

PEARL of AFRICA
SPECIAL TRAVEL SECTION

Once upon a time, they used to be referred to as Uganda's bushmen. But not anymore; the Batwa have since become a 'new people'

By Noah Jagwe and Agnes Nantambi

The Batwa were originally forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa. The Batwa in Uganda are said to have migrated from the forest in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Over time, they lost these forest lands and territories to agro activities and later government conservation.

In 1991, the minority group was evicted following the establishment of Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable national parks. They thus became squatters living on the edges of other communities. The Batwa currently occupy parts of Kisoro and Kabale districts in southwestern Uganda in the Albertine Rift. Over the years, they have been learning to survive outside the tropical forest environment, although it has taken some deliberate effort to achieve some success. Today, many take solace in traditional crafts such as wood carving, basketry and blacksmithing that their forefathers used to do.

Francis Achorwendye, Singurumukiza Damasuni and Enia Babinwano are sibling word-carvers. The trio learnt the skills from their parents who used to depend solely on forest resources to make their artefacts.

Today, the trio is attached to the Rwerere Enterprise and Training Centre (RETC) in Rubanda district, which is reviving such traditional skills and helping families to earn a livelihood from them. At the same time,



1. Customers admiring James Sebushashi's products
2. A group of Batwa dancing at a function in their home area
3. Some of the baskets the Batwa weave and sell to tourists
4. David Birikano practising blacksmithing
5. Achorwendye, a local craftsman, making a panza at Rwerere village. This is the main activity for the Batwa in the forests planted by them.

the activities attract tourists and earn foreign exchange for Uganda.

"Our plan is to use the centre and these craftsmen to train other community members to pass on such skills and at the same time promote tourism in the area as well as conserve the forests," the Kisoro district tourism officer, Richard Munzerero, says.

At least 40 people around the area have registered for crafts training and three

entertainment groups for cultural dance and drama training. They will perform mainly Batwa, Kikiga and Kifumbira dances in an amphitheatre.

BATWA BEGIN NEW LIFE

<<WE BOOK TREES FROM FARMERS DURING THE PLANTING SEASON>>

TREE-PLANTING INITIATIVE

Since some of the crafts are dependent on forests, conservation and sustainability is necessary. This is why Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust introduced the idea of planting trees for raw materials other than directly depending on forests.

"Initially, we got trees from the national parks, but now they are bought expensively from individuals in the communities," Achorwendye says.

Babinwano recalls the days when they would freely move to the forests and harvest the raw materials before the national parks were gazetted.

"We now have to book trees from farmers during the planting season and wait till harvesting. We also used to have blacksmiths who would design the tools, but they are now phasing out. The young generation looks down on the work. As they opt for jobs in Kampala, I fear this kind of work will soon disappear," he observes.

Products made include wooden ladles, spoons, bowls and traditional mortars. The craftsmen use the proceeds from their work to meet their basic needs.

BLACKSMITHING

Munzerero says several traditional blacksmiths have been identified to train others in the skill at the Rwerere centre. One of the

trainers, David Birikano, is a blacksmith with experience that spans 20 years. He has experience in making a basket, which I sell at sh50,000. I sell such baskets to women preparing to get married," he says. The process involves preparing sticks for a day, drying them in the sun for two days and three days of weaving.

Traditionally, there were no suitcases for keeping or carrying clothes for the family. So, during cultural functions and

become scarce as commercial mining industries have been set up in the area, hence the reliance on scrap. Birikano is concerned about the lack of community interest in the ancient art of blacksmithing. He has, however, trained his own son in this work.

"Young people have a negative mindset; they look at blacksmithing as a difficult and inferior job. The other challenge is that the process is becoming expensive," Birikano says.

He sometimes exchanges his products for goods and services. For example, he could exchange a machete for labour on a farm for four days. He says there is a high demand for his work, and he does not often need to take anything in the market.

He as most people book them in advance. He sells knives at sh1,000, hoes at sh10,000 and machetes for sh10,000. Birikano also weaves mats and baskets which fetch him about sh3,000-sh40,000 each.

WEAVING AND HERBAL REMEDIES

James Sebushashi has planted a bamboo forest as a source of raw materials for his basket weaving. He buys the rest from the community. He has been a herbalist and craftsman for the past 30 years.

"My father (RIP) used to do the same and I started learning how to make and handcrafts from him in 1966," he says. As a herbalist, he treats a number of ailments including diarrhoea, dislocations, malaria, tonsillitis and cough.

"It takes me five days to make a basket, which I sell at sh50,000. I sell such baskets to women preparing to get married," he says. The process involves preparing sticks for a day, drying them in the sun for two days and three days of weaving.

Traditionally, there were no suitcases for keeping or carrying clothes for the family. So, during cultural functions and



3 SPECIAL SKILLS BATWA HAVE

BLACKSMITHING
The Batwa are good at this skill, whereby they make things such as knives, spears, arrows and hoes. Their products cost between sh1,000 and sh10,000.

BASKET WEAVING
The Batwa weave baskets that are usually bought by tourists and sometimes used during customary marriages.

DANCING
They have a beautiful traditional dance that is normally performed for tourists and during other national events

weddings, these baskets were and are still used as suitcases.
"In the early days, these baskets would

be used to carry items to the king. Women kept their secrets for their husbands in these baskets. While weaving the basket I can inscribe the name of the owner and decorate it with papyrus," he explains.

He also says the activity has benefited his family financially. He is never worried about the market because by the time he completes a basket, someone has already booked it.

"But my sons have refused to learn my work, arguing that it is old-fashioned," he laments. Munzerero indicated that to maintain such knowledge and skills in the community, Sebushashi has been identified as a resource at the centre and he will train members in basket weaving and herbal remedies.

He revealed that one other targeted activity for promotion under the Rwerere centre is the local brew referred to as *Umusururu*. This is a local drink fermented for seven days from brown sorghum. With such deliberate projects in place, the Batwa can be more optimistic about their survival outside the forests.

DID YOU KNOW?

WHY I LOVE UGANDA

By Arthur M. Katabalwa

Recently, I spent several weeks in the UK visiting family and friends. It was a very beneficial trip as I caught up with long lost friends. However, I found out in my interaction with many people, especially in London, that the prevalent views about Uganda were largely negative. Even where one had once visited the country, they had a negative view of Uganda. I love Uganda and I found myself defending her in any way possible. But what is it about Uganda that is so compellingly beautiful that one should defend it to the hilt?

One simple point that is undeniable is that Uganda is home. Many of us who have lived in other countries know that feeling when one comes back home, sometimes of trepidation, but many a time of sheer joy. As a Ugandan, when and where do you get that feeling from? From the weather? The airport staff that you meet at Entebbe? The neat? The crossing of the border from Kenya into Uganda? That is always unique to an individual. A family friend told me that on his way from the airport to Kampala, the traffic hump in Kitoro, Entebbe heralded the return to proper Uganda. The manic driving after the relative calm of Entebbe is quintessentially Ugandan.

Paul Bagenda, an old schoolmate, told me something in 2014 that has stuck in my psyche since. He said in Uganda, one is part of the "establishment." For those who may not be conversant with the usage of that term, it refers to someone who is recognised by the system. One who is a major stakeholder in that system. This means that you have a vested interest in that system. In this case Uganda. So, I, as a member of the Ugandan establishment, I have that interest and I see the beauty of this country.

There is a simplicity to this country that cannot be replicated easily anywhere. In the villages one is going to find a life so beautifully simple that we, who are urbanised, would want to be part of it. I was in Bakijula recently and one question that I left with was: "What is it that I have that those people don't have?"

I may have electricity, running tap water and all the amenities that a modern life accords one. But then what next? The families that I visited ate fresh produce from the garden at the back of their house. When we were served lunch, they only spent money on the salt and the plates from which we ate the food. After that, the food had been cooked in traditional ways using banana leaves.

The food was surprisingly very tasty and fresh. We had visited with the intention of getting some modernity to the area. But at what cost? Would the locals be able to afford modern life? Once told me that Uganda's weather is probably the yoke around our necks that is preventing us from developing. Anyone who has been in temperate countries will vouch for what I am saying. The weather in these countries is so temperamental. When it gets cold, it is like threatening. The heat during the summer is so stifling at times it also threatens life. They have a limited crop growing season. It is, therefore, imperative that they learn to harness nature or work with nature. Ugandan weather? If you are in a room and it is too hot, you open the windows. Too cold? Close the windows. We build houses which, other than the occasional lick of paint and repairs where need be, cost next to nothing in running thereafter.

Uganda is a beautiful country. One cannot have enough space to write about it. The Uganda that we have at the moment, wars and all, is a tremendously beautiful country. We must all be proud of it.