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## SMTD graduate student helps plant seeds for rebirth of Uganda's royal music traditions

Using the seeds of a nearly extinct gourd, Oakland University graduate student James Isabirye is helping the people of Uganda rediscover their musical roots by reintroducing instruments, songs and traditions that were almost lost forever following decades of conflict and political upheaval.

"These are the traditions that drive the Ugandan people to be who and what they are," said Isabirye, a lecturer of music and drama at Kyambogo University in Uganda who is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Music Education at Oakland University. "These traditions are the essence of the community, and when they are lost, the people are lost as well."

According Isabirye, there are several constituent kingdoms in Ugandan society, including the kingdoms of Bunyoro, Buganda, Ankole, Toro, and Busoga.

"Each kingdom has its own musical traditions," he said.

While studying the traditions of the Basoga people of southeast Uganda, Isabirye was first introduced to Bigwala, a genre of ceremonial music and dance centered around five or more gourd trumpets that are blown in combination, accompanied by drum players, singers and dancers. It was primarily performed during royal celebrations, such as coronations and funerals, until the kingdoms were abolished by former President Apollo Milton Obote in 1966.

"The music was rooted in the kingdoms, so when the kingdoms were abolished, all the things to do with them, including the musical traditions that were very much cherished, were abolished as well," Isabirye said.

By the time the kingdoms were restored in the 1990s under President Yoweri Museveni, many of their musical traditions, including Bigwala, were on the verge of extinction.

"The people had forgotten about Bigwala," Isabirye said. "No one played the music, no new musicians knew the trumpets, farmers had forgotten how to grow the gourds used to make the trumpets, and the seeds were lost. So we started the process of trying to bring it back."

Isabirye began by applying for a grant from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He received approximately \$24,990.



*James Isabirye (center) has been teaching OU students about traditional Ugandan songs, dances and instruments, including the Baakisimba drums.*



*James Isabirye (second from left) has been working with Mark Stone (fifth from left), an associate professor of World Music and Percussion at Oakland University, to teach OU students about traditional Ugandan songs, dances and instruments, including the Baakisimba drums.*

“When the money came, the first thing I focused on was creating an environment where the only surviving (Bigwala) player, James Lugolole, could live,” he said. “When I first met him, he was sleeping in something like a shack. The money went to build him a house where he could be happy. It turned his life around immediately. He became more energetic, and he used that energy to teach others.”

Isabirye then set about establishing communities where people could learn how to grow the gourds, make the trumpets, play them and dance to Bigwala music.

“When we would come, we would bring a few gourds with us, make the trumpets and leave the seeds with the community so they can grow their own gourds and continue to practice what we have taught them,” he said.

According to Isabirye, it takes approximately three-and-a-half months to grow a single gourd.

“But that one gourd became a matchstick,” he said. “In Uganda, we use fire to cook so if you get a matchbook and you only have one matchstick remaining, you will either be very careful with it so you can have dinner or you will fail and go hungry. This gourd was our

matchstick. If the seeds from it did not multiply, we would have missed the Bigwala the same way one misses their dinner.”

With support from UNESCO and the Singing Wells Project, a non-profit organization committed to identifying, preserving and promoting the diverse music traditions of East Africa, Isabirye and Lugolole have helped to train more than 100 people in Bigwala music.

“We’ve started to empower people, and it’s really taken off,” he said. “We’ve recently taken it into the schools, and it’s become part of the curriculum for Uganda’s Certificate of Education. But more importantly, this musical tradition has found its way back into the lives of the Basoga people.”

Based on the success of the Bigwala project, Isabirye has received support from the Singing Wells Project to reintroduce another musical tradition in Uganda: the Entenga drums of the Buganda Kingdom.

“The Entenga drums are actually 15 tuned drums played by six people,” Isabirye said.

Like the gourd trumpets of Bigwala, the Amakondere (gourd trumpets of Buganda) and Izungwa (drums of



during performances for the king in the palace.

“Entenga was a very important palace tradition,” said **Mark Stone**, an associate professor of World Music and Percussion in the **School of Music, Theatre and Dance** at Oakland University who has performed with the foremost musicians of Uganda, Ghana, Trinidad, South Africa, India and the United States.

*at Kyambogo University in Uganda who is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Music Education at Oakland University, demonstrates the embuutu drumming of the Baakisimba set.*

But when the palace in the Buganda Kingdom was attacked and destroyed in 1966, the royal musicians disbanded and much of the music was forgotten.

“There’s no place in the world where Entenga music is played except for Buganda, so if it isn’t being played there, it isn’t being played anywhere,” Isabirye said.

In an effort to revive the tradition, Isabirye searched for any surviving Entenga drummers who had played at the palace.

“The first destination I went to was the kingdom of Buganda,” he said.

After about 10 months of searching, Isabirye located Musisi Mukalazi, one of the last surviving royal instrumentalists that played the drums in the palace as a child.

“I found him through his sister,” Isabirye said. “By that time, he had moved about eight miles outside of the village. When I found him, he was so frail, so I invited him to stay with me at my home.”

Isabirye also asked Mukalazi to teach his students at Kyambogo University, and eventually invited professional musicians to play with him.

“He considered himself an ‘old dog,’ but he still forged a connection with these musicians, who had never even heard of this kind of music before,” Isabirye said. “Within a month, they had learned nine songs on the Entenga.”

As word of Isabirye’s efforts spread, the musicians Mukalazi had been playing with were invited to play during two performances for the king of Buganda, Muwenda Mutebi II.

“The king remembered when he was a young man and there were Entenga players in the palace,” Isabirye said. “The professional musicians played the Entenga drums in exactly the same way as the men he used to see when he was a boy, so he got a chance to relive his youth.”

According to Isabirye, the king was so impressed by the performance that he wanted a private audience with the musicians.

“It was unusual,” Isabirye said. “The king doesn’t ask to meet with people, especially in public. But this time he veered from tradition and invited us. When we met him, he shook my hand, and said ‘I’ve heard about you.’”

According to Professor Stone, many of the musicians that Isabirye and Mukalazi had been working with have gone on to become teachers of Entenga music, as well.

“The real excitement is he’s not just reviving these traditions to be played for the king, which is fantastic in itself, it’s that he’s also training these guys to become teachers so they can carry on this important work,” Stone said. “It’s really exciting to see.”

