

Lunch with the DM

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'We should not downplay the civilising mission of colonists'

Over lunch, **Nicholas Byengoma**, a businessman, civil engineer, and philanthropist, tells **Philip Matogo** that British colonisation of Uganda should not be viewed through a narrow prism.

Caramel Café and Lounge next to Capital Shoppers shopping centre in Ntinda, Kampala, is a good place to have a quick meal; very slowly. The atmospherics favour unhurried gluttony, so chew away. But do so in a manner that doesn't make you look like you just emerged from an underworld where *Kikomando* is a Taco with identity issues. You might be wolfing down lunch when some lady of a delicately ethereal demeanour, the ones that frequent the joint, rolls her eyes at your savagery.

When that happens to me, I pause, my mouth dripping with soup, and say: "It was a bet. The owner of this place bet I could not eat with my mouth full. This showed him."

You have to throw in the lie that you know the boss and, by association, she will think you own a café as well. Birds of the same feather flock together, and all that. Then she will like you "MOB" (Mate of Boss).

After settling down there last Saturday, a discreetly attractive waitress with the name tag "Mahoro" served me black coffee. Strong black coffee. I needed it. No, I was not going to ask the waitress if she could go out with me and thus make the coffee "on the house." Instead, I was about to meet a man with some ounce to his bounce and the coffee would likewise perk me up.

Mzee kijana

Nicholas Byengoma is a Ugandan businessman, civil engineer, and philanthropist, known for his leadership in the construction and hospitality sectors. He is 82 years old, going on 20! The mzee looks young. He was like August in February. I am talking about Harry August, a character in the book: *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* by Claire North.

August is a man who is born, lives, dies, and is reborn in the same time period, retaining all memories of his previous lives. He would require such recall, what was done yesterday determines the present.

Today, Byengoma serves as the managing director of Nicontra Limited, a leading Ugandan civil engineering and construction firm. He is a respected figure in the industry, often participating in high-level discussions such as those organised by the Uganda National Association

equipped ambulance to Rugarama Hospital in Kabale to help reduce maternal mortality rates and improve emergency referrals. He is an active supporter of the Diocese of Kigezi, with church leaders frequently commending his family's commitment to social welfare. His passion for distinction through community service and patriotic duty is something of a family heirloom.

Chiefly background

Pan-Africanists have frequently criticised traditional chiefs and monarchs from the colonial era, accusing them of failing to protect their people and contributing to the colonisation of Africa.

In various speeches President Museveni himself has, particularly around 2008 and later in 2021/2022, attacked these leaders, sometimes referring to them as "undisciplined" and "shameless" for allowing foreign rule. That is at least one side of the coin.

African responses to colonial rule involved both strategic collaboration and active resistance to secure local interests, protect power, or survive superior military force. Collaborators (e.g., Baganda, Maasai leaders) sought protection or gains, while resisters (e.g., Nandi, Herero, Nama) fought to defend sovereignty.

Byengoma, a son of a prominent chief, tends to be more sympathetic to his forebears, acknowledging how they operated within a system that provided very few opportunities for Africans and yet they managed to wring concessions from this system to the extent that Ugandan lives were favourably transformed.

"I have for many years

1954

The year when fatal punishments against unmarried pregnant girls ended.

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Opinions I have for many years now, since our independence, heard the political class in the country, the elite, saying that the colonial chiefs let down Uganda for having not fought for independence. But their [the chiefs] aim then was to collaborate with the missionaries and colonialists to start civilisation through education.

now, since our independence, heard the political class in the country, the elite, saying that the colonial chiefs let down Uganda for having not fought for independence. But their [the chiefs] aim then was to collaborate with the missionaries and colonialists to start civilisation through education. For example, my late uncle Paulo Kangwagye and his younger brother, our late father (Michael) Mukombe gave land for churches. One in Kikungiri in Kabale while Paulo Kangwagye gave land to the Nakishenyi Parish, where it sits today. And they started a school," says Mr Byengoma.

A fighting chance

Byengoma adds that Messrs Kangwagye and Mukombe were Abachuchu, a clan among the Bakiga people, with significant presence in the Kigezi Sub-region of south western Uganda, including areas in the Rukungiri District.

"We hear the bachuchu came from Bunyonyi, which was part of Rwanda, and they fought their way through Kerere. They had many cows. They disagreed with another clan called the Baheesi (blacksmiths), and to avoid disagreements moved through Kerere to Nakishenyi where they found Nakishenyi and settled in a plateau. So, they got those hills, Muhenvu and Ramterere, for protecting their clan and that's how they tied up with Mpororo Kingdom, especially our late fathers. Then they started to become leaders... their fighters started protecting the clan."

Byengoma is not sure how Kangwagye, Mukombe and the clan linked up with Mpororo Kingdom.

"From there, they went into leadership with the colonialists. The leadership then was majorly Baganda, and they were the first indigenous Bakiga to be part of the leadership in Kigezi. Then, most Bakiga worshipped Nyabinghi, and the two chiefs tried to partner with the missionaries to preach so that Bakiga could leave those practices. Then their children started coming to church and going to school. That was the genesis of the civilisation of education in Kigezi through the colonialists and the missionaries. That's where I ask, "Why do we have conversations where the pan-Africanists keep referring to them as very weak administrators who did not get arms to fight back?" Somebody must clarify and say that these historical facts are all up for the

out how Messrs Kangwagye and Mukombe promoted community values over individual selfishness. As chiefs, the two brothers routinely enforced sanitation and cleanliness standards in villages as part of their remit, or what the colonialists dubbed "civilising missions".

They did so to manage diseases, frequently utilising forced labor or local, unpaid efforts. The two brothers' administrative tenures also led to the end of several cruel and barbaric practices in Kigezi. One of these was directed at women who were considered to be of easy virtue, as it were.

In historical Kigezi, unmarried pregnant girls faced severe, often fatal, cultural punishments. These practices were deeply rooted in the Bakiga tradition, where virginity was highly valued for family honour and the bride price it commanded.

The most notable methods of execution or abandonment included Akampene (Punishment Island). Here, girls were rowed to this tiny, isolated island on Lake Bunyonyi and left to starve or drown.

Some survived when poor or slaves, who could not afford a traditional bride price, rescued them to be their wives.

The other was the prospect of abandonment in wild areas. Here, the girls were tied to trees in forests and left for wild animals. Lastly was Gabizi Island. A similar "punishment island" which existed on Lake Mutanda in Kisoro.

Colonial gains

The practice at Kisiizi Falls famously ended in the mid-1950s (roughly 1954), after a girl being pushed to her death, reportedly grabbed her father and brother, dragging them over the cliff with her.

This incident, combined with the arrival of Christian missionaries and colonial law, led clan leaders such as Kangwagye and Mukombe to officially ban the practice. Today, Kisiizi Falls stands near the falls as a symbol of life and healing.

Gardner Thompson wrote in *Governing Uganda: British Colonial Rule and its Legacy* thus: "Colonial rule in Uganda before the Second World War rested in fact on a certain congruence of political and economic interests between European and Africans. At the same time, British authorities determinedly sought legitimacy and public acceptance on a variety of rhetorical fronts. Lugard wrote in 1922 that the British Empire could serve both Britain and its peoples: the benefit, he insisted, 'can be made reciprocal' and it is the aim and desire of civilised administration to fulfil this mandate."

"Thereafter 'trusteeship' was to be the watchword for the interwar period. The provincial commissioner of Buganda had even gone so far, as early as 1917, as to define the objective of British policy as 'self-government', albeit 'under adequate and sympathetic guidance and control'."

