

Depicting Human Rights Abuses in the Batwa Community Through Painting for Empowerment in Southwestern Uganda

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Abstract: The Batwa community of Southwestern Uganda, which was forced off the forests they have inhabited in the early 1990s, have been facing decades of marginalization, forced displacement, and the systematic violation of their human rights (Twinamatsiko, 2017; Nkurunziza, 2020). Voices of Batwa people are still not heard in mainstream education, political and cultural conversations, even with continued advocacy. This article explores the use of painting as a medium of documentation and pedagogical tool as an empowerment. The study is based on a practice-based research project that yielded three series of paintings, each representing a theme: *Shadows of the Forest*, *Beneath the Surface*, and *Voices in the Soil* and shows how creative expression can be used to raise awareness of injustice, challenge stereotypes, and assist in the process of transformative education. The article also claims that painting is a knowledge production method that is easy to access and emotionally compelling to produce knowledge that can be used to spark conversation around indigenous rights and social justice in Uganda.

Keywords: *Batwa Community, Human Rights Abuses, Painting, Empowerment, Practice-Based Research, Visual Art, Art Education, Indigenous Peoples, Displacement, Marginalization, Southwestern Uganda, Critical Pedagogy, Social Justice, Visual Storytelling, Cultural Identity, Indigenous Representation, Artistic Advocacy, Decolonial Art, Community Empowerment.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Education is generally known as a situation of learning and sharing knowledge, which is normally in a formal setting like school or college. But for the marginalized, who often are left out of the major narratives in their own history, the need for alternative ways of teaching and learning arises (Freire, 1970). In the learning domain of art, art in general, and, in particular, visual art, has the ability to tell lived realities in ways that are not constrained by language and literacy. In painting, imagery, symbolism, color and composition can capture viewers' emotions and intellects and stimulate critical thinking (Eisner, 2002).

The Batwa of the Southwestern part of Uganda is a good example of the significance of alternative methods of education. The Batwa were traditionally forest dwellers, who once inhabited both the forests and the surrounding areas of Bwindi and Mgahinga in the current Districts of Kisoro, Kanungu, Rubanda and Kabale. The forest was an integral part of their life, their faith and their culture. However, during the early 1990s the Ugandan government declared Bwindi

Impenetrable Forest and Mgahinga Gorilla National Park as protected conservation areas despite the Batwa being evicted without any reasonable compensation or resettlement support (Twinamatsiko, 2017).

This forced uprooting of peoples had significant social, cultural and economic implications. The Batwa lost access to ancestral lands, traditional hunting and gathering practices, medicinal plants and even sacred cultural sites. Since then, many Batwa communities have been in extreme poverty, social exclusion, landlessness, face discrimination, limited education, and poor access to healthcare services (Nkurunziza, 2020; Tumushabe & Musiime, 2006).

In the face of these challenges, experiences of Batwa continue to be excluded from the mainstream public discourse and education systems in Uganda. A discussion is presented to convince the audience that painting is an innovative and accessible way to educate the public on the human rights abuses that the Batwa have faced. Art through visual stories depicts injustice and also provides room for reflection, dialogue, and empathy and empowerment.

The research also helps to fuel a current debate on the representation of indigenous peoples, socially engaged artwork and practice-based research in Africa. The article attempts to take a middle-ground approach, as it places painting in the field of art and research, and shows the potential of creative methodologies in supporting human rights advocacy and transformative education.

➤ *Art as Education and Advocacy:*

From the beginning, art has been an effective weapon for resisting, remembering and liberating. In diverse communities, visual art has been a means for artists to resist oppression, to reveal injustice, and to voice the marginalized. (Freire's 1970) theory on the critical pedagogy is described as a pedagogy that can provoke critical consciousness in the oppressed community and that would be able to promote social change. In a similar way, (hooks 1994) considers education to be "practice of freedom" that can "challenge systems of domination.

Visual art is closely related to these thoughts, as they can be expressed symbolically and emotionally. Paintings are images that can communicate without the need for literacy and without the need for formal education. Imagery can open the door for viewers to enter into experiences that they might not otherwise see or pay attention to (Eisner, 2002).

For the Batwa people, who have often been ignored in official accounts, painting is the way to regain visibility and dignity. Artistic representation can serve as a memorial, record lived experience and establish an emotional bridge between the audience and the marginalized communities (Nkurunziza, 2020).

Art has been employed to promote human rights causes and political opposition worldwide. In Mexico, Diego Rivera created murals that highlighted social injustice and the abuse of labour, and during apartheid in South Africa, resistance art decried racial injustice and state violence (Nixon, 2013). In the current context, art in Uganda however, is still often undervalued as political and educational tool with its ability to create public discourse and social awareness (Okello, 2019).

This study will help address that void, not only by showing that painting is a vehicle for artistic expression but also for activism and education. The project also underscores the importance of art as a means to defy stereotypes regarding Indigenous communities and promote empathy, reflection, and critical thinking.

II. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Painting as a Means for Research*

This research used a practice-based research approach where artistic production itself was the process, and the result, of the research. Creative practice is acknowledged as a legitimate method for the generation of knowledge (Candy & Edmonds, 2018) and it is through creative practice that insight can be generated.

The medium chosen was painting as the primary media because it can communicate emotion, symbolism and narration that is easy to see in the painting. While only textual approaches can be used, painting enables audiences to go and feel with themes of suffering, resilience, identity and empowerment.

• *The Research Process Was:*

- ✓ Contextual Investigation – The study was based on literature review on the topic of displacement of Batwa, indigenous rights and human rights violations in Southwestern Uganda.
- ✓ Concept Development – Themes of displacement, invisibility, marginalization, resilience and empowerment were used to develop the visual concept.
- ✓ Studio Practice – Emotional and social realities were expressed through symbolic imagery, color relationships, texture and composition in a series of paintings.
- ✓ Exhibition and Audience Engagement – The finished works were displayed in exhibition areas where the viewer participated in the art by observing, discussing and interpreting the paintings reflectively.
- ✓ Interpretative analysis and audience response to the works of art led to critical reflection and informed opinions on the educative and communicative value of these works.

➤ *The Project Yielded three Thematic Stages of Painting, Namely:*

• *Phase I: Shadows of the Forest*

This phase was primarily concerned with the effects of displacement and cultural loss due to eviction of the Batwa from their ancestral forests. Dark shades, broken shapes, and lone figures represented anonymity, isolation, loss of identity and homeland. The paintings focused on emotional trauma and historical erasure.

Amongst the central paintings of this stage are a pair of somewhat contorted human figures enmeshed amongst the roots of a large tree. The image represents the Batwa people, who were displaced from the forest and are now living a dual life in the jungle, with a direct link with the forest. The tree is a place to shelter, a place to be from, a place to remember, a place to be.

The elongated figures and exaggerated expressions of face and body exude fear, suffering and psychological unsteadiness of forced displacement. The figures are surrounded by what appear to be root-like structures, possibly representing entrapment or a connection to the land and cultural heritage.

The background is filled with abstract, broken-up, and dynamic brushstrokes, enhancing the ideas of social disintegration and fragmentation. Warm and muted colours heighten emotional unease and amplify the trauma of uprooted life.

- *Phase II: Beneath the Surface*

This phase identified the continued challenges that the Batwa communities are encountering, such as poverty, social exclusion, discrimination and stigma. Structural inequalities that are still present in Batwa life were symbolized by layered compositions and constrained spaces, which are still visible in today's society.

- *Phase III: Voices in the Soil.*

The last stage was focussed on resilience, dignity and empowerment. Earthy colors and organic textures represented cultural continuity, regeneration, and optimism. This phase of the Batwa was not just about their victimization but also about their endurance, identity and the possibility of a social change.

The paintings were turned into educational texts, which could start discussion or reflection. The exhibition spaces invited the viewer to be aware of the issues of indigenous rights, social justice and historical accountability while following (Freire's 1970) concept of dialogical education that required a critical engagement with the issues.

➤ *Theoretical Framework*

Theories of critical pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, visual culture and decolonial artistic practice inform this study. These frameworks offer conceptual underpinning to the understanding of painting as a tool of art and as a tool for transforming education and politics.

(Freire's 1970) theory of critical pedagogy proposes that for oppressed communities to be able to become critically aware of the social structures in their lives they must be educated. Freire's education is not seen as a process of imparting knowledge to the learner, but rather a process which asks the learner to reflect, participate, and transform. In this study, painting is used to create a dialogical space that invites viewers to critically reflect on the experiences of Batwa displacement and marginalisation.

Likewise, (hooks 1994) sees education as a discipline of freedom that has the power to challenge systems of domination and exclusion. Her vision of engaged pedagogy focuses on emotional resonance, experience and involvement in transformative learning. The paintings in this project generate a strong emotional response and symbolically evoke empathetic engagement with indigenous struggles.

The study is also backed by the theory of visual culture which focus on the role of images in forming public knowledge, memory, and identity (Darts, 2004). The use of visual imagery can convey complex social realities in ways that are beyond the limits of literacy, and provide open opportunities for reflection and conversation.

A decolonial approach to the study challenges the historical processes of representation that have excluded indigenous voices from the dominant political and cultural discourses. The project's focus on the Batwa experience, captured through visual storytelling, challenges the historical erasure and helps to shift the narrative of indigenous visibility, cultural memory and social justice in Africa.

III. DISCUSSION

➤ *From Canvas and Classroom:*

The paintings sparked a lot of dialogue in exhibitions, in the academic community, and in the community. The images touched the audience on an emotional level, as well as on the intellectual level, with discussions of displacement, inequality, and indigenous marginalisation.

Accessibility is one of the advantages of painting as an educational tool. Visual communication avoids some of the difficulties involved with academic language and instruction through literacy (Darts, 2004). Paintings open up windows on the complex social realities that can sometimes be abstract and inaccessible, through symbolism and emotional resonance.

The artworks can be used in educational settings across a range of subject areas including human rights, indigenous studies, visual culture and social justice education. They challenge pupils to consider the injustices of the past and to also think about the ways in which people are excluded and different in the world today.

Art for the Batwa communities is a means of recognition and affirmation. Having some of their experiences represented on canvas sends the message that their stories and their struggles are important. The process helps to restore dignity, gain cultural visibility and helps to defy dominant stereotypes that have historically marginalized indigenous people (hooks, 1994).

The project further provokes the thought that art is not the second goal of academic study. Rather, it shows that art practice can be a valid research process that can produce knowledge, raise questions, and can help to transform society (Candy & Edmonds, 2018).

Additionally, the research adds to the general discourse on indigenous representation in the contemporary African art. The study shows how creative methodologies can be used to promote empathy and public engagement, in contrast to many discussions on human rights advocacy which focus mainly on legal or policy-based approaches.

Painting becomes an archive of memory, and a catalyst for dialogue through the transformation of lived experiences into visual testimony. In this way, art is more than just illustration; it is a way of learning that can shape perception and foster social awareness.

The educational qualities of the artworks were further reinforced by the audience's comments during the exhibition engagements. A number of viewers gave the paintings a lot of weight because of their emotional impact and informative appeal, specifically in relation to the unspoken trauma of indigenous communities in the country's mainstream narrative. Witnesses participated in discussions about land rights, displacement, poverty, and cultural identity, using visual art to inspire viewers to ponder and engage in conversation.

Some members of the audience said they felt the paintings helped them to get a better sense of the Batwa experiences that went beyond what they could get it from a written report or academic paper. This implies that visualization could serve as a proficient tool for bridging the gap between academic research and public dissemination.

The exhibition itself created a space for the viewer, students, artists and educators to consider issues of justice, belonging, and indigenous recognition together. The exchanges are very similar to Freire's (1970) notions of participatory and transformative learning.

➤ *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical representation was a key consideration in the creation of this artwork, given that this study focuses on human rights abuses and indigenous marginalisation. The research was designed to present the Batwa with dignity, sensitivity and respect, and not a sensational or suffering image of the Batwa.

The paintings did not portray violence in literal terms but rather through symbolism, color relations, spatial fragmentation, and emotional atmosphere, all themed as a displacement from and exclusion from, resilience to, and cultural survival of violence. The methodology aimed to maintain the humanity and agency of the Batwa community and promote reflective engagement in audience.

The research also emphasized the need for responsible representation of the histories of marginalised groups whose stories have often been distorted or overlooked through responsible storytelling. As a result, artistic interpretation was supported by scholarly research, cultural sensitivity and the desire to bring to life a representation that is advocacy-oriented.

➤ *Figure Document and Visual Analysis:*

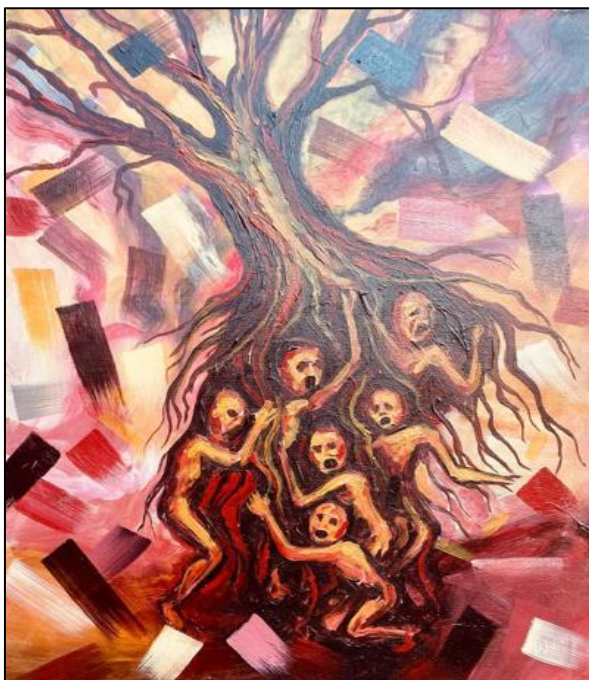


Fig 1 Shadows of the Forest

Acrylic on canvas, 120 × 100 cm, 2025.

The figures in the painting are also distorted, appearing to be emerging from the roots of a large tree, which suggests that the Batwa people have a close relationship with the forest environment and its natural life. The tree is a metaphor for family, place, remembrance and culture.

Sculptural forms of the twisted roots visually connect the human bodies with the idea of displacement from ancestral lands, as it implies a psychological and cultural division. The expressive face distortion conveys fear, grief, vulnerability and collective trauma.

The arrangement pulls the viewer up through branching lines that radiate across the canvas to produce movement, and emotional impact. Abstract brushstrokes in the background of the image create an impression of disintegration and social unrest, further highlighting the instance of forced eviction.

The colours are warm, red, pink and earthy brown, representing suffering, memory, and the longing of people for land. The painting uses symbolic imagery and emotion to challenge history, and to highlight indigenous resilience and cultural survival.

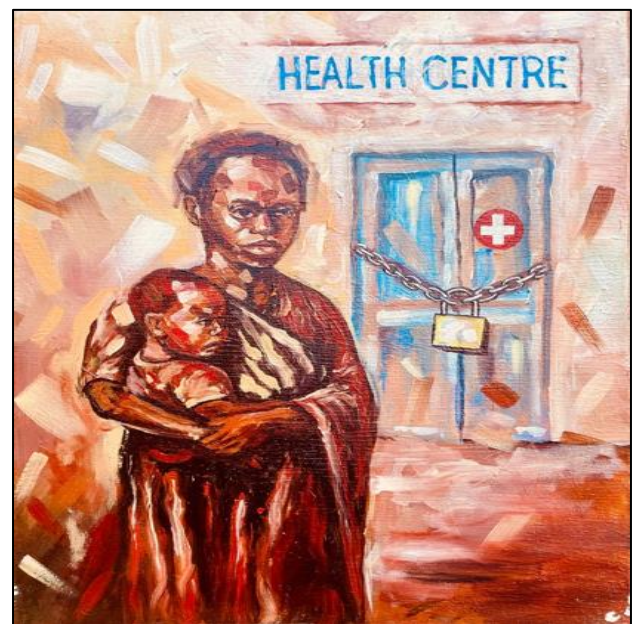


Fig 2 Beneath the Surface

Acrylic on canvas, 120 × 100 cm, 2025.

This is a painting of a Batwa mother holding her child, standing in front of a closed health center. The medical facility is chained and padlocked, reflecting systemic exclusion and inaccessibility of health care services in the marginalized indigenous communities in Southwestern Uganda.

In the composition the mother and child are clearly in the foreground, giving emphasis to vulnerability, emotional burden and human dignity. The child's close physical

proximity to the mother reinforces themes of dependency, protection and intergenerational suffering.

The overall colour palette is warm tones, which evoke a sense of the natural earth and make the figures feel like part of the land, yet also give a sense of tiredness, deprivation and tension. This is an unstable, uncertain and neglected visual space because of the expressive brushwork and layered textures.

The case is made even more poignant by the juxtaposition of the bright medical cross and the locked door to the entrance. While healthcare infrastructure is present, access to them is limited to marginalized populations. The painting uses symbolism and emotional expression to condemn structural inequality and emphasize the injustice of healthcare for the Batwa community.



Fig 3 Voices in the Soil

Acrylic on canvas, 120 × 100 cm, 2025.

Created in acrylic paint, *Voices in the Soil* investigates the concepts of resilience, survival and cultural continuity in a heavily textured manner with expressive movement. The figures dancing around the fire represents the collective strength, resilience and renewal in the face of the suffering and displacement endured throughout history. The way the paint is applied adds a layer of energy and emotion, and the upward composition conveys a sense of hope and spiritual persistence.

The book-like section with text obscured by paint depicts moments of violence and oppression, yet the paint over the words represents resistance and healing, indicating that these experiences are not the community's defining ones. Rather, dignity, resilience and the continuity of native identity from generation to generation are highlighted.

➤ *Significance of the Study:*

First, it widens the discussion on human rights education in Uganda by making painting a pedagogical tool that can tell indigenous experiences in a way that is accessible and emotionally compelling.

Second, the research advances the art scholarship generated from practice in Africa, as art production can be legitimate academic research in itself.

Third, the study highlights the Batwa experiences in the current visual culture in Uganda, thus countering the lack of indigenous voice as part of the mainstream visual culture in the country.

Lastly, the project provides a model of how socially engaged art can be used to fill gaps in academic research and public awareness and to empower communities. When paintings are displayed and communicated visually, they create a space for advocating, talking, and recognizing culture.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the study shows how painting can be used for educational and advocacy purposes, there are some important limitations to be noted.

First, the meaning of visual art is always subjective and can be different depending on the cultural background, education, and perception of the audience. Secondly, the research remained focused on painting and other creative methods were not explored, including digital media, sculpture, film or participatory community-based art practices.

Also, the engagement to the exhibition took place in relatively small academic and artistic contexts and was therefore not documented extensively in the public sphere. The study also depended so much on the artistic interpretations of the practitioners and not on the extensive collaborative production with the Batwa themselves.

Even with these restrictions, the project highlights the tremendous potential of the arts as an educational, advocacy, and indigenous visibility tool.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Educational institutions, policy makers, artists and culture workers are advised to start using creative methods more often in debates on human rights and indigenous representation.

In curricula concerning social justice, the rights of indigenous peoples, and cultural studies, the visual art approaches should be included in the universities and schools.

Cultural institutions should facilitate exhibitions and art projects in the community that give voice to people who have been marginalized.

Practice-based methods need to be more investigated in the field of African scholarship, especially in relation to indigenous communities and Social Advocacy.

Support programmes to document and share the Batwa cultural heritage through art, by government and non-government organizations.

Future projects should include and provide opportunities for participatory artistic engagement between members of Batwa communities and the artists themselves to engage in the creative process and story-telling.

VI. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research could focus on the use of digital art, digital photography, film, installation art, and community engagement projects such as murals to further indigenous advocacy and community empowerment.

Comparative studies should also explore the use of visual art in other African communities affected by displacement to grapple with issues of identity and cultural survival in East Africa. Furthermore, future projects can explore ways in which Batwa-led artistic projects can not only be subjects of representation but also the creators of visual stories.

VII. CONCLUSION

Today, the Batwa people of Southwestern Uganda are still being marginalized, displaced and wrongfully dispossessed of their land by other communities, and are still experiencing the violations of their human rights (Nkurunziza, 2020; Twinamatsiko, 2017). However, these experiences can be expressed in powerful ways through painting, as a testimony, an education and an advocacy.

Thematic series *Shadows of the Forest, Beneath the Surface and Voices in the Soil* are the products of this study, which illustrate the power of visual art to make marginalized experiences visible, to create space for dialogue and critical reflection.

Painting makes nothing silent and makes nothing invisible. It provides viewers the chance to see injustice, and to challenge the way society is organized that fosters exclusion. The creative methodologies like painting, for educators, artists, researchers and policymakers, should thus be welcomed as important tools for the promotion of justice, inclusion and indigenous visibility.

Ultimately, this work also establishes that art is not art for art's sake, but art as a vehicle for scholarship or activism. Instead, art has the ability to teach, provoke, remember and empower those that have been marginalized in today's society.

➤ *Author 1 Biography*

Mike Mashemererwa is a Masters of Applied Design and Fine Art (MADFA) student at Kabale University,

Uganda. His research interests are socially engaged art, indigenous representation and painting as a tool for human rights advocacy and community empowerment through his practice. His art work focuses on the Batwa people in Southwest Uganda, who bear the marginalization of their past, their identity in relation to their own and other cultures, and their resilience.

➤ *Author 2 Biography*

Dr. Mike Nandala is a lecturer in the Department of Applied Design and Fine Art at Kabale University, Uganda. He is involved in teaching, research, and supervision of students in fine art and design. His work focuses on visual arts education, art theory, and applied design practice. He supervises both undergraduate and postgraduate students, supporting them in creative and research-based projects. Through his academic role, he contributes to the development of art and design education in Uganda.

➤ *Author 3 Biography*

Edward Kamugisha Ssajjabbi is a Ugandan visual artist, researcher, and lecturer in the Department of Applied Design and Fine Art at Kabale University. He specializes in painting, design, and visual culture, with artistic works that reflect African culture, community life, and social transformation. Dr. Ssajjabbi has participated in several national and international exhibitions and is committed to promoting art education, cultural preservation, and creative research through teaching and visual expression.

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