

Kofi Kayiga - The Construction of an Identity

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Abstract

Born to a Cuban mother and a Jamaican father in 1943, in Kingston, Jamaica, Kofi Kayiga - the former Ricardo Wilkins - has traversed several spaces, both external (geographic) and internal (ideological).

Having studied at the Jamaica School of Art, The Royal College of Art, London, and Makerere University, Uganda, where he also taught, Kayiga has been at the forefront of that movement, begun in the late 1960s, for the affirmation of that seminal place of an African cosmology in the creation of his art as a New World individual. History accounts that this “New World” arose from the meeting of Europe and Africa on alien soil. This significant undertaking was to influence a generation of Jamaican artists from the 1970s through the 1990s.

Escaping possible harm at the hands of Idi Amin’s soldiers, Kayiga returned to the Caribbean to head the Department of Painting at the then Jamaica School of Art in Kingston. He now holds a professorship at the Massachusetts College of Art & Design in Boston.

This paper takes as its core the locating of Kofi Kayiga within that broad construct of Identity, examining those selfsame indices that are the foundation upon which his work flourish. This it will do from an ideological, religious, social and political perspective, employing that rich tapestry which is Kayiga’s oeuvre.

Keywords: Jamaican identity, ideology, religion, African retention/cosmology, painting, organic process

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The artist now known as Kofi Kayiga, shares with most Jamaicans what I have elsewhere called a *'Mosaic-Identity'*¹. Present-day Jamaica, and indeed the entire Caribbean archipelago, may be described as the common meeting ground of diverse civilizations, drawn from Africa, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. While Jamaicans bear differences of race and religion, yet their common bond lies in being shaped by individual histories of an Old World melding into a unique Jamaican identity in a strange New Land, underlined with history's chafe. This is the direct result of five hundred years of servitude.

It was against this historical background that Ricardo Wilkins, now known as Kofi Kayiga - hailed as the foremost Expressionist of the Jamaican artistic tradition - was born in 1943, to a Cuban mother and a Jamaican-Panamanian father. His birth in colonial Jamaica coincided with growing agitation for self-government and an expanding call for Jamaica's independence. Sherlock and Bennett note:

"The final conflict between African-Jamaica and Britain began in the 1920s at the bidding of Quashie, the most underrated character in Jamaica's history, and of Marcus Garvey, the most feared and derided black leader of his time.

"So decisive, so far-reaching were the results of this conflict that we refer to it here as the Jamaican revolution. It brought about the enfranchisement of all adult Jamaicans, set the feet of the people on the path to independence, speeded up the rapid growth of racial and national consciousness, the emergence of a Jamaican culture, the development of ties with Africa and the modernisation of the Jamaican economy."

(Sherlock & Bennett, 1998. Page 346)

It might be useful at this juncture to look briefly at the key words, *'construction'* and *'identity'*. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, to construct means to build or erect; to pile upon. In the context of this paper, it must be established at the outset, that the constructor is the construction. Identity refers to the fact of being who or what a person or thing is, as well as those characteristics determining this. 'A close similarity or affinity' is also accepted as part of this definition.

Kofi Kayiga has been at the centre of an Afro-centric awareness among New World Blacks that saw its full emergence in the 1960s as an extension of a growing consciousness associated with the Black Power Movement, and that general march to selfhood of dispersed Africans globally. He came to artistic prominence at a time when continental American Blacks were in the throes of rediscovering and affirming important truths about self, society and history. Primarily, they were awakening to the knowledge of self-importance - that this 'self' was possessed of beauty, towards which they had hitherto been visionless. The descendants of slaves, as most Caribbean people are, such unspeakable negativity had been internalized over the centuries of their servitude, that it was impossible to realize this truth independently or easily. Sometimes a society throws up an individual who is a light illuminating the darkness. It might be argued that Kofi Kayiga represents such a personality for Jamaicans.

¹ *'Mosaic-Identity'* is a term coined by the author in 2008 during the writing of his doctoral dissertation. It describes the common lot of most, if not all, Caribbean people who are drawn from several continents and races and pieced together as in a mosaic.

Kayiga's seeds of self-consciousness were sown initially by his parents and later nourished through the influence of seminal literature he encountered as an impressionable youngster, introducing him to Mysticism, Philosophy, Religion and Poetry. The Jamaican society of Kayiga's boyhood, with its African cultural retention and syncretistic religious expressions in Pukkumina, Revivalism, Myalism, Kumina and a fledgling Rastafarianism, along with its unique music and language, also affected him profoundly. From his earliest days he has been a keen observer of life, unwilling to accept ready-made dogma marinated in traditional Christian Theism. He questioned, and questions, our journey as a race and the existence of an omnipotent power. By the time he achieved 18 years of age he was a professed agnostic. Edmund Barry Gaither in an essay titled, '**Kayiga: A Transatlantic Kindred Spirit**', remarks:

"The importance of commenting on the volatile matrix which framed Wilkins's birth lies in recognizing that his formative years coincide completely with the nationalist period, which was characterized by rising anti-colonial sentiment and ascending racial aspirations... Uniquely paralleling the struggle to give meaning to Jamaican independence was Wilkins's commencement of training for his career in art. Again, his personal development coincided with cultural and intellectual crises which centered around the question, What does it mean to be Jamaican? Though not essentially political in his art, Wilkins was profoundly aware of this question and its corresponding struggles. They were an inescapable dimension of his own personal identity formation, a formation profoundly sensitive to those spiritual forces that empower creative expression to manifest within a specific time and place with peculiar originality."
(Gaither, 2000, Page 5)

This identity formation, of which Gaither speaks, became a life-long journey for Kayiga, underpinned with the primary cognizance that a visibly palpable world moved about him, in which the achievements of his race could be examined. In both art and life, which he affirms are one and the same, he endeavours to connect with, recall and give voice to the African aesthetic, to value the spirit-world of his African ancestors - penetrating with discernible force into modern life on continental America - and to shed the vestments of narrow Eurocentrism.

Ricardo Wilkins attended the fledgling Jamaica School of Art, graduating in 1966. He subsequently went to London, on a Jamaica Government Scholarship, where he studied at the Royal College of Art. From here, he obtained his Master's Degree in 1971. Later, he travelled through Kenya and Tanzania, and taught for two years at Makerere University, in Kampala, Uganda, from 1971 – '73. This was to be a crucial juncture in his life.

At Makerere, he enrolled in a doctoral programme to undertake studies in Traditional African Art and Religions - Baganda². He was able to come to an understanding of life in Uganda, initially, through a young Ugandan named Lutalo Makonzi whom he met at the Royal College in London. Makonzi belonged to Baganda nobility, and

² The Baganda indigenous religion, known as *Balubaale* was concerned with gods who had temples identified with them, and concerned with specific problems. They also believed in spiritual forces thought to cause or cure illnesses. The most significant spirits were the *Muzimu* or ancestors who visited the living in dreams and sometimes warned of impending dangers.

encouraged Wilkins in his quest. The move to Uganda was intended to be a permanent one. Here he would live, fully engaged in an African nation, answering the challenge of Jamaican Pan-Africanist thinker, Marcus Garvey, of a return to the motherland for dispersed Africans throughout the Americas: “... *the Negro peoples of the world should concentrate upon the object of building up for themselves a great nation in Africa...*”(Garvey, 1986, Pg. 68)

Kayiga notes:

“It was through him (Makonzi) that I met the leadership in the religion and... culture. But I had to leave Uganda because of Idi Amin... I had too many confrontations with his soldiers, with machine guns in my chest. I was called a ‘confusing agent’, because they were not sure how to place me. I’m not Ugandan and I’m in the village because of my research.

“... I didn’t think I would be leaving Africa when I went there. I stayed for two and a half years.”

(Interview with Kofi Kayiga, September 29, 2016)

The situation was exacerbated when Amin’s army stormed onto the campus of Makerere University, beheaded a female member of staff and paraded her head on a stick. At this point he thought it would be prudent to return to Jamaica. He moved back to Kingston, Jamaica in 1973, accompanied by his first wife, Mukesa, of Ugandan birth.

It was during his tenure at Makerere that Ricardo Wilkins was transformed into the individual we now know as Kofi Kayiga. Taken together ‘Kofi Kayiga’ means ‘lord of hunters, born on Friday’. Again, Kayiga notes:

“My name change started in 1971 when I was 28 years old. So I lived as Ricardo Wilkins for 28 years. There was a lot of introspection as Ricardo Wilkins, living with a name given to me by my Cuban mother and Jamaican father. Wilkins is an English name which most likely has its roots in slavery and oppression. I did not give it the importance that a name deserves but I accepted it. It was more about my connection to my parents and relatives than about me as an individual. However, my quest was not my name but a search for a spiritual identity.

“In 1970 I had an opportunity to travel throughout Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania in East Africa, and I developed a wider world view. I discovered that the culture in Jamaica is African. I saw myself in a larger context beyond Jamaica. I decided to change my name and embrace a new name, a new identity. I wanted a name that makes me one with art and my spirituality. After much research by 1973 I merged West Africa (Kofi) from my time spent in Ghana, with East Africa (Kayiga). I owned Kofi KAYIGA and as such my work and I were much larger than my former name. I left the family behind and accepted a name that had meaning and would support my art and I. I was planning a life in Uganda so it was necessary for me to develop a kinship with my new homeland. KAYIGA means highest hunter. I was hunting, searching for greater spirituality. I became clearer about my art and I expressed myself freely as an artist and my art morphed as bold and demanding and I owned it fearlessly just as I owned Kofi Kayiga and embraced his complexities.

“... the name change worked for me, it was a rebirth. It brought a freshness to my art. My new name emboldened me, I was its creator and my work now lives under this name...”

(Interview with Kofi Kayiga, February 6, 2017)

Kofi Kayiga was determined that this redefinition of self would be entirely on his own terms, in his own time and manner.

Interestingly, there is an added dimension to this name change:

“I am interested in numerology, astrology and metaphysics. It took me a while to understand that the name you are called helps to influence who you are. It is the way in which you greet the world, and how the world greets you. I have become clearer about many things after my name change.”

(Interview with Kayiga, January 9, 2008)

And:

“... once I changed my name it was amusing, in terms of numerology. There have been certain emphases. I emphasize Kayiga rather than Kofi, and that is because it coincides with the number 9. 27 is also 9, and 9 is completion. 9 is the hermit...”

(Interview with Kofi Kayiga, September 29, 2016)

It would, of course, be disingenuous to suggest that Kofi Kayiga's influences come only from Africa. For Kayiga, the beauty of living in the world is that the collective heritage of mankind, artistic or otherwise, belongs equally to humanity. It is not uncommon, therefore, for him to speak about mysticism, Buddhism, and the like. Several streams of discipline converge to create his knowledge base, which in turn enriches his visual language. After all, Kayiga, like most Jamaicans, embrace a *Mosaic-Identity*. This preoccupation with Africa, however, was and is in direct rebellion against a perverted history, written and propagated by Western scholars, tending to portray Africa as a tabula rasa.

Interestingly, upon Kayiga's return to Jamaica, those students he encountered in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before his eventual departure to the United States of America, in 1983, all came under his influence. Many followed suit and changed what they considered a colonial name for one more in keeping with an African identity. Prominent among them are: Robert Cookhorne to Omari Ra, Douglas Wallace to K. Khalfani Ra through Makandal Dada, and Valentine Fairclough to Tehuti Ra, among others. We might, here, view Kofi Kayiga as our own 'New World Griot'. We know of how in ancient West Africa the Griot was a 'Keeper of Memories'. Kayiga and his students were and are seeking to resurrect and keep that ancient memory of an oral tradition, fragmented through colonialism and slavery, in quest of a renewed identity. Kayiga works tirelessly, endeavouring to find the shape of self and spirit in his artistic undertaking. For him, life is about artistic output, and *vice versa*. Life and work exist in ceaseless embrace, always shaping, constantly bestowing deeper meaning and credence to his creative/spiritual journey. He seldom concentrates on one painting at any given time. The surfaces on which he labours are laid out before him like instruments/musicians, in an orchestra. With hand and eye he conducts this orchestra, expressing in colour and with vitality a broad range of emotive vision. He is constantly 'going' and 'coming', playing at this piece, then at that, using one colour

across several paintings, operating as a fountain from whence inspiration and labour flow out onto his surfaces. It is always a symphony of colours that he is in the process of orchestrating:

“ An artist-mystic on a path to higher knowledge, Kofi Kayiga seeks a balance between spirituality and materiality as he touches “the deep energy that makes the heart beat and the sun set.” His high-energy colours, semi-abstract expressionist forms ... radiate a consciousness that is both meditative and an intuitive reflection of the forms and structure he apprehends in his mystical journeys.

“Working multi-compositionally, on many paintings, at the same time, Kayiga injects a free-flowing quality to his paintings, and in the process he creates an underlying visual unity of patterns and themes. The spontaneous nature of his creative process reduces the probability of compositional error from his spiritualized Afro-expressionist work since, in his view, “all destruction is new creation in an endless cycle of creativity.” Kayiga’s conception of spirituality is all encompassing: a hybrid blend of Eastern mysticism fused with Masonic principle, Rastafarian ideas, and strengthened with African esoteric principles he learned in Uganda. Given Kayiga’s preoccupation with the invisible, his brilliantly colourful paintings ... emit intense primeval energies of immense visual force. As well, they depict primordial mystical ideas and concepts that speak of an expanded reality and of a wisdom that lies beyond tomorrow.”

(Gaither)

This “deep energy that makes the heart beat and the sun set” is what, in the Yoruba religion, is known as ‘Ashe’ – the primordial creative force residing in the universe. Robert Farris Thompson, in his book, Flash of the Spirit - African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy , notes:

“Spiritualized form-making reappears in the astonishing work of Kofi Kayiga, a painter who now resides in Boston... he came in contact with John S. Mbiti, one of the richest minds in the study of African spiritual systems...

“... An intricately unfolding odyssey, Jamaican, East African and Black North American, explains why his work stands in spiritual affinity with African-United States traditions of visual enactment

“... in Jamaica... painters... sometimes work in a trance, seeking to document, in line and color, the places where the spirit sings the world into existence.

“These marvels spiritually bind Kayiga to the way he makes his art. Not unlike priests who trace ground-blazons for their ancestors and for God in Kongo, or priestesses chalking sacred ground-signatures for the deity, Olokun, in the ancient city of Benin, Kayiga places paper on the floor and then begins to paint.

“He works, in other words, from an eagle-like fullness of perspective, gazing down upon the play of his forms... “Things read better to my vision from above”... In addition, again akin to the Haitian master [Hyppolite – my insertion] and to Pollock, Kayiga works multi-compositionally: “I never work on one work by itself.”... In this regard Kayiga also reminds me of the late master potter, Abatan of Egbado Yoruba, who used to make two sculptures for her deity, Eyinle, each time she worked. It was insurance against bad fortune in the firing – if one image cracked, there was always another one at the ready.

“... Kayiga argues that making several paintings at the same time deepens the accomplishment of their form and meaning... “That painting brought forth this one” and “This one vibrates that one.

“... And so, at the end, a buzz of hieroglyphs, reading like subtitles supplied by the spirits, translate powers and presences into their proper mystery.”

(Thompson, 1984. Pages 104 – 107)

Kayiga often remarks that he works from the inside out, through a process in which the work emerges without too much interference from him. In his own words:

“Much of my work is concerned with the metaphysical. On some level my work embraces an African aesthetic. I am not trying to consciously work in African modalities, but it is subliminal. It comes out of that inner place, so there’s no force.”

(Interview with Kayiga, January 9, 2008)

In Art As Experience, John Dewey, in quoting William James, writes:

“When the... center of energy has been subconsciously incubated for so long as to be just ready to burst into flower, ‘hands off’ is the only word for us; it must burst forth unaided.”

(Dewey, 1934, Pg. 75)

Those African cultural retentions, mentioned previously, included Pukkumina, Revivalism, Kumina and Myalism. It is in dances integral to observation of Myalism that devotees enter a trance-like state where they are able to commune with a West African Pantheon of gods, including their ancestors. In such dances, initiates actually believe that during spirit possession they journey back to Africa. In this state it is also believed that initiates are able to communicate with ancestors who may have meaningful messages for the present time. In a certain sense, Kayiga’s art-making process reflects tendencies in Myalism. Borrowing, once again from Gaither:

“... let us focus briefly on some aspects that render him such an interesting and compelling artist. Three dimensions require special attention: 1) his approach to art making, 2) his visual vocabulary, and 3) the content of his paintings and drawings. Of course, in practice, these aspects are inseparable, and intimately bound up together, and integral to his creativity.

“In describing his approach to making art, Kayiga stated, “I am never sure what I paint, in a conscious way...” continuing, he said, “I really work from an inside-out situation, so that makes my work become a real surprise to me.” Kayiga works in a largely intuitive way, minimizing conscious interventions, and constantly scanning the emerging work for guidance and ideas that will lend to its completion. His role is akin to that of a houngan (voudou priest) who relies upon the loas (spirits) to direct his actions while under possession, because conscious knowledge is only partially vested in him... In his openness to intuition, Kayiga allies himself with artists of the “unconscious,” submitting himself to a divine improvisation where he discovers hidden symbols and narrative in his work, rather than deliberately constructing them. “I have a preoccupation with things of the invisible and my work is expressionistic as an art form because I work intuitively... Often my paintings paint themselves, making my feelings clearer to me once they have been laid down on canvas.””

(Gaither, 2000, Pgs. 12 – 13)

In approaching Kayiga's oeuvre it is important to bear in mind that his work is devoid of rigid, conscious control by the artist. That act of creating art, for Kayiga, lies also in the process of creation. In other words we must not fix our gaze on the finished work as product. The 'art' he intends to express is also in the doing – that which is hidden from the viewer and privy only to the artist as a sense of 'process in labour'. Having dispensed with knowledge acquired in the academy Kayiga no longer plans his paintings by way of plans, sketches and thumbnails. Yet there is a very strong compositional sense and musicality to Kayiga's expression. His surfaces are covered with lines that zigzag, sweep in curves and get lost in darker, deeper tones. Colours are bold, defiant, yet not unpleasant, and his subject matter, other-worldly. There are dots scratches and broken lines, ordered in their seeming aimlessness. Sometimes one colour waves at us from beneath other, more liberating colours, doing their dance of life.

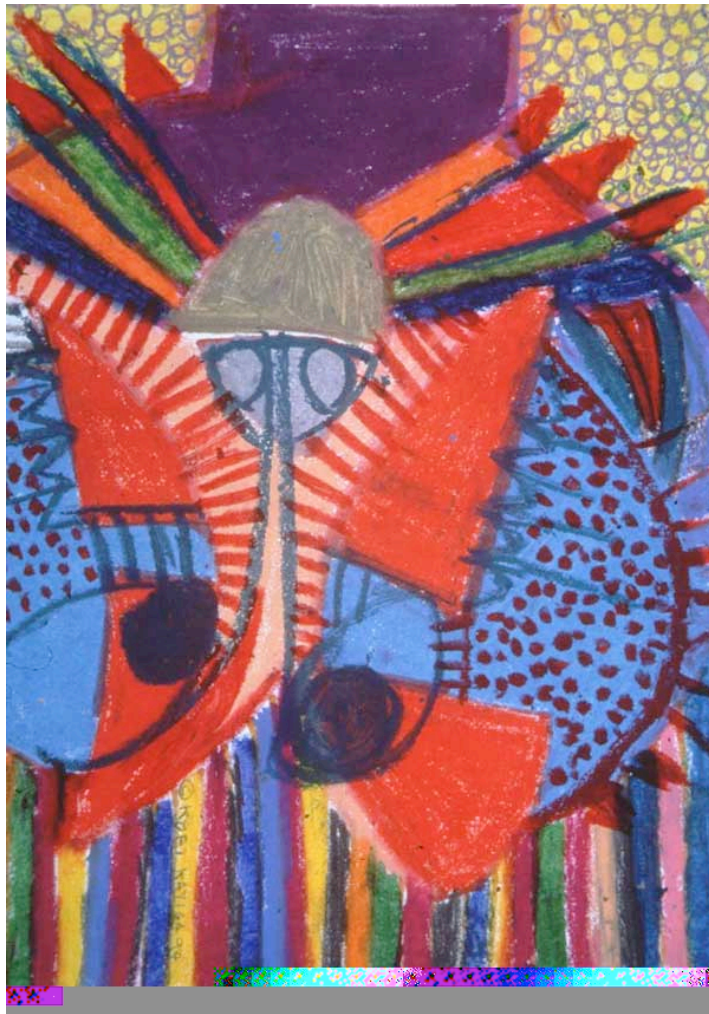


Figure 1. 'Dark Eyed Mask'. Mixed Media on Paper.
12X 9 Inches. 1994.

His expression lies somewhere between Representational-ism and Abstraction, with a slight leaning towards the Surreal. Kayiga's oeuvre teems with music – African drumming, Jazz and Blues, *"My work is connected to Jazz and Blues in that they deal with the human condition and the struggle to find one's voice."* Works such as 'Dark-

'Eyed Mask', 'Drum Drumming' and 'Urban Landscape' all suggest this. In these paintings 'the colour of the sound' rings out.

In the early 1980s Kayiga migrated to the United States of America as a Cuban national, his mother's son. He now holds a full professorship at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (Mass Art) in Boston, where he lives with his second wife, of Trinidadian birth, and their daughter.

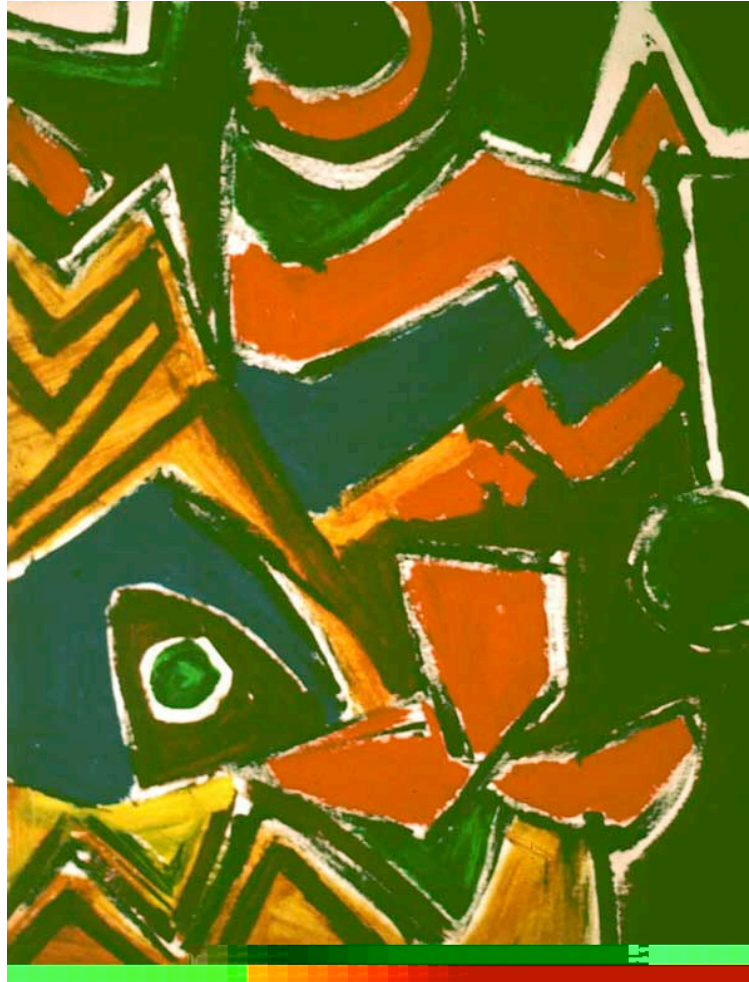


Figure 2. 'Drum Drumming'. Acrylic on Paper.
24 X 20 Inches. 1982

In conclusion, if we examine closely, we shall find several roots intertwined beneath that cultural and ethnic subsoil which nourishes and yields up a deeper sense of identity to the man and artist – Kofi Kayiga – now four years into his eighth decade. These roots derive, as I've outlined, from Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. In thought and creed, they derive from his native Jamaica with its African retentions, London, which paved the way to the African Continent and from Africa on whose soil Ricardo Wilkins transformed into Kofi Kayiga. They derive from Christianity, Buddhism and the mystic way – all manifested in a unique personality whose autobiography has been so eloquently inscribed with line, colour, form and essence as much as with defiance and repudiation.

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