

ukobola lina/when do you return?

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Abstract

ukobola lina/when do you return? is an 18-minute performance film that archives the origin story of the Bagisu people and attempts to decipher the riddle of a family's intertwined histories within the diaspora. Developed through methods of process cinema, the immersive performance combines eco-processed 16mm film and digital projections onto mosquito netting and traditional fabrics, live writing, and sound. We scan for fragmented radio frequencies that only reveal themselves in waves. Expressions of light, time, space and ritual must take place as the work becomes a test of memory to recover hidden wisdoms.

I decipher what I can through performance of writing, documenting, translating, asking, and I am reminded, *agenda gy'amanyi tazibiriwa budde / that one who travels to a familiar place does not worry about arriving in the dark*, and that it is within these surreal abstractions of words, images, and sounds that my identity, culture, language, love, grief and hidden wisdoms are irrevocably entangled in non-linear time and space.

Acknowledgments

Wanyala nabe / Webale nyo / Thank you

I have tried to write out these acknowledgements countless times and have left many a tear stain on my keyboard.

As a young kid, I was always fascinated by moving images, and it was with the steadfast love and encouragement from my parents that I pursued the arts, and for that, I will be forever grateful. Thank you, Father, for bringing home my first camera and walking me through Avid, and Mother, for always being my biggest fan and forever translator.

To my Auntie Liz, Shelby, and Anika, I look forward to our upcoming adventures.

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Wanyala nabe to my dear friend and collaborator Nada El-Omari.

Wanyala nabe to the Mwambus and Malingas.

And last but not least, wanyala nabe my dear cousin Jimmy. Absolutely none of this would have happened without your kindness, knowledge and dedication to getting me up that mountain.

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Origin Stories

In 1997, I was born in Mulago Hospital in Kampala, Uganda, to Stella Malinga and Masaaba Mwambu. Having been born in Uganda but growing up in Canada, everything I do has become an ongoing attempt at reclaiming fragments of my identity. As a kid, I knew I belonged to the Bamasaaba and that I was a Mugisu. One of the very first things I learned was that I was to use Mugisu when referring to myself, that Bagisu is who we are as a whole, and that we live on the foothills and slopes of Mt. Elgon/Masaba.

When I went to Mbale the first time in the summer of 2025 for this project, I asked everyone I could about Mundu and Sera, the first of the Bagisu. Many laughed and joked about why I wanted to know or wondered what I already knew.

The only written documentation I can find of our origin story is from Gideon S. Were, and his study titled, THE BAGISU AND THEIR PAST: SOME NOTES ON THEIR LEGENDS ABOUT CREATION, THE ORIGINS OF DEATH, THE ECONOMY OF THEIR ANCESTORS AND THE PHENOMENON OF KINTU. He begins his study by asking a question:

Question 1: Could you tell us something about your clan, how Bashinde came into this territory, and where they originally came from?

Answer 1: I cannot possibly know anything significant about them because when they came over here I was not yet born.¹

¹ Were, “THE BAGISU AND THEIR PAST: SOME NOTES ON THEIR LEGENDS ABOUT CREATION, THE ORIGINS OF DEATH, THE ECONOMY OF THEIR ANCESTORS AND THE PHENOMENON OF KINTU”, 184.

If I were to be asked such questions, my answer would be similar, as I cannot remember off the top of my head the history of my clan, but I know of Mundu and Sera. I recall my father telling me that one day they appeared out of a hole at the top of Mount Masaba/Elgon.

Were then asks of us:

What is it that is actually knowable, how much of it is knowable, and to whom is it knowable in society? In short, who is the rightful custodian of a people's traditions, cultural values, customs, beliefs and ways of life? Furthermore, how is this knowledge transmitted, and what are the special conditions that have to be met in order that the custodian of a people's cultural heritage may successfully play his role in the community.²

These are all the questions I continuously ask myself as an artist, filmmaker, human, and will never have concrete answers for. How can I become a custodian of my people's cultural heritage and give back to the community? How can I transmit and preserve Uganda's cultural archival practices of song, dance and oral histories by utilizing past, current and emerging technologies?

For now, I begin with myself, and with just a simple understanding of our origin story. Maybe from there, I can begin a journey that may lead me to an understanding of what my ancestors desired, the nature of our reality, and perhaps the purpose of life.

Informant 1

Shindu is said to have come from the north, from the direction of sunrise. As I said before, he came via Mount Masaba and begot a son called Mugisu. Mugisu in turn begot Masaba. Then Shindu went down and begot the Bagwere. Later on he proceeded further down and begot the Basoga. From Busoga Shindu moved on to Buganda where he begot the Baganda. Thereafter he simply disappeared. It is

² Were, "THE BAGISU AND THEIR PAST: SOME NOTES ON THEIR LEGENDS ABOUT CREATION, THE ORIGINS OF DEATH, THE ECONOMY OF THEIR ANCESTORS AND THE PHENOMENON OF KINTU", 184.

believed that his grave has never been identified. He just disappeared. Maybe he was eaten by animals.³

Informant 10

Mundu and his two sons, Kintu and Masaba, came into Bugisu from Abyssinia via Ngai Narok, Elgeyo, Kitale and Mount Elgon. Then Kintu went to Buganda where he begot the Baganda while Masaba stayed behind and became the ancestor of the Bagisu.⁴

One of my uncles told the story like this:

So you have heard of it, of course, before.

I want to hear your version.

My version. Okay. So here in the mountains lived Mundu and Sera who had come from somewhere in the north and resided there. That is in during some time that they ended up in the mountains. And so Mundu was a cattle keeper, and Sera was a farmer. So briefly, they were married together and lived in the mountains.

So they had some children... they had five children. So the eldest one was Masaaba, who remained up in the mountains with them. Of course, that is later, as they grew up. Then the other one was Wanale. That is that hill, those ones, when they grew up, they moved to that hill across there that you see, up there. And then we had also Mbuya. That is, there's a hill behind this one. That is where those ones went. And then we had the ones, the Bagwere. That was another. And then we had another one who got lost. That is where we take, we get the version of Kintu.

The Baganda..

Uh-huh, so those are the five children. But to us, to get the Bamasaaba name, it came from when they were still young, these children were still young, and they were living together. So somehow they of course, the [unknown] came and stole

³ Were, "THE BAGISU AND THEIR PAST: SOME NOTES ON THEIR LEGENDS ABOUT CREATION, THE ORIGINS OF DEATH, THE ECONOMY OF THEIR ANCESTORS AND THE PHENOMENON OF KINTU", 186.

⁴ Ibid, 191.

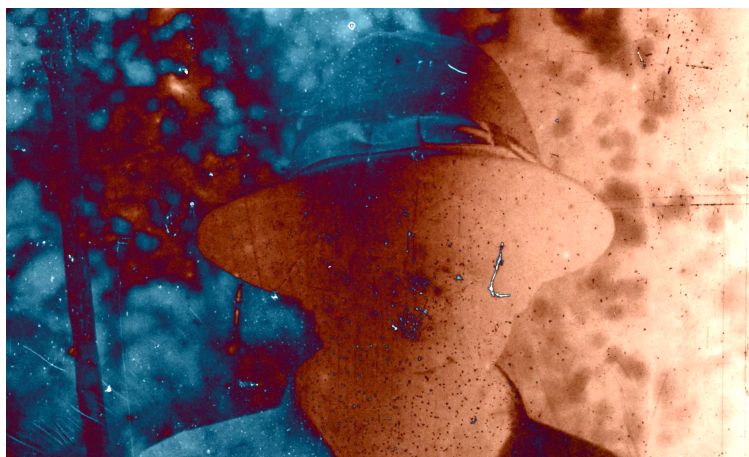
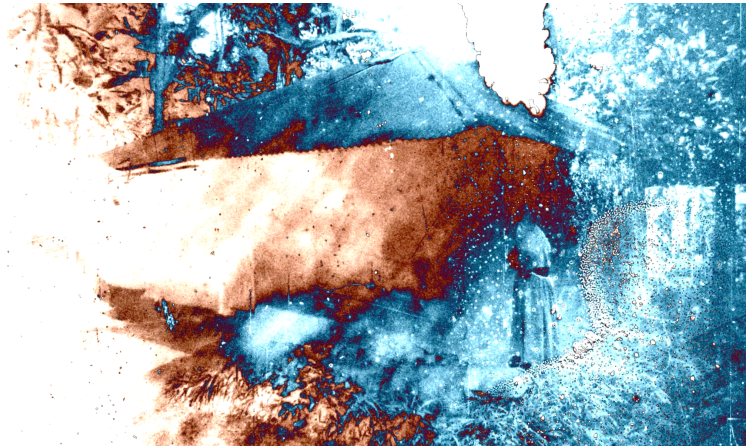
these people's cows. And so the father and his son, Mwambu went to look for those cows.

So when they got there, they captured these cows and brought even excess back. So they gave him, they gave that clan the name Ingisu, meaning cows.

So they became, they were now called Bagisu. But of course, there are other stories in between there.

I didn't know that one. I didn't know that.

So, since they brought the cows back, they called them Bagisu, meaning cows.



Images 1-2. Still from ukobola lina of Sera, still of ukobola lina of Mundu.

Mother Tongue

It causes me great grief that I cannot communicate in Lugisu, “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.”⁵ How do I perceive my place in this world without my mother tongue? What is no longer knowable to me because I cannot speak or understand Lugisu? In its absence, cinema has then become the language I use to translate what I cannot say.

I was introduced to the work and writings of Kenyan novelist and post-colonial theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and I have been particularly interested in the ways he has called us to advocate for linguistic decolonization. “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture,”⁶ and so I feel the need to share as many of the words and translations I learned during my time in Uganda throughout this support paper, in a similar way I explore them in film.

My father sent me a .pdf titled *Lugisu Orthography* via whatsapp, and I’ve learned some useful phrases from it that encapsulate many of the things I asked, pondered and experienced as this film came to be.

Kiguuga ky’owo kyesi usaalikamo bakilanga batyena?

*What is the name of the clan from which you are born?*⁷

I am still not confident in answering such questions.

⁵ wa Thiong'o, “Decolonising the Mind : The Politics of Language in African Literature”, 6.

⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁷ National Curriculum Development Centre, “Lugisu Orthography”, 12.

1 Indwena - Masqaba
2 Ziibili
3 Zidatu
Masifa

1 Indwena
2 Ziibili
3 Zidatu
4 Zinne
5 Ziteno

Images 3-4. Example of the live writing from my studio workshopping sessions, counting to five in Lugisu.

Process Cinema

My practice follows process cinema, a term used to refer to a long and storied tradition of alternative filmmaking that is unscripted, improvisational, participatory, and is based on the manipulation of the very materiality of the film.⁸ During my undergrad at York University, particularly in the Alternative Workshop course taught by Phil Hoffman, I learned how to build through time and experimentation.

In my MFA with a fellow cohort member, Tram Nghiem, we became excited about the idea of process cinema becoming a way for us as marginalized filmmakers to create our own desire lines; informal paths created through collective movement beyond official routes. The improvisational and interactive tools of process cinema allow us to forge these lines beyond dominant cinematic and institutional structures to develop projects around the idea of experiencing art as an active audience and find new ways to self-narrate fragmented histories. These methods position filmmaking as a shared act of care and knowledge transmission, where memory, land-based practices, and lived experience are embedded directly into the moving image. Process cinema thus functions not only as an artistic expression but also as a strategy for survival by strengthening intergenerational ties, cultivating care, and imagining futures on our own terms.

A collective we discussed whose work has been important as part of my research is the Odeimin Runners Club. Within Adrian Kahgee, Debbie Ebanks Schlums and Rebeka Tabobondung's practice-based research, they engage with each other's communities between Turtle Island and the Caribbean archipelago and use tools of process cinema to "visualize the different worlds we

⁸ MacKenzie & Marchessault, "Process Cinema: Handmade Film in the Digital Age".

live in and with at micro and macro levels, including plant, spirit, human, animal, and celestial worlds.”⁹ In their three films *Everything is Right Here* (2021), *Mammoth Bone* (2021), and *the traveller* (2021), they utilize organic materials including, dandelions, trilliums, mammoth bone fragments, cedar, sorrel and strawberry flowers to process the film and create phytograms in response to Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower. They weigh the importance of both the process and the selected plants equally with the constructed images to give meaning to the works.¹⁰

Similar to the work of the Odeimin Runners Club, *ukobola lina* was created by shooting black and white 16mm film, also known as Kodak 3378, or the experimental filmmaker’s best friend, with a Super16 Bolex. The film was then developed with plants from Uganda’s varied geography, including matooke, coffee, cassava and various flowers to embed the tactile ecology of the land onto the celluloid. In addition to the filming and processing, I utilized a cameraless filmmaking technique called phytography, which uses the internal chemistry of plants for the creation of images on photographic emulsion. The land and I became co-directors during my time in Uganda, and I thank her every day for bearing with me.

The beginning of my desire path to making this film started long ago, but took root during my residency at 32° East, a non-profit organization and home for artists in Uganda, between the months of *Gwomukaaga / June*, *Gwomusanvu / July* and *Gwomunaana / August*, where I transformed my studio space into a makeshift darkroom.

⁹ Kahgee & Schlums, “Worlds Meeting Worlds: Murmuration, Aesthetics, and Odeimin Runners”, 93.

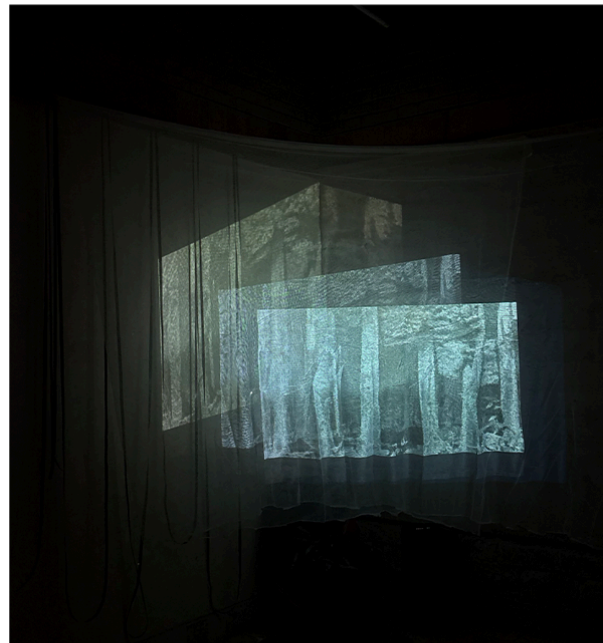
¹⁰ Ibid, 94.



Images 5-8. Sonya with the Bolex visiting their ancestral home for the first time, view from ancestral home on Mt Elgon, first developer made with a variety of plants gathered on family compound, pre salt fix 16mm film processed with the first developer.



Images 9-12. Bucket of plants soaking for phytograms, close-up of phytogram on film X2, plants on 16mm film for making phytograms.



Images 13-16. Studio at 32°East, 16mm film hung to dry in my studio, all of the processed film rolled up to bring back to Canada, studio installation of mosquito netting

I spent my evenings within the compound of my uncle's home making phytograms.

The following are excerpts from the journal in which I attempted to document my process of creation:

Wezile hano utyena? / How did you come here?

I arrived in Kampala on June 9th, 2025.

17/06/2025

I have been in Uganda for about eight days now. I can't find ascorbic acid powder or washing soda to save my life. My studio is nice and big but I need to create some sort of makeshift darkroom. The idea is to use some sort of dark fabric, draped over a mosquito net.

I am "learning" Luganda.

Wasuze Otya? / Wasu Zotya?

- Bulungi, gwe wasuze otya?

I wish things were easy. I already knew the language. But I should know Lugisu, not Luganda technically.

You need to remember that you're shooting black and white. There's something funny about the apparatus/viewfinder not showing me the truth, but I choose it.

I like when she asks me to take her photo (senga/auntie).

I hope it turns out.

18/06/2025

I have eaten Fenne?/Jackfruit

Kiitafala/Kitafeli yesterday (don't know english word)

siiba bulungi / have a nice day

19/06/2025

Types of plants

- Small white w/ one petal purple
 - *Asystasia gagentica*
- Red one / *Heliconia bihai* / Red Palulu

Ndi Bulungi nyabo

Otya = question / how?

- muli mutya is plural

Nyabo = female

Ssebo = male

oli otya -> How are you?

Gyendi (Jendy) -> okay

gwe oli otya nawe (response)

webale -> thank you

Nawe (you) (only for people you know well)

Sula Bulungi

- Nawe sula bulungi

20/06/2025

Words in Luganda

Today / leero

Yesterday / jjo

Wasuze otya

- Bulungi, gwe wasuze otya?

Webale kafuumba

- Thank you for cooking

What time is it?

- Sawa meka

Nja koola ba eda (sp?)

- I will see you later

Siiba bulungi

- Have a nice day
- Nasuze bulungi

Lugisu

The birds are laughing @ me

Hello / Mulembe / Waginyala (Hi)

U/Otyenya / How are you?

- Bulayi / good / fine

Good Morning

- Wagonele utyena
- nagonale bulayi (response)

What time is it?

- Sawa Zenga

Slow down / mpola mpola

Hurry up / Yangwako

Come here / nyeza / myeza

Thank you / Nasimile (thankful)

- wanyala Nabe

23/06/2025

My name is Sonya Ruth Nandudu Mwambu,
I was born on June 24th, 1997 in
Kampala Uganda in mulago hospital.
My mother is Stella Malinga. My
Father is Masaaba Mwambu. It is
currently 18:02 and I am at my
Uncle Abdul's place in Entebbe, Uganda.
My birthday is tomorrow and this is
the first time I have spent my
birthday in Uganda since I was a
child. I am both over and underwhelmed
at this entire ordeal. My mother,
father, nor sister are here.

I'm turning twenty-eight and I cannot speak
my mother tongue, if my ancestors
were to call on me I would not
hear them, recognize them or understand.
The birds are so loud here. ~~What~~ who
would I have been if my parents
never left.

What hope do we have, do I
have for the future. It's hard to allow
myself to dream into better futures
when present horrors cloud my everything.
So what am I archiving for. Who?
What is the point but to selfishly
create something and so my name is
remembered, but my name should have
never been but it always will be.
Ruth came before me, Nandudu came
before me, and Mwambu. To know
is to belong. To know is to
understand. To belong is to live.
The spaces between is
where I long to endure. I am
most tired. I've shot one

roll. I am preserving a history
from the peripheries. My personal
archive to make up my disjointed
sense of being.

30/06/2025

Tomorrow we head to Mbale.
It is my first time. I've been
told or rather reminded that I am
currently at the age my father
was when he returned to Uganda.
He exclaims he went gallivanting
all over just as I have/am
doing right now. My family and
I do things in such chaotically
structured sequences. It feels
so strange and I hate to be
going to Mbale without my
parents. So far removed. I want
to hear immediate family speak
of Mbale in Lugisu.

I am taking 4 rolls of 3378,
1 of Ektachrome and 1 500T.
2 lavs, my zoom, and some
extra film to photogram. I will
carry a bag to bring plants
back to process with. I need
to get coffee as well.....
..... But I wish to know
the ways in which they made
sense of their world being.
When or how did they come
to an understanding, acceptance
or deference of their mortality.
My very being/existence so far
removed from the mountain.

Perhaps the archive can help

lessen the grief, give name to it,
let it grow into more than
what it is. I hope someone may
come across it to just know
that I tried.

01/07/2025

I learned of kintu.

03/07/2025

Yesterday my cousin took me around
the compound and collected plants with
me. He gave me the names of them in
English, Luganda, and Lugisu. I am
making phytograms with a few of the
petals that haven't melted and the rest
will be used to develop the rolls
shot yesterday.

The following excerpts have no dates written.

I'm cutting up 7
matooke's.

I had no way of telling
him I've never stopped thinking
about home. I could just cry and
film with the bolex and hope I
exposed the film properly.

Time as Material within film as
a coded language. The fragments we
manipulate to become almost whole
we never will be.

The "imaginary archive" is not imaginary.
It is there. In song, dance, and story.

The rain was heavy and *luguudo luuza ku lukungu lw\’eweefe lw’abulaga / the road to our mountain is spoiled.*¹¹ We left our car and grabbed three boda bodas to take us up the rest of the way. This was my first time taking one on my own, and my cousin carried the Bolex for me.

Towards the end of my residency, I had the pleasure of speaking with Khadijjah Natasha Sebunya, who visited my studio and wrote a profile on the work I was doing. There were some things she pointed out about my practice that fit into this constantly shifting mode of my filmmaking process:

Arriving on Kampala time, finishing projects at a Kampala pace.

Has been added to my definition of process cinema.

¹¹ National Curriculum Development Centre, “Lugisu Orthography”, 14.

Recipes

The recipe process was similar to the way I would watch my parents cook. They are not known for following recipe instructions to a T, and often experiment with the process, ingredients and presentation. I was processing about 12 rolls of 3378, and at some point, I abandoned exact measurements and just followed my intuition, as they taught me to.

The following are the recipes I used as my starting point. I learned this process during the summer of 2022, at the Independent Imaging Film Retreat, where Phil Hoffman had adjusted and modified some of these techniques from Zoe Heyn Jones and Terra Jean Long, with support from Eva Kolcze during the Site and Cycle Residency in 2018. These processes can be traced back to 1995, and a class led by Dr. Scott Williams at RIT. As is often said, there is no recipe without a lineage.¹²

Eco-processing

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| - Flower/Plant Developer: | 2-4 mins approx |
| - Wash: | 1 min |
| - Salt Fix: | 12 - 14 hrs |
| - Wash: | 5 mins |
| - Hang to Dry: | As needed |

Fixing With Salt (For Negative Process)

Add 2 cups ($\frac{1}{2}$ L) of salt to 8 cups (2L) of water. Fix in complete darkness with salt for 12 hours minimum if using non-iodized/sea salt and 24 hours for iodized/table salt.

¹² Phil Hoffman, "Eco Developing Process for Kodak 3378 Filmstock", 2-3.

Caffenol Recipe¹³

1L of water

54g washing soda

15g vitamin C

40g coffee

- I believe my processing time was somewhere between 2 and 3 ½ minutes.
- We grow coffee on the slopes of Mt. Elgon.
- I used coffee beans from Butta Farmers Cooperative, a coffee brand whose focus is to support farmers to produce Bagisu Arabica coffee sustainably.¹⁴

Phytogram Recipe¹⁵

1L of water

2 tbsp of washing soda

1 tbsp of vitamin c powder

¹³ Dagie Brundert, “Caffenol, the organic developer!”

¹⁴ “About Us – Butta Farmers Society.” Buttasociety.org. 2024. <https://buttasociety.org/about-us/>.

¹⁵Doing, “Phytogram”, <https://phytogram.blog/>.

I processed my film and made phytograms with the following plant materials:

Matooke

- As a child, my parents would always cook food from home. Matooke with peanut sauce, chapati, ugali and pilau (rice). We would search for these foods in the standard grocery stores, find them in local ethnic stores, but it never tasted quite like home.
- I processed at least five rolls of film with my matooke developer with a recipe that was only supposed to process 100ft of film/1 roll.
- By that point in the night, there was just the faint light of the security lights peaking into my studio, but I sat there sprawled on the floor using this heavy black plastic and buckets to process these five hundred feet of film.
- I think I got up to 600ft.

Various flowers and leaves, including

- Lantana Camana
- Hibiscus
- Casaava
- Ground nuts
- Guava leaves
- Tropical almond tree
- Bay biscayne creeping oxeye
- Lemon



Image 17. Still from ukobola lina of matooke plants that were processed with matooke



*Images 18-21. Cut up matooke for developer, plants being prepped for phytograms, Lantana
Camana, bucket of decay*

I wasn't gentle when agitating the film. I was tired and frustrated, other times I was excited that the developer kept working and would try to process as many rolls as I could, which created more scratches:

Scratches and marks on a film are akin to the wrinkles and scars on a human body or the rings on a tree trunk, the emulsion of film is like a layer of skin that holds and protects the image and the history and memories contained within. They demonstrate time, reaffirming that we are all organic matter and bear the condition of decomposition, which is a natural, inevitable occurrence.¹⁶

The film breathes and decays with me over time, and the land has become my co-director, witness to it all, guiding me along a path set out long before me and which I did not know about. We find our way to understand one another by growing images together.

I collected bunches of cut/trimmed hibiscus plants from a neighbour close to 32° East, and I let them sit dry for a week. *Matu gaagwo gomile / Its leaves have dried up*¹⁷, and the death and decay of the plants are in time with my grief. The *salt / kwacumbi* fix ate away at my phytograms that I left when I went to Mbale the second time to try and make it up the mountain. Some days, I left the film in the fix for too long, and when I brought it out to inspect, the emulsion was melting off the plastic.

¹⁶ Bertrand & Routt, "The Story of The Kelly Gang, Victoria: Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM)/The Moving Image", 97.

¹⁷ National Curriculum Development Centre, "Lugisu Orthography", 37.



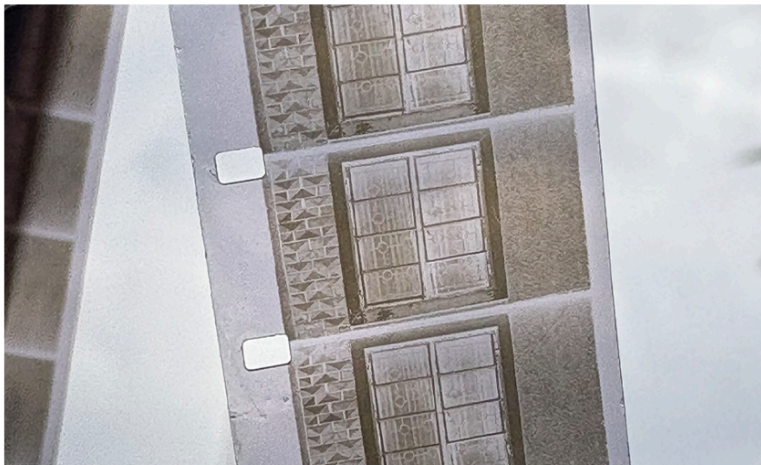
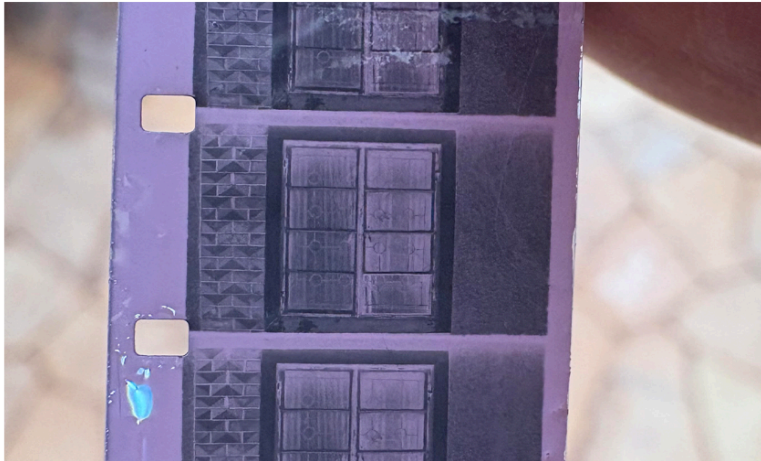
Images 22-24. Eroded emulsion post salt fix, unsuccessful salt fix after three days, uneven salt fix

*“What moment in the gradual decay does resurrection choose?
What year? What day? Who has the stopwatch? Who rewinds the tape?”¹⁸*

I used the dry hibiscus leaves to develop at least two rolls of film. Resurrecting them to grow images. We also used the hibiscus for a phytogram workshop I hosted at 32° East.

Whenever I make developers, I never throw them out right away. Instead, they become part of a bucket of decay. I have one here in Canada, and I decided to continue that process in Kampala. The bucket of decay in Kampala grew mould. I threw a few feet of film and phytograms in there, but I couldn't tell you which ones in my archive spent time with the maggots. I was told that it speaks to the delicate way I consider the world I have inherited.

¹⁸ Enright, “The oxford book of death”, 154.



Images 25-27. Pre salt fix of family home window, post salt fix, digital scan of film

Archives

Due to the lack of audio-visual archival material of and about Ugandans, this performance becomes an impossible archival imaginary. As Gilliland and Caswell say, a situation has been created where the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable¹⁹. The audio-visual archive is what I must create, but it is a repackaging of the archives that are already our oral histories. They are not fixed repositories but shifting, personal, fragmented traces embedded in the landscapes we traverse.

Traces of this archival work I have been building started back in 2022 when I attended the Independent Imaging Retreat, also known as Film Farm in Mount Forest, Ontario. I was there to learn how to process 16mm film with different plants and develop my practice as a maker with the intention of creating work that added a depth of understanding to the relationship between myself, the land, and celluloid as my canvas. I started with no real idea, just loaded up a Bolex and shot my surroundings. During my time there, I came across a box full of books and magazines that had a collection of writings published by, if I remember correctly, the African National Congress. There was a poem that talked about time, that lost time that I couldn't help but connect with and include in my work in some capacity.

That following year, my Kuku (grandmother) passed away, and I went rummaging through her possessions. Amongst them were boxes and cabinets filled with items that tell the story of the amazing life she lived and how our family came to be. After giving birth to my father in 1967,

¹⁹ Gilliland & Caswell, "Records and their imaginaries: imagining the impossible, making possible the imagined", 9.

she moved to Uganda, where she spent eighteen years of her life. I happened to come upon a collection of 35mm slides she had that show a snapshot of her early years in Kampala and Moroto. The slides show memories of the houses they lived in, Independence Day celebrations, the busy streets of Kampala, the River Nile with its surrounding flora and fauna, martyr memorials, churches, the Karamajong and much more. It was also during her time there that she wrote many letters that included poems and songs to her mother back home in Ontario, regaling her with what was happening in the country and to our family at that time. My great-grandmother, Wilhelmena Ireland, held onto all of these letters and gifted them back to Kuku upon her return to Canada, who then used them to write a book, *My Uganda*. Through a process of grief, I combined elements of eco-processed film developed at Film Farm with my grandmother's images and words, as well as outtakes from an earlier work *Banange!* (2017). In that work, I explored the relationship between my mother and myself, our shared memories of Uganda, and my attempts to learn my mother tongue. These elements came together in the expanded cinema performance *maono mzimi / unbroken spaces of vision* (2024).

Every time *maono mzimi* has been performed, it has taken on a new form, ever evolving with my grief, identity and growing archive of Uganda within the diaspora and understanding of community healing. *ukobola lina* is a direct extension of this archive, a perpetual work in progress, that includes my return.

I am looking to open up avenues for experimentation of form and presentation, and allow this archive to become a portal for reimagination, as Huda Tayoub discusses in the podcast series within *The Archive of Forgetfulness*. I yearn to discover avenues for the reimagination of our present realities, future tendencies and many dreams into limitless futures. In the first episode of

the podcast series, curator and researcher Ali Hussein al-Adawy touches on this in the discussion of what the function of an archive can be and, “how [we can] emancipate the future from the hegemony of the past,” in addition to how we across the African continent can care for our archives.²⁰

The performance then becomes the archive. An archive of an archive of an archive. At an experimental research forum titled The Earth as a Wayfinder: (Un)Rooting knowledge, in Kampala, we discussed archives extensively. Did our ancestors even hold onto things the way we have been taught to now? Do we have words to describe archives in our mother tongues? Is there a word for archive in Lugisu? According to Google Translate, *okutereka* is archive in Luganda, and they don’t have Lugisu.

²⁰ Tayob, Huda, Jumoke Sanwo, Ali Al-Adawy, hosts, “The Archive as a Portal for Reimagination’, *The Archive of Forgetfulness* - Conversations with Neighbours.

Afrofuturisms / Afrosurrealism / Afropessimism

As a boy I seldom lived in the present. It hurt too much to be in the present. When I occurred to myself I was myself in the future.

Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*

There are cycles I go through of hope, despair, and longing, constantly in flux. I dream of futures because I must, but all they are, are dreams. I plant myself in the present because this is the only place I will ever be, and all I can ever truly know.

When I started this project, I was interested in researching digital archives and how they might function within an Afrofuturist framework. I was to build a world that situates itself at the intersection of technology and the liberation of Africans, as Womack defines in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, and find a place for our intertwined histories within the diaspora in this imagined future. I desperately wanted to imagine a future that would alleviate the anxieties I shoulder about the state of the world, and had been told it lies in these tech-advanced futures we could supposedly build.

Within my practice of process cinema and handmade filmmaking, I am always considering the role of the non-human and our relations when making. It is important to me, however, to remember that these non-human generative processes persist in the digital technologies.²¹ There are these binaries between what is considered natural and artificial, and I often turn to the natural world to engage with non-human actants but, “The non-human is in our cpus and outside our windows, in the air and on the ground – all ready to relate and already relating, all ready to create

²¹ Zinman, “Echoes of the Earth: Handmade Film Ecologies.”, 121.

and already creating.” The digital is human too, and the ways in which we can use digital technologies to activate or reactivate our archives are just as in tune with the natural world, but at what cost?

As I continued working and researching, I became less enthralled by the idea of a tech-forward Afrofuture, as we witness the over-extraction of resources through forced labour on the African continent. Resource extraction of minerals such as copper and gold to create the physical infrastructure (computers, hard drives, software, cellphones, wires) of these tech futures comes at the cost of livelihoods, environmental degradation, and human rights violations. Copper mining, used for wiring and electronic components, in Zambia, has had a profound impact on Mufulira’s landscape and has caused irreversible environmental damage.²² When strong winds blow in June and July, the dust containing heavy metals enters people’s homes and lungs and covers their crops.²³ In the Niger Delta region, the impacts of oil and gas extraction have all but destroyed what was once considered a global biodiversity hotspot.²⁴ Subsistence agriculture is a main source of livelihood for many rural communities in Africa, but resource extraction displaces these traditional modes of living and pushes community members into dire social and economic situations.²⁵

The artistic research project, *Dzata: The Institute of Technological Consciousness*, by artists Russel Hlongwane, Francois Knoetze and Amy Wilson, is one that challenges our understanding of what technology is and can be, outside of what we generally associate with Afrofuturism.

²² Pesa, “Anthropocene Narratives of Living with Resource Extraction in Africa.”, 127.

²³ Ibid, 127.

²⁴ Ibid, 130.

²⁵ Idemudia, Francis Xavier Dery Tuokuu and Marcellinus Essah, “The extractive industry and human rights in Africa: Lessons from the past and future directions”, 5.

They have put indigenous technological knowledge at the forefront to explore how technology and innovation are an interlinked process of accumulative knowledge that extends into the past, using communication systems, traditional healing, and the interconnected relations of human, plants and animals.²⁶ Within the speculative writing by Hlongwae, there is a wider community of scientists and wanderers working within the history of technological thinking that have built a mandate in line with my own research:

The mandate for the future-facing versions of ourselves is to carry and return to and from other peoples, their and our knowledges, in an attempt to build the encyclopaedia that stands on the indigenous knowledge systems of black and brown peoples across landmasses.²⁷

I have become increasingly interested in the ways in which our ancestors worked with the land, and how we can use that knowledge to build alternative, sustainable futures that my archive longs to inhabit. What practices are communities engaging in this present moment to build these futures? The coffee brands I processed with, have dedicated themselves to building sustainable farming practices by introducing regenerative agriculture, but they are also working with European partners to achieve their objectives.²⁸

In a world built on anti-black violence, I turned to the writings of Afropessimist scholars that understand to imagine a future produced by forced labour is nothing short of monstrous.²⁹ We

²⁶ Russel Hlongwane, “dzata archive.”

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “About Us – Butta Farmers Society.” 2024. Buttasociety.org. 2024.
<https://buttasociety.org/about-us/>.

²⁹ Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors.”

must move away from Afrofuturism, as there is no realized future outside the realm of colonialism and,

Put another way, had Europeans not so forcefully and violently upended (as well as appropriated) African epistemology and supposing transcultural relations between Africans and Europeans persisted, Africans would have been free to approach (or even not approach) the European concept of “future” on their own terms.

I have been having a hard time finding resources specific to East African geographic regions that have researched specific epistemologies and studies of time. “Afrofuturism, again, utilizes borrowed terms, or borrowed epistemologies, that seem universal; however, it either stifles or distorts...” It all falls into a generalized Africa, a myth, an idea, that I cannot understand now and thus cannot construct for later.

Time / Inyanga is an abstract noun as it represents an intangible idea, things you perceive with the five senses.³⁰

³⁰ National Curriculum Development Centre, “Lugisu Orthography”, 32.

In the local languages, time is told as such (these numbers are in Luganda):

7:00 AM Saawa emu 1 hour after sunrise	11:00 AM Saawa itaanu 5 hours after sunrise	3:00 PM Saawa mwenda 9 hours
8:00 AM Saawa ibili 2 hours after sunrise	12:00 PM Saawa mukaga 6 hours after sunrise	4:00 PM Saawa kkumi 10 hours
9:00 AM Saawa isatu 3 hours after sunrise	1:00 PM Saawa musanvu 7 hours after sunrise,	5:00 PM Saawa kkumi na emu 11 hours
10:00 AM Saawa inne 4 hours after sunrise	2:00 PM Saawa munaana 8 hours	6:00 PM Saawa kkumi na ibili 12 hours/sunset

Everything we know, I know, of existence is saturated in antiblack violence “that sustains the world in myriad phenomenological and abstract planes.”³¹ And so I seek/find refuge in the surreal. It is now, it is present, it is tangible and excruciating in a way I can process through performance, that the pain of imagined and lost futures will never stifle.

The evolution of my work as an artist, and specifically *ukobola lina*, is a constant cycle of the futures I grieve, the pasts that haunt me, and the present I only truly know. The phytograms I made in Uganda are what are projected at the beginning and end of the performance, and the convergence of the plants on the emulsion, then projected, grounds me in the present. It also reminds me of falling through a black hole, because I have at some point, and of the evidence of the passage of time. The one thing I allow myself to dream about is the transcendental nature of

³¹ Terrefe, “Review of *AFROPESSIMISM*”, 1049.

space travel embedded in Afrofuturisms. I would love to believe that the destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars to explore the vastness of ourselves, but:

The man just upped my rent last night
Cause whitey's on the moon
No hot water, no toilets, no lights
But whitey's on the moon³²

~~To imagine a future outside of it would be disingenuous and irresponsible for a future can possibly be.~~ What is the future? Why the future? I have to imagine a future to feel better about the present, but both past and future are and always will be obscured, and thus I exist in the present, and the present then becomes surreal, or that is the past and future. The present is all I know, and all these things are occurring simultaneously. An ongoing flow of thought that I will send to the universe that will just come back to me in the present, no clearer or with more understanding than I knew then, but surreal. Reality is surreal because I cannot see into these futures they speak of.

THERE IS NO FUTURE. ONLY PRESENT.

³² Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," track 11 on *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, Flying Dutchman, 1970, vinyl.

Post-Production

The post process for *ukobola lina* was entirely guided by intuition and experimentation. After receiving my digital scans from cinemobilia, I had done a rough edit blending images and correcting contrast, but it wasn't until I got into a studio space, moved the fabric around, projected onto them and listened to the audio, that the flow of the images came together. I used one digital projector as my program monitor which allowed me to see any changes I made in realtime. I would drape fabric, adjust an image, move fabric, and so on and so forth.

As this work is a continuation of *maono mzimi*, I wanted to continue experimenting with live performance and the different ways in which I can interact with the images of my archive. *maono mzimi* utilizes both 16mm and digital projections accompanied by live narration. Throughout my workshopping I knew I didn't need the live narration, and instead decided to implement a live writing element with the use of a second digital projector, a wacom tablet, and photoshop. I was also missing seeing my film archive projected on film, and so I spliced together the phytograms and select images to be projected at the beginning and end of the performance.

That's about as elegant as I can put it. The post process was naturally in tune with the non-linear nature of this project and my shifting moods as I navigated the grief and homesickness I felt constructing this work.

Audio Treatment

During my time in Uganda, I recorded everything from conversations around the dinner table, a passing thought, birds, transit, and rain, practically every single day I was there. I have many hours of recorded audio for my archive. When I returned from my trip, I compiled my favourite clips and sent them along to my dear friend and collaborator Nada El-Omari, to build the sound design.

Nada and I have worked collaboratively since 2015, and our combined practice is rooted in process and guided by intuition, non-linear and material experimentation. Central to our work are themes of displacement, race, femininity, migration, and cultural identity; the lived and inherited landscapes we move through together. Our work then becomes a space for us to recontextualize our voices and reclaim agency, as it is essential for us to remember creation as a form of resistance and healing. The process of making *ukobola lina* has been one of resistance and healing, and Nada realized this with the care with which she crafted the layers of the soundscape.

The prompt I gave Nada was as follows:

We have somehow come across a device that allows us to scan radio frequencies that are transmitting memories across time and space. They are fragmented and revealed to us in waves. They fluctuate between parallel worlds, past and present, and the void, if that makes any sense.

The audio is my broadcast transmission, haunting every corner of time with lost futures promised to us. It has existed long before me, and will exist long after.

Each time I listen, I find something new, something forgotten, something remembered.

Live Performance

There is a continuous search for that harmonic relationship that is in tune with the universal beat. There are secrets to be discovered among the shuffled shadows that move within the jungles of a transient playground...The final expression created in a work of art should be a surprise to the artist and the viewer.

Patrick Turner, *Unrestricted Images: A Continuous Flow of Energy*

Each time this piece is performed, it will take on a different shape based on site specifics, but also in the ways that I become more fluent in my mother tongue. The more I write repetitively, the numbers, words, and names associated with my mother tongue, the more I come to understand. That is the goal, that one day I will be able to recite the origin story of the Bamasaaba entirely in Lugisu.

Lukyelo in Lugisu means proverb: a certain hidden wisdom that calls for an interpretation occasioned by a situation of performance.³³ These proverbs have been presented to me as riddles, and this performance of light, images, sounds and writing is how I must try to decipher them and myself.

³³ Wangwe, “Lumasaba riddles and proverbs. characteristics, ideology, and classification”, 7.

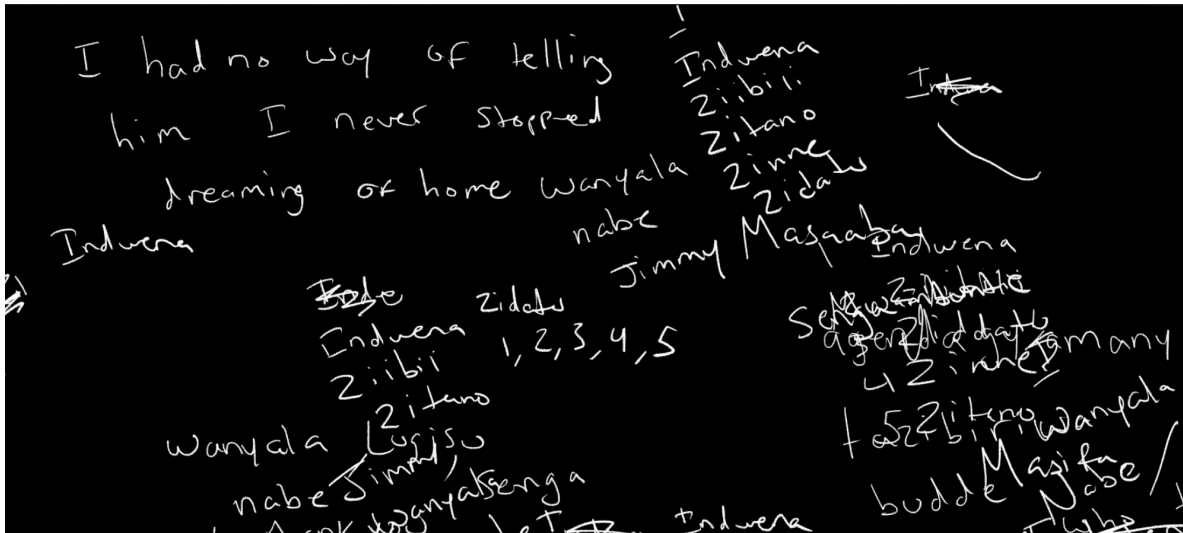


Image 28. Example of live writing from studio sessions.

Each time I have performed this piece thus far, the final expression has been a surprise to myself. The arrangement of the mosquito netting, fabric, projectors and the words I have trouble remembering in Lugisu, or the ones that come naturally, float around the fabrics and images of my family, plants, and the places I visited.

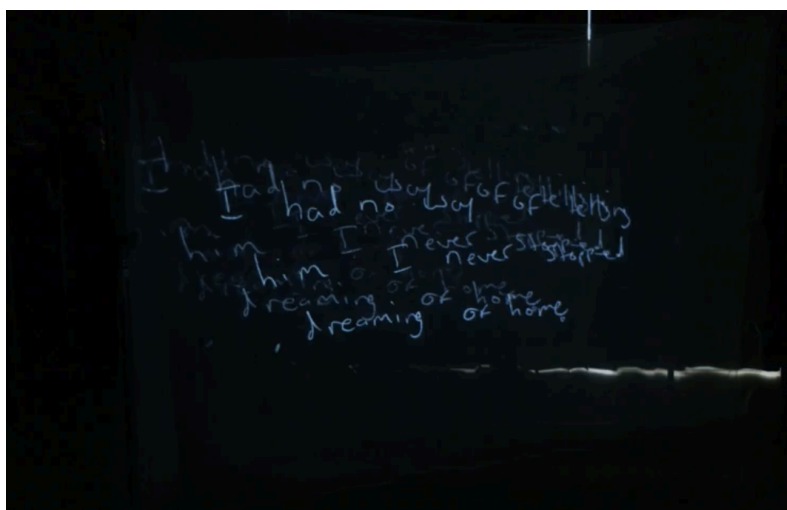


Image 29. Temp still from documentation of live performance

Hauntings

In the present, I am haunted by memories I do not have. For Ghanaian filmmaker and artist John Akomfrah, this haunting, “alludes to questions of mourning and memory, to subjectivity as a scene of being possessed by the past and what he (Derrida) also called spectrality: the way in which the past haunts the present.”³⁴ To recover these memories of the past and their hidden wisdoms, I perform with the light of projected images of my family, land and flora, grown by the land and decayed by hand, superimposed upon themselves by means of layered fabrics, recalling what I can through written text.

In Akomfrah’s multi-channel installations, the juxtaposition of image fragments allows figures to enter the frame in ways that render both the figures and the frame itself more complex. I am especially interested in the presentation of the images and Akomfrah’s, “recurring interest in simultaneously celebrating the epic stature of the image while troubling the boundaries between the screen and the social space outside it, his formal strategy here points to an insistence that viewers extend figures, subjects, and indeed, their precarity, outside the boundaries of the three channels of images.”³⁵ At the beginning of the performance, I tell the audience that if something calls to them to move about the space and within the maze of mosquito netting, to please do so. I gave my father similar instruction when I invited him to the studio to see the piece, but gave him a camera to move about the space with to provide a more organic point of view to my documentation.

³⁴ Cason, “Ghosts and the Machine: When Documenting Past Black Life Haunts Its Present.”

³⁵ Ibid.

This idea of projecting through mosquito netting came to me at the end of my residency in Kampala, where I experimented with presenting the film I made without the use of a film projector. I hung the netting in a corner of my studio and, using a digital projector, refracted the images through it. I use superimpositions on my timeline, but there was something surreal seeing the images stacked on top of themselves and being able to move about, around or in to bathe yourself in the spectral images and sound.

I think about the meticulous time it takes to make over 100ft of phytograms and to watch it play back at 24fps. It moves so quickly, you blink, and you miss a gold speck in the emulsion that the salt eroded. Evidence of the passage of time fragmented by all that is. Yet through the layering of fabrics onto the prints, many things become clear to me within the spaces of the negatives, where supposedly nothing resides. In Akomfrah's view, "the past's relation to the present is 'spectral, it's the way that the present is over-determined by a series of absences, which are not necessarily tactile, but they are active, they have agency.'"³⁶ In *ukobola lina*, it is within the space of the negative image that the image becomes a site where fabric and text surface, taking on a tactile presence. The fabric that I fold up after this is all said and done, and take home with me. That I will eventually have to return to my mother. That may become clothes I pass down.

The tangible experience of life and being and death and resurrection. This is where the work lives: in the in-between, in what is remembered, and in what is still being written.

³⁶ Cason, "Ghosts and the Machine: When Documenting Past Black Life Haunts Its Present."

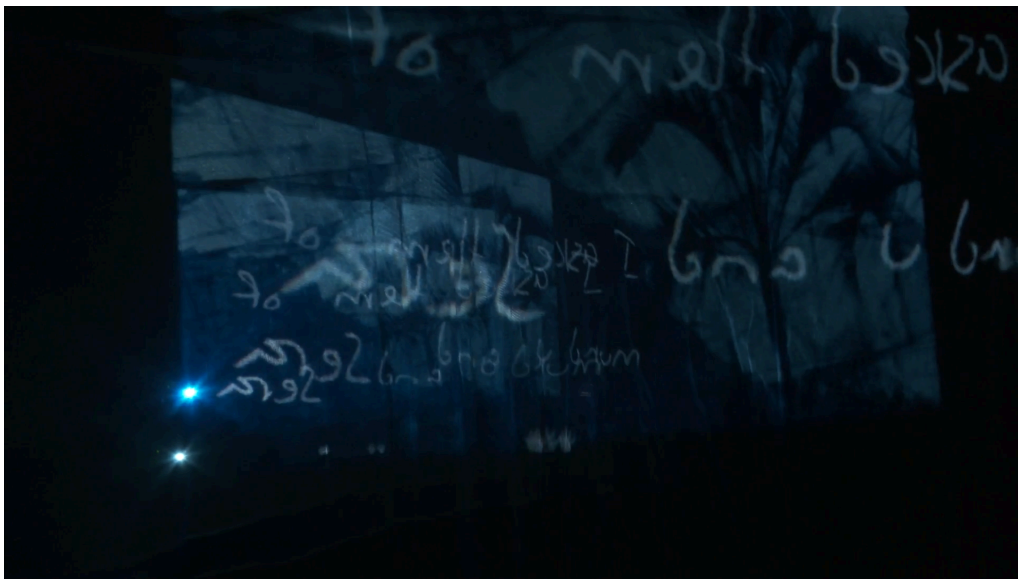
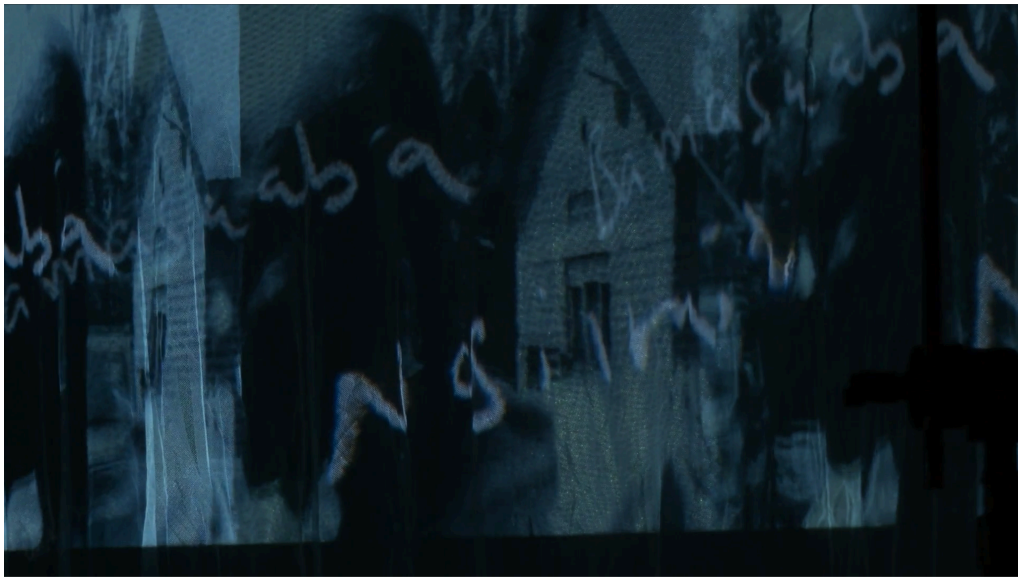


Image 30-31. Stills from documentation of live performance

Loose Script of Live Performance

We begin with the familiar hum of gears advancing sprockets of my 16mm projector.

Slowly, the sounds of birds and her land accompany us

On top of the phytograms and moon I write,
*“agenda gy’amanyi tazibiriwa budde/
that one who travels to a familiar place does not
worry about arriving in the dark”*

The 16mm film is turned off when we see the cow

I write, “I asked them of mundu and sera.”
trying to remember what I’ve been told.

The translating, asking, pondering and reflecting
continues as we scan for radio frequencies.

The last digital image is of Masaba.

The familiar hum returns, and we see
Senga, Sewa, process, plants, land, tears, salt.

The last 16mm image is of Masaba.

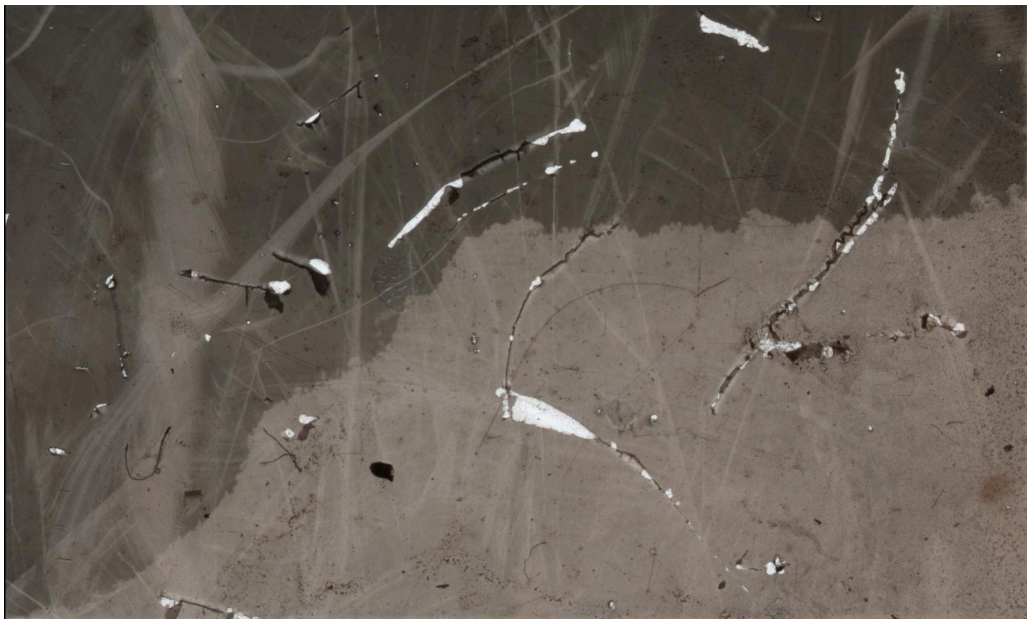
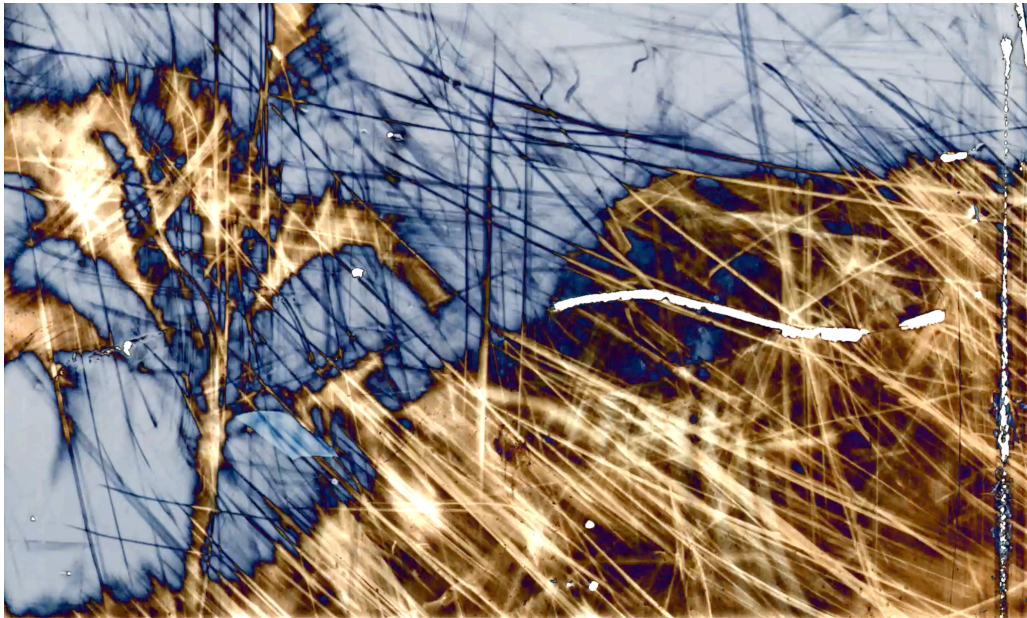


Image 32-33. Last frame of digital projection, digital scan of last 16mm projected image

Conclusion

The performance ends with the final question to be answered,

*ukobola lina /
when do you return?*

I do not have an answer to this question, but hopefully, soon. Every time I watch my archive and write out my thoughts, it is an attempt to return. To where? All familiar places I may have never been. The mountain, the moon, wherever Mundu and Sera were before they came to.

I think about when. It could be right now, it could be tomorrow, or perhaps it was yesterday.

Each time I listen and try to remember, it is a visit. Or attempt to, and all I can do is allow myself to hope that this is just the beginning of this work and that it will continue to branch out in a myriad of returns.

I feel a call to keep experimenting in different ways and have the work I make be a direct reflection of my lived experience of how I interpret time, how I move through the world, my false memories, confusion, grief, and my baseless dreams; it must encompass it all at some point.

I would love to experiment with creating my own film emulsion, and return in another way. Until then, and always, I carry Kuku's words with me:

*When all around the world rushes
To fill minutes of dwindling day
With frantic activity
I to my place of quiet go
To think of day now near ending
To muse on days long gone and far
To count blessings of loved ones near
To nesting places and waiting young
To gaze on flowers, trees and bushes
Straining to catch the sun's last rays
As the crimson ball sinks in the west,
And then I turn to join the world
My soul refreshed, my work to do.*

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