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Danish National ID Centre

Birkerød Kongevej 2
DK-3460 Birkerød
Denmark

Phone +45 61 98 39 00
Email nidc@nidc.dk
Website www.nidc.dk

Uganda – Civil and customary marriages and their registration procedures

Introduction

The following note describes the conditions and requirements for entering civil and customary marriages in Uganda, the subsequent registration as well as the issuance procedures for the related marriage certificates.

The note is primarily based on interviews conducted in Kampala and Wakiso in October and November 2022.

Following an amendment to the Registration of Persons Act (2015) in 2024, the function of marriage registration was transferred from The Ugandan Registration Services Bureau (URSB) to the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA), in October 2024.¹ According to a report from Landinfo, the section of NIRA responsible for registering marriages is physically located in URSB's offices, and there are no immediate plans to move the section to NIRA's offices.²

The below information concerning URSB can be considered applicable up until the transfer of their functions on 1 October 2024. To NIDC's knowledge, the practical implementation of registration- and issuance procedures currently remain unchanged despite the formal transfer of responsibility to NIRA.

Marriage in Uganda

Until 1 October 2024, The Ugandan Registration Services Bureau (URSB) was the directorate of civil registration responsible for covering registration regarding inter alia marriage, business and intellectual property.

In relation to marriage, URSB was among other things mandated to:

- Solemnise civil marriage for residents of Kampala
- Register all Church, Islamic and Hindu marriages
- License churches to celebrate marriages
- Maintain all customary marriage registers.³

¹ Kamurungi & Akullu, 2 October 2024.

² Landinfo, 17 December 2024.

³ URSB, 24 November 2021.

There are five types of legal marriage in Uganda: civil, customary, church/Christian, Islamic and Hindu.⁴ Each type of marriage has its own type of marriage certificates.⁵

For information about religious marriages, please refer to our note: “Religious marriages and their registration procedures in Uganda”.

Marriage registration

Marriage registration in Uganda is mandatory but the specific conditions depend on the type of marriage. Marriage is, however, legal before registration, as long as it abides by the rules and requirements for that particular type of marriage.⁶ No matter how long ago a couple married, it is always possible to have the marriage registered. In case of late registration, the couple will be subjected to a fine.⁷

Eligibility criteria

The following criteria must be honoured, in order to enter into a legally valid marriage in Uganda no matter the type of marriage:

- Bride and groom must be 18 years or above*
- Marriage must be consensual
- Marriage must be heterosexual
- Marriage must be monogamous except for customary and Islamic
- Persons cannot be related by kindred or affinity.⁸
- Proxy marriages are not allowed in any circumstances no matter what type of marriage is celebrated.⁹

*If bride or groom is below 21 years and not a widower/widow, written consent from either one of the parents or guardian is required for church and civil marriages and for customary marriage in cases where the party below 21 years does not belong to an indigenous tribe of Uganda.¹⁰

According to URSB, it is important to underline that marriage is for life except by dissolution due to death or by court order. In that case, divorcees can remarry.¹¹

Cohabitation does not give any legal rights.¹²

⁴ URSB, 24 November 2021.

⁵ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁶ URSB, Kampala, October 2022; Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, p. 3.

⁷ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁸ URSB, Kampala, October 2022; URSB, 24 November 2021.

⁹ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

¹⁰ Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, pp. 6-7; CAO, November 2022.

¹¹ URSB, Kampala, October 2022; URSB, 24 November 2021.

¹² URSB, Kampala, October 2022; URSB, 24 November 2021.

Single status certificates are needed for Ugandans to marry in e.g. Denmark. You and one of your parents swear that you are unmarried in front of a Commissioner of Oaths.¹³

Civil marriage

Civil marriages are governed by the Marriage Act Cap. 251. They are monogamous and solemnised by a registrar of marriages in the office of Registrar General for residents of Kampala and in offices of the Chief Administrative Officers (LC5) at districts outside Kampala.¹⁴ Most civil marriages in Uganda are celebrated in Kampala and Wakiso and according to URSB; it is rare to see civil marriages in the countryside.¹⁵

According to the Chief Administrative Officer in Wakiso district, not all districts are gazetted to celebrate civil marriages.¹⁶

The civil marriage procedure

The intending couple should appear before the registrar of marriages in the relevant district for an interview and present the documents listed below in order to have the mandatory notice of marriage posted:

- Proof of citizenship and identity e.g. passport
- Details about intending bride and groom i.e. occupation and parents' names
- Local Council 1 (LC1) introduction letter from at least one party proving residence for at least 15 days in the district
- A passport size photograph for the groom and the bride
- A photocopy of a valid ID for each of the two adult witnesses
- Registered marriage affidavits (Section 10 of Marriage Act Cap. 251)¹⁷
- If foreigner, a single status certificate from the said person's home country.¹⁸

Regarding proof of citizenship and identity, URSB has in writing elaborated that it is a requirement for the notice of marriage to be accompanied with sufficient identification documents, which can include national ID cards (and the NIN), passports, refugee cards and local administration residential ID cards. The local administration residential ID cards are only used in exceptional cases involving people without the national ID card.¹⁹

Regarding the marriage affidavits, these may be sworn before the registrar or before a magistrate.²⁰

¹³ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

¹⁴ URSB, 24 November 2021; Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, pp. 2, 4.

¹⁵ URSB, Kampala, October 2022; Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, p. 2.

¹⁶ CAO, Wakiso, November 2022.

¹⁷ ULII, 10 March 2014.

¹⁸ URSB, 16 November 2022; Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, p. 5; URSB A, 2022; CAO, November 2022.

¹⁹ URSB, 25 November 2022.

²⁰ ULII, 10 March 2014.

Regarding the LC1 introduction letter, this is to ensure that at least one party to the marriage resides in the district in which the marriage is intended to be solemnised (15 days as a minimum).²¹ According to URSB, this follows the Marriage Act and is a prerequisite for civil marriages and it will assure the jurisdiction of the marriage registrar.²²

Notice of marriage (21 days' notice)

For 21 days, pictures and information about the couple to be will be on public display at URSB or at the office of the relevant Chief Administrative Officer. If there are no objections to the marriage during the 21 days, the ceremony can take place within the following three months from the date of notice.²³ According to Chief Administrative Officer in Wakiso district, however, the couple only has 14 days to solemnise the marriage after the lapse of the notice of marriage.²⁴

At least one of the parties must in person post the notice of marriage and present proper documentation concerning both parties including the mentioned sworn marriage affidavits. It is, therefore, possible to post notice in cases where one of the parties is not in Uganda as long as proper documentation is submitted.²⁵ According to URSB, it is imperative that proper identification is submitted at the point of posting notice. This is among other things to avoid that someone may attempt to marry another person without consent.²⁶

It is also possible to apply online for the notice of marriage, but before the 21 days' of notice are initiated, at least one of the parties must appear in person at URSB or at the office of the relevant Chief Administrative Officer.²⁷

Civil marriage certificates

On the day of the marriage solemnisation, the parties appear with the two adult witnesses before the registrar who performs the ceremony.²⁸ After the civil marriage has been solemnised, the registrar registers the marriage in the marriage register book and issues a certificate of marriage (Form E). The certificates from URSB and the offices of the Chief Administrative Officer are different but contain the same information.²⁹

The process at URSB has recently been digitised. The certificate is printed from the digital system and then signed and stamped by URSB. The old versions of marriage certificates are still valid but no longer issued.³⁰

²¹ URSB, 16 November 2022; Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, p. 5.

²² URSB, 16 November 2022; URSB, 25 November 2022.

²³ ULII, 10 March 2014; URSB, 24 November 2021.

²⁴ CAO, Wakiso, November 2022.

²⁵ URSB, 16 November 2022.

²⁶ URSB, 16 November 2022.

²⁷ URSB, 16 November 2022.

²⁸ URSB A, 2022.

²⁹ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

³⁰ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

Cancelled
He

CERTIFICATE OF MARRIAGE

Form E

THE MARRIAGE ACT

Date of Marriage: 12/2022

Marriage Registry No: 1234567

Marriage celebrated in the Marriage district of WAKISO in the Republic of Uganda

	Husband	Wife
Name	[Redacted]	[Redacted]
Full age	31	30
Condition	Single	Single
Rank/Profession/Occupation	ACCOUNTANT	MONITORING AND EVALUATION
Residence	[Redacted]	[Redacted]
	Father	Father
Name	[Redacted]	[Redacted]
Rank/Profession/Occupation	BUSINESS MAN	BUSINESS MAN
	1st Witness	2nd Witness
Name	[Redacted]	[Redacted]
Full age	28	27
Condition	Single	Single
Rank/Profession/Occupation	IT TECHICIAN	ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT
Residence	[Redacted]	[Redacted]
	Father	Father
Name	[Redacted]	[Redacted]
Rank/Profession/Occupation		BUSINESS MAN
Married at	WAKISO	
(or before) me	by James Mayanja	
This Marriage was celebrated between us	1. [Redacted] 2. [Redacted]	
In the presence of us as witnesses	1. [Redacted] 2. [Redacted]	

Special license

³¹ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

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on a tourist visa, which will expire before the 21 days. According to URSB, if other criteria are fulfilled the special license will normally be granted.³³ Special license is governed by the Marriage Act Cap. 251, which governs civil and Christian (monogamous) marriages.³⁴

Customary marriage

Customary marriages are governed by the Customary Marriage (Registration) Act, Cap. 248.³⁵ Customary marriages are not necessarily monogamous and there is no limit as to how many wives a man can have.³⁶ Customary marriages are celebrated in accordance with the customs of the relevant tribal community.³⁷ In a customary marriage, at least one of the parties to the marriage must belong to 'an African society'.³⁸ Two foreigners where neither belong to an African society cannot enter into a customary marriage in Uganda. As a rule, a customary marriage follows the customs of the tribal community of the bride and according to URSB; it is highly uncommon to see a customary marriage where the bride does not belong to an African society/local community.³⁹ One of the main reasons is that the dowry goes to the bride's family.⁴⁰

It was important for URSB to stress, that customary marriages involving parties below the minimum age of 18 years are not allowed and are invalid in Uganda. Before 1995, the age limit for the bride was 16 as stipulated in the Customary Marriage (Registration) Act Chapter 248. However, following the 1995 amendment of the Constitution of Uganda this is no longer legal.⁴¹

Both parties to the marriage must be present during solemnisation; hence, by proxy customary marriages are not legal.⁴²

A customary marriage can be converted into a civil marriage if it is still monogamous.⁴³

Registration of customary marriages

Customary marriages are the only legal marriages in Uganda not celebrated by an appointed marriage registrar; hence, customary marriages are not entered into the marriage register book instantly, as is the case for all other marriages.⁴⁴

³³ URSB, Kampala, October 2022; URSB, 24 November 2021.

³⁴ URSB, 25 November 2022.

³⁵ Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, p. 7; URSB A, 2022.

³⁶ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

³⁷ URSB, 24 November 2021.

³⁸ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

³⁹ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁴⁰ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁴¹ URSB, Kampala, October 2022; Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, p. 4.

⁴² URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁴³ URSB, Kampala, October 2022; URSB, 24 November 2021.

⁴⁴ URSB, 16 November 2022.

Customary marriages must be registered no later than six months after the ceremony with the sub-county chief or town clerk who are designated registrars of customary marriages at which point it is entered into the marriage register book and forwarded to URSB.⁴⁵ Both parties must be present at the office of the registrar of customary marriages (Town Clerk or Sub-County Chief) with at least two witnesses to the marriage ceremony to register the marriage.⁴⁶

According to URSB, both parties and the two witnesses should sign *Form B* confirming that they are married and witnessed the marriage ceremony, respectively.⁴⁷ This form is filled out by the Town Clerk or Sub-County Chief, who also stamps and signs it. Form B has pictures of bride and groom.⁴⁸

Serial No. _____ FORM B


THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

CERTIFICATE OF CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE
(Section 6 of the Decree)

Sub-County/City/Municipality/Township Register No. _____

Marriage celebrated at _____ in the Sub-County/City/Municipality/Township of _____
(village)

in the County of _____ District of _____

	Date of Marriage	Full Name	Age	Status	Profession	Residence at time of Marriage	Father	Profession of Father
Husband								
Wife								

	Full Name	Age	Status	Occupation	Residential Address
Witness					
Witness					

This Marriage was celebrated between us _____ in the presence of us _____

Signature of Husband *Signature of Witness*

Signature of Wife *Signature of Second Witness*

I, _____ Registrar of _____ Marriage District, do hereby certify that this is a true copy of the
(print in full Registrar's Name(s)).
entry of a marriage as shown above

Witness my hand, this _____ day of _____ 20____

Registrar's Signature and Rubber Stamp.

Image 2: Certificate of customary marriage/ Form B. Available online.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ URSB, 16 November 2022; URSB, 24 November 2021.

⁴⁶ Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 November 2020, p. 3.

⁴⁷ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁴⁸ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁴⁹ URSB B, 2022.

Serial No. 011624

FORM B



THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

CERTIFICATE OF CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE

(Section 6 of the Decree)

Sub-County/City/Municipality/Township Register No.

Marriage celebrated at in the Sub-County/City/Municipality/Township of

(village)

in the County of District of

	Date of Marriage	Full Name	Age	Status	Profession	Residence at time of Marriage	Father	Profession of Father
Huband								
Wife								

	Full Name	Age	Status	Occupation	Residential Address
Witness					
Witness					

This Marriage was celebrated between us in the presence of us

.....
Signature of Husband

.....
Signature of Witness

.....
Signature of Wife

.....
Signature of Second Witness

I, Registrar of Marriage District, do hereby certify that this is a true copy of the
(print in full Registrar's Name(s))
entry of a marriage as shown above

WITNESS my hand, this day of 20.....

.....
Registrar's Signature and Rubber Stamp.

Image 3: Certificate of customary marriage/ Form B, carbon paper. (NIDC reference material)

Customary marriage certificates (Form B)

URSB does not issue any marriage certificates when a customary marriage is registered in their system.⁵⁰ Form B is from the Sub-County Chief or Town Clerk who buy the empty marriage certificate forms, which are in carbon paper in triplet: yellow, white and blue.⁵¹ The digital version can also be used (image 2).⁵²

According to URSB, an extract from the marriage register can be issued on request. URSB will stamp the extracts. URSB's stamps will change over time and are different for each registrar.⁵³

⁵⁰ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁵¹ CAO, Wakiso, November 2022; URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁵² URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

⁵³ URSB, Kampala, October 2022.

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