MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE 2013–14 JOHN HAMILTON FULTON LECTURE IN THE LIBERAL ARTS: A PUBLIC CONVERSATION WITH ANGELIQUE KIDJO

Conducted and transcribed

by

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Introduction

On October 2 and 3, 2013 Middlebury College hosted Grammy Award-winning artist and social advocate Angelique Kidjo to give the 2013–14 John Hamilton Fulton Memorial Lecture in the Liberal Arts and to perform a concert. The organizing committee for her visit decided to format her talk as an interview with a faculty member presented as a public conversation on the McCullough social space stage. Based on my expertise in ethnomusicology, African studies and performance, and given my African heritage, I was requested to serve as Ms. Kidjo's interviewer and frame the questions about her artistic work and activism, and particularly her impact on the developing world. With my prompts, Ms. Kidjo provided insights into these themes and questions that I posed during the course of the conversation.

While Ms. Kidjo had delivered powerful speeches at a number of academic institutions in the past, Middlebury felt that a formal academic discourse would constrain her performativity and energetic nature, thus depriving the audience of her true spirit. The interview format allowed for faculty members from across different liberal arts disciplines to guide our conversation through predetermined questions on subjects of particular importance to the Middlebury community while allowing Ms. Kidjo ample freedom to express herself and share her ideas and talents. From questions and responses about her life experiences to others that dissected social constructs and misconceptions about Africa, the interview style truly highlighted the uniqueness of Ms. Kidjo's personality as she spoke with courage and genuineness.

Multiple times during the conversation I played songs or short excerpts from several of Ms. Kidjo's CD albums. Some musical interludes served as segues into particular questions or topics, while others simply offered short breaks for me and Ms. Kidjo. Musical examples allowed the audience to relate to and contextualize Ms. Kidjo's words in the broader scope of her artistic work and showcased her music repertoire for audience members not previously familiar with it. The interludes also offered an opportunity to witness how she reacted to her own music.

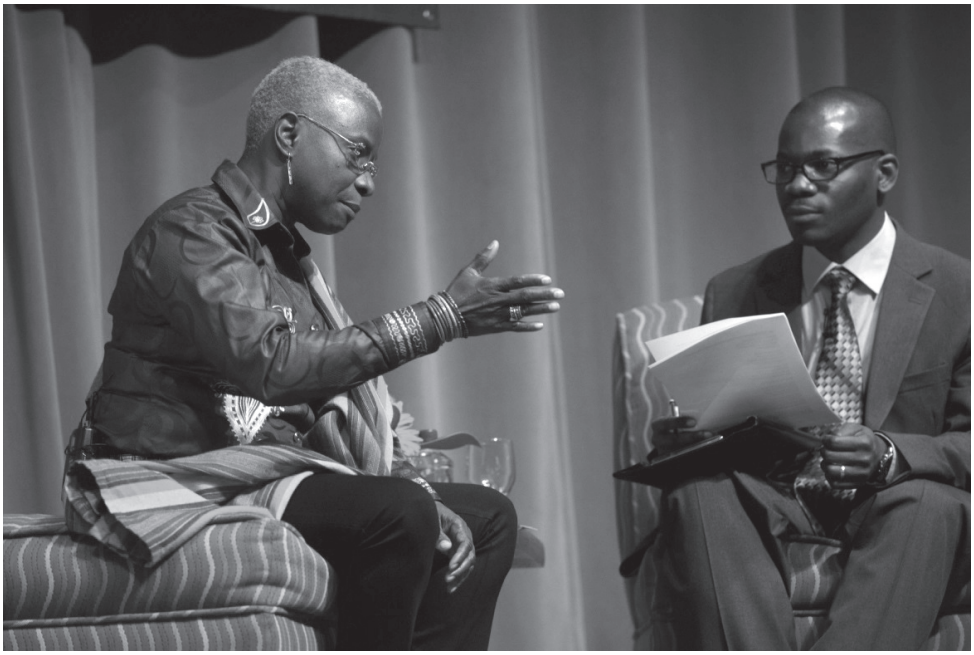

Figure 1. Damascus Kafumbe (right) interviewing Angelique Kidjo (left).
Photo by Brett Simison, 2013.

The conversation with Ms. Kidjo had a very powerful effect on the Middlebury community, igniting much applause, outbursts, and tears from audience members. Her candidness, jokes, and wise insights into many aspects of life touched listeners. One student wrote after the lecture, "I went to the talk with Angelique Kidjo this afternoon and was blessed to have heard Angelique speak her mind. I had a little idea of who she is but when I heard her speak I realized we are in the presence of a living legend. I feel like a different person since this afternoon."[1] One colleague in the political science department noted that the stark contrast in Ms. Kidjo's and my demeanors and speech delivery had inspired her to design a course titled Francophone vs. Anglophone Africa. Indeed, the talk was a reminder about the vastness and diversity of the continent. Many students shared sentiments similar to the aforementioned and revealed that the talk had influenced them to attend Ms. Kidjo's performance in the Nelson Arena the following evening.

Ms. Kidjo's concert gave us an opportunity to experience her energy, inspiration, and love through live music. Using song and dance, she interacted with the crowd on and off the Nelson Arena stage and quickly won them over. After the first couple of songs, the crowd started dancing and singing along with her songs, which many people were hearing for the first time that evening. The President of Middlebury College,

[1] http://middbeat.org/2013/10/02/everyone-freeze-focus-come-to-angelique-kidjo-mystical-experience/

Ronald Liebowitz and one of his sons joined Ms. Kidjo on stage and sang along with her in front of a roaring crowd. Her music was very moving, and her comments during interludes were inspirational. The hugely successful concert was something the likes of which many of those attending had never experienced before at Middlebury.

The 2013-14 John Hamilton Fulton Memorial Lecture in the Liberal Arts and Ms. Kidjo's concert not only introduced the Middlebury community to an outstanding artist and activist but also drew the community's attention to Ms. Kidjo's work. On May 25, 2014 Middlebury recognized the global impact of her work by conferring upon her an Honorary Doctorate in Arts. The following is a verbatim transcription of President Ronald Liebowitz's opening remarks and the on-stage conversation with Ms. Kidjo, edited for content that focuses on her creative process, her activism, and how music became a powerful vehicle for her activism. Because Ms. Kidjo's primary language is French, some text has been edited to read well in English.

Opening remarks by President Liebowitz

Good afternoon and welcome to the 2013-14 John Hamilton Fulton Lecture in the Liberal Arts… Today we welcome Angelique Kidjo, a Grammy Award-winning artist, international superstar of song and sound, and a social advocate who has used her magnificent and powerful voice to lift up continents and make a difference in the lives of millions in the developing world. Alexander Hamilton Fulton would be thrilled.

A trustee of Middlebury College from 1964 to 1978 and then a trustee emeritus until his death in 1986, Fulton established this lectureship with a gift in memory of his father, John Hamilton Fulton, a prominent New York City banker. Alec Fulton, as he was known, dedicated his life to a vigorous self-education that was fueled by insatiable curiosity and a yearning for world travel. While living across the lake in Plattsburgh, New York, he discovered and fell in love with Middlebury, a place that both captivated his heart and his mind. An extraordinarily generous supporter of the institution, Alec established a named professorship to support teaching, a named scholarship to support students, and the John Fulton Lecture in the Liberal Arts to further the intellectual life of this campus. In establishing the lectureship, Alec stipulated that invited speakers should address subjects "important to the spirit of learning in the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences." Alec sought to attract speakers who would embody the College's values and bring a worldly perspective to our campus in Vermont. Angelique Kidjo does just that.

A native of Benin, Angelique speaks and performs in at least six languages. Her musical influences include Afropop, Caribbean zouk, Congolese rumba, jazz, gospel, and Latin styles. She has been called "Africa's premier diva," "the undisputed queen of African music," and "one of the 100 most inspiring women in the world." She has performed at Nobel Peace Prize concerts, at two Olympic Games, and at nearly half a dozen United Nations General Assembly concerts. She has sold out Carnegie Hall, the Sydney Opera House, and the Royal Albert Hall in London. She has won a Grammy for Best Contemporary World Music Album. And she has used her prodigious talents

and channeled all of her hard work in service to bettering the world for those most in need. Ms. Kidjo was part of the Official Kick-Off Celebration Concert of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, along with John Legend, Hugh Masekela, Shakira, Alicia Keys, and Black Eyed Peas. She is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, has created a foundation that supports educational and leadership opportunities for young women in Africa, and is a tireless campaigner for clean water, access to medicine, and an African continent free from war and terror. In the words of Harry Belafonte, Angelique Kidjo is one of the few artists who not only talks about doing good, but actually goes out and does it.

Joining Angelique in conversation on stage today is Damascus Kafumbe, an ethnomusicologist and assistant professor of music. A native of Uganda and a scholar of African musics, Damascus directs an African Music and Dance Ensemble at Middlebury and is an expert on a number of East African musical instruments and dance traditions. Damascus will be asking Angelique questions based on conversations with faculty from across the liberal arts curriculum, including colleagues from anthropology, French, Spanish and Portuguese, history, economics, political science, dance, and American Studies. It is now my pleasure to welcome Angelique Kidjo as she joins Damascus for what I know will be a conversation that we won't soon forget. [Applause]

Interview

Kidjo: Well, thank you. Thank you! (*laughing*)

Kafumbe: Thank you.

Kidjo: Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you (*singing*).

Kafumbe: Thank you.

Kidjo: I'm not singing yet. Tomorrow is the day. Today is talking…

[Musical Interlude: "Iemanja," *Black Ivory Soul* (2002)]

Kafumbe: So, let's start by talking about the continent from where you come, Africa. You recently referred to Africa as a river that flows through everything that you do, and I thought that was very interesting. Can you talk about the role of a performing artist in Africa?

Kidjo: Well, for me, basically, it started when I was in my mother's womb. And my father said to me, because someone was asking me, "When did you start singing?" And I said, "Dad, do you remember that?" My dad said, "You started singing before making phrases." And my mom said that when she was pregnant with me, one of… my auntie (of the family that is related to the traditional song linked to the lineage of the family in the country), came to the city for a visit to doctors because of health issues, and at that time they didn't have the capacity of looking to see the sex of the child before the baby was born, right? And she came in and said to my mother, "This one is gonna be a girl."

And my mom was dying to have a girl because she was having boys and boys and boys and she was looking…, she only had two girls at that time. And my mom said, "If she is a girl I'm gonna name her!" And my father goes, "OK, but if it's a boy, I'm naming him." And my auntie would sing every morning to my mom's belly. So when I grew up and started walking, I was singing, basically, before I made phrases.

So, then I grew up and my mom had a theater troupe, where she pushed me on stage, literally at six years old, because the girl that was supposed to play a role and sing on stage was sick. As I was telling you back there, I'm very curious. When I see something, I have to put my finger in it. And then I would be mingling all the costumes, because my mom wrote the play, did the lighting, everything! And we'd set up all the costumes to be able to catch up because she was the only one; she was running the whole thing. And I liked the chalk that the women used to do their makeup, it smelled very good. And then I would be jumping in it, and stamping on it, and making a mess in it and I was in the middle of the stuff. Then she pulled me away from the costumes and said "You're going to sing," and I'm like, "Yeah, I'm singing right now, here," I said. "No, you're going on stage." I'm like, "mmh, mmh,"… "Yeah, you're going to." "No, no, no…" But while I'm talking, POOF! She put a costume on me and shoved me on stage and there's a big spot. I walked onto that stage for the first time and I could hear all the bones in my body go…

[Kidjo shaking]

Kidjo: I was like, "I'm not gonna sing." And that was exactly the reaction, and they would… laughing. I'm like, "Hmm, I'm not singing, anybody, I'm hearing people laugh…"

Kafumbe: So at that point, did you become aware of… In Africa a performing artist, as you know, is a genealogist, is a philosopher, is a poet, is everything. At that age, at six years old, did you become aware of those roles?

Kidjo: No! I was having fun, man! No, not at all, I was just having fun doing it and, actually I had never stopped singing because my brother decided to put together a musical band. Right, so my father bought instruments. One of my… my older brother was playing the guitar. He was the leader of the band and keyboard at the same time. One of them played drums, the other one played bass. So they used the initial of everyone's name in the band to name the band. They called themselves ROSS, and they always… they were playing and I came back from school and I saw boxes, boxes and I'm like, "What are these boxes doing at home?" I was smelling them closely, and I was like, "What is that?" Trying to look at it, and they're like, "Get off of there!" And then they opened it, and for the first time in my entire life, I discovered a drum kit; a western drum kit, a keyboard, a guitar, and a bass, because I grew up hearing those instruments in music, but I never could envision those instruments. The only instruments I knew were the traditional instruments that the traditional musicians used to use. So here I am, I'm like, "How in the world are you gonna play this drum? You play with four feet?

How is that? I see only two. I'm like, "aaa… I'm waiting for this!" My brother started playing, I'd be looking on like, "Can you play all this stuff?"

I always say drummers are crazy, the only time I sat behind a drum and I tried to play, I went to bed. Every day was going like that; in my bed. I'm like, "Hell, no! I'm not playing drums forever. Never!" So, for me, music is my rhythm. Actually, it's um…, it becomes part of me. Even though I wanted… I said to my father, "I want to be a surgeon," because I've always been the type of person that wants to help people. And then afterwards I go, "Oh, umm, actually I want to be a human rights lawyer." Why? Because I heard the story of slavery and I'm like, "We gotta do something about it."

Kafumbe: Right.

Kidjo: But music took me away.

Kafumbe: You've been listed as one of Africa's 50 most iconic figures and the first woman among the 40 most powerful celebrities in Africa. What is it like to be the face of the continent?

Kidjo: Gee, I never think of it like that.

[Audience laughing]

Kidjo: Well, one thing that I know is that it comes with great responsibility, and it's good that the work that you do is acknowledged. But on the other hand, as my father put it, people don't give you an accolade unless you deserve it. "And don't let it go to your head." That's what my father said. I cannot have a big head; don't have it. Why? Because I started being famous when I was in primary school. The same people that come and see your shows are the ones that you play soccer with, then how are you gonna have a big head?

Kafumbe: So, the notion of celebrity doesn't really ring so well with you?

Kidjo: Let me tell you one thing, at twelve years old…, eleven…, I came home and was like, "Dad, what's the point of going to school, anyway? I'm making money singing, what do I need to go to school for?" My dad said, "The deal is you go to school, you sing. You don't go to school, you don't sing." I'm like, "Going to school is for having a degree and making money, working, right? I don't need a degree. I'm singing. I can make money." He said, "Okay, you wanna take it like that? Find yourself a place, rent it, and have your own life. But not under my shelter, my home." I'm like, "Oh, okay." So I went back to school.

Hey, you can't beat that. Every time, at one point my father would film my show, okay... film the show then give me one week. I'm like, "woah, I'm the best, man, yeah yeah…" And then he pushed the film button and said "Okay, let's start [here]. That line, you're out of key. That one…, that dress, you don't wear it anymore. What kind of shoe is that?" I'm like, "Oh my God, I relate this to being naked!" So I'm like, "Okay," and he said, "If we don't tell you the truth, nobody out there is gonna tell you the truth. Only

people that love you are gonna tell you the truth, and you gonna know what it is. And when you make a mistake it's okay, but don't repeat the mistake all the time."

Kafumbe: Right, right.

Kidjo: My father always said, "You gotta keep yourself in question all the time. Doubt is about learning. If you're too sure of what you're doing, you learn nothing anymore." So every time I'm in the process of writing a new album I'm always doubtful even though I'm always at the service of my inspiration. For me, inspiration…, you cannot control it; you don't know when it will come. When it comes, grab it, and when it is there, don't try to make it look beautiful. Just get the inspiration the way it is.

Kafumbe: Just do it.

Kidjo: Let it sink into you, and listen. That is how you have songs that speak to people. If you're trying to make a big hit at any cost, duh, it doesn't work! Perhaps that's why I'm where I am today. I don't have big hits all over the place but I have a career. I know a lot of artists that do one hit, and disappear.

Kafumbe: Right.

Kidjo: Aw man, I'd be miserable if I can't sing!

Kafumbe: To what extent do your compositions draw from these experiences that you're talking about?

Kidjo: All the time.

Kafumbe: All the time?

Kidjo: All the time. I mean, I was telling you back there that my nickname in my village is 'When Why How.' Every time I come to my village they're like, "Okay, you come here under the condition that you ask one question." I'm like, "Yeah, that's not gonna fly." So if you don't ask questions you don't know, right?

Kafumbe: Right.

Kidjo: So, one day at the ceremony of one of my family members that passed away (because when somebody passes away, after the funeral, after forty days we do a ceremony to celebrate the memory of the person, like the good times that we spent together, and we sing, we dance for it, we celebrate it), suddenly I was like, okay, my feet are hurting from dancing, I'm gonna just listen to the music. And I sat back and I was like, "What in the world is that?" I went to my uncle and I said, "How can people dance to that? You're talking about death, you're talking about all that (eeee) stuff and people are dancing. What is this about?" And then he goes, "Well, the person is gone. We have to live with a void, and that's what death creates. And we can't avoid talking about the subject. That won't make death disappear from our life."

As a musician and as an artist it's not your role to make people feel guilty or lecture people. You bring it out there and every single person will take the message

and incorporate it into their life the way they want to. That's what it is about." So that's how I started writing music for me. And I asked my uncle, "Okay, tell me, what makes a song? How do you write a song?" And he looked at me and he said, "I thought you said one question?" I said, "Answer that, too." And then he said to me, "The traditional songs that we sing were here before we came. All we do is to adapt them to our time."

Kafumbe: Right.

Kidjo: "Take the subject from the existence of our family today to prove that we still are the same lineage. The problems that accrued before still exist, but in different ways. How do you make it relevant for the next generation to take it over? So, what we do basically is follow the core of the song, what appeals to us." And I said, "You are just lecturing me! Why, just what is the song? Just tell me what it is?" And then he said, "Song…, a song is made of three things: the melody, the rhythm, and the lyrics." And I said, "Okay, but how do you know?" And then he said, "If I can explain inspiration I'll be the richest man on the planet." And then he said "When you are listening to that inspiration that comes, do you know where it comes from? You don't. Make sure you pay attention to what comes first, and once you start laying that thing down the rest comes. That core thing that comes the first can be the melody, it can be the rhythm, it can be the lyrics, when it comes in and brings you the other two things… and you listen to it, then you have the core of it. And the song by itself you can sing it alone, you can sing it with a guitar, you can sing it any way that you want because the song has an entity. And at the end of the day, once you write that song, then you yourself cannot say anymore what came first."

And that's exactly what I do all the time. I'm always at the… the thing is there, and then it starts bubbling. And I always travel. Now, with the i-phone it's easy. Before, I used to have that cassette tape. I would wake up in the middle of the night, I could be sleeping deeply and the song would come. I wake up and grab it, I always keep it next to my night table, take it and sing it, and go back to sleep. And I don't even remember what it is. The next morning I will have forgotten it completely.

Kafumbe: Fascinating!

Kidjo: Then I started listening, "Hmm…, this is kind of interesting." You see, that's how you do it, and I never try too hard on it. And when I'm working with a producer in the studio and he's adding things, I'm like, "Stop, enough! If you put more, I'm not singing." It happens, for example, the song *Agolo*; when I wrote that song I was pregnant with my child, I was six months pregnant. I toured till my fifth month of pregnancy and I ended up at the emergency room because I was having contractions. And the doctor said, "Do you want the baby or you want the concert?" I'm like, "Baby!" And I cancelled everything. And then I had to go somewhere and rest, so we went to the countryside in France. My husband is French, by the way. I don't know if that's a good thing but it's okay. He's not here so I can say whatever I want. I'll tell you a story about him later.

And we went there and we were writing the song and some friend of my husband came to visit. And he said, "Oh, it sounds like smurf song. I'm like, "Doesn't matter, if it's smurf it's smurf; it's good to me." And I realized one day after a week in the countryside that the garbage truck came three times a week and the garbage can was full. I'm like, "Hey, we're talking about preserving this earth and we individually enable consumption. In this society of consumption, we pollute as much as any government doing anything nuclear 'whatever-it-is.' We personally are part of the birth of mother earth." And I wrote that song *Agolo,* talking about how we have to continue nurturing mother earth because mother earth is a cycle of the same system. So how do we preserve that? And when I finished writing that song the friend said, "Oh, it sounds like smurf," I'm like, "Whatever it is, I like it." The blue people, you know, they say "smurf," the French say "smurf," whatever you say, smurf, I'm like, "Okay, I like the song!"

But it was exactly the same process that I go through because the song was there. And actually the song started with one word: *Agolo*… Agolo, which means (when you want to attract people's attention), "Please, listen." And that's what it said, that's what the song was about. Just listen to what I have to say about mother earth. We will do it collectively, preserve this earth. Because without earth there's no humanity. That's it.

Kafumbe: Africa has been associated with war and disease and conflict and underemployment. How have these perceptions and images affected your artistic work and activism?

Kidjo: Well, it's affected because people are stupid enough to think that Africa only has one story to tell.

Kafumbe: Nice.

Kidjo: You know, the danger of a single story defines all of us. And that is dangerous. We come back to Africa. The story of the bible, of human kind, has been told by men. Therefore they choose the role the women are going to play from the beginning to get the power, right?

Kafumbe: Right.

Kidjo: God didn't create anybody to tell anyone that you are after me. He created us equal. We are partners of men. Men cannot live on this earth without us and we cannot live without them. So how do you get it out of there to a point where everything that is bad is women? Okay, I'll give you an example. The next album actually is talking a lot about that. Forced marriage, female genital mutilation, all of those horrible things that are imposed on women and the men are walking around. I'm like, "What are you proud of? What is your fear?" I mean, my father is an example for me. My father always said…, because when my mom started her theater troupe, friends (so-called-friends), would come to my father and say, "Frank, what are you doing? You let your wife… [mumbling]…" And my father is like, "What is your business? If my wife is happy, I'm

the most happiest man in the world! What do you know? When did you learn that love is a jail cell you gotta put your partner in to feel better?"

Kafumbe: Right.

Kidjo: I'm like, "Huh!" And I used that to write a song too. And my father always stood against his own family, his mother, and everybody; when they came from the village and said, "Come on, let's marry your girls." My father would say, "They're not merchandise. Get the hell out of my house!"

[Audience cheering, applause]

Kidjo: So, we're not gonna generalize about men. But the problem is, the single story told by men about women is defining us today…

Kafumbe: Um, wow… You've resided in the diaspora for almost three decades, and that's where most of your work is based. You lived in Paris for fourteen years, where you established your reputation before moving to New York in 1997. How have you been able to help a continent that regards you as a great asset when you're mostly active out of it?

Kidjo: I'm always in Africa. I'm even going on Saturday. I'm going till the end of the month. Well, the reason why I left was a political reason. And, if you've never lived in exile you don't know how painful it is. Because a lot of people come from Africa, not willing to come, to leave the country, because they don't have the means. We were talking about unemployment--this is one of the reasons. But for me it was political, because I refused to write my music to praise the revolution and communists. I refused it, because my father told me to not be linked to a political party, "because your career is gonna… disappear in it." And when the military regime arrived, they banned that beautiful radio for us, where you could listen to Bob Dylan. From Bob Dylan, you go listen to a traditional musician from another part of…I mean it's… You put the radio on in the morning before you go to school and you feel empowered because there was music from every part of the world; in Yiddish, in Arabic, in whatever language that was out there. I mean, I went to Koranic school, man, for crying out loud! That's how good it was. And then the communists arrive and go, "Bam, no more!" And now, you artists in this country, you're gonna say, [comments in French]; you're gonna write this, you're gonna write this, and your father, you're gonna call comrade. I'm like, "Forget you. My dad is my dad. You're just the leader of the country. You're not gonna tell me to call my mom and my dad comrade. What's going on with you?" And as I started doing that, my father was like, "Oh my gosh, she's gonna end up in jail here." So, I had to leave. I just had to leave. There were no other choices for me. And before you left at that time you needed an authorization signed by the government and you tell them how long you're going. I skipped all that.

Kafumbe: I recently read about why you actually moved from France, from Benin to France, and then to New York, and I stumbled upon this excerpt that I think is very

powerful. And I think that it highlights the complex relationship between the African continent and the diaspora. I'm going to read it and have you comment on it.

> I had to leave Benin because the communists wanted us to preach revolution in song. Then I had to leave France, the country of fraternité, because I always had to justify who I am. It became painful for me as a francophone not to be understood… I went to New York when I did my album trilogy tracing the roots of slavery through music. I was determined to write and record with Americans, black or white or Latino, who had been influenced by the music of my people. I wanted to see how people reacted to what is a really painful part of American history. I was amazed at the reaction, like a huge ball of oxygen. I realized that all Americans had a feeling and philosophy about it, yet no one had given them a chance to talk about it. Going to America also meant being closer to Brazil… As a francophone, I'd say my experience in America was much more musically enriching than in France…

Kidjo: I was being polite.

Kafumbe: *Continuing reading the quote*

> …because I didn't share a history of colonization with the Americans I'm simply perceived as an African artist they can do business with… In France, colonization tends to get in between the artist and human that I am. Of course, without France I wouldn't be here, but what struck me was that if I didn't do what the French thought I should do, then you have no say. (Oliveira 2010)

I mean, it's just so… there is a lot in there.

Kidjo: …

Kafumbe: Let's take a break and listen to "Malaika."

Kidjo: Oh, you play that music, yeah, go ahead, it's better for you.

Kafumbe: Wow.

Kidjo: You know what you're getting yourself into, right?

Kafumbe: I do, actually.

Musical Interlude: "Malaika," *Logozo* (1991) [DVD track 1]

Kafumbe:
Yeah that's…, Malaika is like an anthem in Africa, very pan-African.

Kidjo: Yeah, well you know that song is dealing with a lot of problems in our societies, because the guy that wrote that song is from Tanzania, and it's a true story of his life that he wrote. It's a love song because he happened to fall in love with the daughter of the most powerful and richest man of his village and the father was marrying her off to somebody else. And he wrote that song and the girl said, "I'm not marrying anybody but this guy."

Kafumbe: The person that I love.

Kidjo: And a lot of people have covered that song and never put his name on it.

Kafumbe: Wow.

Kidjo: So the rights mostly are held. That guy is very old now, I don't even think…, I don't even know if he's still alive. And the same thing with "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." It's only just five years ago that the family of the guy that wrote the song started getting some money.

Kafumbe: Wow! Let's talk about your music and activism. How has singing and songwriting enabled you to be an effective social advocate, and how has activism in turn influenced the music you make or perform?

Kidjo: I think it's all linked. One of the things that I learned from the traditional musicians in my country is to tell a story, to tell the story of the people, and to tell us also where we come from, because our history is not written; it's oral in Africa. So we need traditional and old people to be there to continue to be the link between generations. So for me every time I travel, especially since I became UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador, I've been through some emotional rollercoasters. And for me to be able to come back here and continue doing my music and understanding that people can be trivial about things that mean nothing, it's music that keeps me grounded. And also I have realized, you see when I did the album *Logozo* earlier, I never thought about how big of an impact it had all over the continent. And traveling with UNICEF in faraway villages and seeing people come and go, "Oh, Agolo, Agolo," I start seeing myself and I'm amazed. I mean, the videos that I released at that time, were very cutting edge videos, at the time when TV started in Africa, across the continent.

Kafumbe: Right, in the 1990s?

Kidjo: Yeah in the 1990s. And um, sometimes I come back and I just wanna disappear. I just wanna go somewhere where there's no suffering any more. But always what I come back with is the resilience and the power of people. My first trip as UNICEF goodwill ambassador was in Tanzania. We'd been talking about orphans of AIDS, till I walked into an orphanage and I collapsed. Because the age goes from two, all the way to fifteen. And you see all those kids and you go, "Why? Why can't we just take care and be cautious in our life that's impacting the future generation?" And as I was standing there crying, a little boy comes to me and stands right in front of me, and said, "Are you gonna cry or sing?" They had prepared a beautiful chair for me and everyone else was on the floor. I was like, "I can sit on the floor," and they said, "No, you can't do that." I said, "Why not?" That little boy started following me all over the place, and then I reached out to grab him. He was so hot I almost dropped him; he was so feverish, it was ridiculous. His eyes were really bright with fever. And I gathered myself, got that child, and put him on my lap because first he said, "Can I sit on your lap?" I said, "Come on, I'll take you." And then I had to pause again, because they wanted me to sing "Agolo," and I was like, "I don't have it in me right now." Then they had a rally cry, and they all

started, and all the kids start going [chant] "Mtoto kwanza, Oye! Oye! Mtoto kwanza, Oye! Oye!" I'm like…, it was so powerful. I got up and went, "Woah, what is that?" And they said to me, "It means 'children first.'" I was like, "Okay, now I wanna sing for you. I can sing now." So I sang the song and they all sang the chorus with me. And before leaving, that little child said to me, "Once you leave here, can you make sure that the world doesn't forget that we're the future, we're the children of this world?" "Doesn't matter where we are born,"--four years old. And I ran out of that place, crying. I went and came back again. And then he looked at me and said, "Why are you crying?" I'm like, "Jesus Christ, this child is really killing me, man." And I said, "Can I ask your permission to use that cry of yours to write a song?" He stayed quiet for a moment, and then he looked back at me and said, "Is it gonna be a sad song or a happy song?" I said, "Which one do you want?" He said, "I like happy songs." I said, "Then that's what it's gonna be. So on the album *Oyaya,* I wrote that song, "Mtoto Kwanza" out of that trip.

Music has helped me break the silence of child soldiers, of girls' rape, of conflict. Because you cannot get through to them until you start singing and you see the smile, I mean, it starts blooming like a flower in the face. And you go, okay, now I can reach out. I can let them talk to me. Sometimes I say, "Can you draw something for me?" And they draw. The drawings are really disturbing. I mean, it goes on and on. It's just like…, and every time when I'm leaving they always say, "We're gonna be here when you come back." It's that… the resilience and the hope in the future.

Wow, we took a trip to Chad, in the refugee camp in Darfur, Chad. We were a delegation of eight women. Jane Wells from the Clinton administration, the minister of finance in Nigeria, a couple of different activists, a journalist from UK, a parliamentarian from Germany. We were women from different backgrounds, we decided that enough of seeing the men in the camps still telling the stories. We wanted the women to tell us the story. And we received, before, the amount of women that were supposed to come and talk to us, roughly 150 women. When we arrived at that camp, once again the men dictated. The men said, "No you can't speak to the women." And I said, "If that's the case, I'm out of here. I'm not here to hear you whining. I'm not here to hear you talk. If the women don't talk to me I'm out of here." So, I was with a politician and they said, "Angelique let's just deal with it." I said, "Whatever you do, if I don't speak to the women, you get me to the airport and I'm out. I will come to speak to them [the men] after I speak to the women because I came here to listen to the women. The men, I will listen to them, the complaints, anything they want…, but the women first." And the girl was like, "Why is she mad?" I stopped talking and just sat in the back of the room and said, "Okay, whatever you do, I don't care." I had made up my mind to leave.

So it became a joke with all those ladies that were with me, they said, "Oh Angelique you are…" So they talked to the men and they said they were gonna come back. I don't know what they said; I was there without being there. I just closed myself down and said, "Forget you." So we went, and while we're talking to them they sent somebody to tell the women not to come, so most of them were gone. So when they sent us back they were already leaving. So I said, "If I go there and I see two women, I'm out too."

So they grabbed a few of them. Out of the 150 we had 23 women, and I said, "I'll take that." Some of them cry every day. They started telling me the stories. I wished I could just vanish, get out of my body and leave. It was horrible, story after horrible story. I can't even repeat one story, you will go home and have nightmares. I came back from that trip and for three months my sleep was disturbed, I got no sleep. One thing they said to me, though, before we left, was that, "Whatever you got out of here to do out there, please don't victimize us. Campaign for us to be able to go back to our villages in safety and security, to be able to raise our kids. We came to this camp because of all that happened, and we realize the importance and beauty of education. We want to continue that back home. Please tell any leader in… everywhere in the world, make sure we go back to our country with no more rape, with no more war for us to be able to get back our life and raise our kids."

Kafumbe: Wow, please allow me to play "You Can Count on Me" from the UNICEF campaign, off of your 2010 album.

Musical Interlude: "You Can Count on Me," *Õÿö* (2010) [DVD track 2]

Kafumbe: It's just amazing to hear this sense of hope in a song. So many artists do more talking than doing…

Kidjo: Talking is cheap, action is expensive.

Kafumbe: Right, but it's amazing how you are telling these people, "You can count on me."

Kidjo: But you know what, about that song, I can't take the credit by myself, my daughter wrote the English part of it…

Kafumbe: When commenting on your work with UNICEF, you were recently quoted saying, "It allowed me to feel useful outside the world of music. I meet so many people that work so hard to improve the lives of children, it is so refreshing compared to the many self-centered people in the music business."[2] Do you sometimes feel tension between your artistic work and activism?

Kidjo: No, not me. People have problems with that. I don't have problems with that because I always say I do music for people, and if I cannot go to people, I can sing in my shower and shut up, right? I mean, I know that for some of my colleagues, it is all about the ego, they don't care about the public. I say, "How can you say that? Without the public you're nobody. If they don't buy your music, don't buy tickets to come to the show, you sing to the wall." I mean it's true that I've made a lot of enemies in the business, because I tell them, "You know what, you want to work with me, you leave your ego in the bathroom and you come here, because me, I am at the service of the music, of the song. If you wanna be…, your ego wanna overshadow the work, I'm out of here." And if it's my song, I say, "Thank you, go away." That's where I come from.

[2] http://www.popmatters.com/review/angelique-kidjo-djin-djin/

My stage is my sanctuary that I share with the public, you know. And you cannot be on stage being more concerned about your breasts, whether your bra is fitting, and doing this and that. I just can't stand it! And you go and see some people that are like…, I'm like, "Sing, man! Show me your guts! Give me what you've got." And some of them are just like this. I'm like, "What the…?" And I say it and I say it, and people hate me. "You don't have the right to say that." Don't sing anymore if you don't wanna…

My mom always said that since I was…. Okay, when I started singing she used to tell me and all the other people in the theater troupe, "Once you hit that stage, your headache stays back, your troubles stay back, you've got to be ready to be naked spiritually to be able to open to the world to get them to you. And most of the time people come on to the stage and they're like a piece of wood. I'm like "Oh…" And sometimes their dance too is just not… [mumbling].

Kafumbe: Who are some of your predecessors or influences, both artists and activists?

Kidjo: Miriam Makeba, Aretha Franklin, Bella Bello, Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, Otis Redding. Man, I can name…, they are millions of them! Beethoven, for once, Ravel, Mozart... Because I listened to all that stuff when I was growing up. When my father brought classical music I was like, "What kind of music is that?" And he started playing them on the banjo… Oh, Jesus Christ, it was so painful and I would be like, "Okay, stop it! I'll go listen to the original!" And then my father said, "Okay, I got your attention, didn't I?" I said, "Yes, but please, please don't play with the banjo anymore."

Kafumbe: James Brown actually comes up a lot in your conversations. During a recent interview you commented about how his music not only influenced your music career but inspired you to learn the English language.

Kidjo: Absolutely.

Kafumbe: You were quoted saying, "When I heard his music come on the radio at home, I said to myself, 'This is grooving too much for me not to learn the language,' I had to be tight like him." (Rodriguez 2010) What was so special about James Brown?

Kidjo: Man. Have you ever seen James Brown's show?

Kafumbe: Of course. On TV.

Kidjo: I met him live. Jesus Christ! This was something else. You know what? When my brothers started covering James Brown songs they found a guy that impersonated James Brown. He wore the wig, wore the cap; we called him a girl, man, the party guy. And he comes in, "Whahh, what are you doin!!!" I'm like, "This is kind of cool, man! You slide on the stage, you do this, I'm like, "Oh, I wanna do that!" And my mom was desperate to put shoes on my feet, to put me in dresses, to put ponytails in my hair. I always threw all these things away because I thought I was a boy. And I used to tell my mom, "You see, when I grow up I wanna be James Brown." And my mom is like, "No you can't." I said, "Yes I can." "No you can't." And then I realized that I really

cannot be James Brown. That's how much he impacted my life. Because everybody else was coming… I was in love with the sound of English. But that rhythmic…, that rhythm that he puts on the language. I did not speak English but I wanted to sing it. So, like, I do, "Say what [nonsense singing]," everybody said, "Woah, woah, what are you singing?" I said, "I'm singing James brown, man [nonsense singing]." I was crazy. Or I would be singing Otis Redding, "I've got dreams," right, that I cover. I would go, "ah gah dweee…" it means 'all the way up there' in my language. And my mom, I would see my mom putting cotton balls in her ears, because I was… I'm just singing that, pretending I'm a man, and I have the voice.

Kafumbe: Um…

[Audience laughing]

Kafumbe: That's amazing.

Kidjo: I got you, right?

Kafumbe: You got me… As an artist who fuses dozens of global musical genres, whose inspiration comes from Africa and beyond, who rerecords works of international artists, who has collaborated with various international figures, who is African but based in America, and who performs in multiple languages, how do you think the performing arts can serve as a medium of global communication and intercultural understanding?

Kidjo: They do because that's where you really come… the performance arts are. What it does to you is it forces you to leave the internet, to come and see the real thing, because this internet business is good. But gee…, people are living in bubbles. Get out of your house, interact with people! I have a friend of mine in Zurich, every time I go and I'm doing a show he says "I'm coming" and he never comes. And then you call him and, he says, "Oh, I got swamped in the computer." Everything, he's been looking at the computer. I say, "Tony, get out! You want a wife on the computer, too? What's wrong with you? You complain you're single. You don't get out."

Ahh whoooo! I mean the computer is great, don't get me wrong, but I can't deal with it. Because as soon as I come close, my daughter says, "Mom get away!" I tried to help once and I pushed a button and erased her homework. I was just trying to shut the computer down. And she says, "Thank God I saved my work. Don't you come close to my computer anymore." The computer is a good thing, it's a tool. As long as we understand that it is a tool of communication that allows us to learn about the rest of the world, it's okay. But the computer can't talk to me. Even that silly voice on the iphone, if I don't put it on it drives me crazy. [mumbling] I'm like, "What the hell is that? I want somebody to speak to me." If something is good, we have fun together. If I hurt you, I speak to you, I apologize. I don't want to live in a bubble. Relationships between us are difficult, but yet it's the salt of the relationship that is great. I mean, I can fight with you, and then just say, "Okay, sorry, let's forget it." As long as we can talk, I'm cool with it.

That's the one thing that I really… something that drives me crazy. When people say, "Oh I haven't spoken with him in ten years." I'm like, "Are you part of that? Are you crazy? You're wasting time and your energy not talking to somebody. Why don't you settle and then talk and walk away with it." I talk to you, huh? If something is wrong I don't care where you are, I'll go find you and we'll talk about it, and it's over. If you don't wanna talk to me anymore, at least I know in my heart that it's settled, and I don't have any business with you anymore. I don't want to go to bed with somebody's trouble or with hate or with… my bed, nobody comes in. Only me and my husband.

Kafumbe: What's your final word for the Middlebury community? What do you want us to walk away with today, one thing that you think we should be walking away with?

Kidjo: Be proud of who you are. And whatever you do, do it with your heart. My father used to say if your dream is not big enough it's not worth talking about it. We are able to do so many things. We are capable of moving mountains, we have proved it in the history of humankind, we have come far. What is holding us back to achieve better and more but fear? And fear is the weapon of the politicians, of the big corporations. If you don't want to live your life like that, have the courage to change it. We can! We can be whoever we want to be. I believe in…, I've been living outside of Benin since 1983, and every time I go to my country the people say, "You haven't changed a bit. You still speak the language better than we do." I say, "What do you want me to change for? To look like who?" It's already hard to look at myself in the mirror every day and I want to be somebody else? How do you live with that? I mean you wanna be somebody else and how do you keep up with all the stuff you have to do to be there. It's true, man. It is good to have a role model. My role models have given me the strength to find my own voice. We need it. But don't imitate the people. Every time I go to Africa and the young artists are asking me, "How do you get there? What can we do to be successful?" I say, "Be yourself." And they go, "What do you mean?" I say, "Me, I was never ashamed about my country, about the music that comes from Africa, nothing to be ashamed of." Because that music is the source of blues, rock and roll, pop music, R&B, soul music, hip hop. All of these, you go back to Africa and you find them on the sidewalk. Damn it! Why are they coming to get our music from there and then call it something else when they come here? Why can't you be proud of who you are, and I see those young girls, they wanna be like Beyonce; they have the hair, they go on stage like this. I'm like, "What the hell are you doing? What's wrong with you?!" Beyonce, I love Beyonce. Beyonce is one… she is a role model. But you cannot be Beyonce, because you cannot do better than Beyonce, ever!

[Audience laughing]

Kidjo: Sorry. Because I cannot be better than anybody else, I might as well be myself.

Kafumbe: Right.

Kidjo: Beyonce!... okay.…

[Audience laughing, cheering, clapping]

Kafumbe: Well, thank you so much. You know we could listen to you forever.

Kidjo: It's okay. I'm done.

[Applause from audience]

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