



President Museveni carrying *olubengo* during campaigns in 1995 and the *kisanja* (right), which was still popular in the 2015-16 campaigns in places like Aruu (above)

# Museveni rides on symbolism

By Nicholas Wasajja

**D**espite President Yoweri Museveni's seemingly low regard for arts subjects in high school, he was a student of English and Literature. And as a politician, he has exhibited a mastery of performance and prolific symbolism as an art of communication, which has endeared him to supporters.

Although his critics always find means of distorting the messages, Museveni has always found a way of riding on the tide of symbolism in all previous elections.

## Olubengo, 1996

Ugandans went to the polls for the first time under the NRM regime. The campaign was a two-horse race between Museveni and the Democratic Party's Paul Kawanga Ssemogerere, a former internal affairs minister.

The campaign was the ultimate platform of symbolism with a lot of creativity and excitement from each camp. But what stood out was when Museveni addressed a rally at Nyenga sub-county headquarters in Buikwe and the LC3 chairman, Kitaka, gave him a grinding stone, *olubengo*, a symbol he embraced and took around as the entrusted leader to carry the country's burdens.

A monument was erected to commemorate the significance of Museveni in Uganda's politics at the very scene where he received the stone.

## Cotter pin, 2001

The political interplay when Museveni sought re-election after five years had changed. A former colleague was his main challenger.

**TUBONGA NAWA IS LOCAL SLANG USED BY YOUTH TO MEAN, "WE ARE WITH YOU". THERE WAS NO BETTER WAY OF COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE THAT THE YOUTH SHOULD STICK WITH THE PRESIDENT**

To political pundits then, Dr. Kizza Besigye under the Reform Agenda platform was an uphill task to overcome but at the kick-start of his campaign, Museveni dubbed himself a bicycle cotter pin, a piece of metal that can only be fixed and removed with a hammer.

The interpretation was that Museveni had ascended to power through a people-supported struggle and that was the only way he could ever be beaten.

Interestingly, Besigye was quick in response when he referred to himself as a hammer (Senyondo).

However, the hammer was not effective enough to unseat the incumbent.

## Ekisanja, 2006

The campaign saw the two bush war comrades face off again. In 2005, Parliament had amended the Constitution to allow for a multi-party political dispensation and had also scrapped term limits.

The *ekisanja* symbolism was born in this

period from a Luganda word *essanja* (dry banana leaves). In this context, it was for an extra term of office. Museveni and his NRM used it to seek re-election for a third term. They donned it on top of yellow party T-shirts with Museveni's picture on the front.

Songs were composed around the catchy word and one local musician, Moses Ssali, better known as Bebe Cool, recorded an album called *ekisanja*.

Amama Mbabazi, who was defence minister at the time, bought it at sh7m at the launch.

Although the opposition tried to use the word against the President by saying he was as weak as dry banana leaves that needed a broom to be swept out, Museveni went on to win the election.

The songs, the word and the *essanja* itself became even more popular after the campaigns, and were present at all NRM functions.

## Another rap, 2011

The campaign again pitted Besigye against Museveni but this time, the national dynamic had changed. Research and statistics had proved beyond doubt that the youth were the biggest population and whoever won over them would take the day.

Strategically, Museveni came up with a song titled *Another rap* and with which he hit two birds with one stone. It raised his appeal to the youth, while also urging people to vote for him again (*you want another rap.....yes Sevo*) in the song.

The song that had a chorus in English and different parts in Runyakitara became a favourite of many media houses because the young, regardless of political affiliation, enjoyed to it. It was a telephone ring tone and a slogan used by both the rural and urban youth until Museveni won the election.

The same campaigns had the slogan *pakalast*.

This was borrowed from a telecom company's promotion, where subscribers were assured of talk time without worrying about the cost.

Like in the previous two contests, Besigye lost to President Museveni, but decided not to contest the outcomes in the courts.

## Tubonga Nawe

The 2016 presidential campaigns ushered in a new entrant in the person of Amama Mbabazi the former Prime Minister and close confidant of President Museveni. He needed a message that would not only resonate with the dreams and aspirations of the electorate but one that could stick and stand out. To achieve that music turned out to be the appropriate vehicle and a group of local artistes were only eager to compose the right song and accompany him on the campaign trail.

They composed the *Tubonga Nawe* song that was meant to appeal to the youth while at the same time enumerating the achievements of the NRM. They also had a catchy phrase and slogan steady progress to counter Mbabazi's Go-Forward. In the song, gospel artiste Judith Babirye paints a picture of how the NRM government, under Museveni, emancipated women and elevated their social status *....abakyala twabonabona..... naye kati twevuga..* meaning that the women in the past suffered but now they are empowered and even own cars. *Tubonga nawe* is local slang used by youth to mean, "I am with you or I bond with you or I feel you."

There could have been no better way of communicating the message that the youth should stick with the President considering the fact that the song was composed and sung by their celebrated artistes.

Little wonder on voting day final tally indicated that the electorate had stuck with Museveni.