

Once a symbol of unity and social cohesion in Ankole, alcohol is now increasingly blamed for fuelling domestic violence, crime, mental health challenges and poverty.

BY RAJAB MUKOMBOZI

In Ankole, locally brewed alcohol such as *tonto* (fermented banana juice) and waragi, a distilled by-product of *tonto*, were for generations central to cultural ceremonies, communal gatherings and conflict resolution. Drinking was guided by social norms and communal discipline.

Today, however, residents, leaders and health experts say alcohol consumption in the region has evolved from a controlled cultural practice into a widespread social crisis.

Mr Eldard Byentaro, a resident of Kijjo in Bugamba Sub-county who has spent more than 20 years in the alcohol business, says drinking in Ankole was traditionally communal and closely regulated by society.

"Alcohol in Ankole was used as a unifying tool. It was not as commercialised as it is today. Its consumption was communally controlled, but now it is mainly driven by profit and that is why it is being abused," he says.

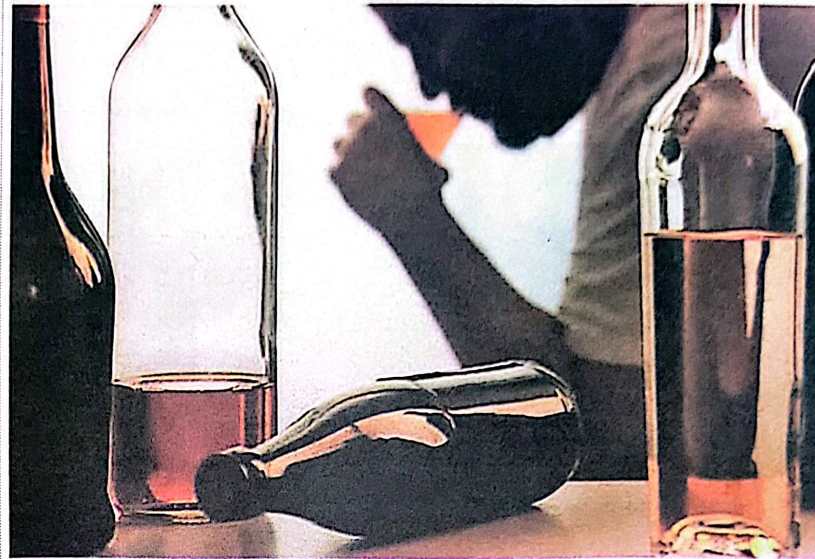
According to Mr Byentaro, the growing demand for alcohol has encouraged the production of illicit and unsafe drinks, which were previously discouraged by communities.

Mr George Kamusiime, a resident of Rwenshanku in Bubaare, Kashari, says alcohol consumption once promoted harmony and accountability among community members.

"In the past, while drinking alcohol, communities would share ideas, strengthen relationships and instil discipline," he said. "Cases of wife battering, disrespect and other anti-social behaviour were discussed openly, and offenders punished through fines or public shame," he added.

He said alcohol gatherings previously operated under strict social order where elders did not drink alongside young people or women, a practice he

Alarm as alcohol fuels social crisis in Ankole



A man takes alcohol. Experts attribute the rising abuse to weak family structures and poor parenting. PHOTO / FILE

says helped maintain discipline.

"Today women, men and young people all mingle in bars. Some youth start drinking as early as 7am and stay in bars past midnight," he said.

Ms Annet Kinkuhire, a family counsellor and resident of Kakiika in Mbarara City North, says alcohol was once associated with joy and social bonding within families.

"Our parents and grandparents would rotate from home to home while drinking together. You could rarely hear about domestic violence or family breakdown," she says.

She adds that the situation has since changed dramatically.

"Today, alcohol is one of the leading causes of domestic violence and family collapse. Most family cases I handle are linked to alcohol abuse," she adds.

Human rights activist and former



What residents say.

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Mbarara City councillor Evelynne Walimbwa says excessive drinking is also affecting productivity in the sub-region.

"Many people begin drinking in the morning, which has reduced productivity and increased poverty," she says.

Ms Loice Owembabazi, a public health specialist in mental and reproductive health in Mbarara City, says alcohol and substance abuse are among the leading contributors to mental

illness in the region. "If you move around Mbarara City or along highways and villages, you will encounter mentally affected individuals, many of whom are struggling with substance abuse," she adds.

She attributes the rising abuse partly to weakening family structures and poor parenting.

Mr Robert Atwiine, a bar owner in Nyeihanga Town Council, says traditional social controls that once regulated drinking have disappeared.

"In the past there were social restrictions that limited alcohol consumption," he says. "Today alcohol is heavily commercialised and easily accessible. Drinking has become an individual activity without community controls," he adds.

Some residents also blame unemployment and economic frustrations for the increasing alcohol abuse.

BACKGROUND

Many Ugandans had hoped that the Alcoholic Drinks Control Bill, 2023, would strengthen regulation of alcohol consumption and sales.

However, Parliament rejected the proposed law in August 2024, leaving local leaders and communities struggling to contain what many now describe as a growing social and public health crisis.

Ms Betty Niweomwe, a former student of Bishop Stuart University, says many unemployed youth are turning to alcohol to escape hardship.

"Today many young people find solace in alcohol and drugs because of unemployment and social pressures," she says.

Local leaders say efforts to regulate alcohol abuse are being frustrated by weak laws and enforcement gaps.

Mr Abbas Kazibwe, the secretary for community development and coordinator of Local Councils in Mbarara City, says authorities often arrest people found engaging in excessive drinking or producing illicit alcohol, only for them to be released shortly after.

The Rwizi Region Police spokesperson, Mr Samson Kasasira, acknowledges that alcohol abuse contributes significantly to crime in the region.

"We are relying on community policing and working with local leaders and religious institutions to address the challenge," he adds.

However, Mr Richard Baguma, the vice chairperson of the Executive Board of the Uganda Alcohol Alliance, argues that alcohol abuse has always existed in society, although cultural sanctions previously discouraged excessive drinking.

"Families known for alcoholism were often isolated socially, including during marriage arrangements," he said. "Drunkards were publicly condemned, but the health and social effects of alcohol have always remained the same."