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Andrew Ssebulime

## **Positioning of Imbalu Circumcision Ritual Dances among the Bagisu ethnic tribe**

### ***Abstract***

*Circumcision as a cultural practice is a rite of passage with a nuanced symbolic and associated public status. An event, lasting days, weeks or even months, the performative elements involved are a reflection of political, cultural and social positions among the Bagisu ethnic tribe of eastern Uganda. The entire event is divided into three sections, each with a special dance; 1, Isonja, 2, Mwaga/Kadodi and, 3 Inemba dances. In this article, however, the focus is on Isonja and Inemba dances in a ritual setting and their relation to a broader community context. The article further sheds light on the notions of dance, music, and dance-musicking elements rooted in the ritual while theorizing the Imbalu circumcision process according to Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner's triple concepts of separation, transition, and incorporation.*

***Keywords:*** *Imbalu circumcision, ritual dances, ritual process*

I define the notion of ritual, as understood by Emile Durkheim (2008), as a social process that binds the individual to society through symbolic acts [of the candidates in relation to their culture]. The community in question is that of the Bagisu or Bamasaba, who are a Bantu people living on the slopes of Mount Elgon in Eastern Uganda. They speak Lugisu, also known as Lumasaba, a language among the Bantu family languages. Ethnically, among the Bagisu, circumcision is an initiation ritual and is considered the only way to turn a boy into a man. It is a communal ritual of a rite of passage for manhood that occurs only in the even years of the calendar. Circumcision is intended for every young man over the age of sixteen in an elaborate ritual known as *Imbalu*. Makwa expounds on the involvement of other performative arts when he asserts that, this ritual denotes ‘not only the cutting of the foreskin of the penis but also other rituals involving music and dance’ (2010:2). The discussions and arguments contained herein, are drawn in part from 1) my two decades of practical experience as a Ugandan folk dancer, teacher, and choreographer in and outside of Uganda and 2), from literary sources of mainly Ugandan scholars who have conducted extensive ethnographic research on *Imbalu* circumcision rituals focusing on issues such as gender, identity, dancing and dance-musicking among the Bagisu, see (Makwa 2005, 2010, 2016, Khamalwa 2004, 2008, Kitaka 2014, Khanakwa 2018).

To contextualize the dance and music of *Imbalu* circumcision rituals, one must examine the phenomena within the rituals combined with music and dance, as observed by Royce in Nahachewsky's claim that one of the strategies that facilitate better, cross-cultural discussions about dance is ‘contemplation to open beyond the movement patterns themselves and to include the entire dance event’ (2012:11). This notion is further developed by John Kaemmer when he explicitly posits that ‘music [dance] and ritual are so closely intertwined that, it is difficult to determine with certainty which influences the other’ (1993:69). Therefore, ‘due to the integrative nature of music and dance and other cultural elements in *Imbalu*, the Bagisu refer to the entire *Imbalu* event as

dancing circumcision, locally translated as *Khushina Imbalu*' (Makwa 2009:33). The music and dances performed in each phase of the *Imbalu* convey the broad and subtle meanings behind the performance of these rituals, aimed at creating a society of brave men. One of the aspects that highlight the composition of the Bagisu ancestors is the structure of the *Imbalu* circumcision rituals. The entire season is divided into three consecutive sections marked by different performative specificity. These include 'preparing and examining the candidate', 'performing the *Imbalu* circumcision', and 'welcome the men'. The first stage of preparation in the ritual cycle begins in January and lasts until July of an even year, the year of the *Imbalu* circumcision. The rituals, music, and dances performed in this phase are intended to let the prospective *Imbalu* candidates, their parents and relatives know that the year of *Imbalu* rituals has begun. The dance performed at this stage is called *Isonja*. The second and third sections run from August to December and the dances and music performed are *Mwaga* and *Inemba* respectively (Kitaka 2014). For this paper, I will focus my discussion on the first section containing the *Isonja* dance and give an in-depth description and analysis of the last section involving the *Inemba* dance.

### **Phase one, Isonja Dance: Preparing and testing the candidate**

This is one of the introductory dances performed during the process of *Imbalu* circumcision rituals. All ritual candidates of the community usually gather in one place, an open area, and normally begin the practices each evening under the direction of special *Isonja* teachers, traditionally known as *Banamyenya*. The candidates are introduced to singing and dancing skills as 'a candidate needs to sing and dance during the *Imbalu* circumcision ritual' (Makwa 2008:85), to demonstrate courage and determination to be circumcised. However, while learning and performing the *Isonja* dance, the role of leading songs rests with the leaders or coaches, traditionally known as *Namyenya singular* or *Banamyenya plural*, while the candidates are only expected to respond to the songs for motivation while dancing. Furthermore, during the training, candidates are introduced to ethnogenetic information about their culture, including the ancestral history, norms and customs of Bagisu ideologies, to embolden the 'real men' within them, first through words and later through deeds. Makwa adds that 'the trainers (*Banamyenya*) keep reminding the candidates that their mission is to initiate them into men, emphasizing the fact that a real Mugisu man should be energetic and aggressive enough to defend himself, his family and the kingdom against any outside attacks' (2008:87). The songs that accompany the *Isonja* dance convey powerful messages to test the candidates' resolve and determination to prove if they are ready to be accepted and welcomed back into the community as real men. In addition, the dance aims to test the candidates' maturity and masculinity for them to qualify for that year's *Imbalu* circumcision rituals. Depending on their dancing ability, the young and weak may be disqualified, as suggested by watching community members or advised by clan members to wait for the next season when they mature and get stronger (Makwa 2008:90). The candidates adorn the *Imbalu* paraphernalia, which consists of props such as ankle, leg, and thigh bells, headgear made from colobus monkey skin, and cowrie shells. Meanwhile, the dancers also carry tree branches, sticks and clubs to demonstrate their fearlessness and give a strong impression to the terrified onlookers.

### **Phase Three, Inemba Dance: Welcome the men**

*Inemba* is both a ritual and a dance performed to mark the culmination of the *Imbalu* circumcision ritual. The newly circumcised boys (initiates) of kindred lines gather to be commissioned as men in this dance. They make

their way from their houses to gathering spots, where they collectively rush to the community performance venue. Here, they sing songs depicting themselves as triumphant men in the community, which songs are responded to by people accompanying them. They dance from eastern to western villages as they approach the performance venue from a mountaintop. Since it also a celebration, the *Inemba* dance is done in an open arena large enough for initiates from different lineages to dance together. Additionally, the dance is performed during the dry season when people have not been growing their crops to minimise the destruction that might occur when the ritual commences. In some districts and counties in Eastern Uganda, when the dry spell begins in February, *Inemba* is performed for three days to provide initiates adequate time to interact with their peers and share their *Imbalu* circumcision rite experiences. According to Khamalwa, 'every newly initiated person should participate in the [*Inemba*] dance at least once. If someone cannot attend in person [,] a proxy is paid to attend on their behalf' (2004:103). It is therefore obligatory for all initiates and their family members to attend and participate in *Inemba* rituals.

Preparations for *Inemba* dance performances begin at noon. The relatives of the initiate gather at his father's house to drink local beer which has been prepared to welcome the initiate back to the community. Makwa elucidates that, 'at around 4:00 O'clock in the evening, the initiate performs the ritual of being clothed into the new robe' (2010:138). He further adds that 'an elder who is kind, affluent, and has produced male children, is chosen to put the animal skin (*isumbati*) on the initiate. The elder re-echoes the admonitions that the circumciser issued during purification as he hands the initiate the skin,' (Makwa 2010:139). Then he drapes a long garland of (*libombwe*), a fast-growing creeper thought to bring good luck, around the initiate's neck as he is given more gift by other elders to welcome him back into society. Meanwhile, others of the community are forming a ring around the initiates to follow suit and deliver their presents. Anyone with a gift places *libombwe* around the initiate's neck and hands him the gift. In fact, the more creepers (*kamabombwe-plural*) he wears around his neck while performing *Inemba* dance, the more gifts the initiate is said to have received from relatives and friends. When the reminding drum sounds in the evening, the initiates rush to the gathering sites to meet their peers from other clans and move together to the *Inemba* performance venue. However, a few meters before reaching this venue, initiates perform the ritual of 'tightening their skins' *khubwaa tsingubo-tsisumbati* (Khamalwa 2004). Elders from several clans gather their initiates and instruct them to kneel in two parallel lines, facing one another. Each initiate unties his skin, folds it, and tosses it to the person kneeling across him. In the process of exchanging these skins, the elders enlighten the initiates on the importance of unity for men in society. The tightening of the initiates' skins takes place at around 4:30 in the evening and afterwards, initiates run to the *Inemba* performance venue reaching there from the eastern direction. 'It is believed that the Bagisu normal life moves in a clockwise direction just as the sun rises from the east and sets in the west' (Makwa, 2010). In his ethnographic article Identity, Power and Culture, Khamalwa revealed, 'that moving in an anti-clockwise direction is associated with bad luck, therefore, the Bagisu avert bad luck when they are out for a journey by spitting to the right to evoke ancestors for their protection' (2004:91).

### ***Inemba* Dance Description**

*Inemba*, like the *Isonja* dance, is celebrated in an open community area. The drums are hoisted up on two poles to allow the sound to travel further, and the dancers, who make up most of the congregation, move around the

drums. The main motif of the *Inemba* dance is in a demi-plie position, demonstrated by putting the feet apart and somehow bending backwards. After that, the performer swings his body from right to left while moving his hands in the same direction. The performers then bend and pass the skins between their legs, providing another dance pattern. The skin is lifted to the left, then to the right shoulder and thrown between the legs. The female performers, who come mainly to accompany the initiates, dance while raising their legs. In addition, when the females spread their arms, they bend slightly to the left, and then to the right. Usually, their torsos are lifted forward when they show their breasts. All the *Inemba* dance motifs discussed above relate to the theme of sexuality as it underpins society's inclusivity in both ritual and dance. In addition, initiates raise their legs to indicate to the girls that they are healed and can therefore engage in sexual activities with them. While dancing *Isonja*, when initiates see less attractive girls, they push their skins to the left and right of their bodies to symbolize that they are not interested in such ladies. On the contrary, the female dancers indicate to the initiates by raising their legs that they are ready to be married as wives. Unlike *Isonja*, the *Inemba* dance is a stage to affirm masculinity before the community which is exhibited through leading songs while dancing. Now that they are men, society views the initiates as strong and tough individuals capable of sharing men's space. The initiates sing triumphant songs as they dance, mocking their colleagues who feared, cried, and fell during circumcision. They sing and dance for joy to demonstrate to the community that they are victorious men ready to fulfil men's obligations. Women exclusively respond to the initiates' songs and often dance to show the initiates that they are ready to be married. *Inemba* dance forms a path by which young girls and initiates can attract future spouses.

*Inemba dance video at Mutoto grounds in Mbale district*

*Recorded by Dennis Machio*



### **Theorising *Imbalu* Circumcision Ritual Process**

I contextualize the process of *Imbalu* rituals to the threefold classification of separation, transition and incorporation of rituals by Arnold Van Gennep (1960), and Victor Turner (1969), while highlighting the nature of dancing in *Imbalu* rituals. Makwa discusses how dancing transforms a 'boy right from the time he separates himself as a candidate, through the time of circumcision and healing the penis wound until he is re-integrated into the community' (2010:131). When the confirmed candidates have been selected by their families or clans, they undergo rigorous training to become fully equipped and prepared for the tough circumcision ceremony ahead. There are high expectations from their families and clan members to fully get equipped with the knowledge and determination required of 'real men' hence the need to be isolated from all external influences that may affect their behaviour in the proper conduct during these preparatory stages. Victor Turner classified rituals such as circumcision as 'life-crisis rituals whose aim is to elevate the status of the involved individuals, families and communities' (1969:169); thereby cementing and solidifying their social and political status within peers and the entire community. Nevertheless, consolidating such a status takes a long process and requires a

prepared mind. The separation from the community and the family only happens when candidates meet the trainers locally known as *Banamyenya* to embark on a completely new, unfamiliar and stressful journey. Moreover, the different stages the ritual ‘undergoes can fit into Van Gennep’s scheme of separation, transition/seclusion, and social re-integration that he uses to describe the process through which rites of passage undergo’ (Van Gennep 1960).

While discussing the stages through which ritual subjects undergo, Van Gennep argues that one is first separated by and from the community before being initiated, secluded, and finally re-integrated into society. Victor Turner (1969) builds on Van Gennep’s notion and provides details about the liminal stage of rites of passage. Like Van Gennep, Turner posits that people intending to engage in rites of passage are first separated from the wider community before being initiated. After that, they are sequestered and subjected to a transformation process through seclusion rituals. Rites like *Imbalu* bring multiple initiates together under one roof to undergo healing, and this creates a bond that Turner refers to as *communitas*. Once the process of separation is complete, initiates are reintegrated into society to take on new roles expected of them as men.

According to Van Gennep, the first phase is separation, characterized by purification rites, innuendo, loss of old identity, bathing, shaving, changing clothes and markings and removal from the main social group (1960:72). Before the *Imbalu* candidate joins the others in *Isonja* ritual, he is smeared with white corn flour or yeast. On the second day, the candidate undertakes the *khubeka litsune* ceremony, which entails shaving off all his hair. This rite is carried out by a paternal aunt who has been chosen for her good behaviour, kindness, and ability to produce offspring, particularly boys. The aunt invokes ancestral spirits to appear and bless the candidate while shaving his hair. According to Makwa, the Bagisu believe that the paternal aunt is more or less the father in Bugisu (2010:112). As such, the paternal aunt is given the title of female-father (*papa mukhasi*) and freely calls the mother of her nephews or nieces ‘my wife’. After all, the cows she brought home as a bride price are the ones her brother used for his wife’s bride price. Additionally, the candidates are taken away from their immediate family members and put in a place where they do not see friends; they usually socialize and meet entirely new faces. They are taught how to behave and act after circumcision and are expected to abandon their old ways and lose their old identity to embrace a whole new identity and role.

During the second phase, the transition, or the ‘liminal period, the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous; they traverse a cultural domain that has few or no attributes of the past or future state’ (Turner 1969:94). Although a well-known phenomenon, the operation (circumcision) itself is a new experience for the candidate, preceded by other rituals such as *khucheenda tsinzila* (walking the paths) and *mukombe* (seclusion). This eventually adds up to what Victor Turner calls the ‘liminal stage-simplification and elimination of a social structure [ *imbalu ritual* ]’ (1969:167). Walking the paths takes place three days after the circumcision and is a ceremony where an elder shows the initiates around the village to re-orient them into daily life. Khamalwa posits ‘that at this stage the initiate is shown the paths that he should use as well as those he must avoid whenever he is able to leave the solitude room’ (2018:23). During these excursions, Makwa adds that ‘initiates sing songs depicting them as brave men who faced the knife’ (Makwa 2021). Through such songs, they also make fun of those who either were not circumcised or cried during the operation. After this ritual, the boys are returned to

their seclusion rooms (some may remain there as individuals while others live as a group) to continue the healing process. Seclusion puts boys in an indeterminate state where they reflect on how far they have come to project their post circumcision lives; this usually happens during the healing process of the penis. Van Gennep's (1960) concept sheds light on transition as another phase marked by the suspension from normal routines and conventions. For this phase, I will associate it with the circumcision process, in which the candidates are limboed in a 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by the customs and the ceremony' (Turner 1969:95), which I have characterised as a 'moment of no return'. At this stage, there are strict rules that must be followed. When candidates for training are separated from their families, they are expected to abide by the rules of a new environment, such as meeting at a specific time and place. This aims to cleanse and purify them from their old ways and embrace new ones as instructed by *Banamyenya*. First, the *Imbalu* candidates undergo a 'metaphorical death' during which they are separated from a previous state of being and, break with previous practices and routines. They then find themselves between two different planes of existence, in which their own identity is partially dissolved and the assumption of a new one is imminent. Here candidates spend time with the initiator and learn new things repeatedly for three consecutive days until it becomes a routine and a permanent way of doing things.

The final phase of incorporation can be inferred to be the operational rite among Australians as Van Gennep argues, in which 'an individual is welcomed back into society, but now with a new status and identity' (1960:39). According to *Imbalu*, the post-circumcision celebration begins with a celebratory dance - *Inemba*, which is also known as the welcome dance for families, clan members and the wider community. The freshmen are dressed in new skins and wear garlands of creepers around their necks. At the opening of the *Inemba* ceremony, the newly circumcised are inaugurated for the last and most important time, but related clans almost follow the original traditional paths trodden on the day of the circumcision. Shouting, cheering and beer blowing are performed as before. *Inemba* dancers (initiates) hold specially prepared long branches and dance around the drum area. At the end of each rhythm, dancers point in *Mutoto*<sup>1</sup> direction in salutation.

## Summary

In the article, I discussed dance in a ritual context and demonstrated how circumcision rituals among the Bagisu people of eastern Uganda are a community event whose values transcend dancing to emboldening social aesthetics and cultural knowledge. It is a significant rite of passage of turning boys into men with maximum respect to their tribal leaders. The elders' cultural positions and roles in identifying the embedded knowledge and responsibilities in the activities of the *Imbalu* rituals are critical to the preservation of their traditions. Furthermore, theorising the circumcision ritual process in light of Van Gennep and Victor Turner's ritual concepts in retrospect elucidates the interconnectedness of ritual, performance and community among the Bagisu. It is therefore worth noting that the circumcision rituals for the Gisu, although spread over a longer period (months), are viewed as an event involving various activities, including dancing and musicking, among others, and aimed at the social well-being of a community.

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<sup>1</sup> Mutoto is a place where *Imbalu* circumcision is believed to have started.



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