

# How Rotary became part of the Ugandan elite culture

BY MICHAEL AGABA

Rotary is one of the world's largest humanitarian and professional service organisations. It brings together business leaders, professionals, and community members who are committed to improving society through volunteer service and ethical leadership. Rotary's guiding motto, "Service Above Self," reflects its mission of placing community needs and humanitarian service before personal interests.

Rotary was founded on February 23, 1905 in Chicago by Paul P. Harris, an American lawyer who believed professionals from different occupations should meet regularly to build friendships, exchange ideas, and work together to serve their communities.

At the time, many people living in large cities felt isolated despite being surrounded by others. Harris wanted to recreate the spirit of friendship and trust that existed in small communities.

Together with three friends from different professions, he organised the first Rotary meeting. The meetings were held in rotation at members' offices, which inspired the name "Rotary."

What began as a small professional fellowship in Chicago soon developed into a global movement dedicated to humanitarian service, peace building, and community development.

## Spreading around the world

Rotary expanded rapidly beyond the United States during the early twentieth century. Clubs were established across Europe, Asia, and Latin America as the organisation gained international recognition for promoting friendship and public service.

By 1921, Rotary had reached Africa through South Africa. This marked the beginning of Rotary's presence on the African continent. The movement continued spreading across East Africa, and by 1930, Rotary had entered Kenya, laying the groundwork for expansion into neighboring countries.

As Rotary grew internationally, it became known not only for professional networking but also for large-scale humanitarian projects such as fighting disease, promoting education, supporting maternal health, and improving access to clean water. The introduction of Rotary into Uganda was not immediate. Initial efforts to establish Rotary clubs in the country began around 1946, during the colonial era. However, these attempts faced challenges and did not succeed at first.

After several years of effort, Rotary finally gained a permanent presence in Uganda when the Rotary Club of Kampala was officially chartered in May 20, 1957. This became the first Rotary club in the country and marked the official beginning of Rotary activities in Uganda.

The establishment of the Kampala club was a significant milestone because it created a foundation for community service, professional fellowship, and humanitarian work within the country. The club attracted professionals, business people, and leaders who shared a commitment to serving society.

More clubs were formed as interest in service activities increased among professionals and community leaders.

## Some of the early Rotary clubs established in Uganda included:

● 28/05/1964 — Rotary Club of Mbale was chartered

● 16/11/1964 — Rotary Club of Jinja was

chartered.

● 26/02/1970 — Rotary Club of Kampala West was chartered.

During the early years, many Rotary members in Uganda were expatriates, especially Europeans working in business, administration, and professional fields. However, after Uganda gained independence in 1962, many expatriates left the country. As a result, leadership within Rotary increasingly shifted to Asian and Ugandan professionals who continued building and strengthening the organisation.

This transition was important because it helped make Rotary more locally rooted and reflective of Uganda's own communities and development needs. Challenges during Idi Amin's rule The growth of Rotary in Uganda faced serious difficulties during the regime of Idi Amin in the 1970s. Amin's government was marked by political instability, fear, economic decline, and human rights abuses.

Rotary was heavily affected during this period because the government reportedly viewed it with suspicion. Amin is said to have described Rotary as an organisation linked to "imperialists," which created fear among members.

## As political conditions worsened:

Many Rotarians fled the country. Some members were imprisoned. Others stopped participating due to insecurity and fear. By 1973, Rotary membership in Uganda had declined drastically, and several clubs became inactive. The organisation nearly collapsed during this difficult period.

## Revival of Rotary in Uganda

In the 1980s, as Uganda slowly regained political stability, Rotary began to recover and rebuild. One of the most influential figures in this revival was Samuel Owori. He played a major role in rebuilding Rotary in Uganda and strengthening its presence across the country. Owori later gained international recognition when he was selected to lead Rotary International globally.

## Rotary in Uganda Today

Today, Rotary in Uganda has grown into a vibrant and highly active network of service organisations. Uganda currently has over 140 Rotary clubs and over 100 Rotaract clubs with over 10,000 members overall.

Rotary and Rotaract clubs in Uganda are involved in numerous humanitarian and development projects that improve the lives of communities throughout the country.

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