

A childhood marked by struggle and sacrifice ends in triumph at Makerere's graduation ceremony.

BY FRANKLIN DRAKU

The 1995 Constitution lists 54 indigenous communities in Uganda as at February 1, 1926, but some of them are dwindling and becoming endangered.

Among the endangered minorities are the Batwa in Kigezi, Mvuba and Vonoma in the Rwenzori, Choje in Bunyoro, Lendu and Kebu in West Nile, Mening and So (Tepeth) in Karamoja, Bakusu in the Elgon, and Banyala in Uganda.

Nestled inside Bundibugyo are two groups, the Mvuba and Vonoma, whose combined population stands at only 1,062 as listed in the 2024 Census.

The two communities form part of the pygmy, the majority of who live in the jungles of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

In Uganda, the Mvuba and Vonoma largely occupy rural sub-counties of Burondo, and Ntotoro, and urban Bundibugyo Town Council, where they are known to provide cheap labour to their wealthier neighbours.

The Mvuba people are found on the northern foothills of the Rwenzori Mountains in western Uganda and extend into the DRC.

They are said to have migrated from Sudan and travelled south-west to present-day DRC. In Uganda, the Mvuba settled among the Vonoma, Baamba, Babwisi, and Batwa in present-day Bundibugyo District.

They reportedly left DRC due to the enforcement of forced labour by the Belgian colonialists.

The Mvuba, together with Vonoma, Baamba, and Babwisi, are the guardians and custodians of Bundibugyo District where more than 70 percent of the 26,000 tons of cocoa exported by Uganda annually are produced.

But in the last 11 years, the populations of the two communities have significantly dwindled. For instance, the 2024 Census shows that a number of minority groups, including the two, are staring at likely extinction as their population continually dwindles.

For the Mvuba, their population reduced from 2,879 in 2014 to 382 in 2024, while that of the Vonoma had its population cut down from 2,613 to only 680 people.

Uganda's dwindling,



Batwa showing off their skills among which is making a fire. The Batwa are one of the endangered tribes in Uganda. PHOTOS/FILE

This trend, residents from the district and government officials, say is worrying and call for urgent research to find out what is happening and how this decline can be reversed.

Other minority communities that have witnessed decrease in their population include the Batwa, whose numbers have reduced from 6,200 in 2014 to 3,857 in 2024. Similarly, the Choje declined from 34,327 to 26,029 people, Barundi from 92,570 people to 65,964 individuals.

Also included on the list are the Banyabindi whose population reduced from 16,331 in 2014 to 11,947 people in 2024, while the figures for the Banyabutumbi dropped from 10,113 in 2014 to 8,484 in 2024, The Shana from 10,835 in 2014

WHY DISCRIMINATED

There are several reasons why these tribes are dwindling in number, one being that some such as Vonoma are both in Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. Another is the fear of being discriminated against hence declaring that they belong to other tribes. This is in regards to government opportunities and employment.

to 7,209 in 2024 and the Kebu who were 54,109 people, dropped to 51,672 people in 2024.

The So (Tepeth) have also seen significant reduction in their population from 23,422 in 2014 to 19,286 people in 2024, the Basongora from 15,897 in 2014 to 13,837 people in 2024 and the Bahororo from 151,566 to 149,146 in 2024.

UBOs explains numbers

The Uganda Bureau of Statistics attributed some of the reduction in population among the minorities to those who failed to disclose their ethnicities, while locals say many of them either migrated or feared to state their identities for fear of being discriminated against.

"The individuals who did not state their tribes (404,006 persons) and those in unclassified category largely ex-

endangered tribes



plains a decline in the population of some tribes," UBOS said in its final report.

But Mr Robert Tibakunirwa, the Bundibugyo District (LC5) chairperson attributed the decline to possible migration. He also said others simply feared to identify themselves for fear that they will be discriminated against by the bigger tribes regarding employment opportunities and other government programmes.

Mr Tibatunirwa said the Mvuba and Vonoma are predominantly based in the DRC and are a minority in Uganda, but do constantly move between the two countries depending on the situation on the ground.

"They have their big roots in the DRC and keep crisscrossing the border. With scarcity of land in Bundibugyo and availability of the same in DRC, it is one of the factors that can make them migrate to their original homeland," he said.

"Secondly, some people have been discriminated against and marginalised thus fear to come out and declare their tribe openly," he added.

Mr Tibatunirwa said the local government in the district is working together with the cultural institution to protect the minority communities and ensure they are not marginalised.

He said work is ongoing to document them and ensure their rights as citizens of Uganda and as minority groups are protected. He, however, said the work starts with an awareness campaign for both the bigger tribes and the minority groups.

"So, as a district, we need to open up for greater sensitisation and push this to the cultural leaders. We have partners in the country to work with the people about their identity. We have the Bwamba, the Vonoma and each tribe

has their identity, but under one umbrella," Mr Tibatunirwa added.

He said the district is already implementing several measures to ensure the minority groups are given priority in government programmes. "As the local government, we passed an affirmative action to give priority and make them benefit from government programmes

like the PDM," he said.

Gender ministry speaks out

The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development oversees the ethnic minorities and says the problem of dwindling numbers are real hence investigating the cause.

Mr Aggrey Kibenge, the permanent secretary of the ministry, told this publication they are devising ways of protecting the communities facing extinction risk.

He said the department of equities and rights is taking up the issue and will come up with a proper direction on how to proceed.

Mr Bernard Mujuni, the commissioner of equities and rights at the ministry, who directly oversees the minority groups in the country, said his department has taken note of the falling population among the ethnic minorities and is working to address the issues.

He explained that the ethnic minorities are being swallowed by the bigger tribes among whom they live because the minority cannot be recognised politically due to their low numbers.

"We have seen, in Uganda, that if people do not make political numbers, they risk being marginalised and are disenfranchised by the larger populations. That's what is happening to the Vonoma, to Mvuba, to even the Batwa," he said.

"Therefore, even government programmes like Youth, Livelihood or Women's Empowerment programmes do not reach them because when they form a group of 15 or 20 people, they hardly meet the criteria as they are scattered and can't be part of the larger community," he added.

Mr Mujuni said faced with these difficult realities, the government has developed an affirmative action for the ethnic minorities that will see them get

priority status in government interventions.

"The ministry has thus developed the National Action Plan on ethnic minorities to make sure they are effectively protected and affirmative action is applied to make sure that they are considered," he said.

Mr Mujuni said the government is waiving the rigid requirements for groups to access its programmes for the ethnic minorities to ensure that they benefit.

"We are making deliberate measures for them to benefit without following the standard guidelines which are for the bigger communities. The World Bank has also helped us to develop the National Plan of Action on ethnic minorities highlighting their livelihood and remedial measures to be taken in terms of improving their livelihoods," he added.

Mr Mujuni said the ministry has succeeded in amending the guidelines for social protection for the elderly in Karamoja and have lowered the age for the Ik group who are part of the ethnic minorities to 60 years so that the elders there can benefit. He also said for the Batwa community, affirmative action has taken place making their resettlement possible.

"We lowered the age for the Ik people in Karamoja, because the older persons around 60 looked 80 because of the vulnerability and harsh condition.

"We are also targeting the Vonoma and the other vulnerable groups to make sure they benefit, but also to codify their culture and their identity," he said.

Equal opportunities

Mr Yusuf Muziransa, the senior information and communications officer at the Equal Opportunities Commission, said they have taken note of the issues that ethnic minorities are battling and are working to address them.

"The biggest challenge is discrimination and marginalisation. We have had several reports of such discrimination where dominant tribes are pushing the smaller ones to extinction," he said.

"In some cases, members of minority tribes are denied an identity card because their tribe is not registered in the Constitution or even the people doing the registering are asking them to change their identities," Mr Muziransa added.

He said the ethnic minorities are also being victimised by the bigger tribes, forcing them to lose their identities, which is not right.

Mr Muziransa gave a scenario where one is seeking employment and the office they go to has people speaking acertain language the individual can speak. "Chances are high that this person will embrace that tribe in the name of getting help. These things are happening. There is a lot of discrimination."

He asked those who are being victimised and discriminated against for belonging to a particular tribe to report to the commission for immediate redress.

"We have received several reports from those people. Some of the reports are against the local government or the dominant tribes, among other issues. People should come up with any complaints of such because the more we let them identify as people of other tribes, they may face extinction," he said.

So, as the Equal Opportunities Commission, we call on all our stakeholders to join us to ensure these people are identified as who they are. Because the more we let," he added.

Tribes with small population			
Tribe	Population in 2014	Population in 2024	Districts where they are found
Mvuba	2879	382	Bundibugyo
Vonoma	2613	680	Bundibugyo
Lendu	18,919	18,801	Zombo
Kebu	54,109	51,672	Zombo And Arua
So (Tepeth)	23,422	19,286	Moroto, Napak and Nakapiripirit
Shana	10,835	7,209	Bulambuli
Mening	2,655	2,271	Kaabong, Karenga and Kotido
Babukusu	37,117	35,914	Mbale and Namisindwa
Bahororo	151,566	149,146	Rukungiri and Ntungamo
Banyabindi	16,331	11,947	Kasese, Kabarole, Kyenjojo, and Kyegegwa
Banyabutumbi	10,113	8,484	Rukungiri
Banyala	47,699	47,438	Kayunga
Barundi	92,570	65,964	Kisoro
Basongora	15,897	13,837	Kasese, Sheema, Kyegegwa, and Kibaale
Batwa	6,200	3,857	Kisoro, Kabale, Kanungu, Bundibugyo, and Rukungiri districts
Chope	34,327	26,029	Kiryandongo

Source: UBOS 2024 population census report

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