

Can Jinja regain its former glory?

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Last week, I visited Jinja to shoot a video of the town, its people, places, and activities. For reasons I'm unable to put a finger on, Jinja depresses me every time I visit or think about it.

Most of the roads in the residential area are dilapidated; the Indian buildings on Main Street from the 1950s look their age; the Industrial Area has a rusty, cobwebby feel; and the town has lost its 1960s urbane, cosmopolitan culture.

Jinja looks ugly because its terrain is dominated by worn-out industrial assets. The only part of Jinja that looks world-class is nature – Lake Victoria, the River Nile, and the general greenery of the trees in the civil service residential quarters and the sugarcane fields on the outskirts as far as Kakira.

The faded, peeling, and rusted look is a poignant reminder of what Jinja Town once was: the industrial and cosmopolitan heartbeat of Uganda.

As traumatic as Jinja's dilapidated look is to many of us, that's not the worst part of the story. The crisis with Jinja, in my view, is at its core the death of the spirit. The older civil servants of the 1960s and 1970s retired or left the scene.

Jinja was essentially a European town in the 1950s, a town created by the biggest infrastructure project in Uganda up to that time – the hydropower Owen Falls Dam. Not only did the dam create a whole ecosystem of processing factories, copper smelting, and electricity distribution infrastructure, but it also created the best laid-out town in the country.

As with other towns such as Entebbe, Mbarara, Tororo, Gulu, Mbale, and so on, the departure, first of the Indians and gradually of the Europeans, saw the start of a decline from which upcountry Uganda has never quite recovered.

In recent years, there has been some rebuilding and remodelling of Jinja, but most of it is more a case of pouring new wine into old wineskins than of creating entirely new wineskins.

So, as with much of Kololo, Bugolobi, and Nakasero in Kampala, a good part of Jinja's southern senior civil servants' quarters is now hotels, bars, NGO offices, or kindergartens.

In Jinja's central business district, the same pattern is seen: A new, multi-storey, glass-fronted building next to and overlooking the old Indian shops.

In Kampala, a few pockets of residential areas such as Kigo, Kibuli, and Lubwa, that were in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s are still there.

tempted to have the appearance of urban planning, but others such as Najjera, Kira, and Naalya, wine in old wineskins or new apartments arising from shabby surroundings.

Six decades after independence, urban planning is a concept and skill that still eludes Uganda. Reviving Jinja and other towns as part of a cohesive grand plan requires a level of imagination, dedication, teamwork, and purpose that does not exist in Uganda.

Which brings me to the main source of frustration, culture. Buildings, while important, are not the most important feature of a town. I attended Namasagali College in Kamuli, a school with buildings much more dilapidated than today's Jinja, and yet a school with a glamorous culture that mesmerised the country.

Jinja today is more derelict in mentality and popular culture than in infrastructure.

This gets to the heart of most of present-day Uganda. The years of civil war, military coups, and scarcity of basic commodities are now behind us.

Are we back yet to where we were around 1968? In some ways, yes, but in most ways no.

Individuals in Jinja or Mbarara, Gulu, Mbale, Hoima, or Masaka have phones and can find most basic goods within walking distance. But they walk on dusty roads, live in congested quarters, and many even in these towns called "cities" still fetch water from boreholes or communal pipes.

A new Cabinet has just been announced by President Museveni and, as usual, much national interest and scrutiny are in who's in, who's out, and if a particular district or region has gained a ministry.

What's all this for?

It requires a level of seriousness, ambition, and admission that we are not good at urban planning, and with this admission, to seek help from overseas.

One of the first steps in admitting our limitations was with road construction, and we saved ourselves frustration by simply outsourcing the task of upgrading our roads or building entirely new ones to Chinese construction companies.

With the Chinese, there's no news of scandals, embezzlement, or failure. The work gets done.

We might need to extend this into urban planning and bring in people and companies from countries with much experience and skill at some of these things.

That's the only way our favourite towns like Jinja will, at last, shake off the cobwebs and rust, and return to the beauty they