

Impact of Post-Modernist Trends on the Practice of *Imbalu* Initiation Rituals among the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda

Evans Nyongesa Odutsa^{1*}, Beatrice Busolo², Selline Oketch³

¹The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), P. O. Box 908-30100, Eldoret, Kenya.

²Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Pwani University, P. O. Box 195-80108 Kilifi, Kenya

³Lecturer, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), P. O. Box 62157-00200, City Square, Nairobi, Kenya

DOI: [10.36347/sjahss.2019.v07i08.008](https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2019.v07i08.008)

| Received: 14.08.2019 | Accepted: 23.08.2019 | Published: 30.08.2019

*Corresponding author: Evans Nyongesa Odutsa

Abstract

Original Research Article

This article provides a detailed examination of the Post-Modernist elements in Bagisu's *imbalu* circumcision rituals based on a study of the male circumcision ritual among the Bantu-speaking people of Eastern Uganda in Africa. The study was inspired by the fact that the contemporary cultural context of male circumcision has undergone some transformation. Traditional practices were of a particular and rather narrow profile linked to the toughening, training and initiation of male adolescents into warrior or adulthood status. For those groups, the normal social context of circumcision was in the adolescents' rite of passage typically called "Hushina *Imbalu*" or initiation schools in ethnographic literature. Therefore, the study undertook a post-modernist interpretation of the performance elements in the circumcision songs and dances of the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda. The study was conducted in the Larger Mbale Districts, Eastern Uganda. It targeted the Bagisu initiates who were circumcised in the past years and those who faced the knife in August-December 2018. It also targeted their parents and surgeons involved in the circumcision ceremonies. Only one circumcision ceremony was observed through all its stages. The sample size comprised four current Bagisu initiates, another four past initiates, four circumcision surgeons, nine local elders and eight parents of the initiates. Therefore, the sample size was 29. The current initiates, the circumcision surgeons and parents were sampled purposively. The past initiates and the elders, on the other hand, were sampled using snow-balling method. Primary data was collected from the field using questionnaires and interviews. Secondary data was obtained from relevant reports, researchers, library research, websites and internet sources. In this study, data analysis began with open coding, followed by axial and selective coding. The findings were then analysed and presented thematically. From the study findings, despite the fact that Bamasaba people have continued with the *imbalu* activities, post-modernist elements such as Christianity, intermarriages, western education, among others, have greatly affected the ritual. Based on these findings, it is recommended that future literary researchers should investigate why *imbalu* songs and dances have transcended their original contexts of performances since today they are performed during Ugandan Music, Drama and Dance (UMDD) competitions even in Kenya's Music Festivals (KMF) for Schools and Colleges as well as in political rallies (*khadodi*).

Keywords: Post-Modernist Trends, Practice, *Imbalu* Initiation Rituals, Bagisu, Eastern Uganda.

Copyright © 2019: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use (NonCommercial, or CC-BY-NC) provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Among the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda and most of African tribes, being non-technological societies, circumcision ritual plays a very significant role to its people. Not only does it ensure that people have a tight grip of their society, but it also ensures the community develops a sense of confidence that they have in themselves through its traditional practices such as initiation rituals. Since every member of the community is practically involved, ritual serves to create a sense of unity. In initiation, those who are

circumcised together develop a sense of togetherness and comradeship and can work together to defend the community's values and taboos. Besides, they form an age-set that defines the year in which they were circumcised. There is a kind of rehearsal for life that takes place when young people are initiated. The older people rededicate and restrict themselves to the values and beliefs of the community. Initiation ensures that people of the community uphold the communal values and beliefs and are re-enacted. While male circumcision is practiced among many communities living in Eastern

Uganda, the research focused on the practice by the Bagisu alone. This is because the practice among the Bagisu is definitive, considering the community is regarded as the most patriarchal and fearsome tribe in Uganda in terms of the culture and circumcision rituals that are held every even year.

Among the Bagisu Eastern Uganda, the ritual of circumcision is more important and more intense since it is used to promote community identity of real manhood the *Omugisu man* is. In Bagisu community, *Imbalu* circumcision rituals are a religious ritual performance. Like other religious performance, these rituals are associated with spirits and their performance follows strict procedures. In addition, *Imbalu* circumcision rituals are administered under the unquestionable authority of ritual executors; they involve the evocation of the dead; covenanting; and symbolic meanings which are not known by all the participants. The evocation of the dead is important since they are invited to “witness” as well as to bless the candidate. The performance of *Imbalu* circumcision rituals is associated with spirits (kimisambwa), which are believed to have come from the clan of “Nabarwa” the wife of Masaba who is believed to have lured her husband into getting circumcised. To Bagisu people the circumcision is quite vital and is marked by a number of stages which are symbolically determined by the ritual songs played together with its dance movements (*Khadoti*) that the candidate is exposed to by his dancing squad.

Literature review

There is substantial research on *imbalu* rituals and the associated circumcision songs and dances among the Bagisu. However, most writings on *imbalu* rituals have examined the songs sung by Bagisu musicians. Some of these writings are in form of articles published in Ugandan newspapers such as *The New Vision*, *Daily Monitor* and *Weekly Observer*. Newspaper articles are journalistic in nature and as such only report on *imbalu* inauguration ceremonies, myths about the historical background of *imbalu*, incidents when some Bagisu men are forcefully circumcised and the impact of HIV/AIDS on *imbalu* rituals.

Among the scientific studies done on *imbalu* rituals among the Bagisu was a presentation by Heald who offered a psychological interpretation of *imbalu* circumcision rituals [1]. Heald discussed the phases in the *imbalu* ritual process, themes of *imbalu*, costumes used and the symbolisms embedded in the items smeared on *imbalu* candidates. She argued that the items smeared on candidates, the way candidates were urged to dance and sing were intended to arouse anger (*lirima*). According to Heald, a boy whose anger was not aroused may not undergo the *imbalu* ordeal successfully because the power to withstand the *imbalu* rituals was embedded in anger (*lirima*). Heald also argued that after undergoing *imbalu* circumcision

rituals, the Bagisu expect “real” men to put their anger under control. Heald’s interpretation of *imbalu* and the definition of “man” as constructed by the Bagisu does not provide proper data on *imbalu* circumcision rituals and the definition of the concept “man” among the Bagisu. As the data for this research reveals, *imbalu* was not the only tenet which defines “man” among the Bagisu.

Heald’s interpretation of the *imbalu* ritual exemplifies an attempt to provide a post-modernist analysis of the traditional rite of the Bagisu. However, Heald does not document the changes that have occurred to warrant such interpretation. Therefore, to fill this gap, the present study sought to identify the post-modernist elements in the *imbalu* ritual of the Bagisu people. Nevertheless, it provided room for the Bagisu to “spell out” other qualities of manhood: Getting married, to feed and raise a family, the ability to construct one’s house as well as being able to “produce.” Furthermore, *imbalu* songs and dances were not primarily performed to arouse anger (*lirima*) amongst *imbalu* candidates. Instead, circumcision rituals educate, empower and play the role of transforming boys into men by telling them what society expects of them when they become “men”. As such, the study sought to fill the gaps left by Heald since it has examined the *imbalu* process and how *imbalu* defines and performs the roles, identities and relations between men and women among the Bagisu. In so doing, the study tried to find out other tenets in Bagisu that defines ‘man’ apart from *imbalu*, especially those who boycott the rituals and see whether or not are men among the Bagisu people. In addition, the study tried to establish if an initiate who cries during the *imbalu* rituals is still viewed as real man among the Bagisu people.

The concepts of continuity and change have preoccupied scholars in various fields including ethnomusicology, anthropology, linguistics and history [2]. Scholars have argued that western civilization, through education, religion and technology have influenced peoples’ attitudes towards African cultural performances such as *imbalu* among the Bagisu. In a book, Nangoli discusses how western civilization has affected the “beauty” of cultural forms like *imbalu*. Nangoli defines *imbalu* and presents it as a platform for defining the Bagisu identity [3]. However, since Nangoli’s work was a result of extensive surveys conducted in various parts of Africa, he does not discuss how, what and why certain aspects *imbalu* circumcision rituals have changed. Further, Nangoli does not discuss changes in *imbalu* rituals against the concept of continuity. Indeed, as Merrian has argued, cultures do not change overnight and as a whole: Certain aspects change while others do not [2]. Unlike Nangoli and Merrian’s work, this study conducted an intensive exploration of the nature of integrated *imbalu* rituals, songs and dances and some of the aspects of the

imbalu rituals which have changed. This research has also examined the continuities in the *imbalu* rituals.

Furthermore, by defining *imbalu* in terms of the pain experienced by the boy, Nangoli [3] ignored the fact *imbalu* circumcision rituals undergo a process. This study has tried to uncover how *imbalu* circumcision rituals include the *imbalu* songs, dances, rituals as well as pen-surgery, the ritual which involved the removal of the foreskin from the boy's penis. To emphasize that *imbalu* was more than the pen-surgery ritual; Heald's description of *imbalu* as "festivities" [1] was significant. To fill the gaps left by Nangoli, therefore, the study examined the reminding ceremonies, smearing, the pen-surgery ritual as well as the performance of inemba dance as part of the *imbalu* cycle.

Due to changes caused by education, religion, technological advancements and urbanization, many scholars have wondered as to whether or not the future of *imbalu* circumcision rituals is guaranteed. Among these scholars is Namanda, who, in a dissertation, writes about *imbalu* circumcision rituals in light of the effects of western education, religion and the urbanization of the twenty-first century [4]. Namanda examines the aspects of *imbalu* rituals like dancing, singing, nature of participants and the rituals and have been they were affected by the above elements of change. Indeed, as Namanda observes, some phases of *imbalu*, especially the performance of isonja dance and searching for *imbalu* have significantly diminished from the *imbalu* scene. In addition, education, the influence of politics, technology and religion has led *imbalu* music and dances to transcend their original contexts to schools, political rallies and discos. The present study explored some of the changes that have occurred on the rituals due to forces informed by post- modernism.

Many scholars have portrayed the Bagisu as a "race" or "nation" of "men" (basani) as opposed to their neighbours who are depicted as "boys" (basinde) [1,5]. Although these scholars have stressed that *imbalu* circumcision rituals are a platform for concretizing this identity, they had downplayed the place of performance elements as a platform for performing the traits which defined men among the Bagisu. Naleera, for example, mentions riddles, proverbs, exposure to hard work and *imbalu* as the avenues through which the Bagisu inculcate courage in young men [6]. On top of these elements, this study has explored how performing elements in *imbalu* circumcision rituals are used to enhance the transformation process of boys into "men." In order to bridge the gaps left by Naleera, therefore, the study examined *imbalu* songs and dances as a platform for performing aggressiveness and strength, the traits which define men among the Bagisu.

The ethnographic work of Khamalwa examined the structure of *imbalu* rituals from the period

isonja dance was performed to the concluding dance, inemba [7]. Khamalwa also mentions the major actors in *imbalu* rituals, discusses symbolization of the rituals as well as the nature and factors of change in *imbalu* ritual performance. Khamalwa's work offers a lot of points of departure to the present study. For example, he advises scholars to examine a full canopy of the *imbalu* rituals. To examine *imbalu* as a process, therefore, the present study explored the preparatory, pen-surgery and incorporation stages in the *imbalu* circumcision ritual cycle. Furthermore, *imbalu* rituals cannot be divorced from *imbalu* songs and dances. As such, it was important to approach *imbalu* circumcision rituals as integration of songs and dances with the understanding of the above ritual process of *imbalu* as well as the reasons as to why the Bagisu circumcise.

Khamalwa's [7] ethnographic study has attempted to study the relationship between *imbalu* rituals and the integrated circumcision songs and dances. In this work, the researcher describes *imbalu* circumcision rituals, songs, and dances as well as the role of circumcision songs and dances in these rituals. The research examines circumcision songs and dances as part and parcel of *imbalu* rituals so that the success of *imbalu* rituals depends on the nature of circumcision songs and dances performed. This view gave impetus to the present study, especially in examining the singing and dancing processes in *imbalu* circumcision rituals, to find out how these processes participate in performing the Bagisu *imbalu* rituals. This study therefore analysed dance motifs, formations, costumes, the nature of *imbalu* songs, their texts and instrumentation to establish how gender roles, identities and relations were defined and performed through them.

Among the non-scientific writings about *imbalu* circumcision rituals was Wangusa's novel [8]. Apart from "narrating" the process of becoming a man among the Bagisu, Wangusa stresses that *imbalu* is a site for enacting manhood among the Bagisu. In chapter nine of his novel, Wangusa describes the process through which circumcision songs and dances are performed in *imbalu* circumcision rituals, the role of circumcision songs and dances in these rituals, costumes used while performing the rituals and the pen-surgery ritual. Though Wangusa's writing informed the present study, it was narrative in nature. Wangusa also downplays the role of the stage after the pen-surgery ritual and how it enhances the transformation of boys into men, as this study sought to demonstrate. Furthermore, although Wangusa enlists three categories of men, namely "real", "half" and "womanly" men, he does not illustrate how these men are performed through *imbalu* songs and dances. The present study approached *imbalu* rituals as a site for power struggle between men and women among the Bagisu and stresses that they participate in performing the various categories of men as constructed by the Bagisu.

Newspaper articles have also presented some writings about *imbalu* circumcision rituals, songs and dances. Among the journalists who have written about *imbalu* rituals is Kirunda whose article describes *imbalu* inauguration activities, myths about the origin of *imbalu* and reasons why Bumutoto has become a place to host *imbalu* inauguration ceremonies [9]. Further, Edyegu presents *imbalu* inauguration ceremonies as a stage for socialization and integration as well as a period when the timetable for *imbalu* activities for other parts of Bagisu are launched [10]. Since these articles are journalistic in nature, they produce only descriptive facts. Moreover, the circumcision songs and dances performed on the inauguration day only depict the preparatory and the pen-surgery moods. To understand *imbalu* rituals, literary scholars need to examine the whole ritual process from reminding activities (*khushebusa*) to the period when *inemba* dance is performed. Through this ethnographic approach, the present research investigated how circumcision songs and dance processes during the preparatory, pen-surgery and incorporation stages enhance an understanding of *imbalu* circumcision rituals, songs and dance.

However, since circumcision songs and dances pervade the whole ritual process, the present study has demonstrated how a person who does not perform, sing and dance during *imbalu* circumcision rituals is regarded in relation to the Bagisu. Such a person misses out on significant transformation agents as far as circumcision rituals are concerned. The same can be said of those Bagisu who are “high jacked” on the streets and forcefully circumcised and do not have the same status as those who “danced” *imbalu*.

In his newspaper article, Mafabi posits that elders have an obligation to lead *imbalu* candidates in song and dance. In addition, he discusses that *imbalu* is highly valued by the Bagisu [11]. The Bagisu do not entrust their boys to any elder but only those with specific features: The kind, humble, wealthy as well as elders who are married and have produced male children. *Imbalu* initiates are exposed to elders with the above features because they are expected to emulate these elders in character and behaviour. Further, by emphasising that *imbalu* is highly valued by the Bagisu, Mafabi underplays the fact that culture is dynamic. As such, what is of high value in 2007 may not be highly valued in 2019. Indeed, this study noted that technology, urbanization, religion and education may have affected peoples’ views about cultural *imbalu* circumcision. In fact, many modern Bagisu opt to take their children to the hospital. The present study has explored how this new trend has reflected on the traditional circumcision ceremonies of *imbalu*.

Similarly, by emphasizing the “evils” associated with *imbalu* rituals, writers have depicted *imbalu* as an out-dated ritual. Among such writers is

Wanzusi, a journalist, who discusses the view that the Ministry of Health needs to regulate *imbalu* rituals in order to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS scourge [12]. Further, Ahimbisibwe argues that cultural vices such as *imbalu* go against peoples’ rights, especially when someone is circumcised by force [13]. As such, Ahimbisibwe stresses that such rituals need regulation by government. However, views against or in favour of cultural practices like *imbalu* circumcision rituals among the Bagisu should accrue from scientific studies. This study is among the scientific presentations about *imbalu* circumcision rituals since it employed participant observation, interviews, performance, recordings and one of the researchers’ own experiences as a member of the Kigisu culture to study the *imbalu* ritual process and establish the reasons as to why the Bagisu circumcise.

The post-modernist theory

Post-modernism was used in the study to unravel how post-modernity influences the changing trends of circumcision rituals among the Bagisu. The study specifically employed ideas of Patricia Waugh [14] on post-modernism. Waugh’s views were influenced by changing trends and how post-modern technology has influenced literature. Waugh argues that literature does not exist in a vacuum and it kept on changing due to modern factors. This theory has specifically employed concepts of post-modernism, such as simulacrum, to illustrate how new meanings attached to *imbalu* circumcision songs and dances have become the referential meanings in themselves as opposed to the original meanings which represent grand or authoritative narrative. Post-modernism sought to address emerging trends and changes caused by education, religion, technological advancement and urbanization among others. This theory was further enriched by the views of Ruland and Bradbury who argue that society, being dynamic, influences how people think, interact hence changing their traditional practices [15].

Namanda, in a dissertation, writes about *imbalu* circumcision rituals in light of the effects of western education, religion and the urbanization of the twenty-first century [5]. Furthermore, Namanda examines the aspects of *imbalu* rituals like dancing, singing, nature of participants and the rituals and how they have been affected by the above elements of change. Indeed, as Namanda observes, some phases of *imbalu*, especially the performance of *isonja* dance and searching for *imbalu*, have significantly diminished from the *imbalu* scene. In addition, other aspects of post-modernism such as education, politics, migration, technology and religion have equally shifted the *imbalu* songs and dances from their original contexts to schools, political rallies and even discos.

Statement of the problem

Traditional forms of circumcision were accompanied by certain oral literary performances that had educative and aesthetic values. However, just like other traditional rituals performed among the Bagisu and many other Bantu speakers, traditional circumcision ceremonies among the Bagisu face many challenges brought about by post-modernity and other aspects of social progress. Among the notable problems is, first, the insufficient time allocated for these practices, the influx of Christianity and modernity in Bagisu sub-region which tend to disregard most of the traditional circumcision practices together with its songs, considering them as unholy and evil and, as such, not important for the post-modern circumcision processes. There is also the growing view that traditional forms of circumcision are expensive, especially considering the actual act of male circumcision can be done by any trained doctor, irrespective of the manner one does it, and some government policies that have made it difficult to undertake certain traditional practices as the *Imbalu* and rural-urban migration amongst others. What is the effect of these post-modernist trends on the current practices of *imbalu* circumcision ceremonies/performances among the Bagisu?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Mbale and parts of Bududa Districts, Eastern Uganda. The principal researcher had contacts in the above districts, especially due to the fact that he has on several occasions participated in their circumcision performances especially inauguration that is *isonja* and *inemba* rituals. Therefore, it was easy to access the informants. Mixed methods research approach was used in the study. This enabled the researchers to observe and to actively participate in the Bagisu circumcision performances hence involved in the entire circumcisional processes.

The study targeted the Bagisu initiates who were circumcised in the past years and those who faced the knife in the year 2018, from August to December. Only one circumcision ceremony was observed through all its stages. This allowed the researchers to analyse every ceremony closely and in depth. Besides, the stages involved in all these performances were the same across the conservative *Bamasaba* people. Therefore, observing several ceremonies would have been redundant. Four circumcision surgeons in Mbale District were interviewed and the work of one of them was observed during the period of circumcision. Nine local elders were involved to provide information, especially pertaining to the learning process entailed in these *imbalu* circumcision performances. Eight parents of the initiates were approached too purposely to foreground and enrich the research in terms of the role played by them across all these stages of circumcision performance. The sample size comprised four current Bagisu initiates, another four past initiates, four

circumcision surgeons, nine local elders and eight parents of the initiates. Therefore, the sample size was 29. The current initiates, the circumcision surgeons and parents were sampled purposively. The past initiates and the elders, on the other hand, were sampled using snow-balling method. The snow-balling method was appropriate because it helped the researchers to identify only those who had the information most relevant to the study.

The researchers used both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected from the field using questionnaires, participant observation and interviews. The interview sessions were phone-recorded as well as photographs. The past and current initiates and surgeons interviewed. These people were some of the prominent Bagisu who were in touch with the Bagisu cultural trends and history. The surgeons, current and past initiates were asked to fill the questionnaire. These respondents were given information on current views, attitudes, trends and ideas on the ritual of circumcision. The researchers also used participant observation in order to complement the findings from the interviews and questionnaires. Secondary data were obtained from relevant reports, researches, library research, websites and internet sources.

At the end of every interview, the researchers transcribed the data onto a word processed document. In this study, data analysis began with open coding, in which the researchers examined collected data to identify and eliminate irrelevant and redundant information. If two significant statements from different participants carried the same meaning, then one was removed. In the second step (axial coding), the units of significant meanings generated in the first phase were organised by grouping similar statements into clusters, upgrading others, and downgrading some to avoid repetition. By the end of this step, more redundancies had been removed, and any overlapping units of significant meanings and clusters identified. The third step (selective coding) was the final stage in analysing qualitative data. At this stage, categories were grouped into themes (clusters of meaning), which at that point corresponded with the objectives of the study. This stage involved examining the themes formed by the clusters to make sure that no central theme had been left out.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of initiation rituals

The study sampled the views of various groups on the post-modernist impacts and the changing trends of *imbalu* ritual. The views were grouped into three main thematic areas, namely: The views of traditionalists, partial traditionalists and those of pure modernists regarding the *imbalu* ritual. Many factors in the larger Mbale District have enabled the initiation tradition to keep on changing. The researchers

identified three categories based on the dynamics which are currently prevailing in the whole region. The infiltration of the Mbale region by outsiders, especially because of intermarriage, has tremendously had an impact on the Bamasaaba's circumcision songs and dances. The acceptance of modern life through western education, which has brought new thinking and new techniques, has changed the patterns of the Bamasaaba traditional ways of life. The acceptance of Christianity and Islam has also impacted on the practice of initiation. There is also the movement from the rural to urban areas which has interfered with the life patterns of the Bamasaaba people in the whole region of Mbale. Many of the present-day Bagisu are educated and, therefore, move to such urban centres such as Kampala, Entebbe, Mlale, Lira, Mbarara, Gulu and even Nairobi and Dar-es-salaam to seek further education, jobs and other career opportunities. Some of these Bagisus sometimes find it difficult to travel back to Mbale Region for *imbalu* rituals. They would, therefore, prefer, for example, to undertake clinical circumcision in the centres where they work and live. As a result of these circumstances, there are three types of circumcision initiations that can be identified in present-day Mbale.

Traditionalists

These are the people who have stuck to the traditional way of initiation. They are the conservatives who have not been influenced by Western education and Christianity. They undertake the ritual step by step, use traditional instruments and apply traditional medicine during the process of healing. These are in the majority among the Bamasaaba and, as a result, an organization of surgeons known as *Khushina Imbalu ya Bamasaaba* has been formed to ensure the perpetuation of the tradition and to train young surgeons. The organization is registered with the Ministry of Social Culture and Traditions in the Institution of *The Inzu ya Masaaba* of Community of Uganda, Kenya and the Diaspora. They meet regularly, especially in the year of circumcision, to decide on the actual dates and processes of *imbalu* rituals. By the time the date is announced, the initiates here will have gone through public circumcision that encompass the stage of *Isonja* and *Khadodi*. It is also imperative that an initiate through the pure traditional ritual will have partaken of *inemba* during the healing *Khuyayulula* period.

Khushina imbalu ya Bamasaaba is an organization that includes both the old and the young. The youth are inducted by the old as discussed in the previous chapters to enable them to carry on the *imbalu* rituals when the old surgeons retire. The organization prescribes the conduct of the initiation and the instruments to be used, including the traditional herbs to be applied after pen-surgery. A certificate is provided to the new members of this organization after training and only they are allowed to carry out circumcision in the entire Mbale Region.

Partial traditionalists

These are people who blend the traditional and the modern way of circumcision. Moses Kutoyi, the Cabinet Minister in the *Inzu ya Masaaba*, argues that these people have no stand and are community hypocrites who are always stricken by the community calamities (Personal Communication, December 14, 2018). In this case, the initiates will go through part of the traditional ritual which include song, dance, eating and drinking and visit to the maternal uncle. However, instead of going to the swamp for mudding before proceeding to the courtyard, they go to the hospital for clinical circumcision. Some Christians practice this type of circumcision and counselling is done by the church elders. Some do not even go through *imbalu* singing and dancing, but they just go straight to hospitals for clinical circumcision or the church leaders call clinical officers to carry out pen-surgery in the church compound; thereafter, they receive teachings from the church elders for a period of three weeks. Most of these partial traditionalists are also influenced by the prevalence of HIV and AIDS. They fear using the traditional knives and using African medicine. Therefore, they opt for the hospital process which they consider more hygienic than that done at the village courtyard. Most Christian groups have also changed some of the Bagisu *imbalu* songs and dances to Christian songs because they consider *imbalu* songs and dances as being extremely crude and vulgar in nature, therefore not godly at all.

Pure modern

The people who undertake modern circumcision are mainly those who have shifted from the rural set-up to live in urban centres either in Mbale town or far from the larger Mbale District like Kampala, Jinja, Mbarara, Gulu and many others. Most of those who undertake modern circumcision, which is Christian in nature, are *Bagisus* who have dissociated themselves with the rural village. They, therefore, do not have an opportunity to travel back to Bamasaaba land (Mbale) during even years of *Imbalu* rituals, especially months of August and November or December, when the *Imbalu* is taking place in traditional set-up norms. Some of them, whose parents are educated and are perhaps Christians or Muslims, choose to be circumcised clinically. Waduda of the Church of Uganda, Mbale Diocese, said: "Clinical circumcision is gradually emerging amongst the Bagisu because of the influence of education, cost, health and religion in otherwise a traditional circumcision." According to him, Bagisus are constantly re-evaluating male circumcision to adapt to contemporary realities (Personal Communication, December 16, 2018).

Waduda argues that the Bagisu are gradually re-defining *imbalu* rituals and its symbols and embedded meanings and are now gradually taking up clinical circumcision as a ritual way of initiating the youth into adulthood. His argument is that traditional

circumcision is failing to live up to changes of contemporary life. Initiates circumcised clinically have no pre-circumcision ceremonies. It is also important to note that circumcision takes place far away from the initiate's home. It is done in a hospital or within the church compound. The traditional *inemba* dance stage of the *imbalu* rituals which take place while the initiate has healed does not happen. Instead of *inemba* rituals, either a church elder, priest or imam is invited to advise the initiate about his new life. So, essentially there is no graduation ceremony here as happens in the traditional circumcision, as the church takes over advising the young man on future responsibilities and conduct based on Christian principles.

The changing faces of the *imbalu* initiation rituals

The ritual of circumcision is a serious matter in African communities. Among the Bamasaba, the process is still intense and more serious among the Bagisu in some areas far away from Mbale Town. *Imbalu* ritual as a tradition in Bugisu land is, however, becoming less vigorous in some parts. In part, westernization has had a negative impact on the *imbalu* rituals. Initiates no longer move round villages (*khadodi* Stage) calling on all the relatives because of the expenses involved and the energy that those movements entail. Currently, increase in population has made this difficult. Initiates only dance *Khadodi* dance on the close neighbours and relatives. At times they do not even have to make long journeys to the maternal uncles for announcement of the feast. This is less pompous.

In modern urban Bugisu society, animals are also not slaughtered. Instead, the cattle are preserved for sale to cater for the candidate's school fees or for dowry payment. This is because schooling is increasingly regarded by the Government of Uganda as mandatory as and more important than circumcision itself. *Inemba* and *khuyayulula* stage of counselling, which is part of the traditional ritual, is discarded by many candidates in most families after hospitalization. They do not go for seclusion period which is an important aspect of training the youth to be adults. *Inemba* stage in traditional Bagisu initiation is a crucial moment that every candidate must go through.

The researchers observed that the Bamasaba's *imbalu* has undergone drastic changes. The ritual, for which the Bagisu were known, has drastically changed despite measures put in place to safeguard it. Not all Bamasaba boys are traditionally initiated; hence some of the traditional circumcisers are opting for modern and Christian circumcision. The forces behind these changes have come from both within and without the Bagisu culture, as discussed below.

Effects of urbanization and Christianity

Mbale town traditionally was viewed as the headquarters of Bagisu people and all shrines were located near or within it. However, because of

urbanization, currently Mbale has grown to a very larger municipality so that the Government of Uganda plans to upgrade it to Eastern City of Uganda. Christian based institutions have also been set up in Uganda. For instance, the Church of Uganda has set Uganda Christian University within Mbale town. There is also the Diocese of Mbale and St. Antony's Cathedral under the Church of Uganda. There are quite a number of Parishes within the town that fall under the Archdiocese of Tororo for the Roman Catholic Church. Besides, Mbale town is also home to Regional Referral Hospital for Eastern and Northern Uganda which has countered the home-based circumcision.

Furthermore, Christianity has widely spread in the larger Mbale Region of Eastern Uganda. Christian teachings have insisted that Bamasaba circumcision is archaic, ungodly and therefore has been by-passed by time hence advocating people to be circumcised either in hospitals or within the Christian set up. It has minimized all activities that take place during *Isonja*, *khadodi* and *Inemba* dances. Dancing to the swamp and feasting has been avoided too. In an interview, Amos Wafula, the Archdeacon of Bubutu Archdeaconry of Mbale Diocese of the Church of Uganda, claimed that that year (2018) alone, his parish had circumcised over 236 candidates in a Christian set rules and regulations. Boys were brought forth to the church by their parents taken through the teachings for three days, thereafter circumcising them with church doctrines. He argued that Christian mode of circumcision was cheap, healthy and modern (Personal Communication, December 18, 2018). The respondent further stated that not only the Church of Uganda has championed this but even the Roman Catholic Church. The two churches dominate the whole region of Mbale. There is no mudding done for Christian initiates. In some cases, the *imbalu* songs have been replaced by Christian songs making *imbalu* lose its traditional impact. With *inemba*, which refers to seclusion of initiates when they are counselled, the priests are invited to do it in the Christian way using the Bible. This has tended to reduce the effect of the Bamasaba tradition.

Influence of western education

Circumcision among the Bagisu is greatly influenced by the Ugandan Government's school calendar and the farming season. Circumcision takes place in August in alternate even years when many potential candidates are likely to still be in school. August is also a time that ushers in the examination period – the Uganda Certificate Course for Primary Education and Ugandan Certificate Course for Secondary Education for both O-Levels A-Levels – are done. These normally take place in November to December. This has made the ritual to have two phases, that is, August for non-school going children and November-December for school going children. On the same note, some families have made arrangements to bar pupils/students in the examination year from

undergoing the *imbalu* ritual. Those between Primary 5 (P5) and Primary Six (P6) and those between Forms One and Three could be circumcised but not those sitting for National examinations in Primary Seven (P7) and Form Four.

Imbalu ritual's time is regarded as time for celebrations marked by a lot of dancing, eating and drinking. Therefore, the months of July (*Nekesa*) and August (*Naasambu*) are appropriate for non-school going children because they coincide with the harvesting time. On the other hand, November (*Nefuna*) and December (*Khuulia*) are appropriate for school going children. There is plenty to eat and to give away as presents in these seasons. However, school going children do not take part in *isonja* dance which comes at the month of March (*Nalyaka*) and April (*Namwidikho*) when they have gone back to school. This really affects their preparation since they do not assemble all the artefacts required for *imbalu* rituals and they do not practice dance movements and songs to be sung during *khadodi* stage. In the midst of these challenges, the fact that the ceremony is held bi-annually also gives those involved ample time to prepare and also to identify prospective initiates. Those who have received Western education have mostly tended to cut links that they had with traditional culture and have, therefore, shunned traditional ways of circumcision. The educated Bagisus and their children opt for clinical circumcision. This has tremendously reduced the number of those who face traditional circumcision.

Setting

Imbalu among the Bamasaba is an open air performance for *isonja*, *khadodi* and *inemba* dances. It takes place in a number of places and is not restricted to buildings. It also involves performing gender. For the *Khadodi* stage of circumcision, performances usually begin at the homestead of the candidate with a movement to the neighbours, close paternal relatives and ends with going to the maternal uncle's homes purposively to notify them of the impending ritual and to receive blessings and presents. There are also movements the candidates make to swamp. The candidate moves from the homesteads to the swamp. The first movement to the swamp is when the initiate brings water for brewing his own beer. This is to prepare the initiate for future chores as an adult. The second movement to the swamp is at the night preceding the one after coming from maternal uncles before heading to the courtyard for pen-surgery. This movement to the swamp symbolically plunges the initiate into the spiritual world of Bamasaba ancestors. The same applies to the mudding which is not washed until after complete healing of the wound. During *inemba* rituals, the candidate is washed with a special herb after being handed the *musaliti*. This is symbolically done to return the candidate to normal life – this time as an adult. The first movement to the river is an induction of the initiate into the daily chores of

adult life. The last trip to the river is basically to wash away childhood and to welcome the initiate into the adult world.

In modern times, the dynamics surrounding *imbalu* have also influenced the setting. Gradually, the actual cutting of the foreskin is moving away from the courtyard in the homestead to the hospital, if the circumcision is partially traditional or purely modern. Other performances have also been restricted to the homestead instead of the traditional venues. Restricted setting also reduces the number of people involved in the ceremony. Instead of the whole village participating, it is only a handful of relatives who make appearances. During traditional *imbalu*, education took place in the songs and dances which taught the initiates about manhood. At the end of seclusion, there would be *inemba* which is a counselling exercise whose symbol is that the initiate has washed away youthfulness and started a new life as an adult.

Intermarriage

There is extensive intermarriage between the Bamasabas and other communities of Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan and even Europeans. In some of these other communities, circumcision is not essential, for example, the elite Bagisus who have married Europeans. Most of these Europeans could have been married abroad during studies by these *Bagisus*. As a result of business interaction and professional engagement, circumcision is no longer a necessity. Such intermarriages have tended to reduce the impact of *imbalu* traditional circumcision. Children born in such marriages are mostly circumcised in hospitals. Moreover, it is very evident that Mbale Town and its environs have become quite cosmopolitan due to a number of factors such as religion, trade and modern ways of life through Christianity, Islam and formal education.

Rural-urban migration

Many people in the whole of Mbale Region have moved to live and to work in major towns in Uganda and even abroad. Some of these people are semi-skilled and skilled people and have joined their educated counterparts in urban towns. Most of these people have, because of economic reasons, chosen to stay in towns with their children and not to return to Mbale for the ritual ceremony. This movement back to the rural areas has changed the perception of the candidate. In the past, it was difficult for a candidate who has undergone the ceremony in hospital to stand amongst his peers and speak. He would be booted because he was considered a coward (*omusinde*). The irony, however, is that most of those who went to school and were circumcised in hospitals are the ones who seek leadership among *Bamasaba*, hence making people to shun off the ritual.

Government policies

As part fostering a healthy nation in East African region, the NRM Government has prescribed policies that have really affected the *imbalu* rituals. Today, the kingdom of Bamasaba has been interfered by the Ugandan Government; the kingdom has been put under the Ministry of Culture of the Government of Uganda. This has forced the kingdom to be part of Government's gazetted institutions as the *Inzu ya Bamasaba*. This has limited its operations hence denied its privacy and freedom since the Ugandan Government Minister has a right to monitor its activities. In most cases whenever the Bamasaba launch the ritual, it has become a norm for the president to be part of inauguration ceremony or he sends his representative, either the Vice-President or the Prime minister. The government of Kenya also does send leaders, especially from Bukusu community of Trans-Nzoia and Bungoma counties.

The government has discouraged interference of Wetlands as part of Government Water Catchment Areas. Most of these wet areas are swampy and that is where candidates go for mudding. Some of the shrines that were within or near Mt. Elgon have also been destroyed by the government as a way of forest conservations. In addition, next to the *Bumutoto* cultural shrine that is within Mbale town, two UPDF barracks have been set up, hence interfering with its seclusion and its traditional privacy. Politically, for a long time, Mbale region has been in the opposition party and, therefore, the region has been put under strict government policies. *Bududa* region which is believed to be home of most surgeons, has been faced by natural calamities such mud slides and, due to this, the government plans to relocate the people from this area and, in so doing, will interfere with ritual circumcision of Bamasaba. Furthermore, to avoid the spread of HIV/AIDS, AIDS Control Council of Uganda has laid down regulations for candidates sharing the same knife at the same time and this has really messed up with *imbalu* customs. This has greatly limited the activities of the shrine and its privacy. In addition, the government of Uganda uses *imbalu* celebrations to bring people together and educate them on the development aspects of the region. For instance, during the inauguration of the 2018 *imbalu* celebrations, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Uganda used the occasion to sensitise the masses on the expectations of the government.

Human rights activists

Human rights activists have come up with guidelines to protect the girl-child who in one way or the other is part and parcel of *imbalu* rituals. The norm of the girl-child standing the knife with the candidate (twin brother and sister) has been discouraged by the activists as being inhuman to girls. *Inemba* rituals initially were meant for the candidate to forcibly grab a girl for marriage. However, today the Human Rights

Commission of Uganda has discouraged this as a way of interfering with the freedom of women in the Republic of Uganda. This has made the candidate to end up not marrying as required by the *inemba* rituals. Due to this most of the circumcised candidates are not married as it used to be in the past.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the fact that Bamasaba people have continued with the *imbalu* activities, the post-modernist elements such as Christianity effects, intermarriages, western education, rural-urban migration, government policies, health implications and human rights activism have greatly affected the ritual. The study has provided a detailed explanation on how these factors have affected the *imbalu* rituals. Subsequently, it is recommended that future literary researchers should investigate why *imbalu* songs and dances have transcended their original contexts of performances since today they are performed during Ugandan Music, Drama and Dance (UMDD) competitions even in Kenya's Music Festivals (KMF) for Schools and Colleges and political rallies (*khadodi*). Still, *imbalu* songs, dances and rituals are considered by Bamasaba people to be sacred performances, a view that brings to the fore the question as to why these songs and dances are regarded as being secular. As such, future literary scholars need to investigate the secularization of *imbalu* songs and dances despite the fact that *imbalu* is a sacred matter. Moreover, future researchers need to find out how *imbalu* rituals can be used to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, STIs and STDs among the candidates as crusaded by human activists in Uganda.

REFERENCES

1. Heald S. The Making of Men: The Relevance of Vernacular Psychology to the Interpretation of a Gisu Ritual. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*. 1982; 52(1), 15-36.
2. Merriam AP. *The Anthropology of Music*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1964.
3. Nangoli CM. *No More Lies About Africa: Here is the Truth from an African*. AH Publishers. 1987.
4. Namanda HM. L'avenir de la Circoncision chez les Bagisu (BA Arts Dissertation). Makerere University, Kampala. 1999.
5. Were G. Further Thoughts on the Early History of the Bagisu. *Journal of Eastern African Research & Development*. 1971; 1(1), 99-109.
6. Naleera JB. *The Formative Value of Courage among the Bagisu People of Uganda in the Light of Christian Spirituality* (M.A Dissertation). Eastern University of Theology, Nairobi. 2003.
7. Khamalwa WJP. *Identity, Power and Culture: Imbalu Initiation Ritual among the Bamasaba of Uganda*. Bayreuth: Pia Thielmann & Eckhard Breiting. 2004.
8. Wangusa T. *Upon this Mountain*. London: Heinemann. 1987.

9. Kirunda KA. Sex, Booze Mark Imbalu. *The Daily Monitor*. 2004, August 15. *Nation Media Group*.
10. Edyegu D. *Imbalu Season for 2008 Kicks off*. 2008. Available from: from www.newvisiononline.com
11. Mafabi D. *They Face the Knife in Life and Death*. 2008. Available from: www.monitor.ac.ug
12. Wanzusi J. *Circumcision Surgeons to Stop Work at 60*. 2008. Available from: www.newvisiononline.com
13. Ahimbisibwe F. *Forced Circumcised Illegal, Says Social Affairs Minister*. 2008. Available from: www.newvisiononline.com
14. Waugh P. (ed). *Postmodernism: A Reader*. 1st ed. Edward Arnold. 1992.
15. Ruland R, Bradbury M. *From Puritanism to Post-modernism: A History of American Literature*. Routledge Classics. 1991.