

## SELLING THE INVISIBLE: BUSINESS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION ON THE UGANDAN EQUATOR

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**Abstract:** The 32 craft shops that are cramped together 60 kilometers away from Uganda's capital, apparently in the middle of nowhere, would make many people wonder how these kiosks are still in business given the apparent lack of any visual attractions. But this is where the Equator line runs through Africa, separating Northern and Southern hemispheres. The confusion one might experience comes from the fact that the object of tourist gaze is not easily detectable. In this article, I argue that what looks like a marginal set of kiosks in an unlikely site is actually the nexus of a much wider inter-connected economic network. I also I argue that this case represents an example of how tourism can produce economic opportunities even in the absence of government incentives or formal influxes of capital. **Keywords:** Ugandan Equator, Ugandan Tourism, Regional Tourism Networks in East Africa, East African Tourism.

### INTRODUCTION

An unsuspecting tourist would probably be very confused at the sight of the 32 craft shops that are cramped together on either side of the road, 60 kilometers away from Kampala, Uganda's capital, in the middle of nowhere. The confusion one might experience comes from the fact that the object of tourist gaze is in fact invisible. This is where the Equator line runs through Africa, separating Northern and Southern hemispheres. The exact place where the Equator is thought to divide the two hemispheres is marked by two round demarcation stones where tourists can take (touristy) pictures under the "Ugandan Equator" sign. What differentiates this tourist site from others is the fact that the Ugandan Equator does not have a visible dimension the way other tourist attractions typically do. In addition, the economic networks that facilitate the flow of business at the Equator constitute another dimension which is not readily visible, but is in fact very real. In this article, I argue that what looks like a random, marginal set of kiosks in the

middle of nowhere is actually the nexus of a much wider inter-connected, semi-formal economic network. By using ethnographic data on the businesses opened at the Equator, the regional networks of craft distribution and, finally, the local producers that have entered the local industry of craft-making exclusively for the kiosks at the Ugandan Equator, I argue that this case represents an example on how tourism can actually produce economic opportunities even in the absence of government incentives or formal influxes of capital.

Before analyzing the particularities of the tourist industry on the Equator, it is also important to recognize the limitations of such a study. The Equator businesses are to some extent a success story, but they also come at the expense of a range of social and economic inequalities which should be explored at length in a subsequent study. Not everyone can get a job at the Equator or open a business on site. There are monetary, personal or even bureaucratic restrictions which prevent potential entrepreneurs from operating at the Equator. This suggests the dual nature of the Equator: it is an invisible attraction which has been turned into a financially successful site and an opportunity which is only open to some and closed to others.

## POLITICS, PERCEPTIONS AND TOURISM IN UGANDA

Formerly known as the “Pearl of Africa,” Uganda was a leading tourist destination in the 1960s, receiving more tourists than Kenya and Tanzania combined<sup>1</sup>. Its status abruptly changed in post-colonial periods for mainly two reasons. On one hand, during colonial times the tourism center in East Africa was located in Uganda. Its status did not change immediately after independence, but when the East African Common Services Organisation collapsed (1967) and the center of the regional tourism industry shifted to Nairobi. In addition, Uganda gradually lost most of its status as a touristic attraction after Idi Amin took power. Despite numerous efforts on

behalf of the Museveni administration, the country has not been able to regain its former prominence as a tourist destination. However, in the last five years, the average number of foreign tourists visiting Uganda has been growing slowly, but steadily, and has reached around 500,000 per year.<sup>ii</sup> Several challenges are still affecting the flow of tourists, such as: the clashes between the Ugandan Government and the Lord Resistance's Army; the shortages and the high prices for the few flights operated by the Ugandan Airways; and the lack of advertized accommodation for backpackers and young tourists. Like other East African countries, Uganda has various attractions to offer international tourists ranging from national parks, exotic gorilla safaris, cultural tours, to forest walks, birding tours, and trekking adventures. However, despite all the efforts made by private investors, local entrepreneurs and the President's Office, Uganda still falls behind the other prominent members of the East African Community in terms of the annual international tourists' arrival rates. Despite the political crisis following the presidential elections in Kenya and the albino killings in Tanzania, both of which occurred in 2008 and sparked outrage among the international community member states, Kenya and Tanzania still receive more tourists than Uganda. According to the 2009 World Travel & Tourism Council, Travel & Tourism Economic Impact reports, in 2008, about 1.4 million tourists visited Kenya, and Tanzania registered 800,000 international arrivals.

While the LRA is still a worrying factor, in practice Uganda is facing neither political nor economic instability and most, if not all, of its tourist attractions are easily accessible and perfectly safe to reach. Thus the main obstacle to the tourism industry that Uganda is facing is related to the perception of violence. Uganda never managed to overcome its perceived status as a dangerous country despite the continuous efforts of its leaders to promote Uganda as a safe and appealing destination. The attractions it offers are not enough to outweigh the real and

merely perceived problems in the country, and thus do not bring in as many tourists as the administration would like. Jeremy Kahn, in an article for the *Foreign Policy Magazine* briefly summarized the main anxieties uninformed international tourists have when thinking about Uganda: “Close your eyes and imagine Uganda. What comes to mind? Images of Idi Amin and his genocidal murders? Or more recent scenes of “nightcommuting” children swarming rural towns at dusk to avoid impressments into the Lord’s Resistance Army?”<sup>iii</sup> Sadly, these images continue to inform the “common knowledge” international tourists bring to their decisions on their next travel destination, with the effect of a long term depression in the local tourist industry.

The Equator is a site that attracts tourists all over the world<sup>iv</sup>. As some of traders, shop attendants and local residents recall, this has not always been the case. In order to understand the tourist industry at the Equator in Uganda, one has to look at the way in which it has developed in the last twenty years. If the business models on the Equator are just seen as a fixed, completed process, the crucial matter of how and under what conditions these have evolved will remain unknown.

*In the beginning there were none...*

There is some debate among the shop sellers on the Equator regarding the identity of the person who opened the first business on site. Since this was done in the early 1990s, exclusively at an informal level, there are no public records with the local authorities that could shed light on the identity of the first entrepreneur who thought of selling crafts on the Equator. There are four or five shop attendants claiming that their shop was “there at the beginning.” Most of these

sellers accept the hypothesis that the very first entrepreneur was a Kenyan tour driver, who was driving tourists around various touristic attractions in East Africa. Some claim that he decided to open a shop on the Equator because he came to see it as a strategic point of interest after bringing tourists to the Equator on a weekly basis for some time.

Those who were working at the Equator in the 1990s remember how hard it was to get supplies and sell their crafts. “The Equator was little known back then. People were mostly stopping to the Equator by chance but that still meant we were able to make money. Back in those days, there were only three or four shops scattered around the Equator. We didn’t have much to offer, but the few tourists stopping by were excited to buy our crafts,<sup>v</sup>” remembers one attendant who has been working at the Equator for more than 15 years. Based on the statements of five sellers who claim they are the veterans in the business, the greatest challenges at that time were finding the right suppliers, getting the capital necessary to maintain the business throughout the year, and convincing tourists to buy what they had to offer. “We knew little about the business back then. We figured out that by opening a shop here, we will get enough people to buy our crafts and this will bring us enough money to make a living. There were no jobs in the village so we thought that by working on the Equator we at least stood a chance of making some money,<sup>vi</sup>” recalls a different seller. “We had the right idea, but we didn’t know much about how a business is run, what the risks are and how we can survive in a low season. It was a learning experience,<sup>vii</sup>” adds another.

These statements point to the common difficulties entrepreneurs face in countries that are not business-oriented. As these sellers did not receive any palpable support from the local government, and had limited know-how on how to operate a business, they had to learn about all the specificities of this industry the hard way. But as the development of the neo-capitalist

systems in Uganda became more pronounced, entrepreneurs decided that the risks the business entailed in the early 1990s were worth taking:

We had no jobs. No opportunities. No alternatives. I owned four cows back then. I sold three of them and kept one for the family, in case the plan went wrong. With the money I got, I went to Kampala in search for crafts. After meeting with some of the Congolese men trading crafts back then I decided to buy the crafts from the one that gave me the best price. It was hard at the beginning but once we had enough crafts stored in the shop, money started coming<sup>viii</sup>.

Stories like these suggest the entrepreneurial nature of some of the individuals who are situated at the bottom of the economic chain. Many of the ones interviewed for this research, succeeded in changing their economic status, others have yet to register positive results. Much has changed since the first entrepreneur opened their shop at the Equator and nowadays, the number of shops has more than quadrupled.

The first thing one notes when reaching the Equator is the stark difference between the layout and the structure of the shops situated on the North and the South side of the Equator. On the North side, shops are made of bricks and cement; they are permanent constructions, all part of a long, wagon-like building divided in various compartments which are used by different sellers. On the South side, shops are made of steel, carton, timber and other dispensable materials and they are smaller and are all cramped together with every single square meter used carefully.

This division can be explained by looking at the owners of the land on each side. The North side, made of permanent constructions, belongs to a Ugandan millionaire who bought the land five years ago and then allegedly chased away the shop owners who had no ownership of the land or authorization to the other side of the street. He built the shops that are now on site and then rented the various sections to the current sellers or patrons who wanted to invest in a craft business on the Equator. The South side has also been bought by private entrepreneurs,

specifically a couple of Norwegian investors who then rented the space to the rest of the shop owners. On this side of the street, shops are not permanent constructions due to the fact that, according to the sellers working here, the landlords announced they had different plans for the land. On the South side, the rent for one shop goes for US29 dollars per month. Shop owners also have to pay US15 dollars per month for the night guards – a handful of people employed to patrol at the Equator during the night. This is deemed necessary because of various robberies over the last few years. Some of the shops have been looted on various occasions and sellers had to give away their profits at the threat of the gun, but this changed once the night guards were hired. Across the street, the rent is slightly higher, running around US29-48 dollars per month, depending on the size of the shops.<sup>ix</sup>

The craft business has no weekends, no public holidays, and no time off. Shop sellers work from 7.00 AM to 6 PM, Monday through Sunday. Some of the sellers are allowed to stay home during Christmas and Easter, but most of them are not that lucky. Should a personal emergency occur – such as the loss of a relative or someone falling sick – shop attendants are allowed to take a couple of days off, but only if they find someone else to cover their shifts. Generally, some of the neighboring sellers will do that, as they might also need to have that favor returned one day.

Typically, attendants are employed for a fixed monthly wage of US29 to US43 dollars per month. The lowest wage I discovered in the second round of research (August 2009) was US15 dollars per month. The way responsibilities are divided between shop attendants and their bosses is never clear. In fact, it is one of the most fluid social relations on site as owners can change their mind and delegate or abrogate responsibilities based on the confidence they have in the attendants they hire. Sometimes, when new sellers are recruited, their bosses might decide

not to pay them at all and instead just give them a small commission for the first couple of months. If results are satisfactory, a more permanent agreement is negotiated.

The main difference between shop sellers and shop owners at the end of the day is that the owner gets paid much more money than the seller. However, the owner is expected to be able to cover the attendant's salary even if the business is passing through the low season. Due to the hundreds of unemployed youth within a walking distance from the Equator, most shop sellers do not dare asking for any special benefits, rights or raises from their bosses. For example, Joseph, a shop seller who has been working for the same owner for eleven years still receives the same salary as he did at the time of his recruitment. When he tried to ask for a raise, he was immediately dismissed: "Work for 60,000 shillings [US29 dollars] or do not work at all,"<sup>x</sup> came the answer. Occasionally, when salaries are not paid on time, sellers admitted that when such situations occur, they do their best in selling some crafts at higher prices than roughly agreed with the owner, so that they can use the unreported difference to cover their personal expenses. I regard this practice as only being used in exceptional situations since, on average, sellers cannot get a very high price for their crafts because most shops within the area sell almost exactly the same products. Asking for a high price will normally chase away clients, which is the worst thing that could happen to a seller, given the fairly small number of potential clients.

Most sellers that I interviewed also travel to the neighboring villages or the weekly markets in Kampala to buy necessary merchandize. A handful of attendants are also entrusted to deposit the profits at the local banks. Some owners visit their shops during the high season but almost never set foot in their shops when the flow of tourists is reduced.

*Sustainability, philanthropy and business on the Ugandan Equator*

Among the 32 businesses on the Equator, one deserves special consideration. The *Equation Café* is arguably the most visited attraction on site. It opened in 2003 when Nathaniel Dunigan, an American entrepreneur, received a US\$70,000 loan from USAID for a development project. He envisioned a self-sustainable orphanage for children infected or affected by AIDS that would run off the profits from a café shop and art gallery, without further reliance on external aid. Having attained the loan, Dunigan rented one of the largest buildings at the Equator and opened the cafeteria and art gallery. Since then, all profits coming from the *Equation Café* have been used to cover the costs of the projects run by Aid Child, the charity organization he runs.

This has proven quite a brilliant idea: the organization was able to repay the loan to USAID less than a year after the cafeteria was open, and the *Equation Café* has since become “an income generating project by Aid Child – fostering self-sustainability and community development in Africa.”<sup>xi</sup> According to its director, the business generates almost enough revenues to fully finance two orphanages he opened in Uganda, one in Masaka and a second one in Mpigi (the only exception being that some additional funds are needed to cover all the logistical costs for the orphanage in Mpigi). The *Equation Café* employs up to ten people throughout the year (though the number might go down in the low season) making it the largest business on the Equator. When a tourist gets to Equation café, he or she is informed by banners, fliers and stickers that all proceedings go to supporting HIV positive children. This is a necessary incentive as most products sold in this gallery, food and beverages included, are noticeably overpriced. This does not seem to bother tourists, as the prices they pay for a coffee are often similar to the ones they pay in their own countries, but for an average Ugandan, paying three dollars for a cappuccino is not a feasible option. Similar commodities (muffins, cappuccino, café

late, etc) are sold cheaper at different places throughout the country and especially in Kampala, but many tourists seem happy to pay a significantly larger amount of money for the same products at the Equator.

I would argue that overpriced muffins and cappuccino are purchased at the Equator for the understated contradiction that they trigger: Western products and commodities are found in a rural area of Ugandan where tourists expect to get in contact with the local culture, which many anticipate to be significantly different from their own. From a different perspective, given the cause they are supporting, various tourists I interviewed argued that by buying the products sold here, they really contribute to the local community. In fact, without knowing it, they contribute to the local communities by buying *any* product sold on the Equator, but the Equation café's aggressive awareness campaign seems to be a particularly efficient way of persuading clients to support their business.

The *Equation Café* is possibly one of the most ground-breaking businesses on the Equator. The best strength of this place is its own style: a person can come to this place, have a coffee, breakfast or lunch and also enjoy the intimacy and the unobtrusiveness of a gallery. When tourists go to the other shops at the Equator, they are often fatigued by the seller's questions, the shop attendants' different selling techniques and the general pressure on buying souvenirs. This is typical of virtually any craft market in the world, not only the one at the Equator, but here there is also the *Equation Café* to offer an alternative. As Christopher Steiner argues in *African Art in transit*, "the whole idea of the gallery is to provide the buyer with an alternative to the bustle and confusion of the outdoor market place."<sup>xiii</sup>

But the most interesting thing about the *Equation Café* is the business model it uses, one that should perhaps be extended to other charities throughout the world, and replicated extensively in much of the touristic Africa. *Aid Child*, the organization in charge of the *Equation Café*, has managed to combine business with philanthropy with surprising success. In the developing world, aid comes with strings and conditions, which more often than not modify the original ideas to the extent that they become almost unrecognizable. Organizations are forced to shape their plans to fit the requirements laid down by international donors, and are often very restricted in their operations as a result. Nathaniel Dunigan had managed to bypass these difficulties by generating enough money on site to finance the charity's orphanages. Although the initial funding came from an external agency, after repaying the loan, *Aid Child* was able to manage the *Equation Café* fully independent from further external aid which led to a relative independence from foreign donors. The café is perhaps the type of ideas the West should analyze and implement in future aid projects, as it positively affects the local community in various ways. The *Equation Café* not only helps out the orphans of *Aid Child*, it employs local jobless people and attracts tourists to the Equator, thereby helping the other local businesses.

#### *Sellers, crafts and competitive advantages on the Equator*

As tourists from countries all over the world, different cultural backgrounds, and of various social statuses gather at the Equator, they all seem to be searching for something from these innovative entrepreneurs, be that “indigenous” crafts, inspirational stories related to the various souvenirs on sale, or what I would call “the taste of Africa.” This last element might refer to the process of engaging in the bargaining process, superficial chitchats with the locals, or simply the act of taking photos of the Equator and/or the locals. Sellers at the Equator are all aware of these expectations and seem to be well prepared to offer them exactly what they are

looking for. Years of working in this business have helped them learn the most basic details about tourists and tourists' expectations. With the help of other attendants, and through trial and error, shop sellers have become skilled at knowing the best ways to "fool," "trap," or "cage" tourists. Furthermore, they have learned what products sell fastest, which ones are most profitable and what crafts are demanded by various collectors who might happen to stop by at the Equator.

Most sellers that I spoke with say that tourists do not generally come to their shops knowing what they are looking for. Sellers have learned to accept that and continue to work harder to get a deeper understanding of what tourists are most likely to buy. According to some of the sellers, an average tourists is more likely to buy some traditional African items, such as drums, bark cloth products, spears, arrows, batiks, trays, baskets, mats, crested crane bird statues, gorilla carvings or masks, or souvenirs that will specifically remind them of the Equator; t-shirts, jerseys or postcards bearing the word "Equator". Therefore it is likely that sellers will advertise these products before anything else. Moreover, as we will see in the following sections, shop owners make notable efforts to have constant supplies of all the items that a seller might ask for or choose from. Some of these souvenirs are made by local craftsmen (baskets, trays, mats, drums, paper necklaces, fiber dolls or hats, stools,) others are brought from considerable distances (carvings, masks, spears and arrows).

However, as many of the sellers buy crafts from the same suppliers, most shops sell almost the exact same items, which means that actually selling a product is the result of chance and salesmanship. Quoting again from Christopher Steiner, a seller's economic success "depends on a combination of hard work, commercial acumen [...], prayer, and good fortune. This last variable, which accounts for the success of an art trader, is the one which is most talked about by

the traders themselves. Good fortune is usually spoken of as a combination of luck and the will of God.”<sup>xiii</sup> Steiner’s observations are valid as a general rule yet shop attendants on the Equator do not only rely on luck and prayers in their quest to attract tourists and convince them to buy their items. In an attempt to fight the uniformity caused by the presence of the same crafts in almost every shop at the Equator, some shop sellers brought in unique crafts, souvenirs that can only be found in a couple of shops. Among the exclusive crafts that can be found in some shops and not others are: wooden fertility dolls; elephant tail bracelets; porcupine quills; cow tails; walking sticks; wooden sandals; and seashells. While these crafts have not necessarily generated more significant profits, they are a sign of sellers’ effort to diversify their shops through innovative initiatives.

Given the fact that most shop attendants on the Equator sell similar products a series of selling adaptations have been adopted over the years. For example, among the most common strategies to attract tourists that shop sellers employ is the “tipping method.” Some of the sellers on the Equator have prearranged agreements with tour drivers and guides who stop regularly at the Equator. Having gained tourists’ trust, these drivers and guides take them to specific shops, help them “negotiate” a “fair price” and do their best in convincing tourists that the object in question is worth the amount of money asked by the seller. More often than not, this strategy proves to be the most efficient of all, as tourists are under pressure from both sellers and tour guides to buy souvenirs. On the one hand, sellers claim they offer the best prices while on the other hand, there is encouragement and reassurance from the tour guides who are acting as their friends. By using this strategy, shop sellers make sure that they get a consistent amount of tourists to their shops. Moreover, it goes without saying that a small share of the profit goes to the guides who facilitate the transaction.

Another innovative way of getting ahead of the game has been the decision of some of the shop owners to give sympathy-inspiring names to their shops. One of the craft shops on the Equator is called *The Orphan's shop* but, as other discontented sellers told me, there is no connection between the shop and any charity organization. When tourists visit the place, the seller is quick to argue that by buying crafts, tourists help raise and support orphan children, a tactic that has proven successful over the years. Another shop is called *The Discount Shop*, a name meant to help the seller gain tourists' attention and confidence though significant discounts are not actually given. The name *Women's Crafts and Gifts Shop* also suggests that this business is created to empower local female members of the community. However, the shop owner collects crafts in the same manner as most other shops, and is therefore not specifically aiming to empower any of the local women.

Another interesting way of attracting tourists is entertainment. Some of the shop attendants are actually quite gifted singers and musicians. When large amounts of tourists are gathered at the Equator (around noon and during the weekends) some shop sellers put on a show. They use Djembe drums, shakers, and curved harps and wear traditional skirts to attract tourists. By using their natural gifts and skills, these sellers are normally guaranteed selling some products by the end of their performance. A somewhat similar, and perhaps more amusing technique to attract buyers is playing loud music when tourists are approaching. One of the sellers at the Equator has an entire collection of Gospel CDs and cassettes which he starts playing whenever a group of tourists is approaching the area where his shop is located. He strongly believes that his CDs have proven to be quite a "tourist catcher," as some of the more religious tourists will feel inclined to buy from a "true believer," as he proclaims himself. "When they come to my place, tourists say: let us buy from our brother in Christ. I tell you, religion is a

good catalyst for sales,” argues this particular seller. On occasion, the same seller will also start singing and encourage tourists to do the same. “It is all about bonding with tourists. You make them your friends, they buy souvenirs from you,” concludes the seller.

Another common selling technique is the claim that most crafts are made just in the neighboring villages (something I will explore shortly). After learning the hard way that some tourists will refuse buying souvenirs that are not coming from the local communities, sellers are now claiming that everything is traditional and authentic, and produced just behind the Equator. As the assurance of authenticity seems to be extremely important to tourists, very few sellers will ever say or admit that, in fact, about half of their stocks comes from neighboring countries. Almost every seller I spoke with claimed that they at least once made the mistake of admitting to the fact that some crafts come from other countries, and swore never to do that again. “Tourists run from foreign crafts as if these crafts have AIDS. So then we give them local, or at least we tell them we do,” declared one of the sellers sarcastically.

A good command of English is also something that will add to the success of a seller. As tourists are often exclusively interested in the story-behind-the-craft, those who are better at telling inspirational anecdotes are most likely to sell items than those who are not. Finally, some of the shop sellers who have been in this business for many years have implemented what one of them calls the “nice display technique.” Those sellers who have been working on the Equator for years (and a couple of them have been doing it since 1995) have come up with a progressive arrangement of their crafts from the most sought for items displayed just in front of the shop (scarves, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, soft stone eggs and plates) to the more expensive and therefore less commercial crafts in the back of the shop (giant wood carved hippos, giraffes or lions, old masks, tall statues etc.) and all other crafts placed in between.

All these techniques show both adaptation and innovation on behalf of shop sellers. Whatever strategy they use in their effort to attract tourists to their stalls, sellers make informed, carefully studied efforts to generate more income and compete against other sellers. When competition is as tough as it is on the Equator, those involved in the business of trading and selling crafts will try to use whatever advantage and innovation they can think of to get ahead.

Lastly, while it might sound bizarre, sellers do not only compete against their neighbors, but they also collectively compete against the sellers across the street. There is an interesting division between the shops on the North side and the ones on the South side. Most of the temporary shops do not display any price tags and, usually, sellers will start bargaining with a high price and lower it to what seems to be an acceptable price for both the seller and the buyer; almost none of them lists any prices on the souvenirs displayed in their shops. However, in the shops situated across the street most crafts have a price tag. Sellers in these shops are authorized to give discounts up to 15 %, sometimes more if clients buy more than one item. However, shop sellers on this side of the street tend to be less successful than the ones on the south side. By listing the prices for the items in store, shop sellers deprive tourists of the pleasure and the uncertainty of the bargaining process.

One of the reasons why tourists voluntarily go to craft markets is the unknown outcome and the satisfaction a tourist will experience at the end of the bargaining process if the outcome is considered satisfactory by the tourist. Bargaining is a ritual; the rules and expectations are informally set and the sellers work hard to make this ritual as enjoyable as possible for the tourists. More and more tourists expect and even hope to experience the fun of bargaining while in Uganda, as in other tourist spots in much of Africa. When shop attendants list the selling price on their crafts, they make the process of bargaining redundant, as the outcome of any attempt at

bargaining is more often than not known in advance: tourists can expect to get a roughly 15 % discount, which is often granted automatically. Lastly, by displaying the tag price, sellers enter unknowingly into competition with the values and the selling techniques practiced in the West. That makes buying crafts at the Equator similar to buying a souvenir from London, Paris or New York, where prices are almost always shown. This reduces the attractiveness of the bargain ritual, something that goes against the interest of the sellers.

Thus making a real profit on the Equator can prove quite challenging. Despite the fact that some of the sellers have a lot of training and experience in their jobs, there are difficulties that even they cannot easily overcome. The most serious of these is the low season. The craft business is a seasonal one, which means that, in general, from January to March the number of tourists decreases significantly. “There could be weeks without anyone coming to the shop,” one of the attendants told me. Since most sellers sell a fairly standard set of products, the competition among sellers increases during the low season: “In a low season, we are forced to drop prices on some of the items so that we can at least have enough money to buy food,” reported another seller. The low season affects shop sellers and shop owners direly. Almost all shop owners have to pay rent, salaries, and security fees. Some of the local entrepreneurs have credits and loans taken from various banks and are expected to pay the monthly rates. The low season jeopardizes all of these collateral economic activities and local entrepreneurs have to take steps to avoid bankruptcy during it.

Shop sellers deal with the low season in different ways; some of them, for example, have engaged in alternative income-generating activities that supplement their monthly earnings and help them financially survive. One of the attendants I spoke to has invested in a poultry farm, another has a pay phone that people can use for a nominal fee of 200 shillings a minute for local

calls. One seller has a vegetable garden where she grows various crops to sell, whilst another managed to save enough money to buy a motorcycle taxi (the famous boda-bodas.) One family who owns a small shop brews beer during the low season and sells it to various bars around Kayabwe, the closest township to the Equator. However, most sellers do not have any other businesses, preferring to cope with the low season the old fashioned way: by saving money during the high season and using those savings to make it through the leaner period.

*The Unseen Actors at the Equator*

While tourists are walking around in what one shop seller amusingly referred to as “The Zigzag Muzungu Spree,”<sup>xiv</sup> the varied and attractive shopping options are mainly thanks to the traders – the invisible and unexpected players in the Equator economy. They come from as far as Rwanda or the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya and Tanzania, to sell their crafts and old masks in Uganda, as their countries' political and economic difficulties jeopardize their businesses and their capacity to provide for their families.

I was able to interview some of the foreign traders that regularly commute from Congo and Rwanda to the Ugandan Equator or straight to Kampala.<sup>xv</sup> They move goods and crafts both ways and engage in economic activities at home and in Uganda. Mahanga started bringing crafts from Congo to Uganda in 1995. He told me that he had invested in this business after realizing that there was a demand for antique products and crafts coming from tourists visiting Uganda, adding with a smile that “Ugandans had no idea about this opportunity.” He was also painfully aware of the fact that his own country “was getting more and more unstable, with tourists avoiding coming to Zaire<sup>xvi</sup> with looting and corruption becoming the rule and not the exception. So doing this business in Zaire for the foreign tourists coming to my country was out of the

question.” Months after the end of the Rwandan genocide, Nkurunziza, a young Tutsi man who managed to flee to Uganda just before the mass massacres begun, entered the craft distribution business with the help of one of his Ugandan friends. According to him, “the last 15 years have been some of the most successful in my life. With the money made from the craft business, I was able to build a house, provide to my family living on the outskirts of Butare [the second largest city in Rwanda], pay for the school fees for my three daughters, and make a decent living.” Other traders who come to Uganda specifically to bring crafts to the Equator include a handful of Kenyan entrepreneurs who bring crafts over once or twice a year – the infrequency of their visits being the result of their stable businesses at home.

The traders I interviewed are all well established, with complex webs of distribution links and customers both in the region and abroad. All have overcome various challenges that threatened their businesses at the beginning of their ventures. Nicholas, a Congolese trader from the Kivu Province, talks about the arduous efforts he had to make back in the 1990s when he started his business:

In the beginning, I did not know where to sell my products and my friends who knew the right places refused to tell me, thinking that I was going to lower the prices they had agreed on amongst themselves to use with foreign tourists. With time, I came across a Good Samaritan who told me what the best places for selling crafts are and introduced me to the right contacts both in Kampala and at the Equator. When I met my first customers, I did exactly what my friends were afraid of: I asked them to buy from me valuable artifacts at reduced prices. It worked wonders.<sup>xvii</sup>

Nicholas introduces us to some of the most important anxieties and challenges one trader experiences at the beginning of his career. One could have the initial capital to invest in the trading business but then might have difficulties in finding the necessary distributors or customers. As Christopher Steiner points out, the craft markets are like secret societies: traders

are reluctant about answering the most basic questions about their business, talking about their success, chain of supply or chain of distribution.

Traders, for example, are reluctant to talk about their earnings (for fear that kin, friends, or other traders will want to borrow money)...they will not easily reveal either the sources of their goods or their network of clients (for one of the key functions of traders is to maintain their status as middlemen, by keeping apart both village object-owners and producers from Western consumers);<sup>xviii</sup>

Traders decide to keep their business secret for obvious reasons. As the case of Nicolas shows, newcomers will sell their merchandise at lower prices, thus bringing down the market value of various products coming from the same region. Many traders cannot place their merchandise at the Equator simply because some of the shop sellers are used to buying the necessary crafts from their traditional suppliers. On occasion, some more insistent traders will be able to vend some of their crafts, or give them on credit, but only by lowering the price and by enjoying a very small margin of profit. These efforts of the new traders also suggest some of the most common challenges for traders who bring their products to the Equator encounter: shop owners or sellers might be interested in buying more crafts from them, but they don't have hard cash when the traders arrive to their shops.

Traders coming from neighboring countries are thus faced with a difficult decision to make: either go back to their native countries with their unsold products; or give them on credit and collect the money the next time they come to Uganda. The latter option is one most traders choose – after all going back home with unsold products will raise the costs of transportation, and will stop them from being able to acquire more crafts as the extra products might push them over their maximum weight limit or the storage capacity of their cars. Not getting paid for their merchandise could also mean that they will not be able to purchase more crafts upon their return or pay their suppliers, leaving them with basically the same problem as returning to Congo or

Rwanda with their unsold products. Lack of capital makes many of the traders look for other opportunities in other job fields, or to launching complementary ventures. Only those traders who can find the right balance between selling crafts on credit and accepting cash can survive in the industry.

The presence at the Equator of artifacts produced outside of Uganda points towards a regionalization of the tourist art industry. What has generated such a regionalization is still subject to debate. On one hand, most of the foreign regional traders who supply the Equator come from countries where political and economic stability has yet to be achieved, and the internal markets are either collapsed or seriously disrupted by the ongoing political and/or military turmoil. This has crippled their local tourism industry, made international tourists choose other destinations, forcing the craft traders to look for other markets. Moreover, some traders decide to sell their stock abroad simply because the currency of their own country is not stable enough, a fact which jeopardizes their personal wealth and also makes it more difficult for them to buy the goods they need to barter for crafts, as prices go up and down based on economic factors such as inflation or deflation. When going to other countries, they not only sell their products at a better price but also get a hold of foreign currency – be that Ugandan Shillings, Dollars, Euros or Pounds – which provides much greater economic security than having large quantities of a potentially worthless local currency.

From a different perspective, going back and forth between two neighboring countries is a great advantage for those traders who sell crafts and informally (to be read illegally) import goods. Most foreign traders coming to the Equator said that before their return to Congo, Rwanda or Kenya, they buy Ugandan goods – shoes, cloths, fabric etc – which are then exchanged for crafts in their native countries. In the Kivu province in the Democratic Republic

of Congo, traders buying crafts from remote villages which they visit every once in a while are more successful when trading goods than paying money to the local craftsmen. This is because locals have very limited use for money, so that cloths or fabric provide a much more appealing exchange for their work. As the local economic exchanges have been severely disrupted in the Kivu provinces products like cloths, shoes, cheap electronics, crop seeds, fertilizers or some food items (flour, sugar, salt, spices, etc) are hard if not impossible to find in the local markets. Due to the scarcity of these items, local craftsmen are more likely to sell their crafts in exchange for these items than local money. Another notable factor that makes local suppliers prefer goods instead of money is that most of them do not have market information about the changes in the volatile local currency. By bartering for goods, they can operate with the type of “currency” they are most familiar with: the products they need. One Congolese trader summarized it like this:

Based on what I need from North Kivu, and the profits I make in Uganda, I decide what merchandize I buy from Kampala. A cheap pair of shoes is expected to bring me two items (masks, carvings, decorative knives from local ironsmiths etc), one kilogram of rice, cassava, or corn will run for about one to two items, a two meter fabric will earn me three or four items, whereas a mini radio or a small TV will prove most successful: up to 10-15 masks and carvings. It’s all relative to the season we’re in, and the local demands. The worse the season is in Congo, the better for me.<sup>xix</sup>

This account suggests a very complex system of exchange between craft suppliers in the Democratic Republic of Congo and traders traveling to Uganda. In some ways, traders compensate for the lack of development, the consequences of civil war, the shortages of basic supplies and the collapse of the internal market. Artists who make crafts for the local market (i.e. the communities they live in), are now also catering for the external market due to the increasing demand from regional traders. As we will see in the following section with the case of suppliers living in the vicinity of the Equator, suppliers in Congo do not completely rely on regional traders to make a living as they come irregularly and are not a consistent source of revenue. They

engage in various different economic exchanges within the local communities and regard traders simply as a means to supplement their yearly income.

As we have seen, sellers at the Equator are reluctant about admitting that some of the merchandize they have on display in their shops is not Ugandan. They tend to hide the origin of these objects simply because they have learned from experience that tourists are more likely to dismiss such products as it is their desire to consume a particular type of narrative. As the most basic level, tourists search for Ugandan crafts simply because these souvenirs are supposed to remind them of the country they visited, the sites they saw or even the people they interacted with. On the other hand, however, tourists also demand specific types of craft which are difficult to produce in Uganda for lack of know-how, raw materials or simply because of cultural and stylistic / esthetic reasons. The sellers are thus caught between a demand for authenticity, and a lack of real knowledge (in those making the demands) about what is authentically Ugandan. Traders deliver crafts demanded by the tourist industry whereas Ugandan sellers make sure that these products are carefully packaged and then resold as genuine Ugandan handcrafts.

In the case of Uganda, the regionalization of craft trading is an answer to a series of particularities that define the nature of the tourist industry and the tourists' demands who visit this country. Traders from countries other than Uganda buy and sell a series of artifacts that are being requested by international tourists despite the fact that they are not traditional to Uganda. Perhaps the perfect example in that direction is the expressed desire for "Ugandan masks." Widespread demands from international tourists for "Ugandan masks" have increased the demand for masks coming from the neighboring countries. Virtually every day in the high season, Ugandan shop attendants on the Equator or in Kampala sell Maasai, Chokwe, or Teke masks as "indigenous Ugandan masks." One could accuse such sellers of deceiving their

customers, but it is in fact the customers that, in a way, ask to be deceived. If tourists were informed about Ugandan art and traditions, they would find out that masks were not typically used in traditional rituals and ceremonies there. One of the reasons for this might be the fact that Uganda has never had high quality light wood which is necessary for ceremonial masks. Even today, besides masks, most wood crafts have to be imported, as carvings in locally grown tree barks are not of high quality. However, many tourists insist on buying traditional, local masks in a country where such masks never existed, a demand which has forced Ugandan entrepreneurs to engage in two different activities. They had to find the necessary mask distributors – many coming from Congo as the ones interviewed for this article – and then learn or invent the inspirational stories about these masks that can be used to pitch them to tourists.

On the Equator, the worst thing a seller can do is admit, “I’m afraid, we don’t have that.” I spent several days trying to observe tourists’ behavior at the Equator in 2008 and 2009. I simply sat in various shops and recorded the types of demands and requests tourists made upon entering the shop I was stationed in. During one of the days, 71 out of the 93 tourists visiting that shop inquired at one point or another about Ugandan masks. These and other similar episodes throughout Uganda confirmed the hypothesis made above that it is uninformed demands coming from international tourists that keeps the Congolese traders in business. At least for now, Congolese traders continue to control a fair share of the mask market because they can provide local sellers with cheap yet high quality, well adorned and stylistically pleasing masks. Some of these masks are surely imperfect duplicates, but, as I’ve seen first hand, they are still much more aesthetically attractive than the ones made by some of the Ugandan contemporary craftsmen who try to break the Congolese monopoly. In practice, “genuine” Ugandan masks should refer to masks made by Ugandans, like those exemplified in some of the artists’ shops in Kampala.

However, even those masks are mostly imitations of other African masks styles and not products reflecting the local culture and traditions. The only real competitors that Congolese traders have in the masks industry are the Maasai masks made in Kenya and Tanzania.

As traders from all over East and Central Africa supply crafts to Ugandan shop sellers, their business relations seem to affect not only the dynamics of the craft markets but also the larger process of self-definition in an industry where sellers have to constantly lie about what is truly national and what is not. The dimensions of joking, deceiving and repackaging crafts as genuinely Ugandan are vast. On one hand, they speak of the uninformed tourists' expectations which can only be fulfilled with the help of imported crafts. To that end, giving a crafts-piece an artificial meaning, story and cultural background is a rational response to business incentives. It is a proof of adaptation on behalf of Ugandan sellers who are naturally trying to maximize their profits. On the other hand, these crafts are not only given a new identity but also slowly assimilated into the local culture. In 2009, I was able to meet with various local artists from Uganda who have been experimenting with Congolese, Rwandan or even Cameroonian motifs. They were combining different artistic styles in their work: batiks, masks, jewelry boxes, necklaces, etc. Admittedly, most of these products still required aesthetic improvements – in practice most of their products were not nearly as beautiful, stylistically compact or attractive as the objects they were partially imitating – but their attempts at incorporating such motifs in the crafts they were making is yet another proof of adaptation on behalf of those dependent on the tourist craft industry. On a personal level, the process of self-definition is based on one's role in the chain of supplying distributing and exchanging crafts and their role in the tourist discourse. As we will see in the next section, there are many Ugandan entrepreneurs who make crafts with very limited knowledge of foreign motifs or styles. Many of the local craftsmen living in the

vicinity of the Equator simply use the artistic techniques that have been passed down to them from previous generations. They form a share of the craft market at the Equator which represents slightly more than 50 % of the crafts sold there. Other artists choose to incorporate foreign designs to gain a larger share of the market. Foreign traders specialize on crafts that are clearly of a superior quality than the ones produced locally. Consequently, the process of self-definition is a cumulative result of demands, expectations and the practical adaptations in response of the main actors involved in the industry. In such a process, what is truly national becomes relative because suppliers, distributors and sellers have to adapt to the demands of the tourist industry, over which they have very little influence.

#### *THE LOCALIZATION AND THE SPECIALIZATION OF THE CRAFT INDUSTRY AROUND THE EQUATOR*

When talking to some of the regional traders, my research assistant and I were both able to detect a feeling of nostalgia for the late 1990's. In the past, regional traders played a large role in the market, but recent economic improvements have allowed local entrepreneurs to take control of the business opportunities that the increased tourist market has generated, thus pushing out the regional traders. More and more entrepreneurs have taken advantage of the opportunities that come with an increase in the number of tourists. A lot of them now have an idea of what opportunities are available, how to overcome various difficulties, and understand the relation between supply and demand.

Shop attendants at the Equator go to six different villages within a 30 kilometer range from the Equator to get their monthly supplies: Kayabwe (mainly baskets and mats); Buganga (baskets, trays); Nkozi (baskets, mats, stools); Mpambire (Drums); Nabusanke (baskets, paper

albums); and Kikutuzi (carvings, paper products etc.) In addition, every Friday, some of the sellers travel to Kampala to Jinja Road and the University of Makerere markets, where craft makers all over Uganda gather weekly to sell their work to shop sellers from the capital and neighboring regions. These two markets constitute an interesting phenomenon on their own, that could constitute the subject of a separate investigation: they are informally organized, and occur at a couple of unlikely sites - a backyard court, and an abandoned railway yard. Other shop attendants from the Equator also visit the Owino market, down by the Old Taxi Park in Kampala, which happens to be one of the largest markets in East Africa. Due to severe competition – there are literally thousands and thousands of entrepreneurs selling the exact products within a two square kilometers – everything at Owino starts very cheap and it gets even cheaper with bargaining, making it a favorite destination for both shop sellers and casual tourists.

In addition to the craftsmen living close to the Equator, some shop sellers have also formed long term business relations with individual Ugandan craftsmen in Kampala. I was able to have one-to-one interviews with some of these entrepreneurs who make wax batiks, wood carved monkeys, tourist masks, sketches on bark cloth paper crafts, and so forth. What is important to observe in the case of individual craftsmen living in Kampala or close to the Equator is their decision to specialize in creating one main type of craft, which can subsequently be seen in nearly all the shops on the Equator.

Craftsmen, who are sometimes located within a walking distance from the Equator, can be easily reached if some of the shop sellers run out of their stock sooner than anticipated. Using local craftsmen also cuts down on transportation costs, making it both more affordable and more convenient to buy crafts from these suppliers than from regional traders. Local artists also make crafts exclusively for the Equator which, in some cases, means that the prices they sell their work

for are much smaller than the ones practices in Kampala. Another characteristic the local craftsmen have in common is the fact that they generally produce crafts made of locally produced materials. Getting tree bark, light wood for their carvings or palm tree fibers is a tedious job, but the materials are free. Making crafts is a fairly complicated and time-consuming process which requires, above all discipline and dedication, but in most cases there are no production costs involved except for labor. With the growing interest in the Ugandan Equator most of these craftsmen have secured access to a relatively stable market for their products, have gained access to direct capital, and consequently have been able to reliably supplement their income. Given that only ten years ago such an opportunity was virtually non-existent this is a great achievement.

Various studies about African entrepreneurs lifting themselves out of extreme poverty have already shown that the lives of thousands of people have changed dramatically with the help of their entrepreneurial initiatives (Ugandan: ILO report 2008; Gombe 2002; African entrepreneurs in general: Bewayo 1995; Elkan 1988; Gray 1997; etc). Consequently, I asked myself a critical question about the importance of the Equator businesses for the neighboring villages and households: What is the impact of the economic environment created by the transformation of the Ugandan Equator into a touristic attraction on the local community? More specifically, are shop owners and attendants the only ones who have benefited from the sudden “discovery” of the Equator by local and international tour operators, or have the benefits extended to other members of the community? In this section, I analyze two of the main local supplier groups who sell their work to the Equator, their history in this business and their innovative actions that have brought additional income to their households.

The opening of the 30+ shops at the Equator has given a traditionally disadvantaged group of people new opportunities. Like in many African rural areas, women in Kayabwe are expected to be housewives, spending most of their time taking care of their children and managing the household. Some of the Kayabwe women have taken advantage of the demand for crafts on the Equator and gained access to a series of opportunities which can potentially bring financial independence from their spouses.

I decided to further analyze and observe two of the groups of suppliers used regularly by Equator shop attendants for sourcing craft-pieces throughout the year: the Kayabwe Women's Group; and the local women producers from Buganga village. In a survey handed to all the shop attendants working on the Equator, the two groups were ranked as being the most popular suppliers for the shops on site. According to the shop attendants interviewed, some of the most widely sold products on the Equator are baskets, trays, mats, banana fiber balls, dolls and hats, sets of table cloth, masks, bead necklaces and gorilla statues. With the exception of masks, bead crafts and gorilla statues, all crafts on this list are produced by the women living either in Buganga village or in Kayabwe. There are other producers selling the same products in the region but, as some shop attendants argued, the women's groups are the most convenient and reliable suppliers primarily because of their physical proximity to the Equator. Given the fact that the above mentioned crafts are so highly demanded, shop sellers will generally need more crafts than these village suppliers can provide, which explains why they also go to other villages further away to get more of the same products.

Unlike other suppliers, the Kayabwe Women's Group and the local women producers from Buganga village mainly sell their work to shop attendants from the Equator. Only on occasion, especially in the low season, do they actually go to Kampala to try to sell their crafts.

In Kayabwe, I came across various local entrepreneurs making baskets, mats, and other palm tree fiber products. They were all women, and on warm days, one could see some of them weaving diligently on their porches or on the patches of grass situated next to their houses. Their children or grandchildren play in the vicinity of the homesteads so that these hard-working ladies can both keep an eye on them, and focus on the meticulous work of basket weaving.

The average tourist is fascinated by the look and design of the Ugandan baskets. They can either give these baskets any type of interpretation and meaning they see fit, or simply adopt the often mystical, inspiring and emotional interpretation provided by shop attendants. As Sally Price notes in her famous book entitled *Primitive art in civilized places*, “Stripped of its original authorship and, more generally, of conceptual footnotes, the object stands nakedly before the gaze of the Western viewer.”<sup>xx</sup> Bereft of a genuine social meaning, or the knowledge of the work and effort put into making such baskets, the average tourist can simply buy a basket, go home, and impress his or her friends with this souvenir, and the attached inspirational tale, as a memento of their “African experience.” Few of them will ever know that it took up for 40 or 50 hours of work to make such a basket. In exchange for her work, the supplier will get approximately \$1.20 US or roughly one fourth of the average selling prices for such an item on the Equator.

Some scholars might argue that these women are the victims of exploitation, living in remote areas and working tens of hours in exchange for meager pay. Some might express outrage and frustration against the global economic system that leaves aside or exploits such people. I do not share this perspective. On the contrary, I would argue that tourism at the Equator has brought a sense of independence to those local entrepreneurs who live close by it, and contribute to the market there. While these women receive small compensation for their hard work, this extra

income would not have been theirs at all had it not been for the tourist industry. These women would most likely have been unable to sell such goods had it not been for the proximity of the Equator. Given their financial hardship and their many daily obligations, it is doubtful that these women would be able to move to Kampala or engage in any economic activities other than producing baskets and mats for the Equator. Their current part time job is the result of an opportunity that arose with the commercialization of the Equator, that they have embraced and used to their advantage. In fact, most of these women have a more comfortable existence than a significant amount of people living in the city of Kampala who make significantly more money than those living in rural areas, but have much higher daily expenses.

Members of most of the households I visited make money by engaging in numerous economic activities at the same time. Moreover, when a family owns their own house, and has a vegetable garden and a small stock of animals (as most of the people I interviewed have), the value of the 20 dollars made from selling baskets in one month, trays or mats is much more significant than its actual value in our own Western economic system. In rural Uganda, with \$20 US one can: buy various household supplies; have access to different services which are inexpensive but still require payment in cash; pay for transportation to various points of interest; and even start a small business. A young lady opened her own barbershop in her backyard after investing the US25 dollars she had made from basket selling, in the necessary scissors, combs, and other equipment. With US18 dollars another lady bought a used bicycle which she now uses to transport the crafts from her house to the Equator, saving hours of walking in the heat. Combined with the other financial or informal opportunities, most of these families are able to achieve a relatively stable and comfortable lifestyle and the money made from selling crafts to the Equator will be qualified as supplementary income. To be more specific, the money that

comes from the Equator supplements an otherwise insufficient income to allow for a tolerable lifestyle. Without the additional cash flow, most of these women would experience more severe hardships in their lives, yet by taking the initiative to weave baskets and mats, they have been able to significantly improve their lifestyle in a way that would otherwise not have been open to them.

The Kayabwe Women's Group is made of five women from ages 30 to 70 who have decided to work together in an informal co-op meant to increase their monthly income. The five women weave together three times a week – on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. They work together for three to four hours at a time, keeping each other company while focusing on their common goal. On Sundays, they spend more hours working since they are not constrained by other household activities and their children are out of school. They all agree that if they had more time to work, they would be able to make more baskets and increase their monthly earnings. "But weaving is just a secondary activity in my life. I have to make food, wash clothes, fetch water, and clean the house. Time is very limited so we try to make the most of it," said one of the women, whilst the other four were nodding at me in agreement.

Most of the women interviewed pointed out that weaving baskets has not only helped them on a personal level but also allowed them to send their children to school. In Uganda, primary and secondary schools are not free of charge; this prevents many parents from sending their children to school, especially in rural areas. In Kayabwe, the school fees can reach up to US170 dollars per trimester, a price which most parents simply cannot afford to pay. Whilst it is relatively common for families to simply withdraw their children from school when money runs out, the five women I interviewed all proudly mentioned that by selling crafts to shop sellers they have been able to send their children to school, and keep them there. "My daughter is now in

primary seven and the baskets are the ones paying for her school fees,” said one of the craft makers.

Thirty kilometers away from the Equator, in the small village of Buganga, situated along the shore of Lake Victoria, a group of at least twenty other women spends most of their free time making baskets and trays. Like the other craft makers in Kayabwe, the women here say they make five baskets a month and complain about the fact that their domestic duties prevent them from producing more baskets. There are, however, a number of key differences between the craft makers in Kayabwe and the ones in Buganga.

First, given the fact that Buganga is a very remote village with limited access to the outside world (few cars can make it through the surrounding swamps and on the virtually nonexistent infrastructure undamaged), the local crafts produced here are sold even more cheaply than those from Kayabwe. This explains why some shop attendants rent a motorcycle and travel to this village to pick up the crafts that will subsequently be sold on the Equator.

Second, one can see clearer signs here that weaving is a technique passed along from one generation to another. Many of the women I interviewed in Kayabwe learned how to weave from family friends, neighbors or other old women well known for their mastery of the weaving technique. Some of them learned how to weave relatively late in life, after they saw their neighbors or friends make money from selling their baskets. In Buganga, however, adult women are not the only ones who weave at the end of the week. Their children, mainly their daughters, weave as well. Moreover, most of the women who make baskets here learned how to weave from their mothers, in their early childhood: “I learned how to weave when I was eight. I came back from school one day and my mother told me that I was about to learn how to be a woman. And

then she spent the whole week teaching me how to weave.” Most of the women interviewed in Buganga reported that they also teach their own daughters how to make baskets and trays when they reach the age of eight. “My daughter, who is fully trained, can make three medium sized baskets a month,” brags one of the ladies. “From what I and my daughters weave every month, we have enough money to cover our basic needs, our food, house supplies and the school fees,” adds another. The fact that the technique of weaving is passed from one generation to another is both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the positive side, the more baskets and trays are produced, the more money the family gets per month. Furthermore, because children are taught the technique of weaving at an early age, they are able to improve their skills considerably over time providing them with a potential income generating opportunity in the future. On the other hand, some parents decide not to send their daughters to school anymore in order for them to weave more baskets. When children are not withdrawn from school, some of them are still deprived of their free time. Instead of playing with their friends or doing their homework, they have to work on their baskets and trays. This shows clearly that economic incentives can have unintended, damaging consequences in a community, and that locally financed and directed businesses also come at some expense for the actors involved in their operations.

Lastly, one of the most interesting particularities about the women involved in the craft making business in Buganga is the fact that most of them only use the basket making as an addition to their monthly earnings. They engage in other economic activities as well (as opposed to simply doing their domestic work), even though their involvement in basket making remains a significant aspect of their lives. Most women I interviewed in Buganga were much younger than those in Kayabwe (both those in the Kayabwe women’s group and other people I interviewed). More importantly, some of them were not yet married when this research was being conducted in

2009. This is a decisive factor in their work because they do not labor under the time restrictions posed by the domestic work they would be expected to perform once married.

Kissa, one of the local craft makers, divides her time between weaving baskets and frying fish, which is then sold to fishermen at Lake Victoria and to other workers or villagers. One obvious question one will ask when listening to her story is where she gets the money to buy fish from. The answer should not be that surprising, it is from selling the baskets she makes. According to Kissa, her parents' untimely deaths left her with nothing. "I was as poor as a monkey," she says. "Then a woman taught me how to make baskets and then introduced me to some of the shop sellers coming from the Equator. One of them commissioned me to make five baskets and returned three weeks later to pick them up. He was satisfied with the work and since then he keeps coming to buy baskets every time he needs them."

Namuddu, another woman who makes baskets to supplement her income, also cooks food every morning and takes it to the lake for sale. She makes a delicious *kabeero* (a combination of cassava and fresh fish), which is a very popular dish in the villages around Lake Victoria. In the early morning, after she puts the food in a large plastic container and walks along the lake shore in search for fishermen getting ready to go on fishing. Namutebi makes baskets but also has a coffee plantation she inherited after her husband died of AIDS. In addition to weaving, another woman, Nassimbwa, braids women's hair while her husband works as a fisherman. While talking about the high costs for education, she walked with me to her backyard where she showed me the pigs and the hens she bought with the money she has made from selling baskets. She clearly viewed selling baskets and mats as a fairly profitable business, and announced "thank God for those shop sellers from the Equator coming to us every month".

## CONCLUSION

Businesses on the Equator and the commercialization of the Equator itself are a part of a much larger puzzle than is simply visible upon visiting the Ugandan Equator. The Ugandan Equator, a tourist site which only 20 years ago was virtually unknown to the Western public, has gained momentum and has been attracting a significant amount of tourists every year. The commercialization of the Equator has had a direct impact on the lives of the people living at or around the Equator which has transformed their lives and their way of relating to the tourist industry. As a result of the hundreds of tourists stopping every day at the Equator, locally based entrepreneurs have been able to find their own place in the tourist discourse, to adapt to the outside demands and expectations and provide the finest cultural products that they can. Suppliers suddenly found a market that was simply not there twenty years ago. Traders found their own niche which allowed them to stay in business and yield a profit. Witnessing the economic success registered by other locals, other entrepreneurs opened the doors of their shops. The businesses on the Equator suggest that some of the most innovative and ingenious solutions for development strategies could come from the local entrepreneurs themselves. Regional traders, once locally based entrepreneurs themselves have been forced, for various reasons, to find new markets for their crafts. By doing so, they shaped regional markets in new and unforeseen ways and consequently managed to stay in business.

All of these actors play their role in the larger socio-economic story I have tried to tell here, and have had to pursue their own niches, trading connections and otherwise fight to improve their economic status. They answer to and cater for a very specific clientele, provided by the tourist industry, which poses a series of challenges that local entrepreneurs have had to adapt to. In this essay, I have tried to shed some light on who these actors are, what they do and

how they have benefited from the commercialization of the Equator. I have suggested that by virtue of its touristic potential, the Equator has created the context in which an informal regional economy has emerged. Its scale is not significant enough to generate broader arguments about the benefits of tourism in the developing world or even, specifically, in Uganda. But it suggests at least that tourism can actually produce economic opportunities in contexts that are to be thoroughly analyzed by anthropologists and economists interested in tourist studies.

When a tourist visits the Equator he will take some pictures at the Equator signs, perhaps buy some crafts and visit the local café. Tourists will most likely not be aware that for them to have access to the products they take for granted, over 200 people work day and night for this site to be what it is. This group of people involved in the businesses at the Equator have continually adapted to both the tourists' demands and the internal rules that govern the way people do business in Uganda in order to gain personal success. For most of these people, the Equator has shaped their lives in positive ways and, in return, they collectively work towards maintaining the standards of this site and catering for the tourists' evolving demands. Their stories suggest that we still have so much to learn and discover about locally based entrepreneurship and how it is transformed once all the actors involved actually have the chance to interact with each other.

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- iii Jeremy Kahn, A Brand New – Approach, Place branding, Vol 2, No. 2, April 2006, Basingtoke, Foreign Policy page 90.
- iv During my stay at the Equator in 2008 and 2009 I have interviewed tourists from over 50 countries.
- v Interview conducted on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The respondent asked to remain anonymous.
- vi Interview conducted on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008.
- vii Interview conducted on July 6<sup>th</sup> 2009.
- viii Interview with one of the shop sellers who declined to reveal his identity, July 15 2009.
- ix The rates presented in this article are accurate as of Sunday 11, 2010
- x Interview conducted on August 5<sup>th</sup> 2009.
- xi <http://www.aidchild.org/equation.asp>, retrieved July 7, 2009
- xii Christopher B. Steiner, *African Art in Tranzit*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, page 28
- xiii Steiner, 51
- xiv “Muzungu” is the word used in East African for foreigners, mainly white people. The word spree in this context actually suggests the locals’ view that the products sold here are offered solely for tourism consumption and have no utility for the people living in the area.
- xv Traders make their way to the Ugandan Equator on an irregular basis. For that reason, a researcher will have to spend up to one year in order to interview the main traders operating on the Ugandan Equator. Since I was not able to spend that much time in Uganda, I have been assisted by Hassan, an old Ugandan friend who became my research assistant on the project. Traders that agreed to be interviewed for academic purposes answered to a questionnaire handed in to them between July 2009 and January 2010. Hassan lives in the town next to the Ugandan Equator and, in the past, he actually worked as a seller at one of the local shops..
- xvi Back in 1995, the country’s name was still Zaire
- xvii Interview taken on September 17<sup>th</sup> 2009 in Kampala, Uganda.
- xviii Steiner, page 18
- xix Interview taken on August 19<sup>th</sup> 2008 in Goma, DR. Congo.
- xx Sally Price, *Primitive art in civilized places*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 109