

What began as a legal adjustment has grown into a full-blown cultural dispute.

BY FRED WAMBEDE & ANDREW WABUSHENDA

A confrontation has erupted among elders in the Bugisu Sub-region over the name of their ethnic group, with some saying they are Bamasaba while others insist they should be referred to as Bagisu.

This follows the change of the cultural institution's name from Inzu Ya Masaba to the Bugisu Cultural Institution by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development in May 2025, allegedly after consulting with the Bugisu elders led by Umukuuka Mike Jude Mudoma.

Inzu Ya Masaba cultural institution was formed in 2010 to unite the descendants of Masaba, staying around the slopes of Mount Elgon. The tribe occupies districts such as Sironko, Bulambuli, Mbale, Manafwa, Namisindwa, and Bududa in Uganda.

The institution also extended its territories to western Kenya in Bungoma and Tazara, where residents are of Bugisu descent.

Some elders say they are Bamasaba, a name derived from Masaba, the great forefather of the Masaba land. They argue that Bagisu is a nickname.

Mr Joseph Weyusa, an elder from Lwakhakha in Namisindwa District, explained that Bugisu is a name believed to have originated from the Maasai, after Bwambu, the son of Masaba, followed a cow into the area. He added that when the colonialists came, they adopted and formalised it.

"We are not Bagisu, we are Bamasaba, and the leadership should have consulted all districts and clans before the name was changed from Inzu Ya Masaba, but instead the change was made in secret. This needs to be corrected before the situation goes out of hand," Mr Weyusa said.

Mr Weyusa said the Parliament should remove what he described as an anomaly in the Constitution where the name Bagisu appears and replace it with Bamasaba.

Mr John Musila, the Member of Parliament for Bubulo East Constituency and one of the founders of Inzu Ya Masaba, explained another origin of the name, Bugisu.

He said in 1887, a man called Reverend John Roscoe travelled to Bugisu Sub-region together with Baganda agents.

According to Musila, the agents nicknamed the people Bagishu, which is how the name Bugisu came about.

He added that the people who wrote the Constitution made a mistake by listing two tribes — the Bugisu tribe and the Bukusu tribe — in the Constitution of Uganda.

Mr Musila further explained that in 2008, the Mbale District administration elected 12 board members, which was called the Bamasaba Board under the Mbale District Council.

"They registered Inzu Ya Masaba as an institution and presented it to the councils of Manafwa, Bududa, Sironko, and Mbale for ratification. This means that Inzu Ya Masaba was created by the local government authorities," he said.

He added: "Why did we choose Masaba? Because he is the great ancestor of the Bamasaba. Although the name



Circumcision candidates dance to Isorja, a preparatory dance ahead of circumcision, at Mutoto cultural site in 2024. Imbalu is a major cultural rite of passage held among the Bagisu, also known as the Bamasaba. PHOTO/FRED WAMBEDE

Identity row deepens cultural rift in Bugisu

may not appear clearly in the Constitution, we can pursue a constitutional review to correct that."

Mr Musila further stated that the controversy was brought about by the current leadership that changed the name to Bukuka Bwa Bagisu or Bugisu Cultural Institution, not the government.

"If the Constitution of Uganda lists tribe number four as Bagisu, that is well and good. I recognise it as a Member of Parliament. But if you now say Bukuka Bwa Bagisu, should there also be Bukuka bwa Babukusu?" Mr Musila wondered.

He said they are planning to go to the ministry to find out whether there was any official gazettement of Inzu Ya Masaba.

"If not, the next step will be a court battle. However, if Inzu Ya Masaba still legally exists, we will immediately get another Umukuuka to complete the current term or begin a new one, since the current one will be considered to have resigned," he said.

As a result of the confusion, a section of elders in October last year elected Joram Khambo Mayatsa from the Wanaale Clan to take on the mantle from the current Umukuuka, Mr Mudoma, saying his term of five years term ends this October.

Mr Mudoma was reportedly elected by the general assembly under Inzu Ya Masaba in 2020. Shortly after his election, he was engaged in fights for the throne with John Amram Wagabyalile, but the Ministry of Gender in 2023 gazetted Mudoma as the rightful Umukuuka.

Mr Musila revealed that they are preparing a petition to Parliament to raise the matter as one of national importance.

He said that some people in Sironko

prefer being called Bagisu because their forefathers worked closely with colonial administrators, who preferred calling them Bagishu.

He also noted that Kakungulu's settlement in North Mbale influenced the area, which explains why their language contains many Luganda words.

Mr Moses Kutoyi, the minister of culture and heritage in the Bugisu Cultural Institution, said that Bagisu and Bamasaba are the same people.

However, he added that the confusion stems from what was written in Uganda's Constitution, where the name Bagisu appears instead of Bamasaba.

He explained that Bagisu refers to the region, while Masaba is their great ancestor.

HOW DISPUTE BEGAN

The identity row escalated after the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development in May 2025 changed the cultural institution's name from Inzu Ya Masaba to Bugisu Cultural Institution. Some elders argue the change was done without wide consultation and undermines the historical identity of the Bamasaba people, descendants of Masaba. Others say the move aligns the institution with Uganda's Constitution, which lists the community as Bagisu. The disagreement has since triggered calls for a constitutional review, a possible court battle, and even the election of a parallel cultural leader.

Speaking from the Cultural Institution's position, Mr Kutoyi said the founders agreed to name it Inzu Ya Masaba, although before the establishment of the cultural institution, the people were widely known as Bagisu.

"It was the government that introduced the process of updating and formalising cultural institutions. However, if there are concerns about the name, the relevant stakeholders can engage and review the matter," he said.

Mr Kutoyi said there is a need for dialogue to correct any mistakes that may have been made regarding the name.

"If necessary, they can formally inform the government instead of simply gazettement the institution as the Bugisu Cultural Institution, especially when some people in Masaba land prefer it to remain Inzu Ya Masaba in order to avoid further confusion," he said.

He called upon the Bamasaba not to divide themselves over the Bamasaba-Bagisu identity debate, but instead to focus on unity and development of the region.

Dr Stephen Watiti, another elder, revealed that from the beginning, the region has been known as Bagisu while the people are Bamasaba, saying the two refer to the same community.

"The mess started when the cultural institution was introduced; instead of uniting the Bamasaba, people began focusing on survival and personal interests," he said.

He added that the leadership of the cultural institution should explain how and under what process the name of the institution was changed from Inzu Ya Masaba to the Bugisu Cultural Institution.

During an earlier interview, Mr Steven Masika, the spokesperson of the in-

stitution, however, said the change of name was not only legal but necessary for the good of Bamasaba.

"We identify ourselves as Bamasaba, but legally we are Bagisu, and that's what we are just trying to align our institution with the Uganda Constitution that recognises us as Bagisu, not Bamasaba, and the Ministry of Gender must correct that," he said.

Mr Masika argued that the former institution, Inzu Ya Masaba, was recognised by a few individuals who had sold their estates, and that under that setting, the institution was missing out on provisions related to cultural institutions in the constitution.

Mr Richard Masereje, the attorney general in Mudoma's regime, also noted earlier claims that the current leadership advised the government to change the name.

"In my letter, which they say I received the solicitor general to change the institution's name, I simply raised a matter of concern and guided the government to interpret the law after they found out that some of the cultural institutions were operating outside the law," he said.

He explained that the government corrected the mistake where most institutions were submitted as associations, giving examples of Lango Cultural Foundation, Inzu Ya Masaba, Karamoja Heritage Foundation, among others, which he said the founders based on logic, not the law.

"This is the nature of Bagisu. They will never be at the same point because everyone wants to be at the forefront. They didn't want to follow the law because they say they cannot be led by a fellow man," Mr Masereje said, adding that the new name of the institution is Umukuuka Wa Bagisu, not Bukuka Bwa Bagisu.