

Lunch with the DM

Religion > African spirituality, in particular, remains widely misunderstood.

'Heritage can be the next big thing in our tourism industry'

On a cold Thursday, between the warmth of the four walls in Sheraton Kampala Hotel, and with a steamed meal before them, Trevor Lutalo picks the mind of Najib Nsubuga, the main man at the Buganda Heritage and Tourism Board.

The rain had just stopped when Najib Nsubuga stepped into the quiet dining space at the Sheraton Kampala Hotel on a cold Thursday afternoon last month. Outside, the sky remained a dull grey, hanging low over the city as if undecided about whether to clear or pour again. Inside, there was warmth and stillness. Nsubuga arrived composed, dressed in a sky-blue striped shirt, a cream paisley tie, and a charcoal-grey suit that fitted him with careful precision. He spoke the same way he looked, measured, calm, and thoughtful, choosing his words slowly, as though each one carried memory.

Earlier last year, he took charge of the Buganda Heritage and Tourism Board with a mandate that sounds straightforward but is deeply complex: protect heritage, preserve culture, develop experiences, and turn history into economic value. As lunch unfolded, it became clear that his work is not only about tourism numbers or visitor trails. It is about identity. It is about memory. And, above all, it is about how Ugandans see themselves.

Reclaiming a living civilisation

For Nsubuga, heritage is not a collection of old buildings frozen in the past. It is something alive, moving through clans, rituals, spirituality, language, and daily life. He explained: "The packaging of our heritage must first speak to our own people. Someone should be able to walk into a space and understand where they come from—the clan of their father, the clan of their mother, even the family they have married into. Heritage must begin with identity."

"People have somehow moved away from their heritage. And the only way we can bring them back is by creating attractive experiences that allow them to engage with it again, not just read about it, but feel it."

If that reconnection happens, he says, the impact will go far beyond culture.

Beyond the one-day itinerary

For decades, Buganda's tourism story has followed a predictable pattern. Visitors arrive in Kampala, tour the Mengo Palace, see the Kasubi Royal Tombs, pass through Bulange, and maybe visit the Bahai Temple or the Basilica at Namugongo. The next morning they are already heading to wildlife parks. Buganda becomes a brief introduction, never the full story. Nsubuga wants to change that completely. "The responsibility to market a destination cannot lie in the hands of one entity. We must work with private players, communities, and experience creators to design journeys that take time."

He pointed to emerging cultural villages, farm experiences, and rural excursions that cannot be completed in a few hours. "There are places where you need three days and you still have not finished the experience. That is the direction we must take, moving from quick visits to immersive stays."

In his vision, Buganda is not a stop-over. It is a civilisation to be explored. Slowly. "If we create a trail around our royal tombs, it cannot take two days. If we design a clan trail, it may take a full week. Tourism grows when people stay longer."



Tourists who are not coming

The most troubling reality for Nsubuga is not foreign arrivals. It is Ugandans themselves. Schools bring thousands of children to heritage sites every year. Adults, however, rarely come, even when entry fees are intentionally low.

"Our biggest numbers come from schools between May and July. But Ugandan adults are still very few. Some sites even receive more Kenyans than Ugandan adults," he explains.

Many citizens, he added, simply do not know these places are open. "Some people don't even know the Mengo Palace is accessible. Yet a Ugandan can have a guided tour for only Shs5,000, while a foreigner pays \$20 (Shs74,000)."

When election seasons approach, foreign visitors often postpone travel. Uganda experienced this again as the 2026 political period drew closer.

"Foreign visitor numbers went down. But a Ugandan is not as afraid of elections as a foreigner. Our strongest alternative should always be the domestic market," he notes. "We must stop thinking tourism is for outsiders. Even internally, you can be a tourist."

Changing the national mindset

Buganda's tourism ambitions sit within a wider national strategy that recognises tourism as one of Uganda's fastest-growing economic opportunities. Collaboration with national tourism planners has improved, and heritage sites are gaining more visibility. Still, Nsubuga believes the deeper challenge is psychological. "The government speaks about tourism as a key sector. But has that vision truly reached the minds of citizens? Do people understand that when one visitor stays for a week, everyone benefits?"

He described a simple chain of impact: "The taxi driver benefits. The fuel station attendant benefits. Farmers in distant villages benefit. Tourism is not for one office, it is for the entire country."

For him, tourism growth is less about campaigns and more about collective belief.

As the conversation deepened, Nsubuga turned to places rarely centred in mainstream tourism, Buganda's islands on Lake Victoria. His recent visit had changed his perspective. "We should not see water as just water. Water is culture. Some of the earliest stories of faith and encounter in this country begin on these islands."

said, hold powerful but under-told histories. "There is so much meaning, spirituality, healing, and origin stories. Yet we have not packaged this knowledge respectfully for people to understand."

African spirituality, in particular, remains widely misunderstood. "People are curious. They ask questions about traditional healing, praise, and worship. But because we have not explained it well, some confuse cultural heritage with witchcraft. That is a gap we must close," he says.

Handled with dignity, he believes, spiritual heritage could become a meaningful tourism niche.

Writing what was never written

Perhaps the most urgent work happening quietly is documentation. For generations, Buganda's knowledge lived in oral tradition, protected by elders and shared around fires. Some resisted writing it down. "There were fears of exposing secrets or losing control of sacred knowledge. But times have changed."

Modern life, he said, has erased the old teaching spaces. "Children wake up at five in the morning for school. By the time families meet again, everyone is tired. The campfire is gone. If we do not document now, we may lose everything."

Two major projects are underway: recording clan histories and publishing clear explanations that separate heritage from superstition.

Behind the philosophy sits a clear economic goal, to grow tourism revenue significantly within five years. Yet Nsubuga insists that numbers alone will not define success. "True success is participation. When Ugandans begin visiting their own heritage, when communities earn from culture, when history becomes part of everyday life, that is when tourism truly grows."

A quiet call to rediscover

By the time our conversation ended, the grey sky outside had softened but not fully opened. Kampala remained suspended between rain and light, much like the future Nsubuga is trying to shape. His voice never rose. His vision arrived gently, sentence by sentence. Before standing to leave, he returned to the idea that guides everything he is building: "Without fully engaging with our heritage, we cannot move to the next level. And that engagement must start with us, the people who belong to this story."

Then, almost as a final reflection, he said: "We must appreciate that a tourist is not only someone from outside. Even internally, you can be a tourist. The moment I stand on these islands, I am a tourist."

A montage of Kabaka Ponda Mutebi II, Edward Rukundo, and the central administrative building of Buganda Kingdom. PHOTOFILE

66

Heritage
The packaging of our heritage must first speak to our own people. Someone should be able to walk into a space and understand where they come from—the clan of their father, the clan of their mother, even the family they have married into. Heritage must begin with identity.

