The Dzaleka Art Project: A Community-Based Documentation Project in a Malawian Refugee Camp

by Lisa Gilman

The Dzaleka Art Project is a collaboration between youth living in the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi, undergraduate and graduate students at George Mason University (GMU), and me, a GMU Professor of Folklore and English. Six youth who live in the camp documented arts and artists that contribute to the camp's vibrant creativity. The youth, my students, and I then collaborated to produce a website and a book manuscript.[1] The project aims to augment opportunities for the artists, all of whom are refugees or asylum seekers, to share their work, bring visibility to the talent in the camp, raise awareness about their lives as refugees in Malawi, and educate people about the role of arts in migrants' lives.

Malawi is a small country in southern Africa where I have done research and lived on and off since 1995. While I knew that there was a refugee camp near the capital city of Lilongwe, I did not know much about it until I attended the Tumaini Festival in November 2022. Tumaini, meaning "hope" in Kiswahili, is a lively three-day annual event held within the refugee camp. It typically features two stages for music and dance performances, a designated space for traditional dances, pavilions for poetry and theater, booths for visual artists and craft vendors, and kiosks selling food and drinks.[2]

About the photo: Congolese band performing on the Main Stage of the Tumaini Festival during a relatively quiet time on Friday, November 5, 2021. Photo by Lisa Gilman.

The Dzaleka refugee camp was created in 1994 during a civil war in the neighboring country of Mozambique. People fleeing the war came to Malawi for a secure place to stay until they could safely return to their home country. Asylum seekers from other conflicts in the region have since been coming to Malawi seeking security. Although it was originally built for fewer than 10,000 people, in 2024 it is home to around 52,000 residents. The largest number at this time come from the Democratic Republic of Congo where there is ongoing conflict in the eastern region. There are also many people from Burundi and Rwanda, many of whom fled during the wars in those countries in 1994, often called the Rwandan and Burundian genocides. Burundians and Rwandans continue to arrive on a regular basis. Smaller numbers from Ethiopia and Somalia are currently a less prominent presence.[3]

Photo of the Dzaleka refugee camp from surrounding hill. Photo by Giresse Ino.

Dzaleka is a thriving medium-sized town, and daily life is similar to that of other Malawian towns and cities. Residents live in houses of different sizes and do the types of things that people do living anywhere else. There are schools, health centers, government offices, nongovernmental organizations, churches, and mosques. There are all sorts of businesses: markets with vendors selling fresh produce, meats, and other goods; small shops selling dry goods; tailor shops that sew fashionable wear; shoe repair businesses; restaurants; phone battery charging stations; photography studios; and community centers, to name a few.

Intersection in the center of the Dzaleka camp. November 5, 2021. Photo by Lisa Gilman.

Life in the camp is hard. Each person has their own reasons, often violent and tragic, for leaving their home countries. The journey to Malawi for most was treacherous and risky. All have experienced trauma and significant losses: homes, livelihoods, family members, and friends. Malawi's refugee laws are restrictive. Refugees are required to live within the camp, and they cannot legally work in the country.[4] Some camp residents have been refugees for as long as 28 years. There are thousands of youth living in the camp. Many arrive each year, and others are born in Dzaleka or other refugee camps in the region. Children born to refugees in Malawi are born into refugee status with the same restrictions. Malawi does not grant them citizenship; many are stateless because they have no official status in the home countries of their parents.

The future for people living in the camp varies. Some eventually return to their home countries. Some are resettled each year to countries like the United States, Canada, or Australia. Many, however, continue to live year after year in Dzaleka not knowing whether their futures will ever change. The camp is thus a place in which people who were forced to migrate are doing what they can to survive in the present while trying to maintain hope for better futures.

Arts and culture are important for all migrants in any part of the world, especially for those who are displaced from their homes because of war, other types of conflict, or weather crises. When people are forced to suddenly leave both their physical and social environments, they often become isolated and disconnected from everything that made them feel associated with a place and other people. Their sense of being and connection along with feelings of safety are stripped from them. They struggle to establish a sense of who they are as individuals, to connect with others, and to

establish feelings of emotional and physical well-being in a new location where they are often not welcome. Parents often struggle to raise their children to know their languages and culture while living in foreign linguistic and cultural environments.

I was intrigued when I read about the Tumaini Festival in a social media post sometime around 2018. While I had known that there was a refugee camp in Malawi, I knew nothing about who lived there and had never thought about it as a place with a thriving art scene. I was interested at the time in developing a new global project, which is now in full swing, on arts initiatives by refugees for refugees.[5]

Slowed down by the freeze in international travel caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, I finally reached out in October 2021 to Trésor Nzengu Mpauni. Widely known by the pen name Menes La Plume, Mpauni is a poet, musician, and refugee originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is credited as being the mastermind behind the Tumaini Festival. Mpauni and other young artists in the camp and volunteers from Malawi and European countries founded the first festival in 2014. Tumaini is now heralded as the only arts and cultural festival of its kind to be held in a refugee camp and has become one of the biggest arts festivals in Malawi. Mpauni has been honored with multiple international awards for his vision.[6] During our conversation via WhatsApp that October, he suggested that I would learn more by being at the festival than talking to him.

Immediately after hanging up, I scurried to get university approval for travel to Malawi, which was made complicated because we were still in the throes of the pandemic. The next month, I happily found myself at the festival on November 4, 2021. I took advantage of the homestay program and was hosted by a Burundian family who welcomed me into their home, provided me a room to sleep, fed me, and, most importantly, shared with me their stories and friendship.

Left: Host family with author and guests during August 2022 visit.
Right: The host family mother Catherine Nzeyimana and son Jean-Claude taking a break from working on a school project. November 2021.

Photos by Lisa Gilman.

The 2021 festival ran from noon on Thursday, November 4, through late Saturday, November 6. I spent my days moving from festival venue to venue, listening to poetry, watching theater, admiring paintings, buying crafts, listening to many different types of music, enjoying dance performances, and, most importantly, walking around the camp and listening to the many stories of the people I met. During my down time, I spent time with my host family, learning about their stories and chatting about our lives.

Meet the Dzaleka Art Project Artist
Primo Luanda Bauma

More artist profiles available at
https://dzalekaartproject.com

"I'm an artist photographer and one of the people who participated in Dzaleka Art Project. Dzaleka Art Project for me is a platform which brought us artists together, giving an aspect of visibility by showcasing the hard work of creative refugees living in the Dzaleka camp to the world despite living in an environment which brings almost no opportunities. The project is a source of inspiration and a sharing of knowledge which helps me a lot to develop my profession as a future photojournalist. Lack of enough important equipment doesn't keep me from working freely. It's just a camera, a vision, and a big dream!"

—Primo Luanda Bauma,
Team Leader for Photography

I was not surprised that there were artists in the camp. Through the arts, people express difficult emotions, communicate with one another, pass the time, process trauma, pray, make money, flirt, remember, forget, educate, have fun, organize, participate in ritual, create community, and do all sorts of other things. Yet I was struck by just how dynamic and varied the art scene in the camp is.

Late on Saturday night as I leaned against a tree tired and happy from a long day full of arts, culture, and stories, the young Congolese guitar player Elisha Beya came over and introduced himself. We chatted late into the night as we listened to the headliner bands on the nearby stage. Thousands of people—Malawians who had come into the camp to enjoy the festival side by side with camp residents—swayed to the music or danced more boisterously. At some point while we were talking, some of Elisha's friends joined us. I learned that Giresse is a gospel singer in the band that Elisha had performed with early in the evening. Victor is a poet, Serge a painter whose painting I had admired earlier in the day, and Richesse a graphic designer. Getting to know these young men, all talented artists, all from the Democratic Republic of Congo, all living in a refugee camp in Malawi, inspired the Dzaleka Art Project.

Each of these men was eager for me to experience their art and asked me whether I would spread the word about how much creative talent exists in the camp. They craved more opportunities to share their art along with the stories of their lives and struggles. They explained that they needed resources to do their art, but also to survive. They asked me what I could do to help.

The Congolese artists performed a song for me the day I went to purchase a painting at Serge's house and gallery. Paintings lean against the wall in the background. November 2021. From left to right: Giresse Ino, Serge Kasongo, Elisha Beya, Richesse Kabamba, Victor Balmeda.

These conversations repeated themselves in my mind during my long plane ride home. I was especially moved by these young people because I was born and spent my early childhood in the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire). I have not been back since the late 1970s because of the ongoing conflicts. Spending time with Congolese youth, listening and dancing to live Rumba bands, and talking about Congolese food during the festival evoked intense childhood memories and emotions. After I returned home, I reached out to Mpauni and raised the idea of working with youth artists in the camp to document the arts to spread their stories and bring more visibility to their talents.

I learned from Mpauni that the festival is mostly run by volunteers from within and outside the camp. Getting people who are not refugees to help with the festival is a strategy for building refugee advocates. When people come into the camp and work firsthand with camp residents, they often leave with a deep respect for and better understanding of their refugee counterparts. Inspired by this idea, I decided to invite students from George Mason University where I teach to work remotely alongside the Dzaleka team to bring the project to fruition. Perhaps more importantly, I hoped they would contribute to the festival organizers' objective of building refugee advocates across the world. I anticipated that the GMU students would learn a great deal from the Dzaleka

team and the featured artists at the same time that the Dzaleka team would benefit from relationships with university students in the U.S.

The Team Leader for Music is Congolese gospel singer Giresse Ino, Visual Arts and Crafts is Congolese painter Serge Kasongo, Dance is Congolese popular dancer Nellyson_Deo, Poetry is Rwandan poet Angela Azibera, Photography is Congolese photographer Primo Luanda Bauma, and Inspirational Stories is Burundian Divine Irakoze. Divine is the daughter in the Burundian family who hosted me on my visits to the camp. When I invited her to be part of the project, she declined saying that she was not an artist. I knew she would be a great addition because she is an active writer of essays and a youth leader. Eventually, she offered to write stories of inspiring youth, many of whom are also engaged in the arts. Remy Gakwaya, the founder and director of the technology and resource center Takeno LAB just outside the camp, helped supervise the Dzaleka Team, and Mpauni served as an advisor. The U.S. team included the undergraduate students Solomon Tejan Kanu,[7] Audrie Bernard, and Brendan West with some help from graduate students Asa Sutton and Amanda Ellard.

Each member of the Dzaleka team gathered examples of artists' work, interviewed them, wrote their bios, and took photographs of them. They uploaded these materials on a shared Google drive. The U.S. team worked with me to collect materials from the Malawian team, edit the texts, format images, and organize the content for both the website and the book. I made one additional short visit to the camp in August 2022 to work with the Dzaleka team. My husband John Fenn and friends Elizabeth Langran and Bruce Miller joined me and helped with documentation.

Left: Giresse Ino and Serge Kasongo work on transferring photos while Primo Luanda Bauma, Elizabeth Langran, and Bruce Miller sit in the background. Right: The Dzaleka team celebrating their hard work. August 2022.
Photos by Lisa Gilman.

This project was challenging. I had anticipated that we would have regular Zoom meetings with everyone together, but the combination of the almost daily power outages in the camp, lack of good internet connections, and everyone's busy schedules made this almost impossible. The camp team struggled with lack of adequate documentation equipment, the reluctance of some people to participate, and their own time and resource limitations. The U.S. team struggled with busy schedules, trying to understand circumstances in the camp, and the technical challenges of the project. Through a great deal of patience, trial and error, time, and determination, we pulled it off.

Collage of Dzaleka and U.S. team. From left to right: Giresse Ino, Primo Luanda Bauma, Audrie Bernard, Lisa Gilman, Asa Sutton, Serge Kasongo, Amanda Ellard, Brendan West, Divine Irakoze, Solomon Tejan Kanu, Nellyson_Deo, Angela Azibera.

Working with GMU students on the project was a different pedagogical experience for me than what I typically do in the classroom. The teaching and learning happened organically (for everyone involved, including me) through the process of putting together the project, rather than through a curricular plan. I served as a project manager, but we worked together collaboratively as a team. We met weekly and discussed the materials, how to organize them, and problems as they arose. Each of the undergrads interviewed youth team leaders in the camp and produced written biographies, as did graduate student Asa Sutton. We talked a great deal about ethics and how to deal with agency and authority when our collaborators were vulnerable and at risk. We navigated differences in quality and quantity in the documentation given inconsistent access to documentation equipment, English language skills, and time. We embraced the inconsistency to include as many artists as possible and because it is expressive of the experiences of camp residents.

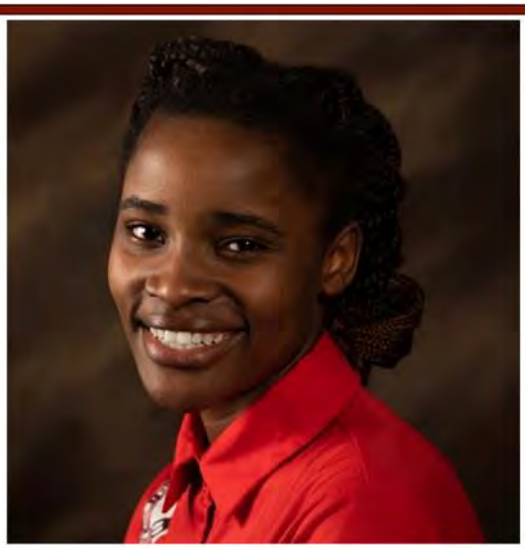
In August 2022, Serge sent with me paintings to give to the GMU undergraduates who had worked on the project from beginning to end. From left to right: Solomon Tejan Kanu, Audrie Bernard, and Brendan West. Photo by Emma Bussard.

In my initial conceptualization, I envisioned a coffee table style book for a general audience. Part way through the project, the undergraduate Solomon, who came to the U.S. as a refugee from Sierra Leone when he was a young child and was studying web development at GMU, offered to build a website to go along with the book. I was reluctant because I knew it would require a lot more work and time. Yet, I respected his motivation to use and further build the skills he was developing as a student to bring greater visibility to his peers across the world. I also knew the website would add value to the project. Solomon took the lead in designing and developing the website with input and involvement from me and the U.S. team. Graphic designer and camp resident Richesse Kabamba contributed the main graphic and color scheme and gave us feedback on early versions of the website.

The Dzaleka Art Project is ultimately an educational tool where young refugees living in a highly restricted environment are the teachers. Anyone visiting the website will learn something. Instructors can direct their students to explore the website, or they can create structured pedagogic activities to guide student learning. Students can interact directly with those artists who shared their social media handles or contact information on the website. And the project could inspire instructors to encourage students to engage with other online materials (for example, on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) produced by Dzaleka camp residents and other refugees and migrants in different parts of the world. It is truly miraculous that technology allows people in very different places living in different circumstances to share something about their lives despite distance, linguistic and cultural diversity, and restrictions on mobility.

It is too soon to tell what this project's impact will be. Everyone who participated gained skills and expanded their networks. Each one of us has expressed that the project was fulfilling personally. I also know that those still in the camp wish for more, that this project and other efforts could bring real change: improve their access to basic human rights, audiences, money, resources, and, ultimately, a country to call home. Unfortunately, my/our power is limited. I hope that in some small way, the website and book (when it is published) will assist the artists who asked me what I could do to help late that Saturday night at the 2021 Tumaini Festival and all the other talent in the camp, to gain a bit more visibility and attract more resources as a result of our efforts. And I hope the project extends Tumaini Letu's goal of increasing refugee advocates, through the U.S.-based students who worked on the project and the people who encounter the website and book.

Meet the Dzaleka Art Project Artist
Divine Irakoze
More artist profiles available at https://dzalekaartproject.com



What do you think the value of the project is:

1. **Visibility and Awareness**: The project highlights the talents and creativity of artists living in the Dzaleka refugee camp, bringing their stories and art to a global audience.
2. **Empowerment**: It empowers refugees by providing them with a platform to showcase their skills and express themselves through various art forms.
3. **Advocacy and Support**: It aims to increase the number of refugee advocates around the world by humanizing the refugee experience through art and personal stories.
4. **Hope and Resilience**: It serves as a testament to the resilience and hope of refugees, demonstrating how art can thrive even in challenging conditions.

What, if anything, did you get out of the project personally?

1. **Inspiration**: I was so inspired on how the creativity and resilience of the artists can serve as a powerful source of inspiration.
2. **Learning and Growth**: I learned about different art forms and creative expressions, contributing to personal and artistic growth.
3. **Connection**: I was able to make connections with talented individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures.
4. **Community Contribution**: The fact that I was able to contribute to a cause that aims to improve the lives of refugees, reinforcing the importance of community and collaboration.

—Divine Irakoze, Team Leader for Inspirational Stories

In the end, I am proud of what we produced and the work we did as a team. I learned as much as anyone about arts, migration, refugee policies, project design, teamwork, and web design and development. The Dzaleka team leaders along with each artist who shared their story and creative works for this project impart knowledge about what it means to be a refugee, what role art and culture have in refugee lives, and what impact restrictive laws have on migrants. Perhaps, more importantly, through their art, stories, and reflections, they teach about hope, strength, beauty, and the need for humans to always treat one another as humans.

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The Dance of Politics: Performance, Gender, and Democratization in Malawi; My Music, My War: The Listening Habits of U.S. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan; *the co-authored* Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork Methods Handbook; *the co-edited* Africa Every Day: Fun, Leisure, and Expressive Culture on the Continent; *and* UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage. *She produced the documentary* Grounds for Resistance *and the Dzaleka Art Project www.dzalekaartproject.com. She is currently working on "My Culture, My Survival: Arts Initiatives by Refugees for Refugees," a global multi-site project about displaced people, agency, and art. Orcid 0000-0002-2380-1076.*

Endnotes

[1] The book manuscript by the same title is currently under review. The link for the website is www.dzalekaartproject.com.

[2] For more information about the Tumaini Festival, see Tumaini Letu (https://tumainiletu.org), Makhumula 2019, Copeland 2022, Gilman 2024.

[3] For more about the Dzaleka refugee camp, see Baker 2011, Chima and Horner 2023.

[4] For more about Malawi's restrictive refugee laws, see Mvula 2010.

[5] The project documents examples of refugees using arts to do something positive for themselves or the communities in which they find themselves in four countries: Uyghurs in France; Syrians in Türkiye; Congolese, Burundians, and Rwandans in Malawi; and people from diverse backgrounds in the United States, Washington, D.C., area.

[6] Mpauni has received numerous awards and international recognition for his work with Tumaini and refugee advocacy, including the 2020 Sharjah International Award for Refugee Advocacy & Support and the 2018 World Bank Africa Region's Social Inclusion Hero Award. He was a finalist for the 2020 Ockenden International Prize, the 2020 Elevate Prize, and the 2021 Global Pluralism Award. He was a refugee co-sponsor of the first United Nations' World Refugee Forum in 2019. He is an inspiring speaker, and his work has been featured in *Al-Jazeera, The Guardian,* and *National Geographic*," https://www.segalfamilyfoundation.org/portfolio-items/tresor-nzengu-mpauni. For a more detailed account of Mpauni's story and the founding of the Festival see Copeland (2022, 161-72). There are several short and long documentaries available on YouTube, including *Menes la Plume,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOAw_HfG_X0&t=962s.

[7] Solomon changed his name while we were working on the project. His previous name was Sulaiman Fofanah.

URLs

Dzaleka Art Project https://dzalekaartproject.com
Tumaini Festival https://tumainiletu.org/our_work/tumaini-festival
About Giresse Ino https://dzalekaartproject.com/individual%20musicians/Giresse%20Ino.html
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