the use of barkcloth. Missionaries such as Felkin and Roscoe were not only recording the changing clothing trends but were instigating a variety of dress modification and adaptations to distinguish followers of Christianity with clothing, particularly aimed at women, designed for western values of modesty and decency.<sup>22</sup>

Missionary John Roscoe's (1861-1932) publication on the customs and beliefs of the Buganda, based on his twenty five years in Uganda between 1884 and 1909, includes a striking number of references to barkcloth, not only as royal regalia, but in everyday life. He recounts how it played a part of nearly every aspect in the life-cycle - at birth, in coming of age rituals and in marriage ceremonies as part of the dowry, and in the preparation of the body for burial.<sup>23</sup> Nakazibwe has observed that missionaries had difficulty in untangling the distinctions between these indigenous social and religious practices, but clearly barkcloth featured prominently in most ritual activities, therefore its displacement could be seen as a material expression of the rejection of traditional beliefs and practices.<sup>24</sup> For missionaries trying to spread Christianity, barkcloth was a symbol of opposition to the belief system they were attempting to inculcate. For the missionaries and their converts it became seen as a 'satanic' fabric, an association that some continue to make, as it continues to be worn and used by practitioners of traditional medicine and beliefs.

#### *Barkcloth in the Colonial Period*

In 1894 the Kingdom of Buganda was merged with neighbouring kingdoms to become the British Protectorate of Uganda. British colonial government officials took up residence in the country. Throughout the early decades of the 20th century, like those missionaries who preceded them, they also proved a source for the Museum of more examples of barkcloth and the implements used in its production. Competition with indigenously cultivated cotton, the increasing spread of Christianity, and changes in the system of land taxation were all having a negative impact on barkcloth production and use. One has to wonder whether this material was being collected perhaps as evidence of a dying tradition and material evidence of a pre-colonial way of life.

However, throughout the colonial period barkcloth continued its association with the royal household, and more generally with burial and mourning. Indeed, it was in this context that it was used as a symbol of protest and solidarity in the latter stages of the colonial period. As the British Government began to prepare for the transition to Independence, conflicts between the Buganda Kingdom and the colonial Government led, in 1953, to the deportation of the Kabaka and his court. As Nakazibwe has described, in the popular imagination exiling the Kabaka was equated to his death, generating a public outpouring of grief. In response many in Buganda reverted to wearing barkcloth as a symbol of mourning for, and allegiance to, the Buganda monarchy, and at the same time a sign of protest against the colonial administration.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> L. Hume, *The Religious Life of Dress*, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 28. For women the *gomesi* style loose cotton floor length dress with a square neckline and short puffed sleeves developed, worn as traditional dress across Uganda to the present day. For men the Arab style ankle length *kanzu* tunic continued to be worn.

<sup>23</sup>The Roscoe collection is stored at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, and contains a number of lengths of Bugandan barkcloth and ritual objects wrapped in barkcloth.

<sup>24</sup> Nakazibwe, *Barkcloth of the Bagandan People*, 141-42.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

With Independence in 1962, Uganda was fragmented on religious and ethnic lines.<sup>26</sup> Over the next 30 years, tribally based kingdoms, which had continued under the British Protectorate, were abolished, as part of the nationalisation programme and the move to a Republic. The social, political and economic situation in Uganda was thrown into turmoil as military conflict and the impact of dictatorship spread throughout Buganda, and the Kabaka, who had returned in 1955 but in 1969, was again exiled. Within Buganda, as Nakazibwe has noted, by the early 1980s, the organization of cultural activities like pre-marriage introductions and weddings, or child-initiation ceremonies, and last funeral rights, which involved the use of barkcloth, proved impossible.<sup>27</sup> This was not only because many people had been displaced from their homes and communities but also for fear that social gatherings would be mistaken for rebel groups during this period of political turbulence and military rule.

Restoration of the monarchy in 1993 had a profound effect on rebuilding a sense of Bugandan collective identity. With the coronation of Kabaka Mutebi II, barkcloth, which had continued to be used as the symbol of monarchy within the Royal tombs, once again became prominently associated with ethnicity and self-identity, connecting the people with their royal heritage. Today, for example, at the annual festival to celebrate the anniversary of the coronation, barkcloth is worn by members of the crowds who attend, often fashioned into western-style sashes, baseball caps, neck ties and suit jackets.<sup>28</sup> With these new developments the population took the tradition of wearing barkcloth at a royal occasion and refashioned, reinterpreting this icon of cultural identity.

#### *Barkcloth in the contemporary context*

Recognition of the significance of barkcloth production in 21<sup>st</sup> century Bugandan cultural identity was acknowledged in 2005 when UNESCO proclaimed Ugandan barkcloth making a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.<sup>29</sup> What impact did this have for the future of production and use? As Professor of Art Lesli Robertson has discussed, the listing seems to have encouraged a number of initiatives, both locally and internationally with commercial and creative outcomes.<sup>30</sup>

One such initiative, funded by the US embassy in Kampala, is run by brothers, Fred Mutebi, a printmaker and art activist, and Stephen Kamyia, a community organiser. Their project, “Revitalisation of the Craft of Bark Cloth making in Kibinge Sub- County, Bukomansimbi District”, is in the Masaka region, historically associated with barkcloth production (Mutebi 2015). They have initiated a long-term plan to plant trees, and train a new generation in all aspects of cultivation and production.<sup>31</sup> One man whose farm is part of this project and whose knowledge is being shared with young apprentices is Paul Katamiira Bukenya.<sup>32</sup> The skills of

<sup>26</sup> P. Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 227-235.

<sup>27</sup> Nakazibwe, *Barkcloth of the Bagandan People*, 319.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO. “Barkcloth making in Uganda”, *UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage*, accessed Aug. 20, 2016, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/barkcloth-making-in-uganda-00139>

<sup>30</sup> L. Robertson, “Rethinking Material Culture: Ugandan Bark Cloth,” in *Textile Society of America 2014 Biennial Symposium Proceedings: New Directions: Examining the Past, Creating the Future*, Los Angeles, California, September 10–14, 2014, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/897/>

<sup>31</sup> Kamyia, *pers. comm.* 30 May 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Anonymous, Paul Bukenya Katamirra, Cultures-Uganda, 2015.

barkcloth production have been passed down in his family for generations - he can trace his family's involvement in the craft back at least hundred and fifty years. With a barkcloth workshop and over eighty *Ficus* trees, his family represents one of the biggest producers in the region. He recently introduced an urban audience to this long-held family tradition through his art installation, *E'kkomagiro* (Beating Shed) for KLA ART 014 in the Railway Station gallery space in Kampala.<sup>33</sup>

An active supporter of this revitalisation project is Sanaa Gateja, the founder of Kwetu Africa Art and Development Centre, based in Lubowa, Kampala. The Centre was established for research and innovation in the arts using readily available materials, and to provide training in rural communities, using art to fight poverty. Gateja is recognised as one of the East Africa Pioneer Artists.<sup>34</sup> He is passionate about barkcloth as a medium for expression. His work includes creating wearable art, mixed media collages, and he has had prestigious commissions for interior design schemes (Figure 4). In an ongoing project he reconnects Ugandan and Scottish history through exploration of the impact of 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish missionary Alexander MacKay (1849-1890) and his work in Uganda.<sup>35</sup> Gateja's close relationship with the producers is crucial to his artistic practice. The organic nature of the bark means that no two pieces are identical and this diversity is a major inspiration to his work. As he reflects: 'An empty barkcloth contains many ideas – it talks to you. I look at the bark I have chosen to work with, start to cut it, choose the width and length and observe how the lines, the texture and colours almost become part of the working process. You talk to it and it talks to you'.<sup>36</sup>



Figure 3 *Lususu Easy Afric* barkcloth products, African Craft Village, Kampala, June 2016  
Figure 4 Mixed media artwork by Sanaa Gateja, June 2016 © National Museums Scotland

<sup>33</sup> M. Serubiri, M. "KLA ART 014, Unmapped", 2014, accessed Aug. 21, 2016, <https://issuu.com/32eastugandanartstrust/docs/catalogue5>

<sup>34</sup> A. Donovan, "Celebrating East Africa pioneer artists," *Daily Nation*, Nov. 8, 2015, accessed Aug. 20, 2016, <http://www.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/lifestyle/Celebrating-East-Africa-pioneer-artists/1214-2946890-rjifw/index.html>

<sup>35</sup> Gateja and Znja, *The Lubare and the Boat*, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Gateja quoted in Thomas, *Jewels in Motion*, 2011.

A vital part of the initiatives to revitalise the Ugandan barkcloth industry is the creation of new outlets for the product. A particular selling point in the international market is the eco-friendly and sustainable methods of production of the material. This is a feature which attracts London-based Ugandan designer José Hendo, who has been working with barkcloth for fifteen years and has done much to launch it onto international catwalks. As she declared in an interview for London Fashion Week in 2014, “Designing clothes now requires an awareness of the environmental impact of the fashion industry. That’s why I combine good design with sustainability. ... My dream is to make barkcloth work alongside mainstream fabrics”. She added, “Barkcloth has a personal as well as cultural relevance to me and my ancestry which I am honouring in my work”.<sup>37</sup>

To promote non-tradition uses of the material Kampala-based university lecturer, artist and business woman Sarah Nakisanze has established a Fairtrade company *Lususu Easy Afric* which employs women to create barkcloth products including bags, belts, cushions and storage, made in Uganda for the tourist and export markets (Figure 3). Significantly, the very association of the material with traditional beliefs and practices was one of the challenges she had to negotiate to establish her business. The workforce, in particular some of the home-workers in rural communities, had to be persuaded to overcome their prejudices regarding negative associations of the cloth with death and the spirit world, and allow the material into their homes.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 5 Art wear by Xenson, *Futuristic Past* show, Kampala, 2011, reproduced by kind permission of Xenson Znja  
Figure 6 *Musisi* by Xenson, outside Makarere Gallery, Kampala, 14 April 2016. Photograph by Eric Mukalazi, reproduced by kind permission of Xenson Zjna

Like Gateja and Hendo, other Ugandan artists are exploring the potential in barkcloth for creative expression. These include Kampalan artist Ssenkaaba Samson, also known as Xenson.

<sup>37</sup> J. Shaw, “José Hendo LFW catwalk and panel – featuring AFG founder Jacqueline Shaw this Week!”, *Africa Fashion Guide*, Sept. 8, 2014, accessed Aug. 20, 2016, <http://www.africafashionguide.com/jose-hendo-lfw-catwalk-panel-featuring-afg-founder-jacqueline-shaw-this-week/>

<sup>38</sup> Nakisanze, *pers. comm.*, 3 June 2016.

For his 2011 fashion show entitled *Futuristic Past* he created a series of highly original barkcloth outfits, which referenced his Bugandan history and identity.<sup>39</sup> In a recent installation *Musisi* [Earthquake], in the exhibition *kabbo ka muwala (The Girl's Basket), Migration and Mobility in Contemporary Art in Southern and Eastern Africa* at Makerere Art Gallery in Kampala, Uganda, 14 April -12 June 2016, he again used barkcloth in a work, in which he reflects on the historic influences of movement and migration of people (Figure 5). As Xenson said:

My work is multi-layered and includes a lot of metaphors and references. The traditional barkcloth that I use in the installation symbolizes the earth, nature and African ingenuity... The stitches show the borders imposed either by tribal demarcations or the colonial partition of Africa. They also show their fragility... blurred by intervention of a proposed United States of Africa.<sup>40</sup>

On his visit to Scotland in 2014, Xenson brought with him a selection of garments from his fashion show. One was acquired for the NMS collections, (accession no.V.2014.73), as representative of his innovative contexts of use, and of NMS interest and engagement with contemporary Ugandan arts. A length of barkcloth was also purchased for the Museum collection during the author's visit to Katamiira Bukunya's workshop in 2016 and further acquisition of contemporary barkcloth inspired artworks is being considered.

### *Conclusion*

This research is a contribution towards contextualising the Museum collections, which has revealed dynamic and complex historic links between Scotland and Uganda. When first registered in the Museum, barkcloth was an integral part of Bugandan life and it was in no small part British political and religious intervention that impacted on the decline of its production and use. The international recognition by UNESCO is acknowledgement of the critical role of specialist craftsmen in ensuring survival of this enduring symbol of Bugandan culture. Bound up in the actions of previous generations, both the makers and users, barkcloth embodies a sense of community, tradition and continuity. Continuity is not necessarily straightforward, and the trajectory of barkcloth is going in new directions as artists and designers appropriate, experiment with and reinterpret the material. Perhaps no other artist working at the moment in Kampala encapsulates the 2016 Symposium themes of "Crosscurrents" more than Xenson. With *Musisi*, he foregrounds the material and symbolic potential embedded in barkcloth to address contemporary issues of local and global relevance in ways that reference its enduring role as a critical medium of cultural identity.

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<sup>39</sup> Mpubani, R. "Futuristic Past comes with style," *Daily Monitor*, Nov. 14, 2011, accessed Aug. 21, 2016, <http://www.monitor.co.ug/artsculture/FashionBeauty/-/691228/1272576/-/101hmmqz/-/index.html>

<sup>40</sup> R. Chikukwa, K. Hoffmann, I. Lähnemann, I. Peters-Klaphake, and L. Potts, (eds.) "Xenson, Musisi," *kabbo ka muwala* exhibition catalogue, 2016:174, accessed Aug.21, 2016, [http://kabbokamuwala.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/catalogue\\_online\\_web\\_23Feb.pdf](http://kabbokamuwala.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/catalogue_online_web_23Feb.pdf), 174.

furthering my understanding of the contemporary context of barkcloth. Acknowledgement is also due to Geoff Swinney for his insightful comments during the preparation of the paper.

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