

Bell-a mu gilaasi: The beauty

Ugandans have a unique ability of turning even the ordinary into something vivid, social, and unmistakably original. From shortened names to the iconic rolex and *kikomando* and endless banter, this piece captures a people whose identity is as fluid as it is proudly distinct. At its heart, it is a love letter to the unmistakable Ugandan-ness that shows up everywhere, all at once. Question is, you as you, *oli ku oligino?*

BY IAN ORTEGA

It was Nankulu Juliana Kagwa, aka Ju, that triggered something in me. You know us Ugandans we have this thing of shortening names. You know we love you, when we find a short name for you, when we baptise you. And we can go off tangents. Because the thing I was meant to say, was simple, you know Ju said Ugandans, we are a special product. And indeed, we are, there is just something about a Ugandan.

That *kajanja*, that *katijjo* that sees us hyping our own, trimming their names, and adding a *ka* accent to it. So a Baraka is a 'Bruh-Ka' in Uganda, Najjera is Jeeras. Now the Gen-Zs are going to claim copyright as though they are not Ugandan. And the thing about Uganda, the moment you land at Entebbe, you become a Ugandan through and through, that Ugandan-ness comes to enter you.

And people always ask, but what is special about Ugandans? What is that thing? To be honest, personally, I have always wondered. Because one week away from home, and it bites. I want to return, to my people, to ask those same questions: 'Muliwa, where is the party at?' Is it at Kyadi obo we are catching the *nyigoo* at Acacia?

We invented timeless

See, I always tell people that even when it comes to time, the Ugandans conquered it. We invented timeless, and classic. Because for us, as in *foras* as Ugandans, we decide what time it is. We decide if it is back to the beginning of time, or we time-travel. Friday can be Monday, and Tuesday can be Sato. Kwegamba if the week is delaying, we just shorten it.

So like Ju said (guess she should see where I am going with this *luseke*), there is a *ka* something about a Ugandan. Party once with a Ugandan, and you want to do it, again, and again. Whether Kampala, whether Jinja, whether Mbarara. Okay, even whether Masaka aka Sakas (reads like circus), we just have this thing, where we pull through with good memories, and vibes.

Chaps claim *mbu* we have food, that is why we are always in that *ka* mood, that is why nothing scares us. It could be true. Because where else? Where else do you go shouting '*mmere yonna*', and then you start those things of 'put my *kinyebwa* on the *tooke*...' And our *ssupu*. Oh Ugandans and *ka-ssupu*. Us and dry food can never. It must have the *ssupu*, the *ssavu*, and ehh, wait, the *Kamulali* and *Kachumbali*.

Greatest privilege

That is why I told that Quex to go demand a monthly salary from Gaava (read Government) because that *Kachumbali* song unlocked something in our nervous system. You know the greatest of privileges is to be a Ugandan. Because to be Ugandan is to be original. The way Ugandans obsess with original, *mbu* they want to be *ku-sure*. So the thing that Ugandans have over other people, over the whole world, there is nothing original like a Ugandan. That is what makes us Ugandan, we are just original.

We are always seeing the humour that the whole world is missing. There is just this *ka*-curiosity in every Ugandan, we love to follow the *ka*-story to proper end. Gwe, there is even a Ugandan who wakes up every morning and randomly trails buses, and cars. You cannot miss a Ugandan anywhere, that *ka*-original essence will waft through. And you will be like, that one, that one, is a Ugandan.

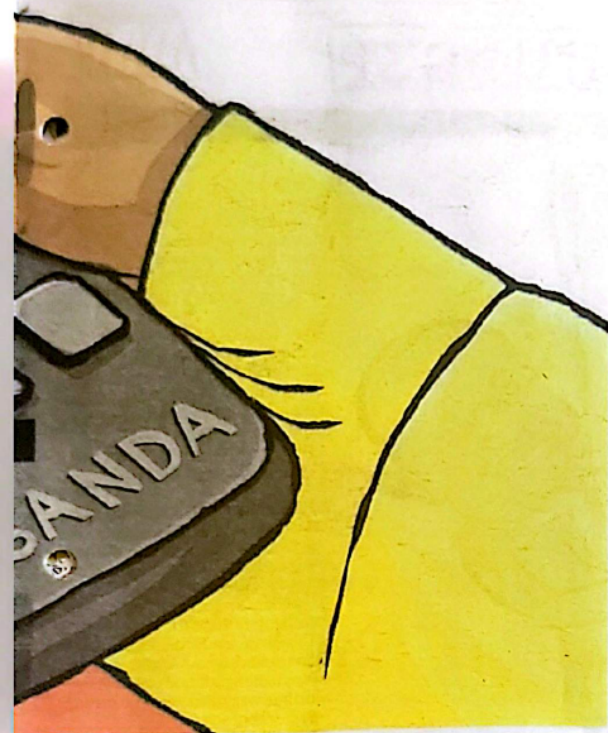
There is this thing about Ugandans, once they love something, they go extra, they stick to it. We love in caps, full brim, full lights. Like, a Ugandan will pick his Bell Lager and they will be telling you everything about it; *mbu* he is the one who pitched the Bell CEO idea, *mbu* *simanya* his girlfriend's cousin brought Neyo. As in Ugandans know everyone, are related to everyone, and they have been part of everything that matters.



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ifful chaos of being Ugandan



And for as Ugandans, we are so original, we live our contradictions, we are everything for everyone. You arrive in Uganda, and in one hour, you can experience 10 lives. You could jump on a boda boda, listen to kiboozi with the dude assuring you he is the one that handles Gaava procurement, drape on a suit, and everyone starts thinking you are gamba n'ogu, arrive at some lounge and men start calling you 'Boss, Senior...' As a Ugandan, you decide who you wanna be. There are chaps here that wake up and are engineers as in yinginiya. All that matters, most important is that you are Ugandan, the original people.

Atte there is this thing about Ugandans, once they love something, they go extra, they stick to it. We love in caps, full brim, full lights. Like, a Ugandan will pick his Bell Lager and that is it. He will be telling you everything about the Bell, mbu simanya he is the one who pitched the Bell CEO idea, mbu simanya his girlfriend's cousin brought Neyo. As in Ugandans know everyone are related to everyone and

that matters.

Just never argue with a Ugandan on anything, he can point at Port Bell and say you see just right there, my family owns two acres. And you are like, you mean in that water? He is like "yeah... lwakuba me I do not want to show off."

A Ugandan is just timeless, connects with all ages, just keeps rebranding, reinventing himself. And there is always a Ugandan twist to everything. Yes, there will be Amapiano, but there will be Ugandan Amapiano. There will be a Rolex watch, but there will be a Ugandan Rolex.

And if you want to crack a Ugandan, you must give them original for original, aura for aura. Like you must be riyo as in real. You be that person who can do Kidandali but also morph into the chap who will enjoy the MJ movie.

You enjoy an outside vacation, but you cannot wait as yesterday to buy that ka-roasted chicken in Lukaya as you head to the countryside, or Nang-Nang and roasted cassava. As long as

Ugandan, then you are an Original. This Ugandaness must always ring the Bell. And if you are this original person, then you are Uganda's very own, as in, like Ju, a Gungas girl who can speak Luganda with ka-accent.

And finally, since we are out of time. You know Ugandans will grab the mic, say, "the previous speakers have already said what I want to say, and without wasting much time..." then they will launch into a five-hour homily.

So finally, it is not Uganda unless we are arguing about those same things. Imagining the rest of the year when Arsenal takes Premier League, and wondering whether the best Rolex is nyanya mbisi or byonna sikilamu. And whether to

eat Kikomando is to be Gumite.

We are Ugandan because original cannot be hidden, we live it, we are it... we find humour in everything... not as coping, but because nothing can take away originality it is written in stone... forever (not that Chameleon song).

And you are not Ugandan until you are wondering whether you belong to stock mpya or stock nkadde. It is in this diversity of identities, though, all these textures, these mosaics of existence, that is a Ugandan.

If you now ask me once again, what does it mean to be Ugandan? To be Ugandan is to be original. And trust me Simi met a Ugandan (probably Bebe Cool) before she composed her Original Baby

song.

And when someone meets you and asks, "Oli Ku Original?" They are asking if you are a Ugandan, so Bell-a mu gi-laasi. And to our very own, the MC Kats, Mzee, the Sheilah Gash, or wait, our Minister omu-bwati, Kasai-what? Kagwa-Njala? Wait, who have I not given shout-outs to in the originals list? Rosie? Og-horn? or our fathers who have been drinking Bell for 75 years now. And you are not a Ugandan until you give shout-outs.

To my Bugos pipo, the campusers at MUBS, the lindos people with fresh tar-mac and if you are Ugandan, then you are our very own. Kati nze nebwentema... unless I hear "nakuha ente..."

