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About (Some of) the Pigments

The Paintmakers asked village elders, potters, and local people about the historical, traditional, or culture of the colors they collected.

("Oloo" is pronounced "Oh-low")

("Ongica" is pronounced "Ong-ee-cha")

("Ngetta" is pronounced "Nee-yet-ah")

005 Amugo Brown Pigment

Amugo village is in Nebi County, Kucwiny subcounty, Olago Parish, Uganda.

This natural brown clay, found abundantly in the region, holds great importance for the Lango community. It has been used for generations, not just as a color but as a symbol of their history and culture. In Aleah Village, located in Ma Parish, Ajo County, Uganda, lives Mr. Odongo David, an elder deeply connected to his heritage. Mr. Odongo explains how the elders and warriors of Lango would use this pigment to paint their faces, especially during times of war and peace, imbuing their actions with meaning.

In battles, the Amugo pigment was a sign of strength. Warriors would cover themselves in the brown clay, believing it brought resilience and success. Mr. Odongo shares the story of a conflict between the Lango and the Hankole, passed down from his father. He tells how the Lango warriors, covered in Amugo pigment, successfully raided the Hankole, a victory that became a significant part of their history.

Beyond war, the Amugo pigment was also used in celebrations. It marked special occasions like births, homecomings, and birthdays, symbolizing unity and a deep connection to the earth. It was a way for the community to express joy and togetherness.

By sharing these stories, Mr. Odongo ensures that the legacy of the Amugo brown clay remains alive. For the Lango people, it is more than just a pigment; it is a symbol of their identity, resilience, and enduring connection to their land and culture. Through Mr. Odongo's storytelling, the traditions of the Lango continue to be honored and passed down to future generations.

008 Oloo Green

The village of Oloo in the Alebtong district, in Aloji subcounty, Akwangkel parish.

According to Imat Erine (a village elder and farmer), the potters in believe the green clay is a premature form of the cream clay, and a pot made with green clay will be weak. They prefer to wait for the green clay to mature into cream. However, the green is most likely colored by glauconite, and it will not "mature" into cream clay.

This pigment is hard to find, and our source floods during the rainy season. From August until October of 2024, the area is underwater! It is found in small, finger-sized patches on a river bank, mixed in with a lighter clays. We have only a small amount on hand.

When levigated, the raw Oloo Green pigment separates into at least three different colors (dark gray-green, green, tan/green). However, if it is crushed in a ball mill, the colors cannot be levigated apart.

009 Oloo Cream

The village of Oloo in the Alebtong district, in Aloï subcounty, Akwangkel parish.

This color is mixed into black clay to fortify the pot, ensuring its strength and durability. Without this color, the pots would be weak, and the community wouldn't be able to craft the high-quality pottery they are known for.

Adoch Fiona, an area counsellor, told us that there's a deeply held belief among the people that if a man urinates in the holes where the clay is excavated, he risks losing his sexual potency due to a curse from the spirits. This belief has kept the clay pits safe and clean over the years, as no one wants to suffer the consequences of a dysfunctional manhood.

However, if such an incident occurs, a ritual is performed to restore the man's potency. The man is secluded in a house for three days, cared for by an elder woman. During this time, he is smeared with a white substance and treated like a newborn—bathed, carried on the back, and fed special foods. After three days of cleansing, he is released, believed to be restored.

010 Bala Orange

Bala is in the Kole district, to the west of Lira.

This pigment is made from a common clay that is used in house construction and road construction.

011 Ongica Pit Yellow

Ongica is in the Lira District

In Ongica, curiosity drove us to ask an elder about other potential colors we might discover. They mentioned Ongica yellow, which Halmon came across where someone was digging a deep, deep pit toilet. This yellow was found 30 feet underground. However, since the latrine is now completed, this particular yellow is no longer available.

012 Ongica Yellow Ochre

Ongica is in the Lira District

Ongica Yellow Ochre is found near team member Halmon's home village. It is used by plant nurseries, in the nursery beds, to provide a slow growth of the seedlings so that their customers can find the plants still young.

013 Bala Orange

Bala is in the Kole district, to the west of Lira.

The land where we found this color is rocky, hot, with few trees. Bala Orange is found next to the maroon. This pigment is traditionally used in local house and road construction.

014 Bala Maroon

Bala is in the Kole district, to the west of Lira.

The source can be spotted from the road side. This "maroon" clay is used as a concrete for houses and for road construction. According to a local farmer, Steven Otuk, this clay site was discovered by road contractors who find it a good clay for road construction. The raw clay looks maroon, and it is found next to orange clay. Separating the two is practically impossible, so the final processed pigment has a little more orange than we hope for.

015 Apii Oguru Yellow

Apii Oguru village is in Agelec Parish, Arum subcounty, Agago District.

This yellow clay is used for making pottery. According to Silvia Ogwang, a local farmer, the color is mixed with the black clay to help a pot be strong and resistant. That there are many different colors of such clay that does the same function, but this community is blessed with yellow, while other people use cream and gray.

015 Tipper Stage Brown

Tipper Stage is inside the city of Lira

Tipper Stage is a public park in the middle of the city of Lira. Sharon saw some rich brown clay on the edge of the field, and that became Tipper Stage Brown. The clay is now gone.

One of the most significant issues has been land disputes and ownership conflicts. Between 2017 and 2020, Tipper Stage became the center of heated debates over who rightfully owns the land. The process of acquiring land titles for this area was fraught with controversy, as various parties laid claim to the land, leading to confusion and tension within the community. These disputes were not just legal matters but also deeply affected the community, as the ownership of Tipper Stage directly impacts how the space can be used and developed.

Local residents have been particularly vocal about their concerns regarding the sale of land associated with Tipper Stage. There were widespread fears that the land might be sold off in ways that would not benefit the community or that would prioritize private interests over public good. These concerns led to petitions being filed with Parliament, as residents sought to protect the space from being mismanaged or taken away from public use.

Another issue connected to Tipper Stage is its role in law enforcement operations targeting criminal activities in the vicinity. While the space serves as a hub for community gatherings and events, it has also been the site of police actions aimed at curbing crime in the area. This dual role—both as a community space and as a location for law enforcement—sometimes creates tension, as residents must navigate the complexities of a space that is both welcoming and occasionally associated with police activity.

These issues underscore the importance of Tipper Stage not just as a physical space, but as a focal point for broader discussions about land use, community rights, and the challenges of managing public spaces in a growing city like Lira. The controversies and concerns surrounding Tipper Stage highlight the need for careful planning and transparent decision-making to ensure that this vital part of Lira's urban landscape remains accessible and beneficial to all.

017 Amon Maka Yellow

Amon Maka is outside the city but in the Lira District, Uganda

"Amon Maka" means "Women hold me!" It comes from an old story:

A century ago, there was a heavy rainstorm that destroyed all the bridges and flooded the roads. It was almost Christmas, and the women were on their way to the market to buy groceries. Some of them also went to collect yellow clay from the riverbed to paint their houses for the holiday. As they gathered on one side of the river, a man boasted about his strength and tried to cross alone. However, he quickly realized he couldn't handle the force of the river and started shouting for help. The women came together and rescued him using a long stick. He admitted he was not as strong as he thought and became an advocate for women's empowerment.

The bridge they eventually built was named after the incident. The land near the river is now used for farming and brick-making due to its abundance of yellow clay.

The rainy season floods the area, and the last time they visited, the bridge was almost washed out. The team was worried they would not be able to find more pigment for a long time, so they have foraged a large amount of this color.

020 Brewer's Charcoal Black

Anai Ober Ward, Lira, is a poor neighborhood of Lira city where many refugees (IDP's) of the war with the Lord's Resistance Army have ended up.

This carbon black pigment is made from the charcoal from the fires of local brewers in Sharon's neighborhood in Lira.

In the poorer neighborhoods of Lira, Uganda, local alcohol brewers play a significant role in the community's daily life. These brewers, often working out of small, makeshift setups, produce traditional alcoholic beverages like "ajon" or "waragi," which are popular among the locals. Brewing is usually done using basic ingredients like millet, cassava, or bananas, and the process is passed down through generations.

For many families, brewing is more than just a tradition—it's a vital source of income in an area where job opportunities are scarce. The brewers are often women who manage both the brewing and selling, creating a small but essential business that helps support their households.

However, this local industry operates in a bit of a gray area. The brewing is mostly informal, with little regulation, which means that the quality and safety of the alcohol can vary. Despite this, these brewers are respected in their communities for their skill and for providing an affordable drink that brings people together in social settings. Whether it's a gathering at a local bar or a casual chat among neighbors, these traditional brews are a staple of life in Lira's poorer neighborhoods, reflecting both the resilience and the ingenuity of the people who make them.

021 Sharon's Neighbourhood Cooking Pot Black

Sharon's neighborhood is Anai Ober Ward, Lira City West Division, Lira, Uganda

Sharon was inspired to make a soot black after Sophie (a volunteer advisor) explained how to make it. Sharon started by collecting soot from her family's small, clay stove. Realizing she needed more soot, she went about visiting her neighbours, scraping the soot from their saucepans with a knife. One elderly neighbour asked her how much she was charging for the service. It's free, said Sharon.

The soot was traditionally used to heal umbilical cord cuts (and other wounds).

022 Oloo Orange

The village of Oloo in the Alebtong district, in Alooi subcounty, Akwangkel parish.

Oloo Orange is used for painting on ceramics by local potters. Sharon spoke with Imat Erine about the colors in Oloo. She had very beautiful red painted pots and we were curious to learn about the color and where she found them. In her conversation she said the Oloo Orange color was also used for painting traditional hut houses. She gave us one young man who led us into the forest to where potters collect the the color. The color is a traditional clay color of the place and everyone thinks that's the look of the red, so we called it "Oloo Red" at first.

("Imat" is a general name given to old Mama's in Lango culture. It was introduced to prevent young people from calling elders with their real names, because our culture believes that it is disrespectful to call elders by their names.)

024 Apii Oguru Yellow

Apii Oguru is in the Alebtong district, about 20 minutes by car from Oloo, on a farmer's land, in Alooi subcounty, Akwangkel parish.

This yellow clay is used for making pottery. According to Silvia Ogwang, a local farmer, the color is mixed with the black clay to help a pot be strong and resistant. That there are many different colors of such clay that does the same function, but this community is blessed with yellow, while other people use cream and gray.

In June 2024, the Paintmakers and David visited Oloo Adwong, a village in Alebtong district (Alooi subcounty, Amuria parish) about 30 km outside of Lira, Uganda. After collecting some green earth by the river, we went to a farm where we had collected yellow ochre before. This time, we knew to look for thicker, cleaner deposits of ochre. Jacky started carving away the mixed, sandy ochre the team had found before, while David rambled up the hill, looking for pockets of cleaner, denser color.

He found them in an under-hanging area protected a tiny pool of water. Jacky, Halmon, and the farmer's son gently carved out pieces of yellow into the waiting shovel (so they didn't fall in the water). Jacky carried the bag back to the car on her head, which is common here.

The farmer, David Ogwang, told us how the color was discovered:

"You would like to know how our local people found this color? One day, a certain an old woman came. She was in need of a color called yellow. She came with her horse and other equipment for digging. She started making a hole. In fact, she dug the hole. Reaching just two feet, she got a rock. It was a something like a rock. And she started hammering it. She found out that the color which was seen was yellow. After she got yellow, she went back and

claimed to and proclaimed to our nearby and surroundings. Then my local people in large number started coming there to pick yellow. That is how my local people got this yellow. Thank you."

The site is past the fields and across a stream. Boys drove by small herds of cows as we foraged. David had to be carried over on someone's back to avoid possible worm infections!

028 Agwata Orange

Dokolo District, the west of Lira, in a swampy area

Agwata Orange is a rich, bright, warm orange color — definitely one of our favorite colors.

Fortunately, we have some kilograms in storage, because foraging for this color is now difficult. We had no trouble the first few times, but the last visit did not work out very well.

When we arrived in Agwata, a man wearing a bright yellow t-shirt with President Museveni's face on it stopped us on the road. His companion carried a spear with sharp tines instead of a traditional spearhead. After some discussion between Sharon, Dan, and the men, we learned that there was a funeral taking place and the community security team was present. Dan showed them a letter from the mayor as proof of our mission, and after some convincing (he made sure to mention his background as a police officer), they allowed us to continue but instructed us to stop at the nearby trees and not go further.

The village elders agreed to accompany us to see the traditional colors, but some locals who were angry about our presence approached us (as Sharon had predicted based on their experiences in Ongica). We were in a truck, rented to us by a local NGO. To the villagers, this meant that someone should be paying money, and they were also worried about the government (or someone) taking their land.

They threatened to attack or burn our truck. Then, a man from the sub-county arrived and in a commanding tone told us to go to his office because we had gone to the wrong people without informing higher authorities first. We followed him to the sub-county office where we sat in a circle with other important officials.

Eventually, the officials got down to business and informed us that if we wanted to obtain colors, we would have to pay a fee of UGX 150,000 plus additional fees for police, local security, and others (about UGX 10,000 each group). They also added that we would have to pay for the actual colors themselves (price unspecified).

We listened attentively and I asked what if we didn't want to take any colors but rather train some of their young people to gather them for us? They liked that idea but still insisted on the initial fee.

Sharon said she would have to consult with the NGO that owned the truck to see if they could cover the cost. We thanked them and left, and in the truck, the team expressed annoyance but also slight amusement. They were not willing to pay such a large sum of money to corrupt officials. They explained that in Oloo and other places, people usually request a more reasonable payment rather than 150,000. Additionally, they believed that even if we paid this time, the next official we encountered would demand another sum even though our paperwork was already on file. They concluded that these officials were only after money for themselves and not for the villagers. Lastly, they warned me that we couldn't even try to negotiate with the locals because once word got out, everyone would come demanding payment, and it was better to avoid any conflict altogether.

052 Ngetta Brown

One day, the paint makers of Lira embarked on a trip to Ngetta Mountain, eager to discover new colors and inspirations. The mountain, known for its natural beauty and unique rocks, seemed like the perfect place to explore for pigments.

As we searched the area, we came across various broken rocks, each with fascinating colors. One particular rock caught my attention—it was rich brown and seemed promising. I tested it by rubbing it against another rock and was delighted to see it leave a smooth brown mark. Excited by the discovery, I snapped a few photos to document the moment.

But our adventure took an unexpected turn. Members of the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) appeared and stopped us. They confiscated our phones, demanding to know why we were taking photos. The situation grew tense as they questioned us further. Eventually, after some negotiation and payment of a small amount of money, they allowed us to leave.

On our way back, we offered one of the UPDF officers a ride to town. During the drive, he became more friendly and assured us that if we contacted him in advance next time, he would help ensure our safety while on the mountain.

Back at the studio, we processed the rock and created a beautiful, earthy pigment. The result was stunning—a natural brown with depth and warmth that truly reflected the strength and spirit of the mountain. We named it Ngetta Brown, honoring both the place of its origin and the adventure we experienced.

This pigment stands as a reminder of the challenges and collaborations that shape our work, as well as the rich natural resources of our land.

The mountain and the pigment place is located in Ngetta Lira City East Division

054 Ngetta Black

Halmon and Dan visited Ngetta Mountain again in search of new colors to add to our palette. As they explored, they came across a group of women working in a quarry. Curious, they asked the women about any natural pigments in the area.

A woman named Nancy mentioned a unique black clay that locals often use. She explained that it is commonly used for coloring houses and as a medium for starting seedlings in nursery beds. Intrigued by this information, Halmon and Dan exchanged phone contacts with Nancy to follow up later.

A week later, I called Nancy to learn more. She confirmed that the black clay was still available and introduced us to Silvia, the owner of the site where the clay could be found. With her permission, we collected some of the clay and brought it back to the studio.

Processing the clay revealed a deep, rich light brownish pigment with a smooth texture and versatility. We named it Ngetta Black, a tribute to its origin and the community knowledge that led us to it.

This pigment represents not just a color, but the collaboration and shared heritage of the people of Ngetta. It's a beautiful example of how local traditions and natural resources inspire our craft.

071 Hellen's Black

Hellen is a resilient widow in her 50s who lives with her six grandchildren, three sons, and her 90-year-old mother-in-law, who can neither walk nor talk. She is my neighbor in Anai Ober Ward, Lira City West Division.

During my search for soots to make black pigments, I was repeatedly told to visit Hellen's home. She was known in the community for having a grass-thatched kitchen, the only one of its kind in the city. The soot gathered from these thatched roofs was considered special and ideal for creating black pigment.

As I continued gathering the soots, Hellen welcomed me with open arms. She was thrilled that I had come to her home, and I could see how proud she was of my progress. Hellen had watched me grow from a little girl into someone who was now pursuing creative projects, and her pride in me meant a lot.

One day, Dan and I visited to take photos of the Atuk soot for documentation. To our surprise, Hellen brought us a handful of black clay and encouraged us to experiment with it. She explained that she had discovered it after burning charcoal—what remained was a rich, black clay. She thought it might be suitable for making pigment and wanted us to try it out.

We brought the clay back to the studio and processed it into pigment. The result was extraordinary—an intense black color that held its hue better than other black clays, which often fade or change when processed.

We named the pigment Hellen's Black to honor her role in the project, her unwavering support, and the deep connection she shares with our work. It is not just a pigment, but a tribute to Hellen's kindness, her wisdom, and her gift of tradition.

072 AYINET Anthill Brown

While searching for a new November pigment to expand my color palette, I decided to look within the studio compound. I envisioned a color that was missing from our collection—a rich brown or red. To achieve this, I knew I needed to find soil untouched by marram.

I approached Alex and asked him to show me areas in the compound with pure, natural soil. He led me to the farmyard, where I saw two ant hills. One was mixed with marram, but the other stood out—entirely organic and a striking natural brown. The hill was small but growing, and I felt a strong intuition about its potential as a pigment source.

Curious, I took a small sample and rubbed it on paper. At first, the result was underwhelming. Undeterred, I collected a larger quantity, processed it, and crafted it into paint. To my delight, the color transformed—it was stunning and full of character.

In Lango culture, anthills are revered. They're not only sources of pigment but also provide valuable seasonal food such as white ants and wild mushrooms, which appear every November. These are seen as gifts from God, as they cannot be cultivated. This connection to tradition and nature makes AYINET Anthill Brown more than just a color—it's a story of heritage and sustainability.

The pigment comes directly from the studio compound in Barogole, Lira City West Division, making it a truly local and meaningful addition to our palette.

073 Groundnut Shell Black

In the Lango community, groundnuts* are a cornerstone of life. Planted twice a year, in March and July, they are essential for food, income, and cultural identity. Every household in the region relies on groundnuts to make peanut butter, snacks, gnut sauce, and for trade. Thanks to the fertile land in Lango, the region is one of the top producers of groundnuts. Personally, I've always made peanut butter for extra income, connecting me to this deeply rooted tradition.

In July, during the first harvest of the year, David visited as we harvested groundnuts. Even the studio's watchman was busy harvesting his own. I asked him for a small portion of freshly harvested groundnuts to roast. Using thatch, grass, and leaves, I roasted them while they were still fresh and in their shells. As they roasted, the shells turned coffee brown, with some becoming black.

After roasting, I shared the groundnuts with David and Alex. As we ate, David suggested trying the blackened shells to make pigment. Intrigued by the idea, I set it aside for later. By the second harvest of the year, I was searching for a unique black pigment to add to my collection. That's when I revisited the idea.

I processed the roasted shells into pigment, and the result was extraordinary. Gnut Shell Black P073 is rich, warm, and full of depth—a true reflection of Lango's agricultural heritage and resourcefulness.

This pigment, created from a staple of our community, tells the story of how tradition, creativity, and collaboration can transform something ordinary into something extraordinary.

** Groundnuts are peanuts in the USA*