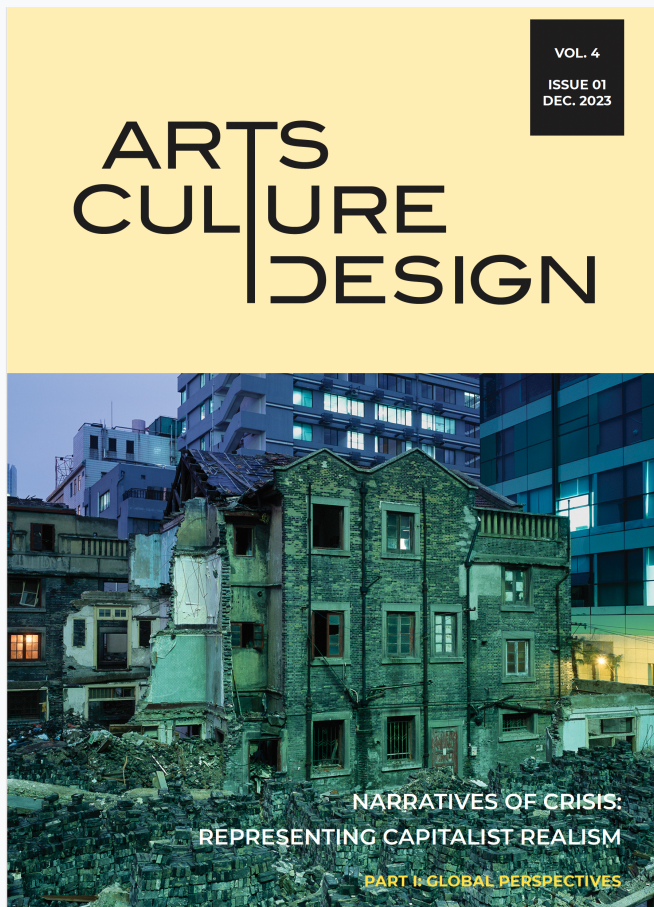


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Narratives of Crisis: Representing Capitalist Realism



TUDDA NYUMA - LET'S LOOK BACK

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TUDDA NYUMA – LET’S LOOK BACK (A LETTER TO HAM MUKASA)

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Performative
interpretations

ABSTRACT

This contribution is positioned between what might be considered an artistic portfolio and a paper. It is perhaps best understood as a visual essay, in which a speculative correspondence with a prominent Ugandan chief and intellectual, the late Ham Mukasa (ca. 1870-1956), affords the activation of an ambiguous colonial legacy. It aims to complicate and question our relationship to- and understanding of archival materials and the web of privilege and precarity in which they were compiled and exist.



ANDREA STULTIENS (NL, 1974) does things with photographs, using her artistic practice as a research method to investigate imaginations of ‘Africa’. She received a PhD from Leiden University (NL) in 2018, lives and works in the Netherlands and Uganda, is employed as an educator and researcher at Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Groningen (NL), and Royal Academy of the Arts, The Hague (NL).

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[1] This likeness of Ham Mukasa was among the first I, a white Dutch artist and researcher who since then started to consider Uganda a second home, encountered back in 2012. One of his granddaughters, allowed Ugandan artist Canon Griffin (1991) and me to digitize part of the family collection in her care. The way the photographic, textual, and material signifiers here generate an ambiguous set of messages while, quite literally, framing one another is symptomatic for my work with historical photographs from and in Uganda.

Paraphrasing the wise words of long-term collaborator Kaddu Wasswa (UG, 1933), I allow the confusion - in terms of linguistic and ontological positioning of pictures produced with cameras - caused by this misalignment to stir my curiosity (Stultiens & Wasswa, 2019, p2).

Should the format of this paper - including awkward footnotes doubling as lengthy picture captions - be confusing too, please keep in mind that I take intervening in "generally distributed ways of doing and making" (Rancière, 2003, p13) to be one of the methodological foundations of my practice, alongside the position of the photograph as encounter (Azoulay, 2010). The footnotes and pictures they are connected to accompany a letter written - with Ham Mukasa as recipient - in 2017 as part of my doctoral thesis. Ham Mukasa (ca.1870-1956) was an early Christian convert in 19th century Buganda. Buganda is situated in present-day south-central Uganda. The nation state was named after the kingdom. Ham Mukasa fought in the religious wars of the region during the 1880s. He then was a prominent chief and landlord in the first half of the 20th century. Being a Christian convert meant that Ham Mukasa was also among the early 'readers' in his community. He would read and write extensively throughout his life. Correspondences - as in piles of letters written (or duplicates thereof) and received - form a substantial part of Ham Mukasa's legacy. Among those letters I encountered a thus far unknown list of described images, assumedly formulated by Ham Mukasa. These images were meant to illustrate Simuda Nyuma, a history of the lives and times of three successive Kabaka (Kings) of Buganda (Mukasa, 1938, 1942, 1962-3, 2012).

Ham Mukasa (ca.1870-1956), or rather his legacy, means a lot to me. This legacy includes a collection of photographic prints and negatives, piles of correspondence in the form of letters written to other members of the Buganda elite, European missionaries and British colonial administrators, and a document that brought me the insight that what I was taught a photograph to be does not necessarily align with what that same image object is and does in Ham Mukasa's world (Stultiens 2017).

Dear Mwami Ham Mukasa,

It is my hope that you have been well, Sir, ever since I wrote to you as part of my doctoral thesis. I am still ever so grateful your legacy allows me to consider how connections can be made between our present and your past. At the same time it raises questions on what was lost when scholars such as yourself left the world of the living while the entanglement of political, religious and economic powers prioritized partial forgetting over the fostering of diachronical connections. the insight that what I was taught a photograph to be does not necessarily align with what that same image object is and does in Ham Mukasa's world (Stultiens 2017).

2²

[2] Ham Mukasa's former bedroom in his house in Mengo, the seat of the Buganda government, with Camera Obscura projection of treetops from the garden through ventilation holes on opposite wall, photographed August 2023. This, and Ham Mukasa's other house in Nasuti, which was the headquarter of Ham Mukasa's operations as Ssekibobo, Chief of Kyagwe, was given a proverbial name. Kwerimide (Mengo) advocates a form of independence which manifests in growing one's own food versus having to ask for a portion. Kwata Mpola (Nasuti) translates to Slowly but Surely. Each of these houses has a library.

HOUSES

I am in the lucky circumstance of visiting your houses regularly. Time and again their construction and the atmosphere generated impress me. The thick walls guarantee that the rooms remain relatively cool, despite warm temperatures outside. The small ventilation holes just under the ceilings generate a spectacle of light.

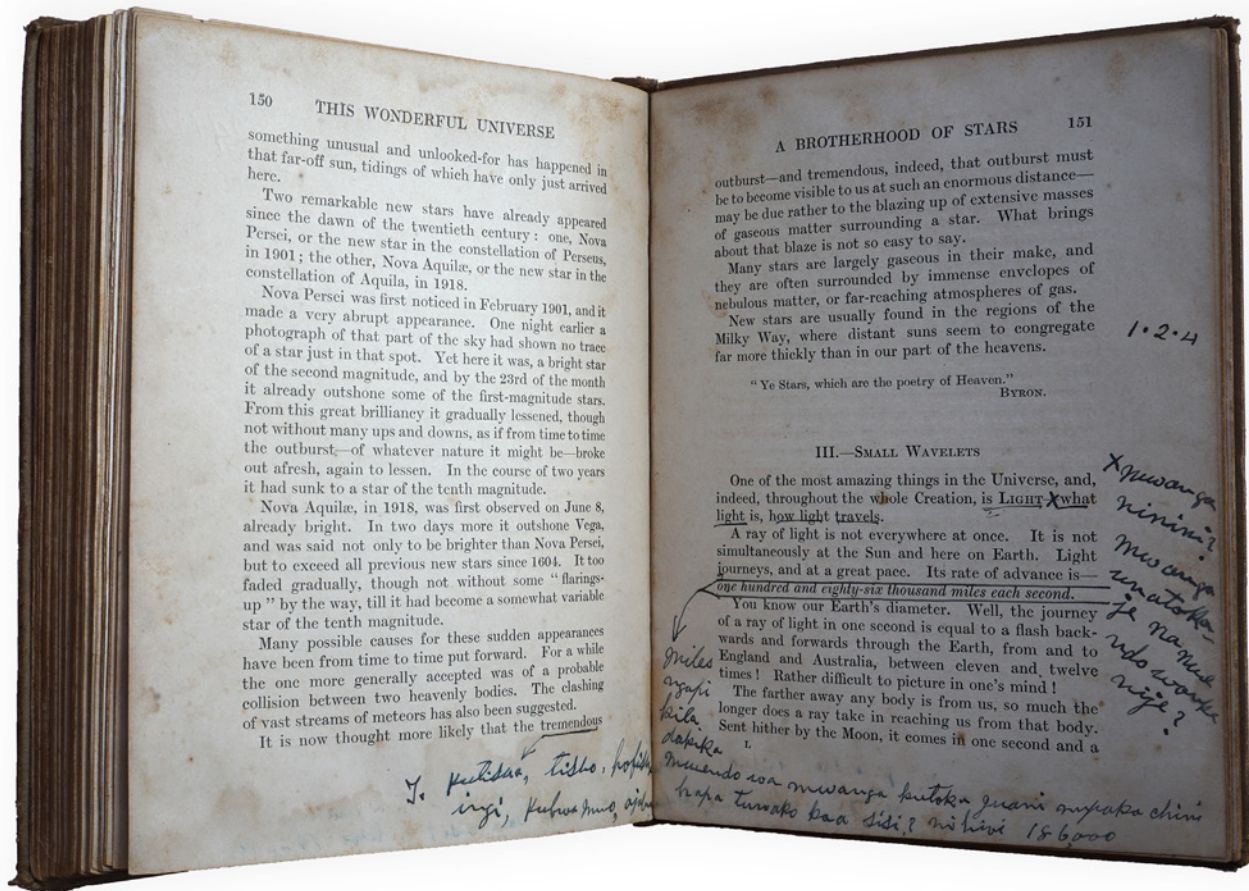
While working in Mengo last July and August, I noticed for the first time how these holes operate as aperture in the master bedroom and render the construction a camera obscura. Would it be fair to take this quality of the house as a metaphor for your never-ending hunger for knowledge to be projected onto your intellect through the study of literature in general and the books in your libraries in particular?

3³

[3] Three of the bookcases in Kewerimide House photographed August 2023 after sifting through the various collections now housed in the room, separating the books that were gifted to-, bought, read, handled by Ham Mukasa himself from more recent materials. The Ham Mukasa shelves include an abundance of encyclopedic reference books, numerous dictionaries (English – Swahili and vice versa), bibles, a Quran, an English translation of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* that Ham Mukasa wrote a comment upon, two copies of “The Wonderful Universe”, and geography books concerned with earthly matters. Many of the volumes include piece of thin robe that guided the reading as well as notes on what was read when and which paragraphs caused interest and wonder.

LIBRARIES

Studying the way you studied, with the books in your libraries, provides a strange sensation of proximity. Your tendency to keep receipts of payment in the books shows that you bought most of them yourself, sometimes in duplicate to have a volume at hand in each of your libraries. The Britannica encyclopedia, once placed within reach of your desk in Kwata Mpola House, is now positioned next to the door connecting the sitting room of Kewerimide House to its library as a guard of sorts. I noticed the roughness of the papers on which the lemma devoted to Uganda was printed, while my hands travelled through the last volume of this resource. I wonder what led you to consult this information. Filling in gaps in your knowledge? Checking how the British positioned the country you lived in? In any case, such remnants of your interests both confirm the privileged position you had and challenge still prevailing simplifications in European communication concerning “Africans”.



[4] X What Light Is – Reading with Ham Mukasa. 2023 reproduction from Gilbern, 1920

DESCENDANTS

One of the grandchildren who is named after you mentioned that being your descendant is not only a blessing. It also means that your extremely high moral standards to looming over his own performance in life. He also shared with me that there are different positions among his peers on how to give form to such a burden. This was most poignantly exemplified by another one of your descendants wanting to denounce Christianity as non-African, causing conflict within the family. How does one live with the legacy of a grandfather who experienced, indeed was part of substantial shifts in the awareness of how the world could be constructed? Through the arrival and acceptance of Christianity, through advocating for and contributing to the availability of formal (western) education, through serving the King in particular and the nation with its citizens at large, through navigating traditions and novelties all in the service of progress. Could you imagine living on another continent? Following an ancestor for whom Christianity was the obvious way forward, while living in a context in which this religion is taken to be part of a colonial and violent past as well as a manifestation of problematic conventional positions?

5⁵

[5] Family photograph from the collections of the Ham Mukasa foundation

ARTISTIC GESTURES

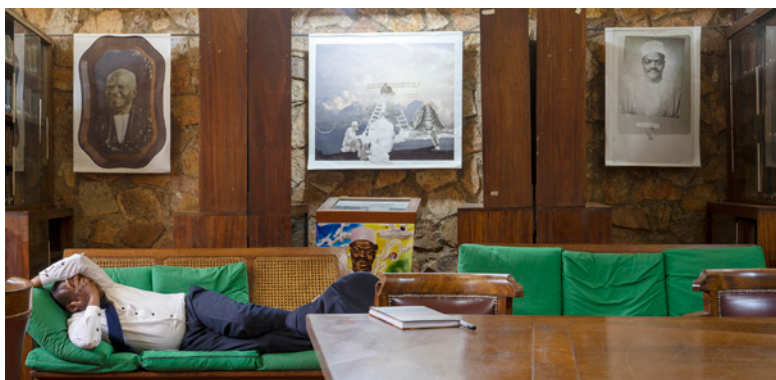
In the previous letter to you I mentioned how I take all histories to be performative interpretations of the past. I was pleasantly surprised to learn since then that you performed in such an interpretation of a scene included in a Luganda version of Bunyan's classic British 17th century Christian allegory 'Pilgrim's Progress', and that you were present at the history pageants celebrating the 50th anniversary of the arrival of missionaries in Uganda. This raised my confidence of the way in realizing the illustrations you desired for Simuda Nyuma. The artist who took this work upon him is Canon Griffin, who also helped in reproducing your photographic legacy. He uses that photographic legacy as a basis for collages in which he synthesizes selected pictorial fragments bring his understanding of the scenes you described into existence. As a result of this procedure, you appear in a substantial part of these pictures. In the example included with this letter, two pictures of you are used to illustrate the way your missionary hero Alexander Mackay taught the Kabaka. You could say that Canon Griffin takes a de-colonial approach, making the man on top look into the head of the man below after having climbed up one of the ladders leading to his position. The past you advocated to leave behind is present in the form of a still life placed on a leopard skin. Does this come anywhere near what you had imagined when composing the list of images to accompany your writing? Or would it be more suitable to appropriate pictures present in books written by friends of yours such as Mr. Stanley (1875), Mr. Ashe (1894), and Mr. Roscoe (1911)?

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[6] Canon Griffin's interpretation of the described illustration for Simuda Nyuma, p.80 Mackay nga aigiliza Kabaka Amagezi agabuli ngeri / Mackay teaching the Kabaka wisdom of various nature (translation of description by Kaddu Wasswa).

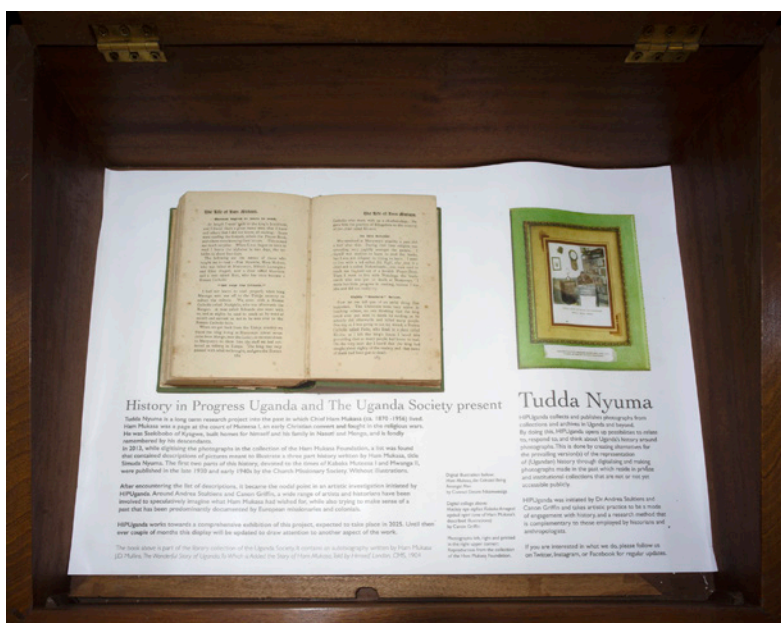
PLATFORMS

So far, I have avoided addressing certain technological innovations that emerged over the last couple of decades in my updates to you. It just seemed to be too far away from the times in which you lived. However, having learned more about your interests in such innovations from the books in your library, I think I should figure out how to fill you in on this too. The novelties of printing photographs, of mass reproduction of texts to distribute ideas have to quite some extent been replaced by a virtual network that has emerged over the last couple of decades out of military intelligence and the expansive ambitions of those in power. I have been using this network to reach people who might be interested in your legacy and my work with it. In a future letter, after further developing my thoughts on how to bridge some of the experiential gaps between us in words, I will elaborate further on this. For now let me end with reassuring you that it is still possible to make books, and I will make every effort to produce one that will afford a stable and material form for our now entangled practices to live on. Meanwhile, I recently installed a small exhibition in the space that now functions as the Uganda Society, of which you used to be a member. This is meant to be the first in a series, leading up to a moment in which your legacy will be celebrated by your descendants alongside all those willing to look back at the way you proposed to look forward.



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[7] Overview of the first installation towards a comprehensive Tudda Nyuma show, projected to take place in 2025.



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[8] Detail of the first installation towards a comprehensive Tudda Nyuma show, projected to take place in 2025.

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