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Stanford, Ugandan students bridge cultural divide through performance

Stanford students team with their peers at Makerere University in Kampala to examine their preconceptions of each other.

BY CYNTHIA HAVEN

Michael Rooney, Class of 2011

It took more than an hour to get through customs.

No surprise. When the small cluster of Ugandans brought eight large wooden drums, a 4-foot wooden xylophone and animal skins through U.S. Customs in San Francisco, the officials were flummoxed. The drums couldn't be dismantled to search for explosives, and they didn't understand why animal skins were needed for dancing, anyway.

Bay Area audiences soon will be able to figure out what the officials couldn't: The Ugandan dancers and drummers will perform *Beyond My Circle* in Piggott Theater at 8 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 1, and 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 2. The performances are free and open to the public. The show is a collaborative effort between Stanford students and their counterparts at Makerere University in

Kampala. The performance had a successful debut at the National Theater in Uganda earlier this month.

The collaboration was born, in a sense, with drama Professor Michael Ramsaur's first trip to Africa two years ago. For the Stanford Drama Department lighting designer, it was an eye-opener – a clash of expectations and realities in an equatorial land where the sun rises and sets at around 7 o'clock, year round.

Personal connections were forged: He deepened his friendship with a Ugandan colleague he had met in Prague a few months earlier, a theater designer, Augustine Bazaale, who teaches at Makerere.

Ramsaur expected to make observations about race, culture and social privilege. "What I discovered was people who were happy, self-satisfied, working in difficult conditions," he said. "Being a stage designer is hard there."

Now he's sharing the experience: Through the Arts Intensive program, Ramsaur has created an exchange that links Stanford students with their peers at Makerere. The effort was supported by [SiCa \(the Stanford Institute for Creativity and the Arts\)](#), the Bing Overseas Studies Program and the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education.

Diverse backgrounds

A dozen Stanford students have joined five Ugandan students and three Ugandan instructors to create an event combining music, dance and the spoken word. The social makeup is mixed on both sides: "A princess from one of the tribes is in our group, as well as orphans," said Ramsaur.



Students perform in the premier of "Beyond My Circle" at The National Theater in Uganda.

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"This project has been exciting, especially from the Ugandan side," said Bazaale. "It's the first of its kind." It is the first collaborative exchange between an American and a Ugandan university.

Bazaale relates the customs imbroglio wasn't the first difficulty in the unprecedented collaboration. The Ugandan students had to struggle just to get their visas.

The exchange program, he said, examined "how Africans think about America, and what Americans think about Africa." For Americans, he said, the stereotypes of Africa typically include "poverty,

corruption." And Ugandans' preconceptions of America? The question elicited another of Bazaale's characteristic infectious peals of laughter: "All of them rich, all of them driving."

Stanford students visiting Uganda for three weeks had "10 rehearsal days to generate material and put it on its feet," according to Isaiah Wooden, the Stanford drama graduate student who co-directed the production with Aida Mbowa, also a drama graduate student, from Uganda.

Wooden noted that Kampala is "not a tourist destination," so foreigners are "exoticized." Wooden, an African American, said he was seen as *mzungu* – a white person – only "a *mzungu* with darker skin," he said.

He watched American students who came to Uganda "in a search for home and roots" come to grips with the size of Africa and the particularities of the region and its history.

For Uganda, in East Africa, race is "not part of the conversation," Wooden said. The region did not participate in the slave trade, and the white population is small; hence, "there isn't fluency or literacy in that particular history."

Preconceptions explored

In many cases, students were exploring preconceptions they didn't even know they had. For example, Wooden wasn't expecting to find "how proud the Ugandans are. It's built into the way they

communicate."

For Americans, "it's in poor taste to list accomplishments without some sense of modesty." In Uganda, however, "everybody states what they've done, and they state it with pride. They let you know that they are amazing and you won't meet anyone like them," he said. "I didn't assume that was something going to be built into the performance of self."

Ramsaur noted that he bought pencils and paper to distribute to Ugandans, who live in an oral, rather than written, culture: "Our kids have it in their backpacks. It's what we do. It's not what they do. It wasn't just from poverty."

Transportation provided another source of challenges. "It's mostly dirt roads," said Wooden. "It's unclear how and when they were constructed. It's its own adventure."

The adventure continued with the group traveling for four days in a bus in the Ugandan countryside. In one village, eight or nine musicians and three dancers improvised a performance under a tree. As they heard music and drumming, about 250 people came from surrounding villages (sometimes only a few hundred yards away) to listen. "It's a cultural happening."

Kampala performances of *Beyond My Circle*

attracted audiences of between 500 and 700 people each night. At the final curtain call, 30 to 40 people from the audience spontaneously joined the students to dance.

The sense of "cultural happening" prevailed in California, too, as Stanford and Makerere students relaxed during an evening barbecue in Ramsaur's Menlo Park backyard, a day after the Ugandan students arrived at Stanford. The students sang a Ugandan song, and then the South African "The Lion Sleeps Tonight."

Half a dozen men and women did the *bakisimba* – a traditional dance in which the upper body is fixed and immobile, as the hips gyrate rapidly (it's performed in *Beyond My Circle*). Ramsaur said that

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Stanford students Kimberley McKinson and Natalia Duong "picked it up very fast. They're considered as good as the Ugandans."

Hence, the animal skins that so befuddled the customs personnel: Even when the traditional animal skins aren't handy, if any Ugandan wants to join in the dance, "the first thing they do is grab a shirt and sweater to accentuate the movement," Ramsaur said.

The skins, sweaters or shirts wound around the hips "accentuates the wriggling. It's part of it somehow. It's so natural it's not even a statement. It's what they do," he said.

Surveying the students, celebrating their reunion after several weeks apart, Ramsaur is more than pleased: "This has been the success I was hoping for."

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