



Bars need tax breaks, too



BLURRY LINES

with Tony Natif

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I am not sure this is the right piece to write this week, given that it is one of the holiest weeks on the Christian calendar but something has ticked me off so hard that I just could not hold myself together. But I also know God is ever merciful, so I will be forgiven for my transgressions.

See, a few days ago, NTV Uganda on their X platform run with this headline: "The Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Stephen Kaziimba Mugalu, called for church leaders to be provided with reliable means of transport to effectively carry out their work". I immediately fired off a question as to why today's clergy need SUVs to reach their sheep while the man on whose foundation their faith

is built used his feet to move through the vastness of Middle East lands, preaching the gospel. I polished it off by reminding online strangers that in fact, churches in Uganda are tax exempt, so they are effectively collecting from a resource pool they do not contribute to.

A devout Catholic lawyer reminded me that churches have a gathering power that can serve the government's interests. He said these audiences pay tax, so the church should not. In fact, he said, "the Church is the only institution that meets Ugandans every week without transport refund."

If the last part of his submission was a quiz question, my answer would have been a bar. See, growing up in Seeta, 30 minutes

to the east of Kampala, our old man run a bar, restaurant and lodge. I occasionally worked there in between school breaks. I have very fond memories of my time between those four, poorly lit, smoke filled, wood paneled walls. To this day, I do not know a better gathering place. It was a place where individuals of eclectic backgrounds gathered to let loose and defy basic laws of economics; spending beyond their wildest means.

See, bars are places of banter and good natured fun. They give us a much needed escape from nagging partners, the world's pressing problems, and allow us to lock out the noise as we empty our pockets in blind service to the taxman's never ending lust for our coins. Call it nation building. It is where local culture mixes with city vibes, sophistication and *kienyeji* (to borrow a Swahili word) vibes, all cooked in one pot; creating a very colorful flavour of the human spirit that keeps society humming along.

A highend CEO served by a local who is six months behind on \$20 rent. Both smiling. And that is the tragedy of it all. The people who serve our drinks with

smiles, the people who pass us those very oiled fries, the people who nurse our hangovers with *molokonyi* soup can barely afford a meal in the very place they pour their sweat, blood and tears into.

Wages have stagnated for decades, working hours extended, living costs skyrocketed and the taxman keeps asking for more. The bar owner is struggling, the staff are struggling, the patrons still need their *kafunda* and the catharsis and refuge that comes with it. But the runaway prices are starting to make ordering a drink feel like taking out a mortgage. We bar crawlers need government intervention here in much the same way the clergy say they do.

Bars should have a special classification; they are assets of community value; indispensable social institutions that deserve protection. They are our Friday-evening-getting-into-Saturday-morning "churches". We are not *gonna* be greedy and ask for SUVs for each bar owner but I am here to shamelessly ask that if God needs SUVs, we need a tax break on our next pint! Call it a tax rebate!