

UGANDA'S DEVELOPMENT: IS CULTURE HOLDING US BACK

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i) Introduction

Culture is broadly defined as a system of collectively held beliefs and values which are passed on from generation. These are always passed on in form of knowledge and skills intended to improve the lives of their beneficiaries by helping them to tame and exploit their environments. The ways in which these values and beliefs are expressed help to distinguish members of one community from those of others.

Like many colonized nations, Uganda suffered the widespread denigration of its culture and value system's, and even long after independence the scars from this protracted assault are still obvious. Hence the widely held, but false, perception that anything that relates to our culture like dress, food, dance, literature, and generally our indigenous knowledge, is antiquated, anachronistic with modern ways of life and offers little prospect in economic and social advancement of individuals and society in general.

Nothing could be further from the truth. And that is what brings me to today's topic: *Uganda's Development: Is culture holding us back.*

I would answer this question in the negative with a loud No. Why do I answer this way?

ii) Precedents

- 1) Precedents from other countries show that most cultures which have embraced, perfected and commercialised some aspects of their cultures have reaped massive benefits from them. Take the popular adage of the Indians: "Britain conquered India with gunpowder, and Indians conquered Britain with curry powder." I think that goes without saying, because Indian restaurants have spread everywhere in the world and with them employment, export for spices, financial returns to investors and respect Indian culture and cooking.

Like the Indians, most cultures have tried to make their mark on the world dining habits – Chinese, Italian, Swahili etc. Ugandan or its subcultures are yet to make a mark.

The same could be said of music, dress, medicine, crafts and other cultural practices from different parts of the world. Go to any city in the world and you will find several Lebanese restaurants, Ethiopian dress, Congolese music etc.

Not only do these activities create employment and business opportunities, but they promote international understanding between people, institutions and countries.

Uganda is one of the African countries with the richest culture diversity and heritage. During the colonial period and the early post independence years, attempts were made to exploit these culture through promotion of musical troupes, national dress, and strengthening the Uganda museum and the National Theatre, and, of course, Makerere

iii) Past Decline

University was a vibrant centre for research and publishing in many fields, including culture.

The political fallout between the central government and Buganda, and the subsequent abolition of kingdoms all over the country removed major players in the drive for cultural conservation and popularisation. This standoff led to a decline in Government interest and support in cultural activities, and this is reflected in the luke warm attitude of all national institutions towards culture, long after other sectors of society have undergone major rehabilitation over the last two decades.

- All around us we here of Makerere University scientists inventing electric cars but I have not heard of any successful attempt to modernise our traditional xylophone or banana juice.
- We hear of Shakespeare books being recommended on our school reading and examination lists, but hardly of any Ugandan author with a typical Ugandan story being popularized in our classrooms. Instead, the discussion is about Harry Potter.

- Ugandan crafts, music, theatre and film industries have been struggling with occasional success but still lagging far behind those of many African countries like Nigeria, South Africa and even Kenya. Not because we lack the creativity and raw material resources, but because there is no serious investment in those areas.
- Our heritage sites whose histories go back centuries are all in a state of neglect. Depressing stories in the local papers abound with headlines like “Encroachers have taken over Bigo bya Mugenyi”, “Kasubi Tombs burnt down”, “Uganda Museums up for sale”. These and other disheartening stories about the state of our well known and even of the others lesser known heritage sites depict a society that is not sensitized about the value of these assets, which in other countries are a source of much needed revenue from tourists.

Despite these glaring failures to exploit our rich cultural heritage in the past, there is growing and encouraging trends of new and more enlightened efforts that bring culture back to the discussion table, as exemplified by the meeting today. This trend is evidenced in the number of players that are focusing their attention on the potential role of culture in our society. Some of these players and efforts include:

iv) Positive Signs

- Civil Society Organizations like CCFU, whose growing role and influence is helping to raise the profile and relevance of culture in Uganda. We are beginning to see community museums, performing groups and other cultural groups forming and having their voices heard all over the country.
- Private sector players who have traditionally shunned culture as an area of investment are gradually coming on board. I happen to be an investor in several areas of culture, first as a publisher, and more recently in a cultural centre, Igongo that comprises a museum and a crafts and book centre. Besides these investments is a restaurant and hotel is under construction and we have set up a cultural institute to liaise with research and training institutions.

- Universities and research institutions are talking more and more about indigenous knowledge and some have set up structures to carry out research in areas like traditional medicine, food and social practices.

I am using a popular model that is common in the more developed world, where cultural or memory sites are subsidized by the commercial activities around them.

- Government as the national policy maker and budget manager for national development has been listening attentively to voices from influential circles both local and international about the need to make culture a tourists area. Over the last five years, we have seen the introduction of “Thematic Curriculum” in primary schools where local languages will be actively taught in classrooms. Though the move has met some resistance, the government has been firm and is buying books for 27 languages to be distributed in schools. This is important because nothing propagates cultural values better than language.

v) Conclusion

Finally, I think we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. We are beginning to see interactive programming of activities between government, civil society and the private sector to add value to all aspects of our culture. Hopefully the media will join us in this campaign.

Thank you.