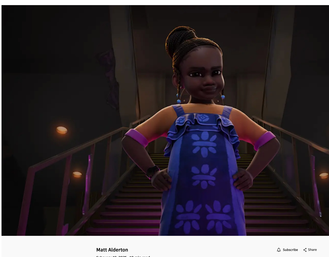
Kugali Media is on a mission to bring African stories to global audiences

From comic books and games to TV and film, Kugali Media is developing African talent to bring African narratives to the world stage

This critically acclaimed TV series " Susu," produced in collaboration with Wait Disney Animation Studios, is a prime example of African animation project.
Image courtesy of Kugali Media



Africa is rich in resources. Along with 1.5 billion people—nearly 20% of the world's population—according to the United Nations, it's also home to 8% of Earth's natural gas, 12% of its oil reserves, 60% of its arable land, and 10% of its internal renewable freshwater source, not to mention approximately 30% of the world's mineral reserves. All of this portends a prosperous future for the 54 countries that constitute Earth's second-largest continent.

Africa's most precious resource, however, might not be its land, its minerals, or its water. If you ask African-born visual effects artist Hamid Ibrahim, it might be people.

"Most people don't quite understand how varied the continent is," says Ibrahim, a native of Uganda who now lives and works in London. "I'll give you an example: My home country of Uganda is a very small country, but we speak over 50 languages. There are so many cultures—so, so many cultures—and all those cultures have their own stories."

From Greek myths like the story of Prometheus to European fairytales like Hansel and Gretel to American folktales like the adventures of Paul Bunyan, Western stories are widely known and beloved. African stories, however, remain largely unknown on a global scale.

"When it comes to African stories, the story most people tell themselves is a very depressing story: the story of slavery. But if they visited Africa, they would realize that slavery isn't the whole story; it's just a single moment within it," Ibrahim continues. "Just think about what Africa is. It's the birthplace of humanity, and we have not told the stories of that journey and where we came from almost at all. I want to change that."

He wants to change it so much that in 2017 he joined forces with African podcasters Tolu Oloweyfunmi and Olufikayo "Ofe" Adesina to establish Kugali Media, a pan-African entertainment company with a mission to tell African stories on the global stage. Less than a decade later, the trio already is succeeding with projects like Susu, an animated sci-fi miniseries set in a futuristic Lagos, Nigeria.

Produced in collaboration with Walt Disney Animation Studios for the popular streaming service Disney+, which aired the six-episode series in 2024, the critically acclaimed show received three Emmy nominations at the Children's and Family Emmy Awards and was nominated for the AMAZE Awards and the NAACP Awards. *Jwọjọ* is an early volume in a vast anthology Kugali plans to write on behalf of Africa's past, present, and future. Collectively, the tales promise to transform the African workforce, the African economy, and, most importantly, the African experience.

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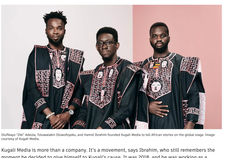
> –Hamid Ibrahim, Kugali Media

Founding a movement



Olufikayo "Ofe" Adesina, Tolowalaiye Oloweyfunmi, and Hamid Ibrahim founded Kugali Media to tell African stories on the global stage. Image courtesy of Kugali Media

Kugali Media is more than a company. It's a movement, says Ibrahim, who still remembers the moment he decided to give himself to Kugali's cause. It was 2018, and he was working as a rigger for British visual effects company MPC, where he contributed to 30 animations for the 2019 remakes of Disney's *The Lion King* and *Dumbo*. Although he had already co-founded it with Oloweyfunmi and Adesina, Kugali at that point was little more than a hobby. Then, suddenly, he had an epiphany.

"An animation project came out of Lagos, and I thought it looked quite cool. So, I showed it to some colleagues," says Ibrahim. "Imagine your kid does a nice drawing, and then you take it to an art critic—without any context—who just rips it apart. And that got me feeling some kind of way. I decided, 'I need to do something about this.'"

"I thought: There's no way a continent with billions of people can fail to produce high-quality work," Ibrahim continues. "There's no way you could convince me that's not possible. That's the thing that really lit a fire inside me."

That fire burned so hot that Ibrahim decided to quit his job to focus full time on Kugali and later became its CEO. He quickly ran out of money and subsisted for months on rice and eggs. But still, he persisted.

Because Oloweyfunmi and Adesina—Kugali's president and creative director, respectively—had grown up reading comics, the company's initial focus was publishing comic books featuring African heroes and storylines.

"We could do the highest-quality possible comic books that could compete with the likes of Marvel Comics for a low cost," says Ibrahim, who notes that a world-class comic book can be produced without exquisite design software for as little as $5 in paper and pencils. "So, it was a very good entry point for us in terms of telling high-quality stories that can compete on the world stage."

The Disney effect

While comic books remain an attractive medium, film and television offer a unique opportunity to achieve Kugali's mission at scale. The company's big Hollywood break came in the wake of a 2019 interview with the BBC, in which Ibrahim publicly declared his ambition to take on Disney—and dominate it—in the African market. The interview went viral and ended up in front of a Disney executive, who subsequently asked for a meeting.

"They reached out to us just to talk," recalls Ibrahim, who says Kugali took the opportunity to pitch Disney a handful of stories hoping that they might want to collaborate on one. Disney liked all of them but decided *Jwọjọ* would be the easiest to produce. It initially gave Kugali a green light to create six 5-minute episodes—then decided to fund full-length episodes of approximately 20 minutes each. "Clark Spencer, who's the president of Walt Disney Animation Studios, said, 'Let's do it.' It was the first long-form series Walt Disney Animation had ever made."

It was a sink-or-swim moment, and the Kugali team was determined to swim. "Everybody on the team was very bold," Ibrahim says. "We were confident in our ability to produce high-quality stuff. We just needed a chance to show what we can do."

Following the success of "Jwọjọ," produced in collaboration with Walt Disney Animation Studios, Kugali Media is developing a new animated version of the comic book, "Land of Tears." Image courtesy of Kugali Media.

In that way, Kugali felt like a proxy for all of Africa. "Generally, the way people think about Africa is with a very reserved mindset," Ibrahim says. "In other words: If somebody is trying to show that where the next big thing is going to come from, they won't even consider Africa."

Big-budget projects with mainstream partners like Disney are an opportunity to change public perception, Ibrahim says. "*Jwọjọ* changed my motivations drastically," he says. "Before *Jwọjọ*, it was all about the fire. I wanted to show what we could do. But after *Jwọjọ*, I was moved quite a bit by the reaction to it."

In particular, he recalls the story of an African friend's expatriate niece. Before seeing *Jwọjọ*, she would cry and complain at the prospect of returning home to visit Africa from the West. After seeing it, she begged her mom to go.

"That was huge," Ibrahim continues. "I knew that the story would be deep for a lot of adults—for the African diaspora. But I never knew it would be that pivotal and monumental for kids, as well. That changed my motivation from a 'let's show them' kind of thing to, 'There's a lot of important work to do here that's very impactful to a lot of people in the world.'"

Upskilling at scale

Hamid Ibrahim shares his vision for Kugali Media and African storytelling at the FTI Superforce Festival 2024 in Antwerp, Belgium. Image courtesy of Kugali Media and FTI Superforce.

Jwọjọ was just the beginning. The series' success was and is its salt. Kugali intends to continue growing the impact of African storytelling with new projects in publishing, film, television, and even gaming. There's just one problem: talent. Or rather, lack thereof.

"The entertainment industry in Africa is a very young industry. Because of that, it's very hard to make a full project there, let alone multiple full projects. Only a few companies can do it," says Ibrahim. As an artist focused on creative leadership, he worries what might happen if the demand for African stories increases, but the supply of African creators doesn't. "I've noticed the same artists popping up on every single major project on the continent, and now there are more projects coming to the continent. If the same artists are being used at the time, that means somebody is going to promise artists that won't be there. The industry is very shy, so one huge error or mistake can set you back years. I'm very worried about that. We need to create new, high-quality artists because right now I don't think we can make more than two high-quality feature films on the continent at the same time."

As a means for upskilling talent, collaborations with companies like Disney are key. "The only way to produce the quality we need is to partner with people who can work at that level while we are growing our own people," continues Ibrahim, who says Kugali's staffing model is heavily dependent on independent contractors based on the ground in Africa—in at least 15 different countries at present. "So, the way I looked at *Jwọjọ* was almost like a university of Disney because all our artists got significantly better."

And yet, partners alone can't do the heavy lifting. Kugali recognizes that it must do its part, as well. For that reason, it has launched Kugali Academy, a company-sponsored talent development pipeline offering free, high-quality education and training to aspiring artists. Because many lack the necessary hardware and software for animation and visual effects, participants can access technology remotely through mobile telecom and virtual desktop services. Upon completion, graduates of the yearlong course gain admission to an internal talent network through which Kugali will select contractors to work on future projects.

It's an organic way to build talent that can serve Kugali and all of Africa. "The idea is almost like trickle-down mentorship," Ibrahim says. "An artist who is good teaches another artist who is almost good and gets them to the point where they're good. Now, we have two good artists teaching more artists. And it just keeps going and going and going."

The initial goal, Ibrahim says, is to train up to 500 high-quality artists with skills in Autodesk Maya and related in-demand technologies to become hireable by industry employers within two years. Even if some projects require offshore labor, that will be sufficient to build a team of creative leaders whose presence on projects can be the genesis for authentic, credible, and legitimate African stories.

African media: Poised for takeoff

What's good for Africa will also be good for audiences, according to Ibrahim, who says people have gotten used to certain types of stories told in very templated and formulaic ways. Because African stories and storytellers are new, they can bring fresh formats and perspectives.

"The industry in Africa is very young, and that means there's a lot of room for play," Ibrahim says. "Things that come from Europe or from Hollywood follow a sort of checklist. There's a machine, and everything goes through the machine. In the African market, the machine doesn't exist, so there's a lot more room to explore different ways of doing things. And that's very exciting."

It's already happening thanks to projects like *Jwọjọ*. But when audiences finally get a taste of African stories—brought to life by African artists and creators—African media and entertainment will take off like a supersonic jet, Ibrahim predicts. "I really believe that Africa is poised to dominate the film industry," he says. "If we can explore our uniqueness and unleash our special stories, we're going to absolutely explode."

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About Matt Alderton

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer specializing in business, design, food, travel, and technology. A graduate of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, his past subjects have included everything from Revere Ballers and mega-bridges to robots and chicken sandwiches. He may be reached via his website, MattAlderton.com.

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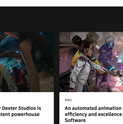

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