

How museums, heritage clubs are saving culture

Cultural experts warn that without deliberate intervention, many elements of Tooro and Bunyoro heritage could be lost within a generation.

BY ALEX ASHABA

As Western cultural influence continue to shape young people's lifestyles across Uganda, communities in Tooro and Bunyoro sub-regions are increasingly placing their hopes in local museums and school-based heritage clubs to safeguard traditions at risk of disappearing.

Traditional practices such as the use of *mpaako* (pet names), clan storytelling, cultural dances and local food, among others, are steadily being shunned for foreign music, language, and fashion trends.

Elders observe that the shifts are alarming and have said efforts to reverse them should be stepped up.

In response, local stakeholders, including educators, cultural institutions, community leaders, and civil society organisations, are running campaigns to revive interest in indigenous heritage for promotion and preservation.

At the central of this effort are local museum establishments, which are repositioned as active learning centres rather than static exhibition spaces, plus heritage clubs started in schools across the regions.

Cultural experts warn that without deliberate intervention, many elements of Tooro and Bunyoro heritage could be lost within a generation. They argue that modernisation and cultural preservation must coexist, rather than compete.

In the Bunyoro Sub-region, Kagadi District, at the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), the Cultural Assets Centre was established to preserve tradition.

Mr Samuel Tumwesige, the museum manager at the centre, said the idea to establish the centre was born around 2000 when community leaders realised that cultural heritage was increasingly under threat, more so among the younger generations.

"We saw that cultural heritage was at risk due to modern influences. We held community dialogues, and from these, the idea of this museum was born."

The museum was established with support from partners like the Uganda Community Museums Association (UCOMA) and the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda. Today, it stands not only as a repository of traditional artefacts but as a vibrant learning hub connecting schools, elders, and the wider community.

Mr Tumwesige said, "Many young people had never seen these cultural items. When they come here, they ask questions, and we guide them to understand the importance of culture and how it shapes their identity."

He added, "Learning does not end at the museum. Staff conduct school follow-up visits to hear what the learners discovered, which shows the cultural knowledge absorption levels. This creates a two-way flow of knowledge that reconnects generations."



Mr Donozio Kasapuri of the Cultural Assets Centre in Kagadi Town shows visitors artefacts on Tuesday. PHOTO/ ALEX ASHABA

Beyond physical artefacts, the centre is championing intangible cultural heritage, particularly traditional ceremonies that have come under scrutiny in some religious circles.

One such practice is the naming ceremony (*empaako*), a deeply rooted cultural tradition among the Bunyoro and Batoto. Mr Tumwesige said some groups have dismissed it as incompatible with modern religious beliefs, calling it a satanic practice, which negatively affects their efforts to preserve culture.

"There have been misconceptions, with some calling them satanic, but through dialogue between cultural and religious leaders, awareness, attitudes are changing. That way, cultural practices once on the brink are being reintegrated into daily life," he says.

More local museums

For the Tooro Sub-region, where tradition and modernity are increasingly colliding, efforts are also underway to preserve the Batoto culture and safeguard cultural identity.

Ms Alice Basemera, popularly known as "Kogeri," founder of Kogeri Foundation Uganda, said for over a decade, she has been promoting and preserving the Batoto culture.

"I had a small space where I kept a few cultural items I had collected over time, mostly from my participation in cultural competitions. That is how the idea of a Kogeri Community Museum began."

She said the museum houses traditional artefacts, crafts, and historical items that tell the story of the Tooro people and their origin. For many people, especially the youth, the museum offers a rare opportunity to connect with their heritage tangibly.

Basemera said preserving culture requires more than collecting artefacts in the face of an enticing western culture. He added that it demands active engagement, especially among the youth.

Heritage clubs

"With support from the Cross-Cultural Foundation Uganda (CCFU), the foundation started heritage clubs (16 so far). These were designed to provide students with a platform to learn about their culture through storytelling, traditional music

and dance, language, and interaction with elders. She said early exposure is key to nurturing a strong cultural identity. She said, to keep young people engaged and excited about culture, the foundation introduced innovative activities such as *Akaswa ka Tooro*, an annual cultural event bringing together

students from various heritage clubs.

During the event, students compete in various cultural-themed activities, showcasing their knowledge and creativity while celebrating their cultural roots.

Another initiative is "Mr and Miss Heritage," which redefines tradition-

al pageantry by focusing on cultural knowledge and community values rather than physical appearance. Here, participants are evaluated based on their understanding of culture, their involvement in their communities, and their ability to promote traditional values at home.

"We go beyond the stage, visiting their homes and talking to their families. The community plays a big role in assessing whether these young people are truly living the culture."

Marvin Asaba, a heritage club president at St John Mary Vian Community SS in Fort Portal City, said their club was shunned at first as many students said its activities are satanic and do not promote culture.

"We began with five members in 2023, but now have 40 students. I am glad that they realised that cultural promotion is our sole intent because our culture is our identity," he said.

He added that the club engages students in cultural preservation activities such as learning traditional dances, documenting oral histories from elders, and practicing customary greetings and naming systems, among others.

Mr Fredrick Nsimbabi, the deputy executive director of CCFU, said they have supported community museums in capacity building by training museum managers and providing grants to facilitate the documentation of museum collections and support outreach programmes.

"A museum only serves its purpose if it is accessible and known to the public. Without visibility and engagement, its value diminishes," he added.

He said museums are essential for future generations since they are centres of knowledge, research, and education.

RESTORING CULTURE

Unlike conventional museums, the Cultural Assets Centre is interactive and community-driven, where several schools from the Bunyoro Sub-region regularly visit the facility. Here, learners engage directly with artefacts, exploring their meaning, origin, and relevance to everyday life.



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