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BUGISU ELDERS SPLIT OVER

BY JOSEPH BATTE

The Bagisu of eastern Uganda find themselves in one of the most painful chapters of their modern history. What began quietly as disagreements over leadership structures, names and legitimacy has grown into a full cultural split, producing rival leaders, rival offices, rival ceremonies and alternative facts.

This year, members of the community are expected to gather at Bumutoto Cultural Grounds in Mbale city to formally kick-start the circumcision season for the year 2026 among the Bagisu, a ritual that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood and is carried out during even years.

The ritual is not just a formality; it is also a symbol of unity among the Bagisu.

However, that unity is cracking due to a cultural dispute that has sharply divided cultural leaders.

The current Umukuuka (cultural leader), Mike Mudoma, is facing stiff resistance from different groups of elders who have accused him of occupying the throne illegally.

They have vowed not to allow him to officially open this year's circumcision season at Bumutoto Cultural Grounds.

Among those who have vowed not to allow Mudoma to step onto the cultural grounds are Bubulo East MP John Musila and Masaka resident city commissioner (RCC) Ahmed Washaki, who accused Mudoma of remaining on the throne beyond his term and irregularly making changes to the structures on which the Bamasaba cultural leadership rests.

"He is not supposed to be in office. He has changed our tribe's symbols and structures, and sidelined elders who have been key in uniting the Bamasaba as a tribe. He has changed the name of our cultural institution from Inzu Ya Masaba to Bukuuka Bwa Bugisu," Washaki said.

He added: "For the record, we are not Bagisu, as Mudoma alleges; we are Bamasaba. Reference to our tribe as Bagisu is derogatory. It is a Kalenjin word for people who stole their cows. Our forefathers used to raid the cattle of the Kalenjin, so they started calling us people of *Ngisu* (cows). We shall not allow him to continue with what he is doing."

Washaki accused Mudoma of attempting to destroy Inzu Ya Masaba, the cultural organisation that birthed the idea of choosing the first Umukuuka, Wilson Wamimbi.

Inzu Ya Masaba is an organisation that was founded by eminent tribal elders such as Eng. Darlington Sakwa, former chief justice George Masika, Prof. Timothy Wangusa and Wilson Wamimbi, among others, to preserve the cultural identity of the Bamasaba.

It oversaw the election of the first Umukuuka, with structures such as the council of elders and clan elders. Inzu Ya Masaba oversaw the election of all four cultural leaders who have occupied the throne, but the current leadership threw out most of its sympathisers in a radical reform that has generated friction among Bamasaba.

One of the people who led the purge against Inzu Ya Masaba sympathisers was Richard Masereje, the attorney general in Umukuuka Mudoma's cabinet.

"These people who call themselves Inzu Ya Masaba have no legal standing in the affairs of the cultural institution. They had instead held the traditional leader captive. So, when I was appointed, my first goal was to sort out that group called Inzu Ya Masaba. That group has to go for us to make progress. You can quote me on that," he told *The Weekend Vision*.

On the issue of the change of name from Umukuuka of Bamasaba to Umukuuka of Bugisu, Masereje said "Bagisu" is the name of the tribe as recognised in Uganda's Constitution.

"We are streamlining things in our cultural institution to ensure that our area embarks on development instead of selfish interests. The information that had been put in the Gazette about the institution's name was wrong. I had to meet the Attorney General to have it rectified. Now that we have put things right, we have people coming up with baseless allegations," Masereje said.



Umukuka III Mike Mudoma standing through the sunroof of his car, waving to his subjects during the launch of Imbalu at Bumutoto Cultural Grounds in Mbale, in 2024

CONTEXT

In 2023, after years of wrangling, the gender ministry gazetted Jude Mike Mudoma as the recognised Umukuuka. His installation at Bumutoto Cultural Grounds was colourful and dramatic. Crowds danced *kadodi*.

Women ululated. Supporters said the crisis was finally over. Mudoma promised unity, inclusivity and development. Many people wanted to believe him because communities tire of conflict long before politicians do.

But the calm did not last.

Once in office, Mudoma's leadership soon became controversial. Critics accused him of failing to properly constitute organs such as the General Assembly, which under the earlier institutional model was considered an important governing body.

He sacked the prime minister, Charles Walimbwa, a veteran leader in Bugisu. Mudoma's camp started deliberately dismantling Inzu Ya Masaba, accusing it of holding cultural leaders hostage.

Then came the decision that transformed disagreement into open rebellion.

In 2025, the ministry gazetted a change of name from Inzu Ya Masaba to Bukuka Bwa Bugisu, also described as the Bugisu Cultural Institution. Supporters of Mudoma said the move was necessary to align the institution with Uganda's Constitution, which recognises the community under the name Bagisu.

They argued that Inzu Ya Masaba had legal weaknesses and had originally been structured more like an association than a formal cultural institution. Even the emblems were changed.

But to many others, the renaming felt like betrayal.

"Mudoma has replaced the animals on our emblem with wild beasts that are alien to the Bamasaba. He wants to make Bugisu a kingdom. We are not and will never be a kingdom," Washaki said.

Some groups have gone as far as accusing Mudoma of being an uncircumcised foreigner, which he denies.

"The Bamasaba do not have the name Mudoma. He is a foreigner," Washaki added.

Mudoma's opponents have also said his term expired in 2025, following his election in 2020.

Masereje dismissed the allegation, saying Mudoma's official term started after the gazettement in 2025.

The same position was voiced by former gender state minister Peace Mutuuzo.

"His term has not expired because he was gazetted in 2023," she said.

GENESIS

If you ask many elders in Bugisu when the trouble truly began, they may not give you a date. They may instead sigh, look towards Mt Elgon and Mt Wanale, and say the quarrel started the day people forgot that culture is meant to unite, not divide.

To understand the origins of the split, one must first understand the people themselves. The Bamasaba, also commonly called Bagisu, are a proud community living mainly on the fertile slopes of Mt Elgon in districts such as Mbale, Bududa, Manafwa, Namisindwa, Sironko and Bulambuli.

Across the border in Kenya, related communities in Bungoma and Trans Nzoia also trace their roots to the same ancestry. Their shared stories often begin with Masaba, the legendary forefather from whom many believe the community draws its original name.

"For generations, the Bamasaba held onto customs that survived colonial rule, religion, migration and politics," Musila said.

However, while the community was rich in custom, it had no officially recognised central cultural institution except a short-lived one during the Obote I regime.

Traditions lived through clans, elders, rituals and local authority rather than one throne.

That changed in the late 2000s as the Bugisu territory was increasingly divided into new districts. Some elders feared that political fragmentation would weaken

groups of elders who have accused him of occupying the throne illegally

TRADITIONAL SEAT

cultural unity.

They also worried that younger generations were drifting away from ancestral traditions, while outside cultural influences, especially the Kiganda model introduced in the colonial era through Semei Kakungulu, had begun to overshadow local identity.

Out of those concerns came the idea of a unifying institution.

In April 2007, elders, intellectuals, politicians and opinion leaders gathered in present-day Mbale city to begin formal discussions on creating a central cultural body for all descendants of Masaba.

Some of the finest minds from Bugisu attended, including elder Jonathan Muwoma; former chief justice George Masika; Prof. Dan Nabudere; poet and scholar Prof. Timothy Wangusa; elder Joseph Weyusya Masafu; Musila and former Constituent Assembly delegate William Giboni Wanendeya.

They formed a special purpose vehicle registered under the name Inzu Ya Masaba. For a brief moment, it seemed the Bamasaba had found a modern way to preserve their identity.



Fierce critic: Washaki

MATTERS WORSENED WHEN THE GOVERNMENT INCREASED TRADITIONAL LEADERS' EMOLUMENTS FROM SH5M TO SH60M PER MONTH.



Bubulo East MP: Musila

The dream was ambitious: to unite the 26 independent clans of the community in Uganda and Kenya under one cultural roof, preserve language and custom, and create a development vehicle for the region.

"It was formally ratified by local government councils in Manafwa, Bududa, Sironko and Mbale, and structured with a written constitution. Unlike traditional hereditary kingdoms elsewhere in Uganda, this was designed with rotational leadership," Sakwa said.

Leadership would move among the three major ancestral lineages of Masaba – Mwambu, Mubuuya and Wanale – with the elected cultural head carrying the title Umukuuka and serving a five-year term. Rotation mattered because it was seen as fair. No clan would dominate forever. No region would feel forgotten.

The first Umukuuka, Wilson Weyasa Wamimbi, was chosen in 2010 and inaugurated amid celebration. He became the symbolic father of a new era, one in which the Bamasaba would speak with one voice while preserving the clan structures beneath it.

Later, he was succeeded by Sir Bob Mushikori, whose reign continued efforts to strengthen the institution.

MAJOR CRACK

When Sir Bob Mushikori died in 2021, the institution entered a vacuum. Death often reveals the strengths and weaknesses of any organisation, and Inzu Ya Masaba was no different.

Questions arose immediately. Who had the authority to organise succession? Which body within the institution had the final say? Were the structures clear enough? Were some individuals trying to seize advantage? What had once looked orderly suddenly appeared fragile.

Soon, rival camps emerged. Matters worsened when the Government increased traditional leaders' emoluments from sh5m to sh60m per month.

One faction rallied behind Jude Mike Mudoma. Another backed John Amram Wagabyalile. A third supported Gidudu Masolo.



