

Uganda Independence Day Special

An age-old culture thrives in diversity

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Uganda, situated in East Africa, attained its independence from Britain on Oct. 9, 1962. Since then, the country has undergone major transformations politically, economically and

socially. Amid all these changes, Uganda's love for its rich culture remains strong. Uganda is home to several tribes spread all over the country.

Among these numerous tribes is the Baganda tribe. Historically, the Baganda are renowned for producing a fabric or textile known as bark cloth. While the exact origins of bark cloth production in Buganda are not known, it is generally agreed that this skill was discovered by one of the clans of Buganda, the *ngonge* (otter) clan.

Bark cloth is widely regarded as one of

history's oldest textiles. Such is its strong cultural significance that in 2005, bark cloth production was inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

The production of bark cloth, locally known as *olubugo*, is an intricate process carried out by highly skilled craftsmen. These craftsmen include those who produce the tools for harvesting the bark from the mutuba tree (*Ficus natalensis*, also called the natal fig); those who produce the different types of mallets required for making the cloth; and the bark cloth makers directly involved in harvesting, preparation and production. A bark cloth maker is known as *omukomazi* in the Luganda language.

During the rainy season, the bark is harvested from the mutuba tree, taking care not to mar it. This is because bark can be continually harvested from the same tree over its 40-year lifespan, once it is regenerated through an ancient technique.

Part of the art of the production process requires the worker to be able to recognize the trees that produce high-grade bark cloth, a skill acquired with time.

Additionally, straight and tall trees will yield a better final product.

Once the bark is harvested, it is taken to a special work site locally known as *ekomago*, where it undergoes the initial treatment. A key phase in bark cloth production involves cooking or steaming the bark. This serves to both soften the bark as well as cause it to acquire a reddish-brown hue.

The next phase involves subjecting the bark to repeated beatings, for several hours, using special wooden mallets called *ensaamo*. The mallets, which have grooves, are specially designed for texture development and to ensure that the bark will not easily tear or rip apart in the process. The process of beating the bark involves intermittent sun drying to rid the bark of any excess liquid.

The now enlarged piece of bark cloth is then stretched outdoors on a certain type of grass, securing it with stones at the corners to facilitate further drying and deepening of its color. This stage involves neatly patching up any tears in the cloth, readying it for use.



Bark cloth, which is considered one of the world's oldest textiles, was added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2008.

EMBASSY OF UGANDA

Bark cloth production is a communal job requiring teamwork, an activity that also creates worker camaraderie and bonding.

Traditionally, bark cloth was only used by royals and chiefs and was a status symbol. Bark cloth was also used in cultural functions for installation of an heir, as a means of barter exchange, as a dowry, as bedding and to wrap the dead for burial purposes.

This content was compiled in collaboration with the embassy. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the newspaper.

Congratulations

to the People of

the Republic of Uganda

on the Anniversary of

Their Independence

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