

Teesa Bahana, Director of 32° East, Ugandan Arts Trust: The Art of Self-Expression

INDAGARE GLOBAL CONVERSATIONS | 3.07

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Hi there, and welcome to Indagare's Global Conversations, a podcast about how traveling the world shapes our lives and our perspectives. I'm Melissa Biggs Bradley of Indagare, a company I founded on the belief that how you travel matters. I'm sitting down in conversation with some of the most inspiring and innovative people I've met while on the road. They will share stories about their travels and how they lead lives of passion and purpose. Welcome to the conversation.

As some of you may know, Africa is one of my great loves, maybe my greatest travel love of all. Of course, it's known for its animals and landscapes. But I find that everywhere you go on the continent, you meet amazing people. People who are involved in protecting communities, traditions, history, and culture. I can't think of a place with as many heroes of all background stories, interests, and achievements.

My guest today, Teesa Bahana, is a hero and a humanitarian, both, even though a very young one. Teesa is barely 30, but for five years, she's been running the leading contemporary arts organization of Uganda. The 32° East Ugandan Arts Trust, located in Kampala, the capital. 32° East is a non profit dedicated to the creation and exploration of contemporary art in the country. And among other things, it oversees the city's biennial art fair. She's now in the middle of fundraising and planning for the construction of the country's first purpose built art center, which will include a suite of artist studios, exhibit spaces, and a library. It's gonna be a long way from the three leaky and hot shipping containers that currently serve as the center studio. I've long believed that Africa has much to teach the rest of the world. And when you talk to people like Teesa, who is born in Zambia and worked at the African Leadership Academy in South Africa after college of Colgate, about the role of art and self expression in a country where freedom of expression is hardly a given and daily life is still an enormous challenge for many, you obviously learn about much more than just contemporary art.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

And so Teesa, I'd love to start by asking you how you ended up doing what you're doing, because you are the director of 32° East Ugandan Arts Trust, right?

Teesa Bahana:

Yeah.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

And it's a nonprofit that promotes the creation and exploration of contemporary art in Uganda. But how did you end up there? I mean, were you always interested in working in arts and, and... I'd, I'd love to hear the

Indagare[®] How you travel matters

background of your story or so- some of the key developments along the path of your career that got you to where you are today?

Teesa Bahana:

Sure. Yeah. I mean, it definitely was not a straightforward journey at all. Um, did not grow up particularly aware of arts even. I mean, I grew up in Zambia, I was born and raised there, um, two Ugandan parents. And there just weren't any institutions for the arts, really. Like, you don't grow up going to galleries or museums 'cause there just aren't very many of them. And so I think, you know, if you're, if you're not really exposed at an early age, sometimes it takes a lot longer to kind of get into it. Um, but I think because I was born in a country that I technically, you know, wasn't from, I always had this awareness of come culture and of difference and kind of the bad and the good that goes with that. And I think, you know, there was so- sort of looking back something that connected to a lot of what I ended up doing.

So, in university I studied sociology and anthropology and peace and conflict studies, which is really about, you know, societies and why people do what they do in groups, how culture is formed, what culture means. Um, and then with peace of complex studies where things go wrong. Um, and so, I think I was always really intrigued by how people live together, um, and, and what that looks like in different context. And so, I also at the time really was very keen on, you know, trying to save the world and, and kind of thought that community development would be the way to do that. Um, and so, I ended up working for a nonprofit, um, for a few years that does community development work you in Kenya. And I think it was... I mean, it was a very informative experience, but it kind of taught me that, um, that wasn't really my path, I guess.

Um, so after that, ended up moving to work in education and worked at the African Leadership Academy, um, which is in South Africa. And I mean, that experience, I think, really... again, culture came up because it was, you know, it's the school that's... a two year program that's really bringing African students from all over the continent to one place to learn together. And just the magic of that, um, of experiencing, you know, all of these people who ordinarily aren't in the same spaces because intra-African travel's really difficult. Um, and then there are also these teenagers that are so brilliant and so inspiring. Um, and I remember when I left, I was like, it's your fault I'm leaving because you really make me wonder what I'm doing with my life (laughs). Like, you're just out here saving the world at, you know, such a young age.

And, and I, I mean, it made me also, I think, think very deeply about my own skills, um, and really, you know, how, how I could bring them to bear in wha- whatever field I got into. And so I worked for another school in Rwanda and Burundi. So, like, a lot of different travel around the continent. Um, and eventually, just really had this moment of feeling like I really wanted to be in Uganda. And eventually just, you know, found a job that paid the bills, um, and was able to, to get me back here, but I wasn't super passionate about it. Um, and I had a lot of spare time. So, I ended up meeting some friends who are like, "We're putting on this music festival. Um, do you wanna help us, help us out?" And I was like, "Yeah, no problem. I have all this free time. I could do communications for you guys."

So I, like, managed their social media, and then during the festival, did, like, handle volunteers, volunteers. But just that experience, I think, was such a, like, click moment for me, um, because it really felt like, you know, all the things that I had wanted to see in the development space, um, and within education, you know, in a three-day festival, I was experiencing. Like, what it really felt like to be truly human and to explore different cultures and learn from different cultures without this, like, defined model of how things should go and what impact should be and what are the metrics and measurables and all these things, they was just cheerly people living

Indagare[®] How you travel matters[®]

their best lives and celebrating and having the best time across all kinds of difference. Um, and particularly, it happening in Uganda where often, you know, we have sometimes a lot of conservatism.

And so, for so many people who had been kind of marginalized to have this space and experience where, you know, typically in development, like, you check a box and say, "Yes, we are empowering women and we are, you know, helping sexual minorities." But with this, it was doing all of that without saying it was. Um, and so, it was really this experience that really made me feel like I want to get into culture and invited me to apply for the job and I somehow convinced them, and here I am five years later. So, yeah, roundabout story, but that's kind of how I ended up here.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Okay. Tha- that's amazing, but there's a lot in there. So I wanna ask you, uh, first I wanna go back to end up asking you, how did you even end up at the Leadership Academy? Because as you said, that must be an amazing moment to be with people from all over the continent, focusing on how to become leaders for, for the next generation. So, what an incredible opportunity, but how did you get there and what would you say was sort of the greatest lesson you learned?

Teesa Bahana:

So, I worked in the strategic relations department. And I got... I guess I just... I was looking for work at the time and trying to move out of, you know, community development work and saw this job application and it was a fel- fellowship role. So I thought, you know, it will kind of help me transition into the space and there'll be learning involved. And I applied and I, I was just so inspired by the vision of it, um, of really wanting to invest in, in young people and really seeing their leadership potential because that's something that's often really diminished, I think, on the continent. Um, so yeah, I mean, I, I just applied and, and went through the interview process. Um, and gosh, biggest lesson. Oh, there's so many. I mean, I think honestly, I would say, um, so it- it's really... they have values as being very key to what it is that they do.

And I think one of the biggest lessons for me was really realizing when you put values at the core of what you do, and how you respond to that can also be such a powerful way of reinforcing those values as well. Um, so, I think, yeah, for, for any kind of... whether you are in business or a nonprofit, when you, when you lead with your values and, and say that those are things that you hold dear, um, how, how you actually live them on a day to day basis needs to be something that everyone feels. And, and often, you can create the opportunity for people to, to build on them when you invite them into, into that process. So, I think almost like at a meta level, um, that was one of the biggest things that, that I gained from being there, um, as well as I think just really being surrounded by an incredible community of people that I'm still in touch with today. Yeah.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Okay. So then how... I, I love that. I... And I imagine that you brought values into your direction at 30° East... 32° East. So, can you kind of talk a little bit about how your vision for community and social change came through those values and, and what it is you're actually doing today?

Teesa Bahana:

Ah, such a good question (laughs). Um, I mean, I think so much of how I work at 32 is also informed by my background. Um, I think not having much experience with contemporary arts before joining the organization, I think has really meant that there's an openness and a level of questioning and critical thought and unlearning,

Indagare®

How you travel matters

um, that, that we really try to explore both as, you know, the, the working team, but even with the artists. I think, you know, we talk about experimenting with contemporary art and the value of that, but we experiment as an organization as well. Um, we'll always try new things and failing at things and, and not being afraid of failure. And I think that's just such... it's almost a cliché, I think, particularly in a lot of entrepreneurial spaces. But I think when you work on the continent in Africa to be a able to say failure and, like, claim failure is really big, because if you've received an education and if you've, you know, maybe, um, achieved certain, you know, success metrics to say that you're not afraid of failure is, like, people are, like, what are you doing?

What is that? We don't fail here (laughs). This is not a thing that we claim. Um, but that's, that's how you grow. That's how you learn, that's where transformation happens. Um, so I think that's one of the, the key things that, um, I try to bring and live at 32, um, that, you know, it's, it's really just a part of the process and, and really process, I think, being a part of it too, that everything... you know, we're not always about, here's this shiny exhibition, here's this publica- sometimes, sure. Um, but it's also just about the journey and, and I think arts being such an amazing way of, of living that, you know, of really saying that, you know, I, I came in not really knowing what my time in studio would look like. And through these three months, I've decided that I really want to explore natural dyes and, and using fabric in my work. And then 10 years later, you know, you're making something completely different. and you can't necessarily say, you know, track the journey in this specific way, but it's also transformative. So, I think, yeah, those are probably the biggest things, um, that I've experienced in, in this time. Yeah.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

That's amazing. And, and I'm actually... you're... you mentioned not being very involved in contemporary arts before joining 32°. But you also talked about what contemporary art is on the continent today because it isn't as established as it is in other places. So, in, in many ways, what you're... the process of, um, really bringing contemporary arts onto the continent and into the sort of awareness of so many people's lives is something that is very different in Africa than it is in other places. Can you talk a little bit about how 32° is looking at that, um, and, and the way you involve the artists in that sort of process and mission?

Teesa Bahana:

Sure. Yeah. Uh, gosh, I think there are many layers to that. Um, because in so many parts... in so many countries on the continent, there's this incredible rich heritage, um, around art making, around materials, um, that often maybe has died out because, you know, this process of urbanization, um, again, it really varies on the continent in terms of government's investment in the arts as well. So, for example, if you were compare... to compare West Africa, um, to East Africa and even different countries in West Africa, right? So, like Senegal, for example, um, has such a rich history, um, around contemporary art even and around supporting... you know, actually having ministry of culture and p- a president as well in the past who has really invested and, like, completely valued, um, contemporary art, um, and, and, and not just art, but, you know, music and, and theater and all of these things.

And, and you, and you can see that as well in terms of where it is, um, with the Dakar Biennale and, and all of these things and the institution and that are there. And then, you know, you have Uganda... And, and also actually, I will point too that a lot of these, um, the present... the state of contemporary art in a lot of these countries is also very much connected to our colonial histories. So, in, in Uganda, um, we were a British protectorate and, and how art and culture was valued is different to often how it was for countries that were... um, that France colonized. So that's also something that's really interesting that we're also dealing with. Really,

Indagare®

How you travel matters

I mean, you know, I'm, I'm not an expert in it, but I think there are certain differences that are connected to, to how art is seen now. Um, I think we offer... we currently still have, uh, a system of education that does not really value arts.

Um, if you wanted to study art, it's actually, you know, it's kind of looked down on. It's kind of seen as a last, you know... you're like, oh, you didn't get grades in... good grades in anything else, so fine, you... I guess you can go and do arts. Um, so it's... in terms of, uh, society's view on art in Uganda, it's, it's really still quite devalued. And so for us as 32° East, um, a lot of our work is one about bringing artists together who have felt devalued and who maybe don't even realize how many other artists there are who feel the same way, um, who see things the same way, who want to question things and maybe disagree about things, that... for that to be an okay thing to do, um, to share experiences, to collaborate, and the power of doing that, um, when historically you've been told that what you do doesn't matter.

And then I think also for the audiences, uh, because art sometimes feels very inaccessible. And even for me, it felt very inaccessible. You know, how do we create spaces for people to engage and not feel very intimidated and feel dumb? I think that's really important. So, one of the ways we do that is through our festival called KLA ART, um, which is short for Kampala. So, KLA is short for Kampala Art, um, that happens every two years, and it's really about getting arts into the streets. So really, you know, having art be there for non-traditional audiences, um, and for artists to also think about how they w- make their work and who they make their work for.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

No, but that gets exactly back to sort of where we started in the sense of the inspiration of the festival, what you saw in that was the ability to use art and education for social change and in, in elevating the values of art and making that more accessible to a wider group of people and bringing them together so that they can collaborate, obviously not just with each other, but with the audience. That's where-

Teesa Bahana:

Yeah.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

... the social change piece comes through the art, right?

Teesa Bahana:

Totally, totally. And I think also because in Uganda, in terms of freedom of expression, it's really restricted. So, even gathering in the city as a group is politicized. You often need permits if you're more than three people and, like, someone doesn't like the look of you, um, you'll be asked what you're doing there, you'll be asked to move along. Um, you... there was a public order management bill that basically said that unless, you know, basically if you're three or more people, you need police permission to, to be in public space. And then also, just, you know, in terms of, uh, politics, we've had the same president for over 30 years.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

But you've also had people who have, um, maybe presented an alternative view to the president through the arts, right?

Indagare[®] How you travel matters

®

Teesa Bahana:

Yes, ex- exactly. So, that's what I wanted to touch on.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

So you've had political... Yeah.

Teesa Bahana:

Right. That it's often... you're able to talk about things through the arts that you maybe otherwise wouldn't be able to, because otherwise, they're so politicized and, you know, there is censorship and all of these things. And so, what art can do is bring up ways to actually converse with people about, you know, different issues that might seem taboo across different populations as well. So I think, you know, I can be incredibly powerful in context where, you know, your means for being able to have these dialogues are, are really quite, um, few, few and far between.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Yeah. So, with all of that in mind, I- I'd be curious to know how things have changed for you over the past five years. How your work at 32° East has evolved and where you see it going.

Teesa Bahana:

Yeah. Um, it's changed quite a bit because, um, we have this huge project on right now, which is trying to build the first ever purpose built contemporary art space in Uganda, um, which we are, yeah, so over the moon about just to have this opportunity. So, we have had funding to purchase a plot of land. So we have land in our name. Um, and we have funding to build at least one phase of it. Um, which is... I mean, you can imagine the, the, the scale of a project like that. Um, but really, what it means in terms of providing more permanence to what we're doing, um, because I joined five years ago, but it's been around for 10 years and has worked with, you know, hundreds of arts professionals, not just in Uganda, but in the world, um, through exchanges and our residencies and the festival.

Um, so to be... I mean, so many institutions or organizations often die out because they're not able to, you know, keep funding and, and all of these different things. But when you have a physical space, hopefully you will always have that space. And so, even if you don't have money for your program, artists, you know, are very creative and will always be able to do something, um, with that physical space. So, that's become the biggest project that I feel so honored to be a part of and really excited to see what, what happens over the next few years because it's, you know, it's really, I think... we've been very intentional about trying to build a space that's for our community and, and with their thoughts in mind. And then also thinking about, you know, the kind of values we want to, to see in the world in a building. So, that's the biggest, biggest thing. Yeah.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

And what's the timeframe on that?

Teesa Bahana:

(laughs) Well, (laughs), um, things keep evolving with COVID to be honest. Um, so we're in a lockdown right now. So, construction is kind of on hold because they were certain... Some construction can happen, but

Indagare®

How you travel matters

there's certain permits that we are still waiting for the city to approve. Um, so, the first phase will take 12 months and that will be three studios, uh, an office space and a cafe, um, which we're really excited about because that's basically more than we have ever been. Um, we've always had these studios, but we use shipping containers and so we, you know, get to actually have purpose built studios. Um, and then the idea with the cafe as well is to really think about who we're bringing into this space. So, you know, we're talking about people who might ordinarily never go to an art center, but might really like some great food from our community garden.

Um, and so, you know, it's a way of like bringing them in slowly into, into our world. And then also, still, um, again with that income question, thinking about our financial sustainability as well. So, really think about these little things that bring in income. And then the second phase, we'll bring in three more studios, a workshop space, a gallery space, and then three shops that we can also rent out for income. And then that will take 12 to 15 months to build as well. So, we're looking at two and a half to three years. So, lots of time to plan your business (laughs).

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

(laughs) Um, no, it all sounds super exciting. Um, really exciting. And I know you recently did a... wrote an article for the Guardian on this i- the idea of, um, more investment in Africa needed in the arts, because it is so key. Can you talk a little bit about, um, sort of how that came about and, and what you were hoping to achieve in that and, and why it needs to be discussed?

Teesa Bahana:

Yeah, I mean, it really came up because, you know, we were mid- in the middle of fundraising and we still are, um, and had done this really great crowdfunding campaign in April and are still, you know, trying to get funds. And often you look and look and look for different foundations that you can apply to. And for a project like this, there're just very few things that we found, um, that we are eligible for because, you know, we're not... we don't fit within a particular paradigm when it comes to funding, um, any projects on... in, well, speak to Uganda, but I think, you know, a lot of different countries have a similar, um, similar system set up, because development is often seen in this particular way. And it's very difficult to find people who see art as worth investing in, even though, again, I mean, we're in halfway through 2021 and with this pandemic, it's just really felt as well that there's so much talk about changing things and imagining new ways of being, and, you know, new ways of doing things.

And yet we've spent so many years not investing in imagining new ways of being and not investing in communities that are doing that, right? That are actually living alternatively to the system that has left us, you know, in a pandemic where, I mean, so many of us, I think, are so disappointed, right? With, with our own governments. And so, it was just born out of this frustration, um, of really feeling like these are the kinds of things, not just our project, but so many of these arts communities around the world are, are living the kinds of, the kinds of lives that I think are sustainable, right? That are, you know, really thinking about our environmental responsibility, thinking about how we treat, you know, the most vulnerable in society, and thinking about how to make beautiful things for people, right? Um, and so, why are we... why do we not want more of that? And if we want more of that, we, we need to invest in it. So, it came from a lot of those different, different things, and I'm so glad somehow I was able to put it into words.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Indagare®

How you travel matters

That's fantastic. But, but I also think, I mean, Africa has so much to teach the rest of the world in so many ways. And, and I think there's a lot of people who are not aw- a- as aware as they should be of the, the imagination and the creativity as you're talking about. So, um, if we were to try and encourage people to visit East Africa or a- or anywhere in Africa for contemporary arts, I'd love to hear from you sort of what you would say to somebody who, um, you know, is interested in the arts, um, or interested in Africa. And so, you know, why is it special? What are they gonna find? What is particularly unique and interesting, and where should they be, um, where should they be traveling to?

Teesa Bahana:

Uh, I'll start with the first question. Um, I think really being able to see what people are able to do with limited investment is huge. I mean, people are able to create so much and, and aga- and, and I... it's not just the limited investment, but I think it's also being kind of on the periphery means that you see things in a different way and are able to, um, create things that, you know, you're not going to see in your gallery visit in Chelsea, for example, I don't know, right? But i- it's just, it's a diff- you're not ma- you're not in the art world that... in, in that very close way. And so, not always going to be, um, paying attention to, oh, this person show did this. And so, I'm gonna do this, or I'm gonna, you know, do this in this particular way, but you're kind of free of that.

And I mean, that does come with its downsides too. I mean, some artists really are frustrated by that, but it just means that the work that they create is, is going to have a fresh perspective because of that. And then also I think the materials, right? Like, I mean, in Uganda, we have bark clothes which is... which comes from a particular tree that's indigenous to the region. And so, you're not going to see that actual physical material outside of Uganda. I mean, some artists in Kenya use it. Um, but as a material, it's just something that, you know, it's very specific to here and you'll have that in other countries as well in terms of maybe the earth that they use in their paints, right? And pigments, and, and also, I mean, for some artists who use textile in their work and incorporate traditional pattern making and, and all of these things that, you know, bring in our heritage and, and shape it in a new way.

But I think artists are also able to teach us as well, right? Like, the new generation who's, like, too much in social media and all these things. But, you know, they're also able to give us a new perspective on our heritage and custom and in, in a new way and put a new spin on it. So, I think that's super refreshing for anyone who's, who's interested in, in art and keeps up to date with all the trends that you get to experience these things in a different way. Um, and then in terms of places, the places I have in mind, but I haven't actually been to, um, sadly because again, you know, traveling on the continent is so much more expensive than it should be. Um, but I've always wanted to go to Dakar again for the reasons I mentioned, Accra as well in Ghana.

Um, I would also... I've been to Mali and, and going to Bamako was, oh God, like an unbelievable experience. So, if anyone can ever make it for, um... the- they have a photography biennale, um, that's, you know, I think such an incredible experience 'cause you have photographers come from all over the world and, and Mali also has this amazing history of photography and they put these, you know, photos also throughout the city too, which is really exciting. Um, I've also always wanted to go to Addis, um, in Ethio- just Ethiopia in general, I think, right? Like, um, there's so much in terms of contemporary arts a- also around photography, but Addis Fine Arts as a gallery, I think is doing incredible work to, to bring up a lot of, um, new artists, like younger artists, which is really exciting. Um, Nairobi, and of course, come to Uganda for sure.

Um, I think what's great too about, I mean, we have to brag on ourselves a little bit, but (laughs), um, we, you know, we get to introduce you to, to artists and, and you have sort of an entry point to then get to visit them in

Indagare[®] How you travel matters

studios, which I think is one of the best things that you can do, and always gives you such a unique perspective on the place that you're visiting, right? Like, artists are able to tell you so much more that it will always be multidisciplinary, right? Like, because they're so involved in so many different things. Um, and I'd say that's also a thing about artists here at too. Like, you- you'll find an artist who's also a poet, who's also a fashion designer, who's also a rapper and a painter, and, and that's not always something that happens. So come, come, come. There's much to see, um, and many great people to come and, you know, blow your mind a little bit too, I think.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Amazing. Okay. Wait, so, when is the next festival? Because I'm sure you've had some plans changed.

Teesa Bahana:

Yes. I know. That is a good question. It was supposed to be in August. Um, but please, you know, stay tuned and we'll definitely let you know once we know. Um, but it's yeah, just been this constant period of adapting and we don't want to go digital because again, it's really about arts for, you know, people who or don't... some people will never go online, right? Like, who-

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Yeah.

Teesa Bahana:

... will never touch a laptop, so, or, you know, have internet on their phone. And so, it's been really important to us to, to maintain that heart of the festival.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Well, and as you said too, you need the community to come together to create that real collaboration and sense of-

Teesa Bahana:

Exactly.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

... and sense of community.

Teesa Bahana:

Exactly.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Um, okay. So, Teesa, I have one last question which I always ask people. Um, I would love to know what you think the greatest gift of travel is or what you've learned the most from being able to travel yourself.

Teesa Bahana:

Indagare®

How you travel matters

I think it's, it's kind of connected to art in a way. Um, I think both travel and arts have this power to completely transform how you live and move in the world, um, in a way that so many other things just can't do. Um, and, and to take you outside of yourself, um, and, and really help you to see things in a different way. And I think, you know, it's so easy to get stuck and, and feel like things, things have always been like this, you know, things can't change, and this is the way we do things. And travel will shake that up (laughs) and, and show you that no, actually, there is... there are other ways to live. Um, there are other ways to be, and people are doing that. And, and so, you can too, right? Like, the, the ability for it to actually change sh- you and shape you, um, I think is a, a really powerful thing. So, that's what I love about it I'd say.

Melissa Biggs Bradley:

Next week, I'm excited to share with you a personal project that I've been working on. One of my colleagues will be sitting down to chat with me about my new book, *Safari Style*, which sits at the intersection of two of my favorite topics, safari design and conservation. The book will be released on September 21st through Vendome. Head over to our website, indagare.com, for more information or to order a copy. I hope you'll join us for this conversation.

Producer:

If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to subscribe, rate and review it wherever you're are listening. Send us your travel stories, lessons, tips, and questions by emailing us at globalconversations@indagare.com. Head over to our website at www.indagare.com to learn more about how to join our community of passionate travelers and to check out our other virtual content. Lastly, find us on social media at Indagare Travel for more travel content and updates.