



Uganda



Area: 93,263 square miles (slightly less than the size of Oregon)
Population: 47.25 million (2022; more than ten times the population of Oregon)

Capital: Kampala

Ethnic Groups: Baganda 16.5%, Banyankole 9.6%, Basoga 8.8%, Bakiga 7.1%, Iteso 7%, Langi 6.3%, Bagisu 4.9%, Acholi 4.4%, Lugbara 3.3%, other 32.1%

Languages: English (Official); Swahili (Official); Ganda or Luganda; other Niger-Congo languages; Nilo-Saharan languages, Arabic.

Life expectancy: 69.7 years

Literacy: 80.59%

Economy: Agriculture (plantains, sugarcane, maize, cassava, milk, sweet potatoes, beans, vegetables, rice, coffee); Industry (food processing, textiles, cement, steel); Exports (gold, coffee, fish, milk, raw sugar)

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 45.5 (data from 2020; comp.US=41.1)

Gender Inequality Index: 0.7249 (comp. US=0.204 Very High)

“If we don’t tell our own stories, no one else will.”

Maisha Film Lab, Kampala

Yesterday’s Stories

Uganda, a landlocked nation on the shores of Africa’s largest body of water (Lake Victoria or Nyanza, as it is also known), today has one of the youngest and fastest growing populations in the world. Nearly half the population is under the age of 15; the median age is 16.2 years. Yet yesterday’s stories dig back across millennia, when the nation’s territory first became a crossroads for migration and elaborate statecraft.

Historical linguists have identified the region as a meeting place for speakers of Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, and Nilo-Saharan languages. Early societies kept cattle, planted grains and root crops, and traded iron in the regions around the western Great Lakes, where Bantu-speaking groups dominated in the five to seven hundred years after 500 BCE. Relying on pastoralism or specialized banana garden agriculture and fishing, people shaped different social identities and distinctive communities that were responsive to environmental changes and ancestral to the two large states: Kitara/Bunyoro-Kitara (10th century-18th century) and Buganda (c. late 14th century-1900).

The region sustained population losses during the era of slave-trading, via Arabs to the east and then through the encroachment by European explorers (including the famous British American Henry Morton Stanley in 1875 who met the ruling kabaka Mutesa I of Buganda), missionaries, and colonizers. In 1894, Uganda was declared a British protectorate that subsumed Buganda. Under the guise of anti-slavery efforts, but part of the economic exploitation of East Africa, the Uganda Railway linked Lake Victoria and

Kenya with the Indian Ocean. It was constructed using South Asian contract labor and gave access to British East Africa through the port of Mombasa. Uganda gained independence in 1962, after decades of civil war and revolts against the British overlords.

Stories that Divide and Inspire

Chaos followed the era of the British Protectorate. Despite newly gained independence, the limited growth of political parties and the establishment of an economy based on cash crops (cotton, then coffee) impeded the progress of a new nation. By the late 1950s, only a few political parties had emerged, and they mirrored the divisions of earlier geographic and ethnic rivalries. President Milton Obote's presidency ended in a coup led by his own general Idi Amin in 1971, which began a brutal and violent period of divisive politics. Despite this chaos, many bright stories shine through, including the life history of Bitu, an educational pioneer, who was documented by Christine Obbo, the first Ugandan woman to obtain a PhD in Anthropology. Bitu opened her home to young women who had become pregnant, were shunned as unmarriageable, and were being denied primary education under the colonial mentality and Victorian mores of the 1940s and 50s. A single woman with little education, Bitu undertook to secure property, where she could provide refuge and education to more than 220 Ugandan schoolgirls, women and children, between 1955 and 1979. Her work became legendary and was responsible in part for the national recognition of the importance of female education.

Stories That Imagine the Future

The bloody reign of dictator Idi Amin (1971-1979) ended in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, the expulsion of Asians from Uganda, and an unsuccessful attempt to annex part of Tanzania. Amin was ousted and died in exile, the story of his life told by journalist Giles Foden's *The Last King of Scotland*, which was made into the 2006 movie (a UK/German production) starring Forest Whitaker. In office since 1986, Yoweri Museveni was re-elected to a sixth term as president in 2021, perpetuating his repressive regime, its extremely harsh laws against homosexuality, and its frequent disregard of human rights. Ugandan novelists and filmmakers have other stories to tell, some real and others imagined.

At times the historical narrative alone is insufficient to convey a country's predicament and an individual's role in political and social change. Magical realism comes to mind as a genre appropriate for Uganda, from the 1917 revolt led by prophet Rembe, who claimed to be able to stop European bullets, to the revolutionary Alice Lakwena, who led 6,000 troops into Uganda armed with a magic ointment that could stop bullets in 1987. As historian Molefi Kete Asante has observed, "The failure of magical thinking did not mean that the people would abandon their dreams for freedom" (Asante, 244). The resistance movement of Bobi Wine, a Museveni opponent who was imprisoned and tortured, has given hope to a younger generation. Indeed, that struggle has persisted. In 2024, thousands of Ugandan youths took to the streets of Kampala to protest continued government corruption.

-- *Written by Candice Goucher, 2024*

Further Readings and Viewings

Moses Bwayo and Christopher Sharp, *Bobi Wine: The People's President* (National Geographic, 2022).

Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Christine Obbo, "Bitu: Facilitator of Women's Educational Opportunities," in *Life Histories of African Women*,

ed. Patricia W. Romero (London: Ashfield Press, 1988), 99-112.

David L. Schoenbrun, "Cattle herds and banana gardens: the historical geography of the western Great Lakes

regions, ca AD 800-1500," *African Archaeological Review* 11 (1993), 39-72.

Hafsa Zayyan, *We are All Birds of Uganda* (London: #Merky/Penguin, 2021). Novel about belonging and exile,

called "a powerful debut" by Shahidha Bari in *The Guardian* (February 20, 2021).