
EBY'OMU MUTWE, EBY'EMIKONO

THINKING WITH THE HEAD, THINKING WITH THE HANDS

education policies
Southern epistemologies

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Buganda is a kingdom in the central region of a country in East Africa that is currently called the Republic of Uganda. The people of Buganda are referred to as the Baganda and their language is called as Luganda. Luganda is a Bantu language, and hence the Baganda are classified as a Bantu people.

Buganda is the political and commercial capital of the Republic of Uganda. It has been at the centre of the region's politics since long before the formal period of European colonialism. Both pre- and post-independence governments have at times used Luganda words to name legislation, policies and treaties. The most famous one is the Buganda Agreement of 1900 that the Kingdom of Buganda signed with the British Government and so formally creating the Uganda Protectorate. (It should be noted that Uganda Protectorate was made up, like the later Republic, of more than 9 ethnic groups and over 40 different language groups – none of which were not signatories to this agreement.) The Baganda comprise just 16.9% of the current Ugandan population.

The words Omutwe and Emikono are words that feature in many Bantu languages, although their pronunciation, spelling and specific local denotations may differ. In Luganda (the language spoken by the Baganda), these words refer, respectively, to the head and to the hands.

It is from these two words that the Luganda terms Eby'omu Mutwe and Eby'emikono derive. In Uganda, these words are commonly used to refer to informal education and to symbolic creative activities.

The literal translation of Eby'omutwe is possessive in nature – that is, it refers to something that belongs to or something accomplished with the aid of the head or brain.

Eby'omutwe can be used to denote working with, and from memory. Crucially, the word assumes thinking processes to be the most important element of the creative activity.

Eby'emikono, by contrast, is a word used to describe activities, disciplines, and visual and tangible outcomes which rely solely on the creative use of the hands. Any thought processes involved in such an activity are understood to be a purely physical and practical in nature. But both Eby'omu Mutwe and Eby'emikono imply a tangible outcome.

The reality is, of course, that acts of making and thinking cannot be separated. In our opinion, when it comes to symbolic creative expression, the physical act of making is inseparable from the act of thinking, and vice versa. But it is of interest to us that the language Luganda creates and preserves such a distinction.

As terms and practices, Eby'emikono and Eby'omu Mutwe long predate the arrival of the first white Christian Missionaries in the Kingdom of Buganda in 1879. Traditionally they referred to specific jobs, some which, for example, were undertaken for purely commercial purposes, others were solely undertaken in the service of the monarch (i.e. partially or wholly symbolic). Among such jobs were those of drum makers, artisans and boat builders. Historically, the Baganda would undergo years of training to master such skills.

Britain's colonisation of what is now Uganda dismantled and undermined much of Buganda's traditional distribution of social, economic and symbolic practices. In fact, colonialism went so far as to create a whole new social structure: perceived by the British as being the most civilised or developed (or accommodating?) of the peoples in the new Protectorate, the Baganda were actively recruited as its indigenous administrators. Consequently many of them were given access to a rudimentary European-style education and training that was systematically denied to other ethnic and language groups.

This kind of 'white' education soon subordinated all other forms of education within Buganda society and within the Protectorate as a whole. White collar jobs and office work (albeit in many cases, extremely menial ones) became a primary aspiration for many. Such forms of work were accorded high social status and secured comparatively well-remunerated employment within the British colonial administration. Consequently, over time, Eby'emikono and Eby'omu Mutwe (symbolic creative practices that supposedly involved thinking with the hands or with the head) became associatively wholly with the work of peasants and with those who could not afford the white man's

education. And they were not included in early curricula the British colonisers offered to the indigenous Baganda elite.

When white British-trained art teachers first introduced the formal teaching of European-style visual arts in the Uganda Protectorate in the late 1920s and early 1930s, they met resistance not only from the colonisers but also from elite and socially aspirational parents and their children who by now associated what the British termed 'arts and crafts' with Eby'emikono and Eby'omu Mutwe. Even though, thanks to the efforts of Geraldine Fisher (a secondary school teacher in a girl's missionary school) and Margaret Trowell (founder of the fine art department at what is now Makerere University), the visual arts became part of the elite curriculum, within broader Ugandan society, they have never been wholly able to disengage themselves from their association with Eby'emikono and Eby'omu Mutwe, which had become socially stigmatised as result of the colonial encounter.

In the present day, the word Eby'emikono is used more frequently to refer to creative and artisanal practices than the word Eby'omu Mutwe, although the latter term has not entirely fallen out of use. Quite often you will hear someone say in Luganda, *nina omulimu ogw'omu Mutwe* which can be translated as 'I have a job which I know how to do. This job is in my head. It is a talent. While doing it, everything comes naturally.' (i.e. it requires little or no ongoing effort on my part.)

This we would argue is perhaps because another meaning Eby'omu Mutwe acquired under colonialism was that of cramming – for the white Christian missionaries mainly taught by rote learning. So when it comes to creative work nowadays, an accepted idea is to repeatedly produce the same thing year after year without innovation. This is reflected, for example, in the carpentry and furniture that is produced in every Ugandan town and city, where you will find virtually no variation in designs between one workshop and another. This is what Eby'omu Mutwe (thinking with the head) can mean or look like in practice in Uganda in 2018.

The Republic of Uganda, which has one of the world's youngest populations, also has Africa's second highest school dropout rate. Even though, since 1997, primary education has ostensibly been free, the reality is that almost all schools are fee-paying, and 68% of pupils drop out every year, mostly because their families cannot afford it. Thereafter many of school dropouts either join their families in subsistence farming, or attempt to seek or create jobs for themselves in what the government calls the informal sector, which comprises a large and diverse range of economic activities, many of them focused in the service, retail and what might be termed artisanal sectors. (Uganda's manufacturing base is small and extremely weak, so many everyday household items

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like chairs, tables, bedsteads, doors and gates are still made by hand largely without mechanised tools in small roadside workshops.)

In recent years, the Ugandan government has established policies and attempted to introduce measures to improve the skills and long-term economic prospects of this huge number of young people who do not complete formal European-style education. As part of a strategic plan called 'Skilling Uganda', published in 2014 by the Ministry of Education & Sport, they have

attempted to initiate an apprenticeship scheme called 'Non-Formal Business, Technical and Vocational Education and Training' (or BTVET for short).

As in many other former colonies, the language of the coloniser (in Uganda's case English) remains the language of government and law. And interestingly (for our purposes), when translating BTVET into the vernacular, the government describe it as Eby'emikono. To offer a more elaborate, more personal if somewhat crude and cynical interpretation, when describing BTVET as Eby'emikono, we believe that what the Ugandan government are attempting to promote to young people is a 'creative' alternative form of education not wholly dissimilar to the system they dropped out of because of their socio-economic and academic inadequacies that will nevertheless get them out of poverty quickly because all they need is their hands. (And not their brains.)

We believe that the government's use of the term Eby'emikono in its attempts to explain BTVET points to its continuing failure either to dismantle the colonial-era European-style formal education that was invented to create clerks and primary school teachers (at best), and which continues to fail so many, or to creatively overhaul its formal curricula to incorporate long-standing indigenous practices of creating, teaching and learning. There was no place for thinking in the colonial curriculum for anyone outside the upper echelons of the elite, and there is no place for thinking now in the skills-focused technocratic vocational model the government is attempting to use to 'soak up' the vast numbers of young people who are failed by the formal education system every year.

And this, we believe, continues to have a deleterious effect in some sectors or disciplines on the progressive development of symbolic creative work in Uganda – on its production, its teaching, its reception and its social impact – despite the historically important role played by cultural production in anti-colonial and independent movements not only in Uganda and across the world. 'Art' (with a capital A) has become

at once both an elite practice remote from everyday life while at the same time it is also denigrated as an low-status activity of the peasant class that requires no brains.

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