

Disney • KUGALI

IWÁJÚ

PRODUCTION INFORMATION

“Iwájú,” a first-of-its-kind collaboration between Walt Disney Animation Studios and Pan-African visual storytelling company Kugali Media, is an all-new original six-episode animated series debuting on Disney+ on February 28, 2024. Set in a futuristic Lagos, Nigeria, the coming-of-age story follows Tola, a young girl from the wealthy island, and her best friend Kole, a self-taught tech expert and loving son from the mainland, discover the secrets and dangers hidden in their different worlds. Kugali Media co-founders and “Iwájú” creators Olufikayo “Ziki” Adeola (Nigerian), Hamid Ibrahim (Ugandan) and Tolu Olowofoyeku (Nigerian), showcase a futuristic depiction of Lagos, Nigeria, in the world of “Iwájú”—one that is bursting with colour, unique visual elements and technological advancements inspired by the spirit of Lagos.

“Iwájú” is directed by Adeola (Ziki), with the other two Kugali Media founders taking on the key roles of production designer (Ibrahim) and cultural consultant (Olowofoyeku). Christina Chen from Disney Animation was the producer of the series, with Jennifer Lee (chief creative officer for Walt Disney Animation Studios) executive producing along with veteran Disney director Byron Howard (“Encanto,” “Zootopia,” “Tangled”). The screenplay is by Adeola and Halima Hudson from Disney Animation. Marlon West, Disney’s acclaimed effects supervisor/head of effects, makes his debut as visual effects supervisor. Fabienne Rawley was the editor.

Featured in the cast are the voice talents of Simisola Gbadamosi (as Tola), Dayo Okeniyi (as Tunde Martins), Femi Branch (as Bode DeSousa), Siji Soetan (as Kole Adesola) and Weruche Opia (as robotic lizard Otin).

The film’s authentic African-influenced music is by renowned Nigerian composer Ré Olunuga (whose credits include music for the 2022 Disney+ original movie, “Rise,” and the BBC film, “Girl”). Animation for the series was produced by the award-winning animation/visual effects company, Cinesite, in several locations around the world (including Montreal, Vancouver and London). Cinesite’s team was led by supervising producer Joel MacDonald with Ellen Poon (VFX supervisor) and Jason Ryan (animation director) helming the crews with support from Adel Abada (associate VFX supervisor), Andrew Gartner and Stéphanie Roy (CG supervisors).

Adeola observes, “Crafting the narrative of ‘Iwájú’ has been a journey of creative alchemy, blending the rich cultural tapestry of Lagos with imaginative leaps into the future. Collaborating with my Kugali co-founders and the visionary artists at Walt Disney Animation Studios has been nothing short of magical. The heartbeat of my hometown

resonates through every scene, and I am thrilled for the world to experience this unique fusion of tradition and futurism."

Kugali Media's president/"Iwájú" cultural consultant Olowofoyeku explains the origin of the title in this way: "Iwájú' is part of a phrase in the Yoruba language that is actually 'Ojó iwájú,' which literally means 'the day ahead' or basically the future. Many of our main characters in the series are Yoruba (one of the main ethnic groups in Nigeria)." Ibrahim, Kugali Media CEO and "Iwájú" production designer, explains, "We wanted to imagine the future of Lagos, set roughly 100 years from now, where the mainland is designed to house as many people as possible in huge towers, and the island where the richest people live is made to look beautiful like an art piece."

Clark Spencer, president of Walt Disney Animation Studios, notes, "Disney Animation has never collaborated in this way with an outside company in its one hundred years of filmmaking. And so this was absolutely groundbreaking.

"Ziki, Tolu and Hamid had this great story that they wanted to tell, and Disney had the knowledge and best experts in the business who knew how to get it done," adds Spencer. "It seemed like an ideal collaboration and an incredible opportunity. Authenticity was critical, and Kugali led the creative process in every way. They brought an authenticity and a reality to the world of 'Iwájú,' including the beauty of the people, the culture, the food, and the music. They also brought great imagination, artistry and their unique storytelling sensibilities."

Jennifer Lee observes, "As a writer and director, Ziki was very thoughtful and had a vision for the series. He knows character, emotion, and has a storytelling talent that is very deep and original with a distinct point of view. Tolu is incredible because he is always curious and thinking about how everything we do as people relates to the world as a whole. I've learned so much working with him. And Hamid has a beautiful sensibility and loves vibrancy, colour and life. He knows how to fill the frame, but at the same time where the focus should be."

Kugali Media is an African-owned and operated storytelling collective spearheading Africa's modern emergence into the media landscape. Founded in 2017 by Tolu Olowofoyeku, Olufikayo Ziki Adeola and Hamid Ibrahim, Kugali Media is dedicated to taking African stories to the world. It has attracted recognition from top companies around the world, as well as paved the way for a generation of new African storytellers to find their voices in graphic novels. Among their notable achievements are record-breaking crowdfunding campaigns, award-winning graphic novels and podcasts. A companion documentary about the making of the series, entitled "Iwájú: A Day Ahead," was created by the teams at ABC News Studios and Walt Disney Animation Studios that created "Into the Unknown: Making of "Frozen 2"), and can be seen on Disney+. It was filmed across three continents, and shows that anything is possible when talent meets opportunity. The documentary was directed by Megan Harding, and executive produced by Amy Astley and Beth Hoppe.

HOW "IWÁJÚ" CAME TO BE:

The origin of the project dates back to 2019 when it came to the attention of Jennifer Lee that a young and innovative Pan-African collective called Kugali was determined to

“kick Disney’s arse in Africa” by taking African stories to the world, and drawing on their rich and unique culture of storytelling. Childhood friends Adeola and Olowofoyeku, both from Lagos, Nigeria, joined forces with Ibrahim (who comes from Uganda) in 2017 to form Kugali as a way of featuring African characters in high-concept fantasy and science fiction stories, rooted in African mythology. They famously crowd-sourced money to launch a comic book anthology, and went on to great success in the world of comics, podcasts, etc.

Lee recalls, “I was lying in bed one morning and reading the news on my phone, when I saw this headline on the BBC about a Pan-African comic book company wanting to kick Disney’s you-know-what. So I thought, ‘This looks fun!’ I watched the video and got to see the guys and see not only their love of comics, but their love of recognizing all the different artists across Africa. I could see they were driven; they were artists, and they were passionate. I was blown away by their storytelling and felt that their vision dovetailed with our own philosophy about filmmaking.”

Ibrahim remembers, “Just imagine you’re sitting there, young, creative and ambitious, and you’ve just called out the granddaddy of visual entrainment, and then somebody reaches out saying that they’re from Disney and they want to talk to you. At first, you don’t believe them.”

Adeola was skeptical at first when Disney came calling. Previous discussions with other potential partners/collaborators failed to produce any tangible results. He adds, “Things with Disney seemed to be different and so I eventually allowed myself to embrace the possibility that my dream of becoming a storyteller was about to take a huge leap forward, and my faith was ultimately rewarded when I was given the opportunity to come and work on ‘Iwájú.’”

“From the moment Ziki, Tolu and Hamid pitched us the idea for ‘Iwájú,’ we knew it was something unlike anything we as a Studio had ever done before,” adds Lee. “We had done lots of short films, and many features, but we hadn’t actually done a series before. Working with Kugali just felt it would give us something new to build together.”

BRINGING KUGALI’S CREATIVE VISION TO LIFE: A UNIQUE COLLABORATION WITH WALT DISNEY ANIMATION STUDIOS

Choosing from three story ideas pitched by the Kugali creative leadership trio, “Iwájú” was selected and approved to move forward as a series for Disney+. This being Kugali’s first venture into the area of animation, a team of top Disney Animation artistic and technical talents was assembled to work alongside the filmmakers as they achieved their goals. Christina Chen, a fourteen-year Disney Animation veteran with experience in the area of production finance, came on board as producer.

“This collaboration was unprecedented in many ways,” observes Chen. “It’s been an incredible experience from start to finish. First of all, the show had a very international element to it with Ziki and Hamid working from London, and Tolu based in Lagos. Disney is such a well-seasoned company and we’ve been making films for a very long time, and Kugali is a very young company just getting started in animation. There was so much to learn on both sides and we were all forced to think outside the box.

Culturally, their perspective on filmmaking was different than ours, and it was really illuminating and made us all stronger and more efficient across the board. Working in a virtual way across several time zones also challenged us to work in a different and more productive way.”

Marlon West, who has supervised effects for many of Disney Animation’s most popular films (“Frozen,” “Moana,” etc.) over the course of his more than 30-year career at the Studio, stepped into a new role as Visual Effects Supervisor. He was working on the Academy Award®-winning film “Encanto” when he became aware of the “Iwájú” project. “I was so intrigued by the idea of a science fiction project set in Africa that was also kind of a crime story that I knew I had to work on this film from the moment I watched their pitch reel,” recalls West. “As a black man working in the industry and at Disney, I really wanted to help these fellows make the film they wanted to make and to develop as storytellers. It was probably one of the smartest moves I’ve ever made. I would have regretted watching this on Disney+ and seeing that someone else had done it.

“As a visual effects supervisor, you’re in charge of everything visually in the production,” he adds. “It was my responsibility to keep the aesthetic of the Studio while at the same time supporting Kugali’s storytelling and creative vision. It was a wonderful collaboration and I’m proud that we were able to help present their vision and their story in a way that lived up to the Disney standard.

“I loved that this story was set in the future and featured flying cars that had a custom-made quality to them, robots, and other futuristic elements with a uniquely African design to them,” observes West. “There’s a stylization to the characters that’s different than what we do. Some of them have harder edges. They look like Disney quality, but they have their own unique look. There’s a brushstroke, painterly quality to the background, which is what they were trying to achieve.”

With regard to crafting the story and writing the scripts for “Iwájú,” the process began with Adeola providing a complete framework for the series, along with rough drafts for each episode and initial character development. Halima Hudson from Disney Animation got the plum assignment of collaborating with him to add comedy and levity where needed, track the character arcs, and plus the story wherever possible. Hudson recalls, “The story wasn’t like anything we had ever done before at Disney, and I knew from the start that I wanted to work on it and support Ziki’s vision. I became enamored with Tola and her character. She wanted to be seen and to be loved in a specific way, and I really identified with her. I loved this little girl and thought she was a great, great character. I have a lot of friends from Lagos, and I began tapping into their perspective and learning as much as I could from them, YouTube videos, the Kugali comics and other sources. Ziki and I had a lot of fun conversations about Tola, and how she was the anchor of the story. We worked together to grow the characters and expand the story.

“Working with Ziki on the scripts was a great experience. Whenever it was time to do revisions, we would talk about what made sense for the story. There was a lot of back and forth, and he always gave me the freedom to explore my instincts for the characters. This was a first for so many of us on the film – me as a screenwriter for Disney, Ziki as a director, Christina as producer, Marlon as a visual effects supervisor,

and Hamid as a production designer – and we all bonded over the experience. We were all in this together and we wanted to make it great. Jennifer Lee has been my mentor for many years, and she was an incredible inspiration and support throughout the whole process. She was always there to give notes about dialogue, cheer me on and serve as a resource for anything I needed.”

“I’m so proud to have worked on this series, and to have collaborated with Ziki and his partners at Kugali in bringing his vision to life,” adds Hudson. “Even though the story is culturally specific, I think people are going to relate to it because it is such a universal story.

MEET THE CAST OF “IWÁJÚ”:

TOLA MARTINS (voiced by Simisola Gbadamosi) is an aspirational 10-year-old girl who refuses to accept the world for the way it is and prefers to see it for how it should be. She ultimately inspires the people around her. Her empathy and perceptiveness allow her to understand and connect with others.

TUNDE MARTINS (voiced by Dayo Okeniyi) is Tola’s father, who has little time for his daughter because of his dedication to work, and pressure from his hard-driving boss. He is a wealthy tech executive involved in creating robotic guardians to help protect children from a wave of kidnappings. Although he comes from the mainland, his success and fortune has caused him to forget his humble beginnings.

BODE DeSOUSA (voiced by Femi Branch) is a seven-foot giant of a man, who grew up in relatively poor circumstances and runs an underground criminal network. He sees himself as a sort of Robin Hood figure, but he basically keeps the riches he collects. Bode refuses to take responsibility for his circumstances and feels that everything he does is the fault of the wealthy. He believes money equals power and freedom.

KOLE ADESOLA (voiced by Siji Soetan) is Tola’s best friend. Born into relative poverty, he works at the home of Tunde and Tola doing gardening and other work, and gets ensnared in Bode’s kidnapping scheme. With an ailing mother and few prospects to improve his lot, he finds himself backed into a corner that tests his true character. He is scared to hope and wish for more in life.

OTIN (voiced by Weruche Opia) is an agama lizard robotic pet that Tunde gifts to an unsuspecting Tola. Designed for child security, throughout the course of the series Otin develops greater self-awareness and a more nuanced understanding as she struggles to reconcile her straightforward coding with the complex reality of the world.

CAPTURING AUTHENTIC LOCATIONS AND THE FLAVOURS OF LAGOS:

For the Kugali filmmakers, it was extremely important to bring authentic aspects of Lagos to viewers in the form of real places, delicious foods, and other quintessential African attitudes and experiences. To this end, the series features locations that exist in the real-life Lagos and a variety of Nigerian delicacies that are unique to that country. One of the major locations in the story is Ajegunle Market. According to Adeola, “Ajegunle is where Kole and Bode are from. We chose it to be a focal point because one of the most interesting aspects of the mainland to me are the markets and the chaos. Because Tola has this fascination with the mainland, we needed somewhere

that would warrant that fascination. It was a great place for Tola to go on a journey of discovery.”

Other actual places depicted in the series include Ikoyi, an affluent neighbourhood in Lagos, and Murtala Muhammed International Airport.

With regard to foods, the series features such authentic Nigerian dishes as pepper soup (spicy and often served with goat meat), puff-puff (deep fried dough; like an African beignet), Agege bread (which is soft, fluffy and sweet), among others.

“When Tola goes to a mama put, a restaurant at the market, she eats such typical Nigerian food as swallow, the closest western analogue would be mashed potatoes,” says Adeola. “It’s a sort of tuber that is mashed up, cooked and eaten alongside a type of soup. You mix the soup with some fried meat, vegetables, spices and eat them all together.

“Tola is fascinated by the local authentic food,” he continues. “It is incredibly delicious, full of flavour and visually striking all at the same time.”

EPISODE GUIDE:

EPISODE #1/ KUGALI

Set in futuristic Lagos, Nigeria, this original animated series tells the exciting coming of age story of Tola, a young girl from the wealthy island, and her tech-savvy best friend, Kole. On her 10th birthday, Tola visits the mainland for the first time and also receives a surprising birthday gift from her father, Tunde.

EPISODE #2/ BODE

From his high-tech lair, villainous Bode sets his sights on Tola as his next kidnapping victim and mysteriously seeks out Tola’s friend, Kole. Meanwhile, Tola and Kole learn more about each other’s lives and perspectives.

EPISODE #3/KOLE

Against her father’s wishes, Tola goes to the mainland and has her “best day ever” exploring with her best friend, Kole. Otin, a robotic lizard given to her by her dad, keeps a watchful eye on her, but has challenges keeping up. Bode takes advantage of Kole’s ailing mother to force Kole to make a terrible choice between family and his friend.

EPISODE #4/TUNDE

Tola’s father, Tunde, the wealthy CTO at a company which creates tech to protect children from kidnapping, desperately tries to rescue his daughter from the scheming Bode as he raises the stakes. Tola tries to take in her surroundings and makes key observations while Kole, being pursued by Bode’s henchman, is saved by Tola’s pet lizard robot.

EPISODE #5/OTIN

Kole discovers the truth about Tola’s pet lizard, Otin, a robot created by her dad, Tunde, to protect Tola. Kole and Tunde team up to find and rescue Tola. Otin tracks down Tola, and leads Kole and Tunde to Bode’s hideout. The robot struggles with power issues while Tola’s two rescuers are taken prisoner by Bode and his accomplices.

EPISODE #6/TOLA

Bode makes bold new demands and takes Tunde and Tola back to their home on the Island to hack into Tunde's company database. Joined by Kole, Otin and some unlikely heroes, Tola creates a grand plan to save the day. Bode is apprehended and Tunde and Tola agree to do better moving forward.

CREATING THE WORLD OF "IWÁJÚ"/ PRODUCTION DESIGNER HAMID IBRAHIM ENLISTS AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM OF ARTISTS:

As production designer for "Iwájú," Hamid Ibrahim was in charge of the look of all the visual elements and building the entire world from architecture, foliage, character design, to a variety of futuristic technology. He drew inspiration from a group of top African artists and designers from such countries as Uganda (his native country), Kenya, Sudan, and, of course, Nigeria. Helping him to design costumes authentic to the region was animator and fashion designer, Adebimpe Adebambo.

"When we started working on 'Iwájú,' I'd never been to Lagos," says Ibrahim. "But Lagos is so different from Uganda in the way there is that sense of constantly pushing yourself forward. There's a way that it just wills itself to be what it wants to be. It was really nice working with artists who lived in Lagos because it helped me have a starting point from people who knew what Lagos was versus what people think Lagos is. We were trying to make this show a love letter to Lagos and the spirit of the people there.

"As I give direction on what to draw, they give me back something, and we go back and forth," he adds. "In Lagos, for example, you might have a really tall, beautiful building, and right next to it, might be a goat farm. There's always traffic and people hawking their wares like bottled water or snacks."

Christina Chen notes, "Being from Uganda, I think Hamid was able to approach being a production designer for the series with an idea of what's really gettable and digestible from an audience standpoint while also being culturally relevant."

Ibrahim notes, "One of the ways a lot of people identify themselves as African is by what they wear; their traditional way of dressing. In Lagos, a lot of them would wear Ankara designs, which is patterns with a lot of colour in them."

"The indigo fabric that I suggested for Tola's outfit is special to Nigeria," explains Bimpe. "The particular design that I chose, a cowrie shell, is significant in so many ways. It's from the sea and Lagos is called the 'place of aquatic splendor' or center of excellence. But the cowrie was also a form of legal tender in Nigeria, and seemed appropriate for the daughter of a wealthy man.

"Hamid wanted Bode, our villain, to wear an Agbádá, which is basically a big stately three-piece suit," she adds. "Everything about him had to be big. Jumbo coral beads, lots of rings, a fancy watch."

In creating the futuristic world of Lagos for "Iwájú," Ibrahim and his team of artists wanted to take the city as it is today and amplify that in a futuristic sense.

“In Lagos, we have the mainland and the island with an actual body of water separating the two areas,” says Ibrahim. “One side of Lagos is filled with mostly wealthy people, and the other side is not as wealthy as the other one. To have the wealthy side be unique and speak to the culture of Lagos, we designed it to have sculptured buildings as if the rich folks were living in an art piece that represents Lagos. On the mainland, we go all to extremes where houses are made out of travel containers modified into houses.”

THE MUSIC OF “IWÁJÚ” – RÉ OLUNUGA:

To get the right musical moods, emotions and accents for “Iwájú,” the filmmakers turned to Nigerian-born composer Ré Olunuga, who served as the founder and creative director for the Lagos Philharmonic (composed of as many as 75 musicians).

“I was blown away with the story, the ambition and the warmth,” says Olunuga. “All of the social elements are such a strong part of the story, and people such as myself who grew up in Lagos will recognise them.”

“The music of ‘Iwájú’ presented me with a really good opportunity to imagine what music could be like in the future of Lagos,” he continues. “Lagos is a unique city unlike any other, and we wanted to create a musical aesthetic that could truly exist in the future but be comfortable now. Most of the music is orchestral, classically based, but we use the instruments in ways that are a little strange and interesting. We have harp duets along with a fusion of African instruments and performers. We have phrases from Afrobeat to highlife, and even modern pop. Our goal was to create something recognizable and familiar to everyone watching it right now, but also representative of an imagined future.”

Olunuga worked with some of the best musicians in the world in creating the music for “Iwájú” and was thrilled to be able “to dream as big and as complicated as I want when I’m writing the music.”

“Working with Ziki has been great,” adds Olunuga. “We speak the same language and we grew up in the same city. What he reaches for in his storytelling, is similar to what I reach for when I’m trying to tell a story musically. He’s allowed me to take chances and he’s trusted me with crafting the aesthetic for the score.”

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS:

OLUFIKAYO ZIKI ADEOLA (Director/Screenwriter/Original Story) is an award-winning international filmmaker and entrepreneur, as well as co-founder and former CEO of Kugali Media, the African-based media company created in 2017, which publishes African comics from across the continent and promotes African storytelling through augmented reality, comics, animation and games. Adeola is based in London, but production on the series has involved talent working remotely from Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Kenya, London, Montreal and Burbank.

Born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, Adeola spent the last years of his childhood in the United Kingdom. He studied creative writing at City University in London, where he found guidance and a community within the entrepreneurship team, and where he wrote his first screenplay.

Authoring his first graphic novel, “Iku” was the next milestone on his road to success. Among his earliest influences were cartoons, comics and Disney Animation. He found the soundtracks and scores for Disney films resonated with him and proved to be inspirational in his creative process throughout his career. Adding to his desire to become a storyteller was a love of manga and anime, particularly shows like “Dragon Ball Z” and “Naruto.” Also fueling his imagination were such manga series comics as “Fullmetal Alchemist” and “Berserk,” which showed him what was possible in terms of storytelling through art and animation, and shaped his own creative vision as a storyteller.

Adeola joined his childhood friend Tolu Olowofoyeku, along with Hamid Ibrahim, in co-founding Kugali, a fledgling media company with the goal of creating a platform to provide millions of fans with stories inspired by African culture using animation, art, virtual and augmented reality. It began modestly in 2015 with a weekly podcast on Geek Culture (called Tao of Otaku and later the Kugali Podcast) and launched more formally in 2017. A curated website showcasing the best art, comics, gaming and animation from the African content followed. Soon after, they began to produce their own comics, including “Oro” and “Iku.” A Kugali anthology, the first-ever anthology to feature science fiction and fantasy stories from six different African countries, proved to be a huge success. The next project was to create a mobile app making the comics more accessible and allowing them to delve into the augmented reality space. Kugali became an official lens for Snapchat, where their augmented reality filters have received more than 50 million views, over 42 million plays, and more than 2 million shares. Adeola is grateful to his father for always pushing him to do his best, and for his endless support. He also praises his lovely sisters for believing in his dreams.

HAMID IBRAHIM (Production Designer/Original Story) is an award-winning creative executive as well as cofounder and CEO of Kugali Media. He was born in Uganda and moved to Kenya one year later, where he spent the next nine years of his life. His interest in art dates back to this period of time, when he saw a commercial featuring Mona Lisa, and began a lifelong fascination and appreciation for Leonardo DaVinci. Another early childhood influence was Walt Disney Animation Studios’ 1994 animated classic, “The Lion King.” He felt a love and connection with the film even before he could fully understand it, because the characters spoke Swahili. Revisiting the film in his teenage years had a significant impact on Ibrahim, and it remains his favourite animated feature of all time. It was then that his big Hollywood dream – a dream to make something that would touch people all over the world – was born, although he didn’t really believe it was possible for him.

After nine years in Kenya, Ibrahim returned to Uganda to live with his grandmother, while his mother moved to London in search of better work opportunities. Just before he turned 18, he was reunited with his mother in the United Kingdom. Arriving with just a small suitcase, a pencil and an A3 art book, Ibrahim was unprepared for how difficult it would be to adjust and the intense culture shock he would experience. Excelling in math and physics, he originally set his sights on becoming an architect, but stumbled into an Animation and Games Design course while studying at West Thames College. His dream of working on a big Hollywood film re-emerged stronger and clearer than ever

before, and he began seeing the art world as a viable option for a career. Committing himself fully to his goal, he focused all his efforts on his studies and began developing the confidence he needed to succeed in an industry that was new to him.

His hard work paid off and he was accepted to every university to which he had applied. He went on to study 3D Modelling and Animation at the University of Herfordshire, while also working several part time jobs to make ends meet. During his daily 2-1/2 hour bus commute, he downloaded an app on his phone and learned how to code (as he realised it was essential to becoming a rigging technical director) – which he considers one of his proudest achievements.

As a young creative who was so inspired by Disney Animation’s “The Lion King,” Ibrahim experienced a new wave of inspiration when he heard that a CG remake of that film was being made, and that London-based effects house, MPC (The Moving Picture Company), would be working on the film. It became the only company that he wanted to work for, and he tailored his creative work and every effort to getting a job there. The academic gamble paid off when MPC offered him a job and his dreams were fulfilled. After his first day of work, he shed a tear for the first time since his childhood. After years of tireless hard work and dreaming, this achievement was the highlight of his career, and nothing short of poetic. He went on to work for the company on such other major Hollywood films as “The Darkest Minds” (2018), “The Predator” (2018), “Dumbo” (2019), and “Dolittle” (2020).

When he met Kugali’s Tolu Olowofoyeku (former Chief Technology Officer) and Olufikayo Ziki Adeola (former Chief Executive Officer), it was clear that they were on the same page and truly kindred spirits. After just over a year working at MPC, Ibrahim saw a preview for an African animated short, “Malaika,” which he considered one of the best (and coolest) animated films centered on African culture. This led him to a new dream of finding a way to elevate African visual storytelling. He was working with Kugali for about a year before he decided to officially leave MPC and work full time with them in 2018. Today, Ibrahim serves as Chief Executive Officer and Head of Creative Operations for Kugali. The first iteration of the company was in 2015 with a weekly podcast on Geek Culture (called Tao of Otaku). A curated website showcasing the best art, comics, gaming and animation from the African content followed. Soon after, they began to produce their own comics, including “Oro” and “Iku.” Ibrahim brought his skills in visual effects and animation to the company, and helped elevate Kugali from a producer of comics to an entertainment company. A Kugali anthology, the first-ever anthology to feature science fiction and fantasy stories from six different African countries, proved to be a huge success. The next project was to create a mobile app making the comics more accessible and allowing them to delve into the augmented reality space. Kugali became an official lens for Snapchat, where their augmented reality filters have received more than 50 million views, over 42 million plays, and more than 2 million shares.

With all his accomplishment at such a young age and in such a short span of time, Ibrahim continues his commitment to giving back. He started a charity to help speed up the use of technology and tech education in Uganda, both for sciences and the arts. He wants African stories to be mainstream and the best that they can be, and he has

ambitious plans (through Kugali) to develop African talent and create opportunities to showcase them.

TOLU (TOLUWALAKIN) OLOWOFOYEKU (Cultural Consultant/Original Story) is a pioneer in the Nigerian video game industry and co-founder, president, and head of publishing of Kugali, the African-based media company formed in 2017, which publishes African comics from all across the continent and promotes African storytelling through augmented reality, comics, animation, and games. Drawing on his years of experience across various professional and artistic spaces, his current roles include directing the vision of Kugali's narrative roster – when he's not making video games.

Born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, Olowofoyeku developed an interest in comic books, video games and animation from the age of five. His knowledge and curiosity were fed as a child by a set of encyclopedias which initiated his focus on science. He credits his father for being super supportive of his creative dreams, and for raising him and his brothers (following the death of his mother when he was just 11 years old) with the attention and nurturing they needed to pursue their dreams. Disney animated features such as “Aladdin,” “The Lion King,” “Hercules,” and “Mulan,” were important influences growing up, and he would watch them repeatedly.

But it was anime and video games that had the greatest impact on his creative style and aspirations. He cites such classic anime programs as “Dragon Ball Z,” “Digimon,” “Naruto” and “Code Geass” as being among his favourites in shaping his understanding of what visual entertainment could be. Video games have long been his favourite form of entertainment, with “The Legend of Zelda” series being his all time favourite. Also contributing to his creative instincts was a love of storytelling stirred by reading everything from classic literary allegories like Black Beauty and Gulliver's Travels, to more modern tales like the epic George R. R. Martin A Song of Ice and Fire books and the Animorphs science fantasy series.

Olowofoyeku helped form the first iteration of Kugali in 2015 with a weekly podcast on Geek Culture (called Tao of Otaku and later the Kugali Podcast). A curated website showcasing the best art, comics, gaming and animation from the African content followed. Soon after, they began to produce their own comics, including Oro and Iku. A Kugali anthology, the first-ever anthology to feature science fiction and fantasy stories from six different African countries, proved to be a huge success. The next project was to create a mobile app making the comics more accessible and allowing them to delve into the augmented reality space. Kugali became an official lens for Snapchat, where their augmented reality filters have received more than 50 million views, over 42 million plays, and more than 2 million shares.

Olowofoyeku often volunteers, leads and participates in projects that engage the youth, ranging from workshops to events at his local church. He was also a part of the team that hosted West Africa's first skating marathon in 2013.

CHRISTINA CHEN (Producer) first joined Walt Disney Animation Studios in 2010 as a financial analyst on “Big Hero 6,” and makes her producing debut on “Iwájú.” In that

role, she served an integral role in helping the Kugali creative team achieve their vision for the series by coordinating and overseeing the creative and technical efforts of an international production comprised of Kugali, Disney Animation and the Cinesite teams. Born and raised in Irvine, California, Chen received a business degree from the University of California, Berkeley in 2008. She launched her professional career with a two year stint as an assurance associate at the accounting firm of Ernst & Young in San Francisco. A lifelong love of movies and Disney animation, along with a fascination with the ABC television series, “Lost,” led her to seek a job at The Walt Disney Studios. An opening at Walt Disney Animation Studios presented itself, and she began working in the production finance and planning side on such feature film projects as “Frozen 2.” This grew into a leadership position with the Studio. Other films that she worked on include “Moana,” “Encanto,” and the animated shorts “Feast” and “Us Again.”

HALIMA HUDSON (Screenwriter) brings her love and talent for writing to her breakout role as a screenwriter (partnered with Olufikayo Ziki Adeola) on “Iwájú.” Fulfilling a dream that began in seventh grade, and which grew stronger through her studies in screenwriting at Columbia College, Chicago, Hudson worked in close collaboration with the Kugali team and helped to shape the character development and arcs, provide humour, and enhance the story.

Hudson started at Walt Disney Animation Studios in 2011 as a production secretary on “Wreck-It Ralph,” and went on to serve in that capacity on such other popular Disney animated features as “Frozen,” “Big Hero 6,” “Moana,” and “Frozen 2.”

Born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, Hudson moved to Los Angeles in 2009, and began doing freelance work as a production assistant and writer on a variety of projects for various studios. At Walt Disney Animation Studios, she was mentored by chief creative officer, Jennifer Lee, and served as a writer’s assistant on “A Wrinkle in Time” and a sounding board on several animated features. Prior to this assignment, Hudson was working in a creative relations role for Disney Animation, helping to identify and cultivate promising filmmaking talents.

MARLON WEST (Visual Effects Supervisor) oversees the entire image production pipeline, from early visualization of story ideas through delivery of final imagery, for Iwájú.

West has been with Walt Disney Animation Studios since 1993 when he came aboard as a trainee effects animator. His credits include “The Lion King,” “Pocahontas” and “Chicken Little” as effects animator; “Tarzan” as visual effects animator; “Fantasia/2000” as assistant effects supervisor; “Atlantis: The Lost Empire” and “Winnie the Pooh” as visual effects supervisor; the short “How to Hook Up Your Home Theater” as effects supervisor; and “The Princess and the Frog” as effects animation supervisor. He served alongside Dale Mayeda as effects supervisor for 2013’s Oscar®-winning feature film “Frozen,” the Oscar®-winning short “Feast,” and the worldwide hit film “Moana.” He was also head of effects, along with Mayeda, on “Frozen 2,” the highest-grossing animated feature of all time, and alongside Erin V. Ramos and David Hutchins as head of effects on the Oscar®-winning “Encanto.”

Prior to joining Disney, West worked for Encyclopedia Britannica on several educational films in Chicago. He painted and animated on The Beastie Boys' music video "Shadrack" and animated pixie dust for the Michael Jackson "California Raisin" commercial. West's first animated features were "Rover Dangerfield" and "Bebe's Kids."

West was 7 years old when he checked out a book with a picture of stop-motion animation and set his sights on a job where he could bring his toys to work. He studied film and writing at Columbia College Chicago, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree.

RÉ OLUNUGA (Music) is a Nigerian composer of multi-genre orchestral and experimental music. With a unique approach to instrumentation that imbues his music with an unmistakable sense of engagement and tactility, Re's work spans across film and TV soundtracks to ambitious art pieces and even a dalliance with the mainstream through collaborations with commercial recording artists.

Olunuga's is a varied career to date but above all he considers himself to be a storyteller, with music being the medium he is most drawn to. His influences tend to be non-musical, like memories of how it felt to be a child wandering around his grandmother's house in Yaba or the mind-expanding sensation of reading the works of Philip K. Dick and Octavia Butler.

His credits include the 2022 film for Disney+, "Rise," which tells the story of the Adetokunbo family's journey from Nigeria to Greece to NBA superstardom. The score is his interpretation of classic orchestral Disney film music with the inclusion of traditional African phraseology, rhythms and instruments. Like all his work, "Rise" finds Re exploring the kind of complex emotions that can't be put into words, but feel stirring and true. The composer also provided the BIFA-nominated, intimate score for the 2022 BBC Film, "Girl."

Despite now spending a large amount of time between London and Los Angeles, Olunuga still considers Lagos as the geographical heart of all his endeavors. He is founder and artistic director of The Lagos Philharmonic and is working on the development of the first symphonic concert hall in the city.