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RESEARCH ARTICLE

On bundling: the aesthetics of exchange and growth in central Uganda

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Abstract

In central Uganda, even a casual observer would notice the widespread presentation of often identical commercial services and goods – fruit vendors, street food or motorcycle taxis, for instance – in a small shared area. This article brings the dynamics of this phenomenon into view under the heuristic rubric of 'bundling', reflecting both on diverse examples from present-day Kampala and on some of the phenomenon's historical and linguistic scaffolding. We take this phenomenon seriously as an alternative form of socio-economic exchange and growth, one that is distinct from liberal and neoliberal imaginaries of an unlimited flow of goods, people, things and services. Bundling, we argue, reflects an aesthetics in which both material value and social relationships are imagined to arise through thickenings of persons and things, assembled and ordered in spatial proximity and symmetry. The article suggests that bundling offers conceptual resources to imagine growth otherwise, as a process unfolding in ways that complicate and clog conventional economic imaginaries.

Résumé

Dans la région centrale de l'Ouganda, personne ne peut manquer d'observer la présentation généralisée de biens et de services commerciaux souvent identiques (marchands de fruits, cuisine de rue ou moto-taxi par exemple) dans un espace partagé restreint. Cet article met en lumière la dynamique de ce phénomène sous la rubrique heuristique de « bundling » (groupage), en portant la réflexion à la fois sur divers exemples de Kampala aujourd'hui et sur une partie de l'échafaudage historique et linguistique de ce phénomène. Les auteurs considèrent ce phénomène comme une autre forme d'échange et de croissance socioéconomique, distincte des imaginaires libéraux et néolibéraux d'un flux illimité de biens, de personnes, de choses et de services. Ils soutiennent que le « bundling » reflète une esthétique dans laquelle la valeur matérielle et les rapports sociaux sont imaginés émaner d'épaississements de personnes et de biens, assemblés et ordonnés dans une proximité et une symétrie spatiales. L'article suggère que le « bundling » offre des ressources conceptuelles pour imaginer la croissance autrement, comme un processus qui se déroule d'une manière qui complique et engorge les imaginaires économiques conventionnels.

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Resumo

No centro do Uganda, mesmo um observador casual notaria a apresentação generalizada de serviços e bens comerciais frequentemente idênticos – vendedores de fruta, comida de rua ou moto-táxis, por exemplo – numa pequena área partilhada. O presente artigo apresenta a dinâmica deste fenómeno sob a rubrica heurística de 'agrupamento', reflectindo sobre diversos exemplos da actual Kampala e sobre alguns dos andaimes históricos e linguísticos do fenómeno. Levamos este fenómeno a sério como uma forma alternativa de intercâmbio e crescimento socioeconómico, distinta dos imaginários liberais e neoliberais de um fluxo ilimitado de bens, pessoas, coisas e serviços. Argumentamos que o agrupamento reflecte uma estética em que tanto o valor material como as relações sociais são imaginados como surgindo através de adensamentos de pessoas e coisas, montados e ordenados em proximidade e simetria espacial. O artigo sugere que o agrupamento oferece recursos conceptuais para imaginar o crescimento de outra forma, como um processo que se desenrola de maneiras que complicam e obstruem os imaginários económicos convencionais.

This article explores a pervasive, indeed constitutive, feature of socio-economic activity in central Uganda. What we call here 'bundling' is a structuring principle of exchange and accumulation in everyday life, a principle that is ubiquitous and forceful while often being implicit or taken for granted. A number of ordinary, even banal, scenes from Kampala, Uganda's capital and largest city, illustrate what we have in mind.

> **Scene one:** One of us noticed that every morning in her neighbourhood, along a busy traffic junction, the same six women would arrive on the side of the road and arrange their fruit and vegetables into small, pyramid-shaped heaps, mostly on paper trays and in baskets. These women came to sell their wares each day of the week – apart from Sundays, when they perhaps went to church or remained at home. Notably, these women were selling more or less the same things: local produce such as tomatoes, onions and small, sweet bananas. None of these women were selling any produce that the others did not have. Moreover, although the women were not cooperating in the sense of sharing profits or work, neither were they exactly in explicit competition. They did not try to woo customers away from their colleagues, nor did they try to undercut them by offering lower prices as customers bargained over the cost.

> **Scene two:** Throughout central Uganda, one sees clusters of men driving motorcycle taxis (*boda boda*). There are usually a few drivers in a fixed spot, called a *staagi* or stage – often up to ten or fifteen, and in some major intersections many more – all waiting for customers. The men compete to catch the attention of a potential rider, but, like the women selling fruit and vegetables, they do not compete with each other by undercutting negotiations over the cost of a ride. *Boda boda* stages are organized in a variety of ways, but a neat line of riders or a semicircle is common – both being visually arresting displays along busy roads.

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Figure 1. Bundled beer for three drinkers in a Ugandan home, August 2018.

Scene three: Around 11 p.m. on a Friday night at one of Kampala's trendy and buzzing newer bars. Groups of well-dressed men and women in their twenties, thirties and forties crowd around tables, drinking, laughing and dancing. Many of the tables are overflowing with colourful cocktails and champagne glasses, while other tables have bottles of liquor and beer – generally many more than there are people at the table. Luganda speakers colloquially refer to this exuberant overflowing of drinks as *okudugaza emezza* – literally, to make the table 'dirty' or 'jam-packed'. Although this particular bar caters to the elite and the affluent, one can see the same kind of table-packing in bars and hotels across the city, as well as in homes on festive occasions. A friend of ours, Samuel, and a group of his male relatives and friends regularly meet in local bars in a Kampala suburb. A well-off, self-defined 'investor' with stakes in a diverse array of businesses, Samuel inevitably buys drinks for the table – not just one drink but several for everyone in his company as well as more for the centre of the table. On one of the first of such outings, one of us protested that he did not need the four beers placed in front of him – he needed to have an early night. Samuel retorted that it didn't matter: someone else could drink the beers or they could be sent back. 'This is how you drink,' Samuel noted, pointing out that other tables in the bar were similarly stacked with beer bottles (see Figure 1).

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This work of bundling together the same goods and services in a delimited space and time is evident across many forms of economic activity in Uganda, including bars, street food stands and 'pork joints', printing shops, and mobile money and prepaid phone credit vendors. The principles of bundling are also evident across many kinds of exchange in a more general sense: for example, in the ostentatious piling together of presents on a table at a wedding reception or a baby shower. Proximity and symmetry in expansion are both evident and evidently important in these settings. Such bundles of people and things denote abundance, a spatially concentrated and visibly manifest surfeit.

Felwine Sarr (2020) has called for alternative ways of imagining socio-economic life that emerge from the concepts and metaphors of African societies. By focusing on bundling across a range of diverse settings in central Uganda, we want to bring into view one alternative way in which socio-economic life is imagined and enacted. More specifically, we foreground an imaginary of development and growth that is orthogonal to dominant currents of thinking about growth. We are referring to the globally dominant idea of growth as limitless, destructive capitalist expansion as well as to more recent calls for this type of growth's cessation and undoing through 'de-growth'. Unsatisfied with the dichotomized framing here, we think with some quotidian, even humble, examples. We try to get outside this limited menu of stances on growth – pro or con – by suggesting another picture of growth, grounded in its own history while having a vibrant social life in Uganda.

We use 'bundling' as a heuristic label for this alternative picture of exchange and growth in contemporary central Uganda. We characterize it as an aesthetics, or more precisely a social aesthetics, by which we mean norms and assumptions about what human life and collectivity should look and feel like (Zoanni 2019: 449). An aesthetics of bundling organizes not only public manifestations of diverse economic and social activities (what we have described among fruit sellers, taxi drivers and bar-goers), but also, in many cases, particular arrangements within any given activity. By emphasizing aesthetic organization, we don't mean to oppose economics and aesthetics, although bundling certainly exceeds economic framings in a narrow sense. We join efforts to reckon with rich African histories and identify distinctive logics and patterns of exchange that are irreducible to a hegemonic construal of economic and economic rationality (Sarr 2020). By focusing on an aesthetics of exchange, we draw attention to distinctive patterns in practices of valuation and transaction (Guyer 1995; 1996; 2004; Guyer and Belinga 1995; Verran 2001) that have an integrity of their own, even as they defy the supposed self-evidence of dominant economic conventions. Taking an aesthetics of bundling in central Uganda seriously means attending to a pervasive compositional patterning that takes dense, ordered relationships among persons and things in social and spatial proximity as the basis for desirable growth.

Based on our own observations and conversations with colleagues, we know that a similar aesthetics of socio-economic activity is evident elsewhere in Uganda, elsewhere in the Great Lakes region, across East Africa and perhaps elsewhere on the continent too. It may even indicate a particular tradition not unlike what Guyer (2004: 22) described as Atlantic Africa's 'distinctive commercial civilization'. Here, however, we confine our analysis to the case we know best: central Uganda and the kingdom of Buganda, a setting where a logic of bundling seems particularly elaborated and

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influential.[1] The key point we are concerned with is how examples from central Uganda exemplify other ways of imagining growth – distinct from other regional traditions as well as global capitalist visions. Notably, bundling departs from understandings of socio-economic processes imagined in terms of 'flows'. By flows, we refer not only to the flows of material substance to which much writing on the Great Lakes region calls attention (more on this later), but also to liberal and neoliberal imaginaries of the self-regulating movement of goods, money, ideas and services across national boundaries that enable capital accumulation and ultimately economic growth as it is conventionally understood (Harvey 2005; Peck 2008). In contrast to the particular spatial connotations of flows, bundling implies a clotting, leading to the dense assembly of material things and social relationships.

This article asks what envisioning growth through bundling – that is, social and material thickenings that clog economic imaginaries of unrestrained flow – makes thinkable and doable. In what follows, we focus on how bundling shapes daily lives in and around urban central Uganda, with a view to understanding bundling's conceptual usefulness for wider conversations about growth. Although bundling is not primarily a matter of self-conscious intention, it is still a widely distributed form of quotidian knowledge (Mavhunga 2014; 2018). Bundling, in many instances, is so mundane, routine and taken for granted as a way of achieving forward movement that it often does not elicit explicit commentary. Towards the end of the article, however, we highlight some moments when people did explicitly criticize bundling. Based on an analysis of linguistic and ethnographic-historical material, as well as various contemporary everyday exchanges in markets, on streets and in other venues, we argue that bundling practices point to a longer tradition of how accumulation has been done in the region and reflect clear principles about acceptable ways to transact exchange and growth.

An aesthetics of the socio-economic

Bundling, in our understanding, involves the gathering together of similar goods and services: commercial examples include vegetable vendors, *boda boda* drivers, and neighbouring printing shops or pork joints. Neoclassical economic theory, premised on ideas of the individual utility-maximizing actor pursuing profit maximization, would lead us to expect a different pattern of behaviour, one in which individual entrepreneurs seize opportunities and fill niches in space and consumer demand.[2] According to such a logic, we would imagine a vegetable vendor who tries to eke out a living on a stand where there is high demand for fresh produce but low supply – finding, for example, a busy urban area where there are few other vendors present. Or, even if *boda boda* drivers assemble together at places where customers are passing, one could still imagine competitive bidding to occur, with counter-offers to secure a customer. In the light of these dominant assumptions, bundling appears to be economically irrational.

[1] The research for this article was conducted as we led our daily lives in Uganda – moving about the city, doing everyday shopping, and the like – in the context of other research projects from 2011 onwards.

[2] See Arnsperger and Varoufakis (2006) for enduring features of neoclassical economic theory.

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But such a judgement is misleading. It means taking a culturally and historically specific view of economic rationality as a universal standard. Attending to bundling helps bring into view alternative principles of accumulation and socio-economic activity. Such an approach does not, however, imply that bundling somehow operates outside contemporary global capitalist formations. It seems more productive to understand an aesthetics of bundling as indexing concepts of value and forms of socio-economic practice that operate on 'the edges' of liberal markets (Bize 2020), while remaining constitutive of contemporary market practices. Uganda has a long history of integration within global capitalist exchanges.[3] It also is a country that has been profoundly transformed by neoliberal thinking and structural adjustment (Wiegratz *et al.* 2018). In this way, bundling refers to longstanding, passed-down and conventionally patterned practices that shape transactions in present-day Uganda, ranging from the stacking of vegetables in markets to wider social relationships.

In other words, bundling exists within contemporary capitalist conditions in Uganda and shapes capitalist activities, but it reflects principles of exchange not reducible to narrowly construed notions of economic activity.[4] This invites an immediate objection from the other direction: is this not a common, or even universal, feature of socio-economic life? It is undeniable that the agglomeration of similar goods and services is evident in economic practices across many parts of the world, past and present. Some of the examples we have mentioned in our introduction – the clustering together of people selling the same thing, be it vegetables, roast pork or prepaid phone credit – call to mind parallels such as Roman

[3] There are uncertainties about whether and in what form markets existed in central Uganda prior to Swahili coastal traders and European colonizers (Médard 2006). A reason for this is that early anthropological scholarship was more interested in capturing colonial disruptions of local economies and value systems than in precolonial histories of long-distance trade and African markets (Bohannan 1955; Bohannan and Dalton 1962; Barth 1967; Duffield 1981; Shipton 1989; see also Uzoigwe 1972; Peterson 2014). At the same time, it seems that, at least since the beginnings of colonization in Buganda, accumulating 'wealth very largely in European terms (guns, land, money, etc.) was a widely and clearly recognized objective' (Wrigley 1959: 16–17; see also Kiwanuka 1971). Yet the fact that Ganda came to recognize and pursue new forms of value and wealth that emerged in the context of European colonization does not simply mean that precolonial regimes of value and aspiration were thereby abandoned (Kodesh 2001). Of course, cash-based markets and neoliberal capitalist forms of transaction are without question widespread in Uganda today. But recent ethnographic studies of markets in and around Kampala have, for instance, highlighted the permanence of 'older' non-liberal, hierarchical and patriarchal relationships between market actors (Musisi 1995; Monteith 2018; 2019; Baral 2018).

[4] Here, we join a wider conversation that has sought to ground understandings of market relations in their specific social and cultural contexts (Bohannan and Dalton 1962; Sarr 2015). While this has been a canonical anthropological concern (Malinowski 1921; Mauss 1990 [1954]; Sahlins 1972), Africanist scholarship in particular has pushed back against neoclassical economics and its universalizing assumptions about socio-economic rationality and the laws of demand and supply. The work of Bohannan (1955) and Bohannan and Bohannan (1968) is a particularly important precedent. Although it has been rightly critiqued for its lack of historicity as well as for overstating both the rigidity of barriers between value spheres and their near complete dissolution through the colonial economy (Piot 1991; Guyer 1995: 85), we take inspiration from it insofar as it points to the 'conventions' that 'discipline' people's exchanges, implicitly and explicitly (Guyer 2004: 3). Bohannan and Bohannan and others saw barriers between spheres as indigenous tools to maintain a relatively egalitarian social structure and prevent the uneven accumulation of material wealth (Barth 1967; Sillitoe 2006: 17). Others noted the ways in which such barriers also reproduced generational and gendered social hierarchies (Vansina 1990: 237, 252; Piot 1991: 407; Ferguson 1985).

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Figure 2. Roadside bundles near Kalerwe market, August 2019.

collegia, medieval guilds, souks and bazaars, as well as banking and diamond districts (e.g. De Munck 2011; Geertz 1978; 1979; Fanselow 1990). We would not deny that the agglomeration of similar goods and services has often been evident in economic practices across diverse contexts and times. We would, however, still insist on the contemporaneity and specificity of bundling in Uganda with which we are concerned. We discuss examples from different spheres of life under the rubric of bundling, in order to emphasize that it is not simply a matter of creating markets for buyers to meet sellers.[5] Bundling, as we see it, has both a specificity and a generality, and histories that exceed narrow accounts of market formation.

The wider phenomenon of bundling that we are bringing into view as a pervasive social aesthetic highlights not only dense social relationships between people but also specific, ordered and dense compositions of people and things in spatial proximity. Take the example of bar outings, where men and women cluster closely around tables stacked with drinks. What exactly is at work here? Why is it important for people at bar outings to fill their tables with drinks? Why do *boda boda* drivers form neat rows or half crescents? Why do sellers and drivers spend so much time, care and attention

[5] See, for example, typical social science explanations of market exchanges in low-income settings, which emphasize the 'safety-first' strategies of impoverished populations that are oriented towards security and pursuing low-risk, less lucrative activities rather than riskier but high-profit enterprises (Elwert *et al.* 1983). We do think bundling as a strategy has some 'safety' functions that we note throughout, but here function does not account for form. There are many ways to mitigate economic risk; why this one? A reviewer of this article suggested that bundling may take place in order both to advertise produce and to kill time. We also think that this account of the function of bundling may be true in many cases, but it does not explain the *form* of advertising or killing time.

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Figure 3. Bundles of 'Irish' (potatoes), August 2019.

on bundling what they are selling in particular ways? Why is it so common that vendors choose to sit in such close proximity to each other? Why are onions and potatoes sold like this (see Figures 2 and 3)?

In these images, one finds not only a pervasive way of selling vegetables in central Uganda, but also a particularly vivid example of the diverse kinds of bundles that are conceived and composed across multiple avenues of quotidian life – bar outings, wedding gifts, taxi stands, business start-up strategies, and more. The point is not that all of these diverse examples somehow reflect what is essentially the same activity, but rather that these heterogeneous phenomena all reflect a distinctive pattern of doing, and thinking about, exchange and growth – that these happen through bundling. Bundling here is a convention that shapes social transactions as well as people's expectations of them, and it is not limited to economic or monetary spheres.[6]

The qualities of quantity

In the history of Western philosophy, the so-called *sorites* paradox, named after the Greek word for 'heap' or 'pile', takes up the question of when a gathering of sand becomes a heap. If one grain of sand isn't a heap, are two? Three? Ten? Exactly how many grains does a heap require? There is no clear answer to this question. The

[6] Understanding bundling in this way as an aesthetic that spans disparate spheres of life and social exchange resonates with scholarship that suggests that strategies of accumulation in many parts of Africa have historically not been about accumulating material wealth in a narrow sense but rather about 'wealth in people' and 'wealth in knowledge' (Miers and Kopytoff 1979; Vansina 1990: 237, 251; Guyer and Belinga 1995).

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paradox underscores the indeterminacy of what otherwise might seem like a clear concept – in this case, the notion of a heap or pile (see Oms and Zardini 2020).

In Uganda, many people spend a great deal of time thinking about piles or heaps, not simply for the sake of logical puzzles but also for the sake of commerce. This thinking reflects a regime for the management of quantity that is also a 'regime of quality' (Guyer 1993: 246). In this respect, 'heap' or 'pile' is perhaps the wrong word, insofar as they both connote something gathered together in jumbled fashion. In contrast, our preferred term, 'bundle', implies a degree of care and organization in assembly or aggregation. At the start of the article, we mentioned a group of women selling produce alongside a road, as well as the fact that they placed their wares in small piles – bundles, we would say. Those bundles were invariably neat and carefully stacked.

What we are calling bundling is evident at two different scales here. The first is the fact that a group of women have gathered together even as they sell the same sorts of things – in this case, fruit and vegetables, usually bought in the early morning from one of the markets on the edges of town where trucks unload goods from farms surrounding the city. The second scale is the way in which the women assemble not only themselves but also what they are selling into symmetrical, carefully stacked and ordered bundles. They are not alone: from small-scale roadside vendors and shops at road junctions to large markets and trading centres throughout Kampala, and in cities and towns throughout the region, vegetables and fruit are stacked in the same way.[7] The most commonly used form of bundling is a pyramid (see Figure 4).

In Figure 4, potatoes, peppers, pumpkins, onions and aubergines are assembled into pyramids, and then neatly stacked in plastic or wicker baskets on tables and benches. Some of the pyramids are more adventurous than others – note, for example, several bundles where the upper levels are made up of single tomatoes supporting each other. But the basic idea is the same across all stacks. In Luganda, this piling up or stacking of things for display and sale has its own name, *okulenga*, a verb that is reserved for bundling things for commercial purposes.[8] The related noun, *omulengo* (stack), is a common unit in which vegetables and fruits are sold, whether sweet potatoes or tomatoes, onions, mangoes or oranges. And, as apparent in the case of tomatoes, there usually are both small and large stacks. A common market question is some variation of 'How much is the stack?' (*Omulengo gwa ssente mmeka*?). Things are displayed in bundles and sold and bought in those bundles. Bigger 'pieces' or items are the exception here – people often buy a single watermelon or pumpkin from the stack. But for the smaller items, buying in bundles is the norm.

We take stacking vegetables and other goods for sale as one particular form of a wider repertoire that we call bundling. Although the vegetables in the photograph are, we think, some particularly nice bundles, what the image shows is extremely common. This way of stacking goods in a pyramid is popular because it is commonly

[7] Monteith (2018: S19) mentions an interesting exception in the most expensive market stalls in Nakasero market, which cater mainly to Chinese and Indian buyers. There, produce is sold in kilograms, not in heaps. In contrast, small-scale traders mentioned the convenience of bundles and the high costs of scales and the impracticality of carrying them back and forth between their homes and their stalls every day.

[8] *Okulenga* is most commonly used for piling goods in a market and is not restricted to fruit and vegetables. It also has other, less literal, applications, although again exclusively commercial: for example, renting to several people on one plot of land or 'stacking one's body' for display in sex work.

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Figure 4. Bundles at Kalerwe market, August 2019.

regarded as eye-catching and visually pleasing. It is intended to 'attract' (*okusikireza*) customers, serving as a way of advertising one's goods. A stack signals bounty, and bountiful stacks are always good when it comes to food. Of course, the presence of large bundles of tomatoes on the market also reflects the way in which they are bought: often to feed families.

When we asked traders why they arranged their produce like this, they simply said that it was the obvious thing to do. One young man whom we met at Kalerwe market in Kampala was busily arranging a load of freshly harvested watermelons – a heap, so to speak – into small, pyramid-shaped bundles. He explained that he arranged them by size: the biggest were in the front, where people passed, to attract customers, with the smaller ones behind. The young watermelon seller said that he had learned from older people how to organize his produce in compelling *milengo* (stacks); learning, in this case, was through imitation, not explicit instruction (see Figure 5).

On the fringes of Kalerwe and other markets we visited, a number of vendors offer produce without proper stands, selling from the ground; items are often in bundles here too, but sometimes are only in small see-through plastic bags. A trader who was selling vegetables from a wooden stand at Kalerwe was surprised by our initial failure to perceive the difference between the produce sold closer to the road and what she was selling; to us, it all looked good. To make us understand, she asked, while pointing towards those sitting on the street and her own, very neat, pyramids of tomatoes, onions and potatoes: 'Which ones look appetizing to you? And which ones would you buy?' She was suggesting that we would buy from her because we would appreciate the order; her vegetables looked neat, clean, tasty and respectable, and, together with her stand, indexed her status as a properly registered and organized seller at the

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Figure 5. Vendor bringing order to his melon heap at Kalerwe market, August 2019.

market. Through a look of disapproval on her face, she also indicated that, in her view, the produce closer to the street was somehow suspect.

This trader knew what she was doing: we bought from her. Her question was an astute intervention of the metapragmatic sort, because she was making explicit claims about the qualities of her display, or her bundles, that should inform action, resulting in a sale. She was, after all, displaying cleanliness, order and formality, along with a beautiful arrangement. Beyond using bundles to advertise her specific goods, she was displaying what sort of a trader she was in the wider social landscape. While the qualities this trader was displaying are widely persuasive in commercial transactions, they have a particular force – or, more precisely, a particular pattern – in central Uganda, and not only recently. Bundling is a phenomenon that has proved 'durable' across the longue durée (Schoenbrun 2006; see also Vansina 1990). Bundles and bundling are sedimented in language and history, to which we now turn. We discuss origin stories and linguistic roots in order to highlight the historical importance of growing through bundles.

Bundling in language and history

People in central Uganda have a lot to say about bundles, and this extends beyond arrangements of watermelons and tomatoes. Alongside *-lenga*, as the particular activity of bundling or stacking goods and services together for the purpose of selling them, there is an extensive and highly elaborated Luganda vocabulary for different modes of bundling people and things. One can pile bricks or firewood (*-panga*) or a variety of heterogeneous things (*-gotteka*). One can pile things up vertically (*-biina*). One can assemble things together side by side in careful compact lines or stacks (*-komeka*). Or one can crowd things together in a careless way (*-fuutiika*). One can assemble people

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or things in larger numbers (*-kuluumulukuka*). Even 'charms' or 'spells' (*amalogo*) that might be used for witchcraft, or for less insidious spiritual purposes, frequently produce their effects precisely by virtue of being bundles of different materials. Luganda, then, has a veritable heap of terms for bundling. This linguistic abundance helps us work around the absence of clear written accounts of bundling in the longer history of Buganda. Neither Ganda elites nor European colonizers seem to have been particularly interested in how vegetables were sold or assembled. Nor have we come across evidence for or against the existence of bundling in colonial-era photographs: how tomatoes were stacked apparently did not attract the photographic gaze.

Even so, Luganda's highly elaborated vocabulary for gathering things and persons suggests that bundling is an abiding concern. So, too, are stories of origins. On a tour of Buganda's royal palace, custodians told us a narrative about the beginnings of the kingdom. It goes like this: the mythical first king Kintu – after ending a fractious war – was handed a stick by a healer and told to break it into pieces, which he did easily. The healer then put together nine sticks and made a bundle (*kaganda*). He told Kintu to break it. The bundle, however, was stronger than the stick and Kintu failed. The healer told him that it is easy to break one stick but hard to break a bundle (*obuganda*) and advised him to rule his people like this. This gesture gave the people, Baganda, their name.[9]

There are many versions of the Kintu story, and this one sounds very much like the story of the Roman *fasces*, bundles that were symbols of power (see Brennan 2022). This telling could well be shaped by the Roman example – after all, colonial-era Ganda elites studied Greek and Latin and were very invested in establishing their own civilizational superiority vis-à-vis other societies in the region (Earle 2017: 59; Twaddle 1974: 304; Fortt 1973: 66–9). But historical and linguistic work suggests that the imaginary is not reducible to colonial, missionary or educational encounters. The bundle in the case above refers to social organization, the principles that organized people into a collectivity that is decidedly hierarchical and patriarchal (Hanson 2003; Karlström 2004). Importantly, *-ganda* also refers to the pole of a public (or male) house of assembly, conveying an idea of spatial fixity. More broadly, *-ganda* means 'group, bundle, heap' as well as 'relatives or clan' (Schoenbrun 1997: 78–80). This root is then extended broadly – the kingdom (Buganda), the language (Luganda), the people (Baganda), their things and ways (Kiganda). These widespread uses are notable elaborations of the notion of the verb *-ganda* – 'to coagulate' – in several Bantu languages in the Great Lakes region – a linguistic nuance that implies fluid accumulation by virtue of a kind of thickening or congealing rather than ongoing flow (*ibid.*: 80).

Bundling, we suggest, reflects a longstanding aesthetics in which both material value and personal relationships are imagined to arise through social-material thickenings, assembling persons and things in spatial proximity and symmetry. Undoubtedly, display has an important part in commerce, sociality and politics everywhere, but this is explicitly stressed in central Uganda, where public displays of propriety and appearances are emphasized and connected to social status (Zoanni 2019). Scholars have noted the centrality elsewhere in Africa of the idiom of 'building'

[9] Later, we learned that this narration is also published on the official website of the Kingdom of Buganda. See <http://www.buganda.or.ug/index.php/our-history/the-past/origin-of-buganda> (accessed 29 January 2019).

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for how growth in personal and collective life is imagined (e.g. Livingston 2005: 15).[10] In Uganda, too, people place much emphasis on 'building oneself' (*okwezimba*), continually striving to add to the status quo, grow and start a family, have children, construct a house, accumulate wealth and attain an education. Building in this context relies on investing in the accumulation of relationships and things, for personal as well as collective good.

This is not simply a metaphor. In marked contrast to ideologies where accumulation is imagined to occur through invisible market forces and individual prowess, scholars have pointed out the historical and contemporary importance of dependency and clientship for moving forward in Buganda as a thoroughly hierarchical and centralized polity (Hanson 2003; Scherz 2014). Formerly, for instance, the way to maturity, prosperity and success for a young man started with a banana (*matooke*) garden (Wrigley 1959: 7). Having land for a wife's banana garden was a condition for any young man seeking to marry and build a family and a home; this required forging ties of patronage with a chief managing access to clan land (Roscoe 1911: 426; Wrigley 1959: 10–1; 1964: 23; Hanson 2003: 29–30), again creating a bundle of social and material connections.

The historical importance of banana cultivation and its decisive role in establishing longstanding patterns of social organization, value and exchange gave a particular shape to the connotations of bundling (Karlström 2004: 604). *Matooke* has been intensively cultivated in Uganda for a very long time, dating to somewhere between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries (Schoenbrun 1993: 52). Early European travellers in Uganda were struck by what they perceived to be the luxuriant richness of the land and its fertile, well-kept and orderly plantain groves (e.g. Speke 1863: 263–4; Stanley 1988 [1899]: 299).

In a sense, the banana is at the heart of bundling in Buganda. Like a number of Great Lakes societies, but in contrast to much of the rest of precolonial Africa, Buganda was home to a relatively high population density, permanent settlement, and social and political centralization. Historians connect this density and permanence to banana farming and the relative ease through which this crop produces enough food throughout the year (Wrigley 1964: 17; Schoenbrun 1998: 79–83; Reid 2002: 22ff.; Stephens 2013: 66–9). Banana plantations can also be continuously expanded by cuttings made from plants' rootstocks; and, once established, plantations provide a form of wealth that can last over generations if given proper care. The banana's model of growth – a capacious and continuous expansion – differs starkly from visions of growth that emerged along with the annual production of crops such as rice, grains or yam, visions where growth is typically imagined as a seasonal flourish and decay (e.g. Malinowski 1966 [1923]; Jensen 1948).

The banana, in turn, provides a template through which personal and collective growth was and often still is imagined (Calkins 2019; Karugaba 1999). This is connected to the overall importance of the idiom of growth in Buganda. *Kukula* (to grow) and *kukuza* (to cause to grow), for instance, are central to a Ganda imaginary of progress and 'development' (*kukulaakulanya*, lit. to grow and make grow) that is oriented towards the collective (Karlström 2004: 604–6). More generally, vocabularies

[10] See also Brown (2020) for the ways in which concepts and practices of growth unfold in the building of a woman's household in western Kenya.

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of bundling connected to agricultural labour are written into the grammar of social life. A very common phrase in Luganda – *weebale emirimu* – is colloquially translated as 'thank you for the work'. However, *weebale*, while typically rendered as 'thank you', can in fact be more literally translated as 'may it increase you'. In turn, the word for 'work' in this phrase (sing. *omurimu*, pl. *emirimu*) derives from the Luganda verb for farming or agricultural activity (*okulima*).

There are many other such examples that underline how deeply imaginaries of growth are embedded in everyday language, agricultural practice and forms of sociality.[11] We do not suggest that Luganda speakers are consciously invoking or reflecting on imaginaries of agriculture when they deploy such expressions in daily interactions. What we are pointing out is the specificity of key metaphors and images embedded in commonplace terms and expressions. Language clearly indexes the importance and value of growth as a longstanding and deeply sedimented concern of Ganda social life.

Crucially, this is a very particular kind of growth, defined by an aesthetics of bundling that is distinct from another regional aesthetics of growth observed among both Bantu and Nilotic speakers in Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda. In those contexts, it is an aesthetics of flow, in which the cultivation and control of flows of vital substances (food, rain, milk, blood, and more) are understood to be essential for human flourishing (Taylor 1992; Vokes 2013; Geissler and Prince 2010). For example, among Luo in Kenya, for whom growth is also a dominant societal idiom, growth was historically imagined as bound up in the well-being of senior kin. It unfolds like descending rainwater, unable to invert or suddenly change direction (Geissler and Prince 2010: 121–3).

Although a concern with vital substances and their circulation is not absent in Buganda, one does not hear much talk about flows, especially in comparison to elsewhere in Uganda (e.g. Eisenstein 2020; Vokes 2013). Rather, the concern is with a compositional logic (Guyer and Belinga 1995) in which persons and things are bound or bundled together. Although the importance of banana gardens for 'building oneself' (*okwezimba*) has declined for many people, especially in urban settings, these gardens remain the template for imagining normative home and family arrangements (Calkins 2019). Moreover, pursuing personal growth often continues to require forging relationships with wealthier and better-connected patrons, including in the course of urban market practices (Monteith 2018). Again, this is not to say that this is unique to central Uganda, but only to situate this hierarchical imagination of growth as part of a wider range of bundling phenomena. Bundling in this and many other cases points to the importance of collectivity for processes of social and material accumulation: other people are integral to achieving growth. An ideal in Buganda and elsewhere in Uganda is to grow to become a patron who supports other kin or clan

[11] For another example, in even the most cursory forms of interaction with strangers – asking for directions on the street, for example – one would begin with the phrase *ggyebaleko*. Although *ggyebaleko* is also typically translated as 'thank you' or 'well done', it too could be more literally rendered in a way that indexes organic expansion: 'of that which increases you'. The phrase indicates a formalized endorsement of what the person interrupted is doing, alongside the wish that it may ultimately contribute to the growth and well-being of that person.

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members to build themselves: this is how one can earn respect and accrue wealth (Wrigley 1964: 20–2; Whyte and Whyte 1998: 243; Hanson 2003; Scherz 2014).

Thinking about interdependence among kin and clan helps us appreciate that even as bundling is a pervasive aesthetic in many domains of life – from families to markets – it can operate in quite different forms. For if one form of bundling – selling similar goods and services, such as vegetables or motorcycle rides, for instance – manifests relations of solidarity, accumulating dependants is another form of bundling defined primarily by relations of hierarchy. Here, interdependence not only coexists with but constitutes intensely hierarchical relations (Scherz 2014) and a vision of social mobility oriented towards patron–client relations (Richards 1973: 54; Mafefe 1973: 226; Hanson 2003: 47–52). Selling the same goods next to each other and accumulating clients or securing patrons are thus different forms of bundling that entail different practices and orientations. Yet what remains important for the argument we are making is that they are both forms of bundling – that bundling, in other words, remains a fundamental aesthetics even for quite different kinds of social transaction.

Ambiguous heaps

The hope of advancing through proximity and interconnection is central to bundling in central Uganda. Bundling as an aesthetics is deeply sedimented in talk, thought and action. It is manifest in many areas of social life as well as being fundamental for the imagination of growth. At the same time, however, that does not mean that bundling is affirmed unthinkingly or even consistently. Even as we understand bundling as constitutive of a range of socio-economic activities and exchanges that rely on collective clusterings, rather than circulations or flows of vital substances, we do not mean to romanticize this. There is ample documentation of the fierce agonism and competition that have historically defined elite self-making (Kiwanuka 1971: 154; Wrigley 1959: 16–18) and that continue to characterize contemporary market life in central Uganda (Monteith 2018; Musisi 1995).

Another reason for not romanticizing bundling is that people in Uganda do not do so. When we described the focus of this article to Ugandan friends and colleagues, some of them immediately retorted that stacking tomatoes and other produce must be to hide the bad ones, so that a rushed or naïve buyer would end up with lower-quality, harder-to-sell goods when she selected a bundle of something.

Even bundling's avid practitioners can be sceptical. Recall that the young man stacking watermelons said that he had learned how to do this from watching others. This notion – that bundling was linked to emulation or imitation – was a common theme in our conversations with people about bundling. Frequently, imitation was not seen as a good thing; it was a way to learn but an illegitimate practice, a form of 'copying' that implied theft or parasitism. Consider the reflections of Joseph, a neighbour of ours in his late thirties, hailing from a rural area near Kampala. Joseph's preferred gloss of bundling is that Ugandans are 'copycats'. His tale of bundling began ten years ago when he started a chicken farm on a small plot of land on a major road out of the city. He was able to gradually expand and today owns 3,000 chickens, selling both eggs and chickens for a living. He was proud to say that he started the enterprise by taking risks and establishing his own supply chains. When his business began paying off, however, people started 'copying' him, and today there are seven other

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chicken farms near his own farm: 'These Baganda – they even come to your farm and look at what you are doing and ask you questions and the next day they are copying you.' Speaking derogatorily about his own ethnic group, Joseph clearly was annoyed by those who copied him and took some of his business. Yet he also accepted it as part of what people do. He concluded: 'What can you say? People see it works and they want to pick money too.'

The experience of Florence, another neighbour, was similar, although she admitted that she was the one who first copied a friend. Florence, in her mid-forties, owns a boutique for used women's clothing in Wandegeya market. She told us that, before opening her own boutique, she 'used to sit and watch her friend' managing her boutique. Then she 'developed the idea' to open her own boutique. She goes to Owino wholesale market once a week and buys used clothes for the boutique. At the market, vendors of clothing all sit on mats in the same area. She explained that each has their own customers whom they know and to whom they talk nicely. Like Joseph, she was critical: '[People] see someone is successful and sit right next to them, trying to steal their customers. They don't look for new ones.' She described how this happened to her boutique. She managed to buy a car and a plot of land thanks to her business, but today there are four other clothing boutiques right next to where she started. Her business is no longer lucrative, and she has been forced to seek other ways to make a living and supplement the income from the boutique: 'You can sit a whole day and no one buys from you.'

Florence's account, like Joseph's, points to her frustration with the diminished returns caused, in part, by what we have described here as bundling. Joseph and Florence are both entrepreneurs whose success and relative distinction were compromised by imitators. Their experiences do not imply a happy coexistence but rather a reluctant toleration and muted resentment. Florence told us that she could grumble about her business but do no more about her imitators; outright hostility could provoke serious harm, whether through physical violence or spiritual reprisal.

These examples index something that became apparent once we started asking people about bundling: its fraught relationship to social distinction and class. Many middle- and upper-middle-class Ugandans gave explanations that attribute bundling – especially commercial forms – to factors that were not rational or otherwise not legitimate. As one academic put it, implying that people were simply ignorant: '[P]eople see it works for someone and think they'll do the same.' Or maybe, we were told, it is for reasons of kinship that people bundled: perhaps 'all [were] from the same family or village'. Or maybe it is due to 'the lack of imagination among these people'. Or maybe it is even criminal. One Ugandan scientist speculated that perhaps *boda boda* riders were 'crowding together so they can plan their mischief' (see also Doherty 2022). At best, many middle-class Ugandans told us that bundling was an understandable albeit pitiable practice of minimizing risk among the very poorest: because poor people have no money and have to rely on wealthier kin for an initial loan, they start a business, like selling vegetables at a roadside where there already is a demand. From there, if they are lucky, 'they can gradually build themselves up'.

Several observations about such critical commentary are in order. First, middle-class people who are critical of bundling among poorer strata may be expressing unease about the demands regularly placed on them by those who cluster around them – less fortunate relatives and other dependants. Second, even as such dismissals

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of bundling reflect class-conscious stratification, and often contempt,[12] the very people offering such dismissals would engage in other forms of bundling practices, at weddings, baby showers and bar outings, accumulating and displaying gifts or drinks on tables for all to see. Finally, despite such complaints and critique, there is also an enduring sense that successful people are able to pull others up (Whyte and Whyte 1998), or at least enable them to earn a bit of money, even if they do so by imitation. In this sense, the successful people stand at the centre of growing bundles of things and relationships, constituting an accumulating density through which others may also grow.

Let us return to the *boda boda* stages, where motorcycle riders cluster, often aligned in neat straight rows or semicircles. In contemporary Kampala, these have attained a degree of formality, involving membership rosters and various forms of official documentation from government authorities (Doherty 2022). Although not all *boda boda* work from registered stages, riders frequently invoke an 'idiom of brotherhood' (Doherty 2017: 204), preferring to work in proximity to others in their *boda boda* associations.[13] John, for example, is a regular *boda boda* rider at a stage near Buganda's parliament. John works at this stage because two friends from his home village worked there and introduced him to the other riders there. They persuaded him to work from this stage even though that meant paying fees to the association. He noted that riding a *boda boda* is a dangerous business because of the immense volume of traffic and congestion on Kampala's streets, as well as the threat of being robbed or assaulted, particularly in the morning or late at night. As John put it, 'You might not survive long alone.'

Other *boda boda* riders confirmed the dangers of falling prey to violent crimes. When one of us lived near this stage, a rider was assaulted, badly beaten, and robbed of his motorcycle before sunrise; he had been the first to start working that morning and was alone. John explained that gathering together, sharing news and ideas, having a stable place from which to work and rest, and having colleagues to support each other in cases of stealing, cheating or drunk customers all provide a sense of relief and security while working in the streets. 'Competition is a normal thing,' John conceded, but undercutting a colleague's price could mean that you 'get enemies'.[14]

A further point applies to *boda boda* riders. Young men do not usually have the money to buy motorcycles themselves but instead take out loans with wealthier patrons who buy the motorcycles and receive weekly instalments. Without going into the sociological details of *boda boda* associations and the patron–client relationships involved, we simply underline the familiar pattern this manifests: one's growth and progress cannot be safely achieved alone and cannot be accomplished from nothing.

[12] See Baral (2018: 125–6) for strained class relations between formal and informal market traders.

[13] See also Ibrahim and Bize (2018) on *boda* stages as infrastructure in Nairobi.

[14] Speaking of market practices, Monteith (2018: S19) also mentioned this unwritten yet binding rule: 'Once a customer has shown interest in another vendor's goods, even if only by standing in front of their stall, no other vendor is permitted to address them until they have broken off negotiations by physically leaving the space in front of the stall.' The Luganda saying *fa kumu daala gwo* translates as 'mind your own business' but literally means 'keep your eyes on your own stall', underlining the ethic of not meddling with your neighbours' customers. Likewise, Musisi (1995) notes the importance of the phrase *toninyira mukange* or 'don't step in mine' among women working in Kampala's night markets.

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Rather, they hinge on collaborating with other people, be they patrons or colleagues, who provide ideas and forms of support (cf. Baral 2018: 132). Especially for the economically insecure, bundling is appealing. Rather than venture into untested waters and risk losing borrowed investment capital, people opt for what works even when profits initially appear small. They are looking for 'something small to eat' (*okulyaaku akatono*) that will allow them to grow or 'build themselves' over time. Such everyday forms of collaboration and bundled coexistence can involve antagonistic moments and competitiveness, but John's case and that of the roadside fruit vendors show that collaboration among peers normally outweighs open manifestations of hostility. Bundling thus reflects a longstanding way of doing things that is grounded in a particular relational imaginary of growth and collective well-being, and it is a practice that spans horizontal relationships among neighbouring entrepreneurs and vertical ones between patrons and clients. Growth here is not simply individual self-making but rather occurs through constant investments in neatly and carefully assembled bundles of relationships, things and persons.

Conclusions

We have sketched some of the ways in which an aesthetics of bundling serves as a conceptual and practical repertoire in contemporary life, and with a long history, in central Uganda, shaping exchanges and everyday practices in manifold forms and at multiple scales. Bundling, in short, gives a distinct pattern or texture to socio-economic life. This is not to argue that economic life in Uganda today operates outside the forces and ideals of neoliberal capitalism; rather, it emphasizes that the complexities of quotidian socio-economic practices can be both geared towards growth yet still irreducible to conventional understandings of neoliberalism.

Although growth is an internationally normative framework that dominates policy decisions and governmental action (Livingston 2019; Hickel 2021), it is too simple to conclude that an ethos of growth in African settings is simply a colonial imposition or merely a foreign import connected to capitalist expansion. Debates about wealth and accumulation in African settings have long established the robustness of older, coexistent ideas of growth and development. Growth, inspired by organic metaphors, is a deeply entrenched idiom for personal and societal well-being and prosperity. In the case we have focused on here, striving to grow continuously both as an individual and as a collective is important. While bundling's orientation towards accumulation may sometimes seem to converge with notions associated with contemporary capitalist accumulation, it also exceeds neoliberal imaginations of free flows and laissez-faire transactions. Through bundling, people imagine growth through socio-material thickenings, often patriarchal and hierarchical, that entail forms of collective life and accountability. We have described this as an aesthetics because we find the ideas, norms and visible patterns that shape such gatherings of things and persons to be irreducible to 'economic rationality' in a narrow sense. Bundling instead provides a concrete social, ethical and political vision of how to organize space, interactions and relations in ways that allow prosperity through composition.

Our purpose here has not been prescriptive; likewise, we do not intend to romanticize. With its aspirations for forward movement and expansion, bundling in

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Buganda has its own histories and politics, and these have also been tied to rapacious violence, extraction and social hierarchies. Yet, at a time when unprecedented environmental disasters, pollution and species extinctions underline the neglected costs of unhampered economic growth, reflecting on other understandings of growth enriches conversations about alternatives. While initiatives to 'de-grow' are gaining traction in environmentalist circles, we contend that calls to reject the need to grow would not be readily meaningful for many in Uganda. What is more, degrowth arguments may be less urgent in places such as Uganda that still account for only a fraction of global environmental costs (Hamilton 2003; Latouche 2009; D'Alisa *et al.* 2015). Instead, from a vantage point in central Uganda, where imaginaries of bundles exceed understandings of growth as limitless expansion generated by unfettered flows, we see the outlines of other ways to imagine and enact growth – outlines that invite us not simply to take a stand for or against growth, but rather to cultivate other ways of growing together.

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