

Does Uganda have a soul?

According to *Daily Monitor*, (former Finance minister) Prof Ezra Suruma says Uganda's progress depends on three fundamentals: fiscal discipline, prioritisation, and strong institutions for implementation. Noting that without these, even well-designed policies will not succeed, I will attempt to disagree with Mr Suruma, without being disagreeable.

Fiscal discipline, to the poor, amounts to tightening the belt that's around their necks. Again, strong institutions are only a measure of the will to command them within the context of the public interest. As for prioritisation, I shall

needed to achieve its primary function, while all "bells and whistles" are removed.

What are these non-negotiable elements? They are non-pecuniary values and morals, which are foundational principles—such as honesty, integrity, respect, kindness, and responsibility—that guide behaviour, shape character, and foster harmonious relationships and societal well-being. These core virtues, including empathy, fairness, and accountability, help individuals make ethical decisions and build trust.

Without these values in a bare-bones system, indeed in any system, the fundamentals that Prof Suruma refers to become an expression of what 19th Century Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle dubbed "a dismal science".

To be sure, the term "dismal science", coined by Carlyle to describe economics, was initially coined in the context of opposing the abolition of slavery. Carlyle argued that economists' insistence on free labour, supply and demand, and equality was "dismal" compared to the assumed "righteousness" of enforced, hereditary labour systems.

In more recent years, the term is used to highlight economics' focus on gloomy predictions, opportunity costs, and limited resources. This is in contrast to poetry, which was known as the "gay science"; until the word gay, in the mid-20th Century, stopped meaning "carefree" and "bright".

Accordingly, the remedies Prof Suruma offers are more dismal than gay. And thus do not interrogate the somewhat slap-happy Ugandan psyche enough to be relevant to our purposes. Which, if our behaviours are anything to go by, are anything but dismal.

Our so-called fundamentals must be replaced by our vitals, which undergird the spirit over what's material; the metaphysical over the physical. The country has long since moved on from the common sense economics of Prof Suruma. What's required today is the reawakening of the Ugandan spirit to the possibilities born of what's greater than fiscal considerations prioritised by a survival instinct.

In short, what we require is inspiration; it may be religious or irreligious. However, going by what that evangelical Christian answered when I asked her to choose between \$10m and her life, our solutions will require less religious instruction and more soul-searching. But, one may wonder, does Uganda still have a searchable soul?

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share an anecdote.

I recently asked a Born-Again Christian a question I thought would have an obvious answer: would you rather get \$10m and not wake up in the morning, or would you prefer to simply wake up, \$10m-free? She replied, with evident delight, that she would take the \$10m!

Going by their actions alone, a disproportionate number of Ugandans would agree with her. In a country where money is placed above everything, one must wonder if the superstructure that the professor refers to is merely a fig-leaf of respectability dangling in front of a societal structure stripped of all pretensions to nation-building. In other words, the fundamentals the prof speaks of are as alive as the *dodo*.

A system (such as the aforesaid) stripped of its fundamentals is an entity reduced to its barest essentials, retaining only the minimal, necessary components required to remain operational while sacrificing efficiency, redundancy, comfort, and specialised features. This state—often called a "stripped-down" or "bare-bones" system—consists of the core, non-negotiable elements

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