

## Billionaire curses the spotlight

Sizzling Entertainment

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Ssekakala and his girlfriend

Until last April, Abdu Ssekakala was just a Makerere University information technology student. But then he got an ambition that has turned him into an icon.

At 22, Ssekakala's bank account keeps a hefty \$500,000 (about Shs 1.2 billion) – money many millionaires may never earn. He will probably rank among the richest – and humblest – Ugandans next year, when he wants to make a million dollars.

"Friends now call me 'Billionaire' and all sorts of flattering names but I am not letting it get to my head because in the first place, I was not targeting the money," Ssekakala says.

"I still go to class, greet friends and prepare my own breakfast. I live a normal life."

### Fame, the uninvited guest

Last April, Ssekakala and his classmates attended a seminar by the global phone giant Nokia at the College of Computing and Information Sciences. He was inspired by the seminar and started developing mobile applications – internet programmes that run on smart phones and other portable devices. They enable users to access internet on their mobile phones instead of the traditional desktops and laptops.

Awed by Ssekakala's work, Nokia and other global phone corporations entered into a contract with him to distribute his applications. As of now, Ssekakala has nine apps under his name including Uganda Theme; the third most downloaded application on the Nokia programmes store with a total of 300,000 downloads.

Yet Wordbook, a mobile dictionary application is what earns Ssekakala most of the money. He instantly earns a Euro (about Shs 3,200) for every download. The app has so far fetched him over 300,000 Euros (about Shs 960 million) and the downloads increase by the day. His other applications 101 Romantic SMS, nLightFlashlight and Tutu Translate, among others, also earn him a fortune through advertising deals with an elite Indian advertising network called Vserv.

Mobile apps have flung the once little known Ssekakala into the spotlight, something he is uncomfortable with. His lists of friends and foes have grown so much that he wishes he could go back to when he walked around Makerere unnoticed.

"I receive countless calls everyday; my phone barely stops ringing. Everyone has a deal for me and everyone wants to be partners. People treat me differently and that disturbs me a lot because I know I am still the same old me," Ssekakala says.

### Change

Nevertheless, a number of things have had to change. Overwhelmed by the number of phone calls and business proposals, Ssekakala has decided to secure an alternative line. He rarely picks calls and his Facebook page is restricted. It took me over a week and the intervention of his friend to secure this interview.

"It is crazy. Some girls call asking me for sex. Others want loans. Everyone is giving me advice on how to invest money. The press wants interviews. I speak to people I do not know. It is too much for me to take!" he laments.

Ssekakala has learnt to mind what he says, eats and who he hangs out with. An avid movie fan, who hitherto enjoyed catching the latest Steven Spielberg and the controversial Charlie Sheen films from in his hostel room, has now sought refuge at his friends' rooms because many unannounced guests come to his room these days.

"I still go out clubbing and I take the front seat at Cineplex every weekend. I have been so lucky that I am surrounded by wonderful people who give me the right advice. I am glad my friends have not changed," he says with a smile.

### His love

When I met him for this interview, he cut a polite figure – different from the flamboyant young billionaire I had imagined him to be. Dressed in a short-sleeved chequered shirt, black trousers and flats, Ssekakala was in the company of the person he loves most - his girlfriend.

"I understand Abdu best," boasted 21-year-old Qudrah Nampewo.

"He is the most down-to-earth person I have ever known. I know there is a lot more he can achieve," she adds.

Throughout the interview, the lovebirds unconsciously give off a warm air of affection. They cuddle, smile and whisper to each other. They tell me they are classmates and have dated since first year. Standing at a height below Ssekakala's head, Nampewo is equally beautiful. Her oratory skills

and intellect perfectly match her sweetheart’s calm, laid-back demeanour.

“He is very outgoing but that does not scare me because I know he is faithful. I know some of the girls who are after his fame and I have warned him about them. He knows I do not tolerate nonsense,” she asserts. Asked what the future holds, Nampewo looked up into Ssekalala’s glasses, smiled and declared: “We love each other and we will get married.”

## Background

Ssekalala’s family, friends and lecturers have also been equally supportive. Though he does not offer much about his background, he says Kampala is his hometown. He is the second born of three children. His father is a businessman while his mother is a banker. He went to Kyaggwe Road for primary and Mengo Senior School for both O and A-level. He scored 16 points at S.6 and got admitted to Makerere on private sponsorship.

“I am still a mummy’s boy. She is the one who advised me to get a legal team and an assistant. She also coaches me on how to go about interviews. She cautions me on what details to divulge and what not,” Ssekalala reveals.

He also pays a lot of homage to his father. His lecturer, Michael Niyitegeka is his mentor. Speaking to The Observer, Niyitegeka revealed that Ssekalala is a good student with a normal progress.

“He is one of the best we have at the faculty. I have respect for him because he went an extra mile to venture into something we did not teach him. His achievement has caused a lot of excitement around here,” Niyitegeka said.

Niyitegeka has closely followed the works of his protégé; giving the youngster advice on how to develop the next billion-shilling app and how to talk to press. He said some lecturers now consult with Ssekalala, rubbing possibilities of malice and jealousy on the former’s part. Ssekalala’s other lecturer, Margaret Nagwovuma, warned him against rushing to sign contracts with phone companies because some are crooked.

She says she does not wish her student a lecturing job because there is no money there. “Why come back to suffer here yet you can employ yourself?” she queried. As Ssekalala awaits his final exams, due in a week’s time, he is assured of a more-than-comfortable life after school. With a bank account that size, many of his mates would not bother to finish school, but he is different.

“I want to look for a formal job after my education. I do not care how much I earn from it for as long as I work just like other people,” he says.

“I want to be able to wake up, go to work and face challenges. I want to be normal.”

Ssekalala adds: “People consider me a success but I do not, not until I turn my success into significance. I hope my small contribution to society touches someone out there.”

With foreign media already comparing him to Facebook mastermind, Mark Zuckerberg, Ssekalala has probably just begun his climb to success.

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