

# Uganda Since Independence

BY JOHN NAGENDA

SENIOR PRESIDENTIAL ADVISER, MEDIA & PUBLIC RELATIONS



**JOHN NAGENDA** was born in 1938. He has been Senior Presidential Adviser, Media & Public Relations, for the past 17 years. He is also a writer of novels, short stories and poetry. For the last 15 years he has been a columnist, on politics, social affairs and life in general (web: [www.onemansweek.com](http://www.onemansweek.com)). He has played cricket, including in the First Cricket World Cup in 1975, in England. "To live well" he farms and is involved in business. He is a holder of Uganda's Heroes Medal.

Ugandans enjoying leisure time at Munyonyo, Lake Victoria

There are too many years, fifty-two since Uganda's Independence, to cram into one short article. It would, perhaps, be worse if going back to the time when Great Britain added together all the different peoples and permutations in the region and said, "You are all one country now: Uganda!" It was termed 'The Scramble for Africa'. You can't make scrambled eggs without breaking them. What had been four kingdoms - and a cluster of variously ruled units either side of the Equator, many of them perennially at each other's throats - would consequently live together, under the Great White Queen of Great Britain. Some tribes were split right down the middle. No vote taken!

The year was 1894. The name originated from the ancient kingdom of Buganda. It shows the maturity of most Ugandans that at Independence they did not agitate for a brand new name, in hostility to the Baganda, whom some deemed intolerably stand-offish. Indeed, the warmth of the Ugandan welcome is a constant refrain from the country's visitors: Tourism being one of the key earners for Uganda. On the whole, even during the worst of times, with leaders setting tribe against tribe (or other tribes against Buganda), Ugandans have largely remained together. It isn't necessarily so elsewhere, say in neighbouring Kenya or Rwanda.

The British colonisers, perhaps partly due to this, dubbed Uganda a Protectorate, not a Colony; perhaps also for not settling there in such numbers as, for example, Kenya. But whatever was in a name, Ugandans had a far better time of it than Kenyans, whose retort was duly delivered in the fearsome Mau Mau rebellion! Might it also have been because the young Mr Winston Churchill presciently alluded to Uganda as the 'Pearl of Africa'? Pearls are for protection and cherishment!

When Uganda gained Independence in October 1962, all seemed set for calm sea and prosperous voyage. Its first leader, Apollo Milton Obote, started off reasonably well, but there was trouble ahead and two years later it blew up. A Lango from the North, he considered his problems to be from the Baganda in the Centre, who, with their various institutions, he should smash once and for all. In 1966 he sent his army commander, the subsequently ultra-notorious Idi Amin, to destroy the Kabaka's palace and if necessary the Kabaka (King) himself. This was done, and Kabaka

Mutesa II, also the first President, barely made it to London: ironically, the place to which he had been deported 13 years previously by the British.

In 1971, Obote was militarily overthrown by Amin, who during his rule would unleash a reign of terror never seen before or after in Uganda. He made himself a Field Marshall, bestowing on himself various orders such as CBE (Conqueror of the British Empire). He toyed with the idea of marrying the Queen of Britain and Head of the Commonwealth. Although a quick learner for a near-illiterate, he lacked the depth necessary for a president of a modern state. But ironically, using the huge sums gained from the obtaining coffee prices, he did construct many structures which stand to this day. But cross him and his vast entourage, many from outside Uganda, and you died, and horrifically.

Most Ugandans lived in abject fear, or sought escape. Amazingly to this day his name still reverberates around the world, and years after his overthrow and subsequent death, at the mention of Uganda, his name still comes up, although he fled in 1979. He was overthrown by Tanzanian troops, aided by Ugandan fighters, chief among them Yoweri K. Museveni, who has now been our President since 1986. Before then Presidents came and went, some rapidly. Prof Yusuf Kironde Lule lasted 68 days (Obote quipped from exile: "Lule, 68 years of age; in power for 68 days; what a scenario!")

After Lule came Godfrey Lukongwe Binaisa, for



11 months; both Baganda. Paulo Muwanga, another Muganda, became de facto president, for ten days, warming the seat for his boss Obote's second bite. That would be much worse than his first, only minimally less cruel than Amin's. He was dethroned by Okello Lutwa, an Acholi (cousins to the Lango), for six months. Uganda's fortunes then changed greatly, with rule by terror coming to an end, as a policy of governance. Security and justice for citizens was to be the first consideration, and has become even stronger today.

It is difficult to over-estimate the welcome difference this has been brought to the people of Uganda, both at home and in the region. They walk taller knowing that the terrible bad times have passed, and through the combined efforts of all, those that took direct part in the six-year Bush War, won by the National Resistance Army of the National Resistance Movement, and the rest who gave them support. Their pride is increased when neighbouring citizens say, "We could use some of what you have! Can we borrow?"

In Story, more so than Life (for invention comes easier than reality) exist Heroes (men and women) who occupy a space fit for leading others forward. In their pantheons neither dust nor germs penetrate. Earth Heroes perforce breathe the same air as ordinary people, to say nothing of villains incarnate. Necessarily their heroism cannot be pure but human, with the usual infiltration of human qualities. To expect more is to feel unnecessary disappointment.

Museveni and his Movement (NRM) ditto Army (NRA) have brought a new type of leadership to Uganda. Indeed, Uganda's improvement, beyond all recognition in the last quarter century, is a direct result of that. In Museveni's earliest years as President, no less than George Bush Sr, while still Vice President to President Reagan, had after escorting him to his car, told the then US ambassador to Uganda, "That's a man

I'd like to do business with." Others of varying degrees of importance have reiterated that view. Like other forthright people he can be stubborn to a degree, and finds it almost impossible to see opposing views, but if finally convinced he will undertake new approaches to solve problems. The error constantly committed by those under him is to give in too easily, or not even dare to make suggestions in the first place, often leading to tame cabinets. But this is not confined to Uganda. It is a worldwide phenomenon that over-strong leadership often interferes with Systems.

With the greatly improved security within its own borders, Uganda next turned to others who needed help. Rwanda in 1994 had lost 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu in genocidal government attacks and Museveni had sworn never to let it happen again without helping the victims. His percipience in the Somalia case, with that country being attacked by al Shabaab made him send Ugandan troops to keep the peace there. This happened after America had abandoned its role. Afterwards, when South Sudan asked for help against a coup attempt and when IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) was not able to move on time, Uganda was assigned the job. No longer would Africa have to wait for outside help if the job was within its scope.

Uganda keeps crossing new thresholds elsewhere. Oil has been found in serious quantities. Plans are in place to build new roads; a big new dam is in progress, with smaller ones round the country. The railway is being re-built, to a standard gauge. The economy is buoyant. Agriculture, for which Uganda is well placed due to its outstandingly fertile land and great climate, is about to embark on serious development. All this needs partnerships with serious organisations. As for the already buzzing Tourism, the motto is: "Uganda: Putting the Smile on your Face!" E

**Security and justice for citizens was to be the first consideration, and has become even stronger today**

