

Learning ourselves into development

Most Ugandans can describe their country in one word: diverse. We say it easily, sometimes proudly, often without pausing to reflect on what it truly means. We hear different languages, recognise different surnames, and trace different origins. Yet beyond these surface markers, many of us know surprisingly little about the peoples who share this country with us.

We work together, study together, queue together, argue together, and vote together. We share roads, markets, offices, schools, and public institutions. But knowing of one another is not the same as knowing one another. Much of what we think we know is inherited, assumed, or shaped by stereotypes that have never been properly examined.

This short series begins from a simple conviction: national development is difficult without mutual understanding.

In the aftermath of the recently concluded elections, that gap has felt especially visible. Many Ugandans speak of political fatigue, emotional distance, and a sense that the country moves from one electoral cycle to the next without ever settling its deeper questions. Calls for unity are familiar, but unity without understanding is fragile. Before we can talk seriously about healing, reform, or shared futures, we must first learn, patiently and honestly, who we are as a country.

To begin that learning, it helps to remember that Uganda did not always exist as a country. Long before the modern state, this region was home to many historically organised peoples. They governed themselves through different systems of authority, economy, belief, and social organisation. They traded with one another, negotiated alliances, intermarried, competed for influence, and sometimes fought, as all human societies do. Uganda did not emerge from a cultural vacuum; it was built upon already existing social and political worlds.

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Development



Yet many Ugandans grew up hearing a simplified story about that past. It is often said that Europeans arrived to find a continent of "warring tribes." The term tribe, widely used in colonial writing, became a convenient way of describing African societies that Europeans did not recognise as political equals. Over time, the word entered textbooks and everyday language, shaping how Africans themselves came to understand their history. Today, historians increasingly agree that this description tells us more about colonial language than about African realities.

This series does not begin by arguing that point in detail. It simply pauses to note that "how history has been told matters" because the stories we inherit shape how we imagine unity, difference, and belonging long before politics enters the conversation.

Colonial rule rearranged these peoples into a single political unit that later became modern Uganda. Independence delivered a nation-state recognised by the world and governed under one constitution. But political unity arrived faster than social and cultural understanding. The gap between being governed together and truly knowing one another has never fully closed, and it often becomes visible during moments of political tension.

That gap also shows up in everyday life. Modern

Uganda lives with a quiet paradox. We are one country by law and citizenship, yet beyond workplaces and public institutions, many of us retreat, comfortably and unconsciously, into familiar cultural spaces. Weddings, funerals, clan gatherings, thanksgiving ceremonies, and religious events are often organised among people who already know one another. This is not hostility; it is habit. But habit limits learning. And where learning is limited, misunderstanding grows.

Over the coming weeks, this column will explore how Uganda's diversity came to be, how it has been shaped by history, and why understanding it matters for national development today. The focus is not ranking, blame, or reopening old wounds. It is learning.

If Europeans are described as peoples and nations, Africans deserve no less. Language matters because it shapes how we see ourselves and one another. Speaking of Uganda's peoples is not about elevating difference, but about recognising historically organised societies whose stories were folded, often imperfectly, into a single modern state. Understanding that history is a necessary step toward living together more honestly today.

Understanding one another does not resolve all political disagreements, but it replaces assumption with knowledge, and that is where any serious conversation must begin.

A country that can learn calmly is a country capable of healing. Development begins with understanding ourselves.

Next Monday: Before Uganda Was Uganda — how different peoples governed, traded, allied, and disagreed before colonial rule, and what was misunderstood when Europeans arrived.

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