Rooted

Opening on Friday, 18 January, 2013 at 4 pm

For the global initiative "Visualizing Development with Identity" initiated by the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), The Netherlands, Dutch artists Arno Peeters and Iris Honderdos have been in Kapchorwa for the last month, closely interacting with the Benet communities in Mengya, Kitowoy and Teryet. They have attempted to learn about the Benet cultural heritage, how their indigenous culture has changed and the challenges of development for indigenous people. Based on the diverse perspectives and voices of the Benet on these issues, they created a multidimensional portrayal of Benet culture with the help of Benet elderly, women and children to show its precious heritage and its fragile contemporary existence.

The Benet have mainly been in the news for land disputes with Uganda Wildlife Authorities. They have been relocated from deep inside the forest, high up on Mount Elgon to land outside the (now) National Park. Many studies and publications focus on this part of their life. They have often been portrayed as primitive and backwards people. Yet there is more to the Benet than just these stereotype notions. They have a unique cultural heritage, customs and possess advanced knowledge about forest ecology. People who do not know the forest can hardly understand the value of their expertise. It is hard to understand how difficult it is to adapt from a mobile forest based lifestyle to a sedentary agricultural life. With their departure from the forest, much of the Benet cultural heritage related to the forest has been abandoned as well. If is not documented now, this part of Uganda's rich cultural history will soon fade away in oblivion.

To visualize the Benet identity, the artists have been working closely with elders, leaders, women and children in documenting and registering their stories. The forced move down the mountain has shaped their identity and cultural image, but they are not defined by this and their ability and determination to adapt end survive have been equally important. The result of this 5-week artistic research journey is a collaborative art-installation that will be presented to the audience, accompanied by sound, song and dances.

Iris Honderdos has global experience producing community-based art on location. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Utrecht. Iris makes three-dimensional installation artwork, often combining her interests as a photographer and video-artist.

Arno Peeters is a composer and sound artist. He is a producer and editor for Dutch National Radio. His company offers services for radio, feature films and video games. His surround sound and interactive audio applications have featured at international festivals.

Their exhibitions and films have traveled to audiences in Europe, Africa and Asia. They are working with the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), home of one of the world's most prominent ethnographic museums. In Uganda, Iris and Arno have been assisted by Makerere University for this project. The first part of this project was in Meghalaya, NE India with the Khasi people and MLCU earlier this year. The artists, Makerere University and the KIT wish to acknowledge the contributions of the many dozens of people in Kapchorwa who have provided time, ideas and participation. A special word of appreciation is for the Benet people who will come together for this special performance.