

## **Policy brief for the PhD Project More than entertainment: Popular culture and entrepreneurship among urban youth in Uganda (DFC-file no 09-036-AU)**

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### **Objectives**

The overall objective of this study has been to examine the dynamics between popular culture and cultural entrepreneurship in processes of social change and in the formation of personal futures through an ethnographic account of young people working as popular musicians in urban Uganda.

The study focused three analytical themes:

- Appropriation and consumption
- Social spaces and innovation
- Mobilisation efforts

### **Project activities and Outputs**

The project activities were carried out in four phases: data-collection, analysis and write-up, courses and institutional work, and dissemination of results.

Data collection was carried out during four stays in Uganda between November 2009 and June 2011, in ten months of ethnographic fieldwork among musical artists and media professionals in Kampala and Gulu.

The subsequent phase focused data processing, analysis and writing-up of the findings from the fieldwork. As part of the PhD-program, the researcher was enrolled in the Graduate School for Anthropology and Ethnography at Institute for Culture and Society at Aarhus University. Central activities towards fulfilling the requirements for the PhD degree were participating in PhD courses, planning and convening PhD courses and panels, and convening and teaching courses at Gulu University and Aarhus University.

The dissemination and outputs of the project contributes to development and development research on three levels:

**Academic:** A Ph.D. dissertation (monograph) entitled “Connectionwork - Making a Name in Uganda’s Music Industry,” ten papers presented at national and international conferences in anthropology, media studies and African studies, and four articles accepted or published for peer reviewed academic journals and books.

**Local stakeholders:** Presentation of the study and central findings were shared with researchers, students and music industry professionals at workshops at Gulu University and Makerere University, and at workshops for music industry professionals, and at cultural festivals in Kampala

Further dissemination workshops are planned for the fall of 2014.

**Public:** The findings and results of the study helped formulate an initiative to educate older school children in Denmark (grades 5-10) about youths’ livelihoods in Uganda, in collaboration with the UNESCO collections’ education program at Moesgård Museum.

## **Central findings of the study**

The study examines the creation and practice of fame among young musicians in Kampala, Uganda. It investigates how young people engage popular music as resource for creating themselves as people with economic and social value in their society. Specifically, it explores practices of self-fashioning by following young singers as they try to become “*big names*” in the music industry by working on and through “*connections*.”

A new generation of musicians emerged in Kampala in the 1990s in the context of neoliberal reform and the availability of new digital technologies for production and reproduction of music. The account of the Ugandan music industry shows how a city not historically regarded as a center for cultural production, , with its weak formal institutions and infrastructures regarding the production, sale and performance of popular music, gave rise to a strong informal music industry where many different people make a living from popular music, and its stars increasingly are regarded as national and regional celebrities. Karaoke, miming songs made famous by others, has become a dominant form of performance and generative practice which offers young urbanites new ways of imagining and fashioning themselves as *artists* who are part of a global music industry, and where personal fame is the central commodity. Here, fame is condensed in artist “*names*”, as aspiring artists work on becoming famous through extending their names to possible fans as well as others in the music industry. Engaging with young artists’ conceptualizations of “*connections*” as pivotal for making a name, I argue that connections arise in the tensions between the social logic of *kwatagana*, characterized by mutuality and exchange, and *omukutu*, the social logic of channels. I propose to understand the practices of balancing, shifting, disrupting, stabilizing and experimenting with these tensions in the effort to make a name as “connectionwork.” I describe the social organization of artists and their entourage into collective *crews*, and show how these collectives constitute connectionwork along disparate principles of relatedness. Yet artists also seek to make a name through *beefs* – the competitive opposition between artists and crews. I examine *beefs* as alternating modalities of connectionwork, which both constitute and rupture social conventions and negotiates the moral values of contemporary urban life in Uganda. Through an analysis of youth music in the 2011 election campaigns, I link connectionwork to broader societal dynamics, as the self-fashioning practices of young musicians transforms the relationship music and politics in efforts to mobilize voters. This study offers a Ugandan perspective on transformations between local and global popular culture and on young peoples’ strivings towards being counted as valuable persons in their societies. By developing the notion of connectionwork the thesis intervenes with regional debates on networks and relationality and offers an anthropological approach to emergent urban contexts where people work intensively on creating, experimenting with and stabilizing what binds people together in larger collectives.

### **Policy recommendations**

The music industry in Kampala is emergent, youth driven, and informal. The practices and livelihoods of young people working with popular music holds lessons about youth entrepreneurship and urban economies which might be drawn forward towards formulating development policy.

### **Popular culture and “connections” as a resource**

The study stresses the importance of social relations or “social capital” in informal emergent urban economies.

It is important for development interventions into youth driven creative economies to recognize and feed into the existing structures and markets, however informal, rather than assuming that because the industry is largely informal, it does not exist.

The music industry in Uganda is a site for youth entrepreneurship, and many of the small businesses within it is run primarily by youths. In these new creative economies emerging across Africa it is particularly clear that economic capital is not necessarily the most important resource. Rather other kinds of values and capital in the form of “connectionwork” stands at the center of successfully generating value in these economies. It is important for development interventions to remain sensitive to this context and to support young people’s own business initiatives and community projects. Thus, future development initiatives could support existing initiatives to develop professional associations which seek to protect the interest of singers, musicians, deejays, radio-workers etc.

Further, the study indicates that there is a need for support to the development of artist networks and initiatives across the east African region, and globally, fostering collaboration and exchange of knowledge and practice.

### **Popular culture as mobilization**

Since the study was initiated, the music industry in Uganda has increasingly caught the attention of policy-makers and development actors. Popular music is from this perspective seen as a way to mobilize youths to participate in public life or take on particular values. Based on the findings of the study, it is clear that popular culture and popular music in particular has become a resource to reach out to young urban populations and to effect social change on different levels. Here artists and “big names” become important public figures.

The study points the attention of development initiatives and policy makers towards the relationship between popular culture and politics on local and national levels. To begin to recognize popular artists as a new kind of figure in public life, as well as their potential influence, may be an incentive to work towards protecting their interests, in order to avoid co-optation by political and financial elites.