When 'chai' means tea, coffee loses the cup

Uganda grows millions of coffee bags every year, yet most are exported. At home, tea reigns supreme and coffee is largely reserved for rituals and special occasions. Local startups are now trying to change that.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

In many homes, offices and roadside kiosks, the question is asked casually and without ceremony: *Tugende tufune chai?* (Shall we go for chai?). No clarification is needed. In everyday usage across Uganda, "chai" almost always means tea — milky, sweet, familiar, and widely understood as the country's go-to hot drink. Coffee, if it appears at all, must announce itself as an exception: *chai wa coffee*.

That small linguistic habit has had outsized consequences. By collapsing all hot drinks into chai and then equating chai almost exclusively with tea, everyday speech has helped shape consumption habits. Tea became the default. Coffee became the deviation.

Uganda produces roughly 6.5–6.9 million 60kg bags of coffee per year (green bean equivalent), with production expected to reach about 6.88 million bags in the 2025/26 marketing year supporting more than 12.5 million people across the value chain and has recently recorded some of the highest export volumes ever, earning over $2 billion for the economy. The country now ranks as one of Africa's top coffee exporters.

While Ethiopia leads in total production, particularly of Arabica beans, Uganda dominates Robusta cultivation and consistently ranks among the world's top 10 coffee producers.

Uganda consumes only about 330,000 bags locally, less than 5 percent of its output. By comparison, Ethiopia drinks nearly half of its harvest, while smaller producers like Kenya also enjoy higher per-capita consumption. In Uganda, over 95 percent of coffee is exported.

A drink without a home

This paradox is striking because coffee has long held deep cultural meaning in Uganda.

Anthropological accounts note certain regions, even though the beverage version never fully became part of everyday family life.

Elders, not children, handled coffee. It was ceremonial, deliberate and scarce, never boiled in a pot for everyone.

That ritual framing mattered. Coffee belonged to formal moments, not daily life. Tea, introduced later but embedded quickly through colonial administration, schools and wage labour, filled the everyday gap. It was cheap, easy to prepare, forgiving in taste and suitable for all ages. Over time, tea claimed the kitchen; coffee kept the shrine.

With tea dominating the word chai and the moments chai implies, visits, breaks, family gatherings, coffee was left with a narrower social niche: specialty cafés, export markets, and occasional consumption.

Economists and industry players have also noted that low purchasing power and entrenched tea culture inherited from the colonial era contribute to low local coffee consumption, with many people simply not knowing why they should drink coffee or believing that it's primarily for foreigners or elites.

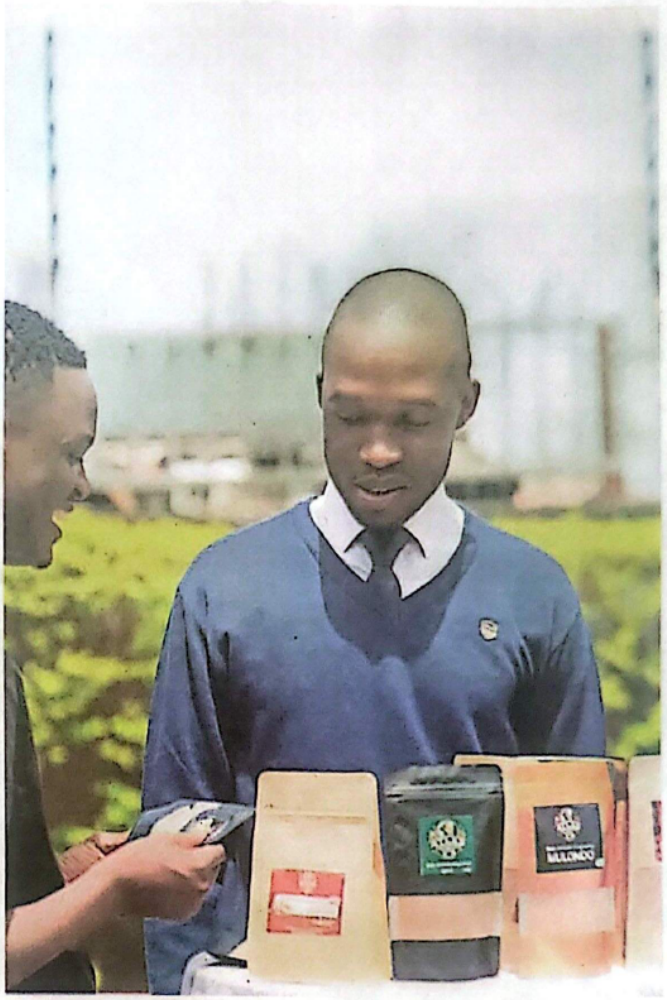
Language reinforced perception. Since chai meant tea, coffee became defined by what it was not: stronger, bitter, adult, medicinal, elite. It was something to "wake you up," not something to sit with. Children grew up tasting tea, not coffee yet it paid school fees for most of them.

Economists often explain Uganda's low coffee consumption through prices, incomes or export incentives. All are valid. But culture matters too. And culture, carried quietly through language, decides what feels normal.

This is the backdrop against which a new generation of coffee entrepreneurs is working, trying not just to sell coffee, but to unlearn decades of habit.

"Validation is where we exist"

For Jonathan Nsamba, found-



Atlas is barely two years old, operating with a team of six youths; four women and two men. Production is modest, about one tonne a year, outsourced through certified facilities at the Consortium for Enhancing University Responsiveness to Agribusiness Development (CURAD) Kabanyolo under Makerere University. The company sources coffee directly from farmers and traders, deliberately avoiding middlemen, and places heavy emphasis on quality control. Nearly three-quarters of the team is trained in coffee quality assessment.

Yet the bigger task begins after roasting: persuading Ugandans as a warm, flavoured, health-associated drink, coffee would have to meet those expectations.

The result was innovation in blends. Atlas introduced spiced coffees infused with ginger, cinnamon, cloves and mulondo (Mondia whitei), ingredients already familiar in Ugandan kitchens and herbal traditions.

"People say, 'I don't like coffee. But when you add ginger or cinnamon, it feels familiar. Coffee is still the main product, about 80 per cent, but the other ingredients help onboard people who would otherwise reject it,'" Nsamba explains.

Atlas Agro founder Jonathan Nsamba inspects packaged coffee ensuring every batch meets the highest local standards.

PHOTO/ GEORGE KATONGOLE

fee's image. Instead of being just caffeine or luxury, it became health-oriented: immunity, warmth, energy. In effect, Atlas translated coffee into the language of chai culture.

Packaging followed the same logic. Recognising that a 250-gram pack can feel expensive to a student or rural household, Atlas sells sachets as small as 25 grams, retailing for about Shs500.

"Even someone in the village can afford it. You are not left out," Nsamba says.

Slowly, the market responded. Atlas moved from supplying only cafes to gas stations, restaurants and retail outlets in Jinja, Mukono, West Nile and Kigezi. Customer referrals increased.

"At the beginning, out of 40 people, one would buy. Now, maybe 20 percent take immediately. Others come back," Nsamba says.

Beyond exports

These efforts coincide with a broader shift in Uganda's coffee sector. For decades, success was measured almost exclusively in export volumes and foreign exchange earnings. Domestic consumption barely featured in policy discussions. That is changing.

The Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UCDA) has set targets to raise local consumption to 15–20 per cent over time, running promotional campaigns, coffee roadshows and barista training.

Urban coffee culture; cafes, specialty roasters, lifestyle branding—has also expanded, particularly among young professionals. But this growth remains urban and concentrated. Rural Uganda, where most coffee is grown, is still largely outside the coffee-drinking economy.

Still, domestic consumption remains a fraction of production with about 330,000 bags consumed locally compared with millions exported each year.

That is why Nsamba insists that consumption must start at the source.

"People grow coffee just to pay school fees. But times have changed. You plant it, you should also enjoy it," he says.

Atlas extends agronomy advice to farmers, promotes agroecological practices and frames consumption as part of sustainability, not just income.

"It's not only about money. It's about people surviving alongside the movement," he says.

Reclaiming the cup

None of this means tea is the enemy. Tea earned its place honestly: through affordability, simplicity and cultural fit. The challenge for coffee is not to displace tea, but to stand alongside it

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