Life&Arts



Motivation. At some point, I felt I needed to challenge myself beyond the routine I had become used to in media.



How Nakitende took bark cloth to the global stage

Trailblazer. She had no money for glue, no access to modern machines, and no interest in abandoning ancestral knowledge. Instead, she assembled wooden mallets, mortars, and pestles, and turned a traditional Ugandan craft into a globally recognised enterprise. P.28

BY MIRIAM WATSEMBA

Her work has been shown in Germany, France, Switzerland, and the United States. She is a recipient of the Prince Claus CAREC Fellows Award. She is currently exhibiting at the Uganda Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which will run until November of 2026. In 2022, she held a solo exhibition at the Chemistry Laboratory at Makerere University; a deliberately unglamorous venue for a deliberately unglamorous practice. Her work is held by the Buganda Museum, the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, and the Feminist Foundation for Contemporary African Art in Geneva.

She has also become a mentor and tutor, extending her practice through teaching, because she understands that knowledge lives in bodies, not in PDFs. The only way to ensure the continuation of revered traditional practices is encouraging the younger generation to try them out. This is what separates Sheila Nakitende from the ordinary run of internationally exhibited artists.

You could attend the Venice Biennale, stand before her work at the Uganda Pavilion, and come away impressed by the sheets of organic handmade paper, their textured surfaces bearing photographs and drawings that seem to emerge from the fibre itself. You would note the craftsmanship, the conceptual clarity, the quiet confidence of the installation. What you would not see, unless you travelled afterward to a hillside neighbourhood in Kampala called Rubaga, is the small home studio where the work actually begins. And you would not see the tree.

The Mutuba tree (Ficus natalensis is its Latin name), grows in family gardens across the Baganda region, unremarkable to the untrained eye, until someone approaches it with a knife. The harvest is not a felling. The harvester makes a longitudinal incision, peels a strip of bark, and leaves the tree to heal. The same tree will be harvested again, year after year, for a lifetime. This conservation is as a habit, older than any environmental science department, embedded in the relationship between the Baganda and the land they have tended for centuries.



Sheila Nakitende in her modest studio in Rubaga. PHOTOS/ MIRIAM WATSEMBA.

The discarded city

Nakitende, who is 43 years old, did not grow up intending to become an advocate for the Mutuba. She came to it sideways, through failure and curiosity. In 2014, working at Artpunch Studio, she noticed the mountains of discarded paper on Nasser Road, the city's printing hub. She had no money for commercial glue, no access to imported materials.

What she had was cassava flour, water, and the willingness to boil one into the other. The paste worked. She began making art from another people's waste. That practical workaround born of necessity, not vision, slowly deepened into a question: If paper is fibre, and fibre is everywhere, then what does it mean to make paper in Uganda, from Uganda?

The ancestral toolkit

Instead of modern machines, Nakitende assembled a different kind of toolkit; wooden mallets, mortars, pestles, and boards worn smooth by decades of use. The same implements her ancestors had used to make bark cloth for generations. With these, and only these, she interpreted her knowledge into the quiet, repetitive labour of real-time production. The principles were identical; soaking, boiling, beating, forming sheets, only the names were different.

THE AMERICAN DETOUR

The question led her to a residency at the Women's Studio Workshop in upstate New York in 2017, where she learnt formal papermaking techniques and confirmed her intuition that bark cloth could be reduced to pulp and reformed into sheets. She travelled with strips of bark cloth in her luggage, carrying home with her even as she went abroad. In New York, she learnt their techniques with the sole purpose of applying them her practices when she got back home. Then she returned to Kampala with knowledge and nothing else.

Nakitende merged contemporary knowledge from the United States with traditional tools from her ancestors and began making organic paper in her home studio in Rubaga. The brown bark cloth of the Mutuba tree became her primary medium, not only for its fibrous strength but for its ethics. The white bark cloth of the dundu or kirundu tree, by contrast, carries ceremonial weight, and she uses it sparingly, with the respect it demands.

The elders and the archive

This is the point at which Nakitende's work becomes difficult to categorise. She is not a traditionalist after all she travelled to the United States, learnt from the global North, and brought those techniques home without apology. She is not a modernist either. She rejected the expensive equipment she could not afford and turned instead to what the land would give her. She occupies a third position, one for which English has no ready label; she is an artist who is reverent.

Reverence, for Nakitende, is not a metaphor. It describes a concrete set of practices. She learnt from elders, women and men who still remember how to harvest and dry bark cloth, because their knowledge lives in their hands, not in any archive. These are conversations that reach into history and ask difficult, necessary questions: What did our ancestors do differently? And what must we relearn, if these trees and these practices are to survive?

The small things

There is a photograph in her studio of her late maternal grandfather, Zakaliya Munywanyi Kabuye. He made bark cloth in his time, not as art but as survival. She has printed his portrait on her handmade organic paper. The image is neither sentimental nor ironic, is a fact, placed alongside other facts; a pair of size-4 shoes she wore in 1988, framed with bark cloth and discarded Nasser Road paper, now standing in the midst of an artist's profound life's work.

On a table sit two small jars. One contains seeds of eKyangwe (loofah). The other, seeds of ebita (gourd, or large calabash). She is farming and storing seeds for future generations. Not as a side project but as the same project, because paper, after all, is just organised fibre. And fibre begins as something living. If you want to make paper in Uganda from Uganda in twenty years, you had better have planted something today.

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