

Film Review

Evelyn Cindy Magara's *Tuko Pamoja: The Making of a Nation*

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A cross-section of African colleagues I have met for the first time have often asked me the following identity questions. My responses have often been indefinite. The common question from those outside East Africa is: "Are you a Sudanese? You are dark like them." I answer, "I am not; but I am Sudanic". Within East Africa, I am often asked if I am an Acoli, a Munyoro or a Mutoro, for I have features that place me in the categories. To these, I respond, "I am not, but related to all of them!" There are those who press the question further and ask, "Then what are you?" When I tell the inquirers that I am a Ma'di, I immediately realize this is an ethnic group they have hardly heard about. Although once a large group that straddled a couple of present-day national borders, the Ma'di are now a small ethnic group largely located in present day South Sudan and Uganda.

Cindy Magara's herculean 13-episode documentary series, *Tuko Pamoja* (2024), grapples with the identity questions: who are we as Africans and Ugandans, and why does understanding this matter? What do we know about our identities? The central argument in the series is that we are all connected. The everyday reality is that we often define ourselves away from the aqueous reality of one ethnic group identity flowing into the other, making the idea of ethnic purity an absurdity. As the title – *Tuko Pamoja* ("We Are One") – suggests, the series advocates for embracing a composite, "rainbow" Ugandan identity. It critically addresses the negative instrumentalisation of ethnicity, which has historically impeded national unity.

This review focuses on the 13th episode: *The Making of a Nation*. Among other content ideas, this segment foregrounds discourses on the movements and settlements of the peoples that make the present-day Uganda. The country's name, a colonial construct derived from the Kingdom of Buganda under the 1900 Agreement with the British, is thus a misnomer that clusters diverse groups, some of whom reside beyond current national borders. Despite its colonial origins, the name *Uganda* serves as a focal point for citizens in constructing a shared national identity.

The film traces Africa's past to the era of the Ethiopian Empire, from which other empires and polities subsequently emerged. It follows the thesis of a once united Africa gradually fractured over the years; and the continent's vulnerabilities became easy to exploit in the waves of imperialist incursions. Nations across history are the outcomes of migrations. We are all moving peoples that came from somewhere. Clustering the over 60 ethnic groups of contemporary Uganda into five linguistic groups, Magara's

meticulous argument, backed by her largely well selected respondents, point to the Sudanic speaking peoples, clustered under the Ma'di language group, as perhaps the first inhabitants of the present-day Uganda; followed by the Bantu, and the Luo and Kalenjin clusters in this order. That the cradlelands of all the Ugandan migrants point to far-away lands in western and southern Africa point to the fact that there is reason for Africa to be defined as one: there are many areas of share commonalities than differences. Today, there are audacious African leaders emerging in Namibia, Zambia and Botswana, towing policies that emphasize a more 'borderless' African mobility and unity in line with what earlier leaders like Kwame Nkrumah and Gadhafi have tried to reactivate. What such African leaders tried to do as part of the struggle against Western imperialism and the restoration of African dignity was not something new. Pre-colonial Africa was defined by free and fluid movements of peoples trading and exchanging intellectual properties. *Tuko Pamoja*, in this sense, re-awakens a sense of renaissance of African identity. I read it that Eastern Africa, particularly Uganda, as the probable cradleland of humanity ought to live with a sense of responsibility as 'firstborns.

Among the fascinating discourses in the film is the truth that identities are never stable; they are as fluid as migration itself. They keep changing as people move. The trails of the biological ancestry of every individual show mixtures beyond the linguistic coherence and unity. Because of generations of intermarriages, those who now define themselves as Bantu, Luo or Ma'di are inherently entangled. For this reason, the director's message is that we ought to play down on tribalism. Along this line, she broaches on what it takes to craft a national identity. What symbols do Ugandans have that can facilitate this process?

Magara introduces the person of Omukama Kabalega of Bunyoro (1870-1899) whose influence, as an iconic leader who resisted colonialism to ensure the dignity of his people transcends Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom. Compared to other Ugandan kings and chiefs of the time, Kabalega's vision of national unity was evident as he waged the war for self-determination beyond the confines of Bunyoro kingdom. He stands out as a credible icon – the kind of symbol around whom to construct a national identity. History is characterized by alliance system. Kabalega knew he could never stand up against the militarily superiority of the colonial army, and so he mobilized a wide network of allies. The film discourses the possibility that in his political ambition, Kabalega could have led the evolution of the Great Lakes region into a nation that expanded beyond the borders of present-day Uganda. He strategically sought the support of the different kingdoms and chieftaincies to back him in the struggle for self-autonomy. That the colonialists arrested both Kabalega and Kabaka Mwanga of Buganda in northern Uganda, where both sought refuge with a Lango chief tells of the vision and 'national' network Kabalega had. As one of the respondents articulates, "The battle of the loss of sovereign Uganda was lost in Dokolo". That two powerful Bantu kings were protected by a Nilotic chief offers a big lesson for contemporary Ugandans.

Tuko Pamoja is a commendable film with a hindsight to the past – reveling in the glories of ancient African empires and kingdoms that had all the potential to develop the continent into a formidable economic and political structure were it not rudely interrupted by colonialism. Looking at a country such as Uganda where the challenges of tribalism and internal stereotyping creates occlude harmony and peaceful coexistence, the film invites viewers to appreciate the ingenuity of leaders such as Kabalega, Kabaka

Mwanga, and other resisting chiefs across present-day Uganda. The film flashes some light on rarely spoken of leaders such as Chief Awich of Acoli and Chief Aliku of Ma'di, to show that besides known historical leaders, there were several others who played their part to inscribe the dignity of their people in the face of colonial arrogance. By doing this, the filmmaker reawakens interest to research and know more about the contributions of historical leaders to nation building.

The documentary is strong on historical information that tease the mind to delve deeper into research. It invites audiences to reflect on the fact that national identity is a construction that requires deliberate effort around shared symbols. Just as it celebrates some leaders, it also scans what continues to dodge African nations in their efforts towards unity. For this, this film would be an excellent resource for introducing scholars in aspects of African histories. It is formatted in an accessible journalese style.

There are, however, many arguments, some related and others not quite, introduced in the film. The filmmaker seems to be driven by a sense of urgency to put all the important issues on the table for discussion: migration, identity, nationalism, leadership, heroism and villainy, decolonization, naming and memorialization, and so on. Although the initial idea was the story of Omukama Kabalega, this is not foregrounded enough. One cannot therefore say that this is a film about Kabalega. The different kings and chiefs referenced herein would deserve documentaries. This included Kabalega. Thus, if this project is ambitious in its expanse, the cost of this is its lack of depth.

Second, the film keeps growing even when the viewer expects an end. This film could be realised in 90 minutes or less instead of the over two hours. A tighter editing, and a more careful selection of interviewees would have achieved this. There are several forms of repetition in the film. Furthermore, some of the content elements that come towards the end of the film feel like appendages that could stand alone. These include the sections on deconstructing African identities around clans whose totems surpass linguistic categories and national boundaries; the contribution on who is a hero or a villain; the decolonial conversation on naming streets, and monuments.

Despite these shortcomings, *Tuko Pamoja: The Making of a Nation* is a compelling and informative documentary that fosters a sense of nationalism. Its content is highly suitable for educational settings, providing numerous entry points for dialogue on leadership, nationhood, and identity. Magara's achievement in producing a 13-episode series that engages all regions of Uganda is significant, offering a platform for critical reflection on what it means to be African and Ugandan.