Are safety concerns still at the heart of Imbalu rituals?

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BY FRED WAMBEDDE

In 2022, at about 3pm on August 13, celebrations at Mutoto Cultural Ground, Mbale City, turned ugly after a group of traditional circumcision dancers escorting candidates to face the knife tore through a VIP section.

The tent had been reportedly planted along a spiritual pathway meant for imbalu candidates returning from a ritual known as *Khuwakha Litosi* (mudding) from the nearby swamp.

The *Khuwakha Litosi* ritual involves smearing traditional circumcision candidates with mud before the circumcision itself happens. It's a symbolic rite that puts imbalu candidates in fellowship with the ancestral powers.

The candidates, charged as they were, ov[illegible]an the VIP section, sending the guest of honour, Dr Mary Goretti Kitutu, the then minister for Karamoja Affairs, MPs and other dignitaries to scamper for safety. While many people were injured, no one died.

The rite, though inspired by the ancestral spirits in Bugisu, at times turns rowdy, and this has raised critical questions about its safety.

In South Africa, reports indicate that last year, about 48 teenagers who took part in highly secretive initiations as a rite of passage into manhood—practised by some of the country's largest black ethnic groups, including the Xhosa, Ndebele, Sotho and Venda—died due to blood poisoning or being maimed during botched procedures, among other causes.

Have any deaths been registered in Bugisu?

Moses Kutoyi, the minister for Culture (Imbalu) and Heritage at the Bugisu Cultural Institution, says among Bagisu, they rarely register an incident of death because being a traditional surgeon in Masabaland is an inborn role passed down through family lineage.

"We register no cases of botched procedures during circumcision because our surgeons use supernatural powers. For one to be a surgeon is a spiritual calling and the process is divine and takes about one minute unlike in South Africa, where the surgeons are trained. Here, we only train them to maintain hygiene but not to circumcise," Mr Kutoyi tells *Sunday Monitor*.

In 2024, a total of 6,024 boys were circumcised across Bugisu Sub-region. There were no incidents of death, except injuries recorded among the imbalu dancers who escort candidates.

When are Imbalu ceremonies held?

Every even-numbered year, the Bamasaba or Bagisu living around the slopes of Mount Elgon and parts of western Kenya observe this age-old tradition passed down from their grandfathers.

The registration of candidates for circumcision in the current season has already started and the Bugisu Cultural Institution believes that this number is likely to surpass the 2024 figure in the upcoming season this year. By April, the institution is expected to release the full list of candidates.



A man undergoes the imbalu ritual in Bududa District in 2018. Every even-numbered year, the Bamasaba or Bagisu living around the slopes of Mount Elgon and parts of western Kenya observe this age-old tradition. PHOTO/ FILE

WHAT'S THE HISTORY OF IMBALU AMONG THE BAGISU?

Documentation of the Imbalu ceremony in Bugisu dates back to 1804, although it is believed that the practice began many centuries earlier.

Elders would later agree that Imbalu be practiced every year. This decision was based on the fact that the ceremony involves extensive celebrations, visits, and communal feasting.

They emphasised the need to skip a year so that one year could be used to mobilise resources and ensure there is enough food for the following Imbalu season.

Afterwards, families will organise and parade the candidates for training through *Isojja*, a traditional dance used to test courage and readiness for circumcision.

During this process, elders observe the boys to determine who is strong enough to undergo the ritual. Those found to be weak are advised to wait for another year.

Mr Kutoyi says in order to ensure the safety of the rituals, surgeons are required to undergo training and obtain certificates before performing the circumcision of candidates.

"They are encouraged to use one knife per boy, unlike in the past when a single knife was used on many candidates. Surgeons are now advised to have at least ten knives to ensure hygiene and safety. This is also to prevent the spread of HIV/Aids," he says, adding that the procession of *Kadodi* dancers during Imbalu rituals is also called upon to maintain peace and harmony during the ceremonies.

When does the process of identifying candidates for circumcision begin?

It begins when a boy reaches around 16. At this stage, parents start communicating with relatives on both the paternal and maternal sides to inform them of the intention to have the boy circumcised.

Preparations then begin in line with cultural norms, including preserving enough millet in the granary to support the ceremonies.

Mr Kutoyi explains that January serves as a public declaration that the year is designated for circumcision.

"During this time, cultural norms require families to observe peace—no divorce, no wife beating, and minimal quarrels," he discloses, adding that unity is essential because family members must work together in preparations such as cultivation, sowing millet, and ensuring adequate food and birds for the circumcision ceremonies.

The Culture (Imbalu) and Heritage minister emphasises that there are only two recognised Imbalu seasons in the region: August and December.

"The August season is determined through a ritual involving a bird performed in July, which confirms the timing of circumcision. The December season mainly caters for school-going boys," he tells *Sunday Monitor*.

The Imbalu season is launched officially in August at Mutoto in Mbale City.

What happens after circumcision?

Mr James Muboolo, an elder and a resident of Makudui Village, says traditionally, after circumcision—which marked the transition from boyhood to manhood—young men aged between 18 and 22 were encouraged to marry immediately.

"They were instructed to find a wife regardless of her age, as it was believed that epidemic diseases were rare at the time. Today, however, this trend has changed, especially for boys who are still in school, where emphasis is placed on remaining focused on education rather than early marriage," he says.

In the past, after circumcision, boys were required to undergo various cultural practices intended to test their manhood.

One such practice involved engaging in sexual relations with an elderly woman, usually one who had reached menopause, as a way of cleansing bad omens.

"It was taboo to begin sexual relations with a young girl. However, these practices are no longer encouraged. Instead, herbal medicine is now used for cleansing, reducing exposure to the risks of epidemic diseases," Mr Majidu Mudebo, the chairperson of the local surgeons in Bugisu, tells *Sunday Monitor*.

He adds that there is need for formal training of surgeons, insisting that circumcision is a spiritual calling; not something taught.

"Our imbalu rituals are guided by the gods that is the sole reason why we register no case of death," he says.

Mr Edward Komoli, the secretary general of the parallel Inzu Ya Masaba cultural Institution, says surgeons don't require any artificial skill blending to do their work.

"They are not given any specific professional skill training but they have been fastest over time and hardly cut blood veins open. And even if it so happened in error, there has never been any specialised medical intervention requirement to arrest the bleeding," he says, adding that some group of people were recently persuading surgeons to go to South Africa for training, something he says was unfortunate.

Mr Derick Wenani, a journalist based in Mbale City, says the circumcision spirits also attack women and whenever there is circumcision, the male surgeon brings the knife and the woman touches it to cool down. "Those women are known but they cannot allow them to circumcise because they are women."

How are the Gisu's age-old coming-of-age initiations adjusting to the contemporary times?

Mr Stephen Masiga, the spokesperson of the Bugisu Cultural Institution, says the Institution plans to train more than 3,000 traditional surgeons from Masaba land.

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> – Mr Moses Kutoyi, the minister for Culture (Imbalu) and Heritage at the Bugisu Cultural Institution

He adds that the institution is appealing to organisations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) and the Health ministry to support the training and certification of all official surgeons.

"Imbalu can only be preserved by using registered traditional surgeons and through proper demarcation of traditional circumcision grounds," he says, adding that the institution has developed a mechanism to register traditional surgeons and ensure they are tested for HIV/Aids, unlike in the past when surgeons circumcised boys without certification, putting health at risk.

Mr Joseph Weyusa, an elder from Mbale City, says initially, only traditional herbs were used for healing circumcision wounds, a process that was painful and took a long time.

"With the introduction of modern medicine, healing has become faster and less painful. These changes reflect a positive evolution of the culture, improving personal health without undermining its core values," he says.

He further reveals that, in the past, circumcision had an economic benefit for candidates, but today things have changed.

"When a boy visited relatives to inform them about his readiness for circumcision, he would be given cows, goats, and birds. This is no longer common today, as some boys get circumcised without receiving any support from relatives due to Western cultural influence," Mr Weyusa discloses.

Mr George Watuwa Simenya, another elder, notes that it's also important for surgeons to receive formal training to gain skills on how to properly handle boys during circumcision.

"I support the requirement for every surgeon to have a certificate in order to avoid people who enter the role without possession of the spirit of circumcising boys in Bugisu," he says.

Mr Michael Mugoma Matepe, a resident of Bulambuli, says going forward, the viable way the community can benefit from Imbalu is by valuing it not only as a cultural practice but also developing it as a source of tourism.

"This is the right time to organise the Mutoto cultural site and rehabilitate clan huts to define identity so that when tourists visit, there are stories to tell about the houses," he says.

He urges parents to stop circumcising their sons at any time they wish and instead follow community guidelines issued by the cultural institution.

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