

## The Impact of Christianity on ‘Imbalu’ Among the Bagisu of Eastern Uganda

Musungu Fredrick Nanaalo<sup>1\*</sup>, Henry Mutua<sup>1</sup>, James Nkansah-Obrempong<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Theology, Africa International University, Kenya

\*Corresponding Author’s Email: frednmoreen@gmail.com

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### Abstract

This study examined the impact of Christianity on the Imbalu circumcision culture among the Bagisu (Bamasaba) of Eastern Uganda, particularly in Mbale and Manafwa districts. The study specifically sought to investigate the causes of conflict between Christianity and Imbalu; examine the Bagisu understanding of manhood and womanhood in relation to Imbalu; compare the Christian and traditional definitions of manhood and womanhood; and explore whether one can remain both a committed Christian and a faithful Mugisu. The study employed a mixed-methods research design using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions involving political leaders, religious leaders, cultural leaders, public servants, and Christians from the selected districts. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to select respondents. The findings revealed that significant conflicts exist between Christianity and Imbalu, mainly due to rituals associated with ancestral worship, sacrifices, immoral dances, alcohol consumption, nudity, and certain sexual practices during the circumcision season. Respondents further indicated that among the Bagisu, a “real man” is traditionally defined through successful participation in Imbalu, while women gain social respect through association with circumcised men. In contrast, Christianity defines manhood and womanhood in terms of spiritual maturity, moral responsibility, godliness, and obedience to God rather than cultural rituals alone. The study also found that Christianity can positively transform Imbalu culture without destroying the social fabric of the Bagisu community. Respondents supported the promotion of medical circumcision, elimination of harmful rituals, retention of positive cultural values such as responsibility, bravery, respect, and community cohesion, and increased contextualized Christian teaching. The study concluded that Christianity and culture need not exist in perpetual conflict, but that constructive dialogue and contextualization can enable Bagisu Christians to preserve their cultural identity while remaining faithful to biblical principles. The study recommended increased collaboration between church leaders, cultural leaders, and health professionals to reform harmful cultural practices while preserving positive cultural values. It further recommended contextual theological approaches that respect African identity, promotion of medically safe circumcision, and further research on Christianity and African culture.

**Keywords:** *Christianity, Imbalu circumcision culture, manhood, and womanhood*

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## 1. Introduction

The interaction between Christianity and the *Imbalu* circumcision has not been a harmonious one, because it was expected that Christianity would modify the culture of the *Bagisu* but this influence is not much felt, some researchers gave two reasons why Christianity fought *Imbalu* culture in *Bagisu*, these were; display of naked bodies and immoral *Imbalu* rituals that accompanied circumcision, they included ritual sacrifices, ancestral worship, beer drinking as well as immoral dancing<sup>1</sup>.

The *Imbalu* culture, therefore, was used to construct the identity of a 'Mugisu', one is only considered a brave man "Umusani burwa" (Singular), brave men "Basani burwa" (plural) when they boldly face the grit of the knife (*Imbalu*). However, the interaction between the *Imbalu* culture and Christianity has not been a smooth one, one reason being that Africans, including the *Bagisu*, consider Christianity as an export of the white man's/ western culture. The interaction between the African culture(s) resulted in what is termed as "cultural shock" but Culture and religion can relate because "different religions are also the heart or motivating force behind all cultures, and the reverse is true"<sup>2</sup>, This implies that religious convictions are shaped by a specific culture, and culture should not be differentiated but separated in structure, association, and context, hence forming a unique culture which is a combination of religion and structural dimensions<sup>3</sup>.

The *Bagisu* circumcise male adolescents between the ages of 16 and 25 years who dance for three days, visiting and informing their relatives about their intention to be circumcised in order to become real men, *Basani Burwa* (B 2022) They sing songs and dance in praise of their forefathers. This happens after the official launch of *Imbalu* in every even year at *Mutoto* cultural center, an event that draws people from all walks of life. The *Imbalu* event is very crucial in the life of every *Mugisu*, be it male or female, because a *Mugisu* male becomes a real man with all privileges and responsibilities on the day he is circumcised. Similarly, a female *Mugisu* is a real woman when she marries a circumcised man. The *Imbalu* sets aside a *Mugisu* boy as a real man (*Umusan*) in comparison to the uncircumcised person, who is considered as "Umusinde," who is not permitted to participate in crucial matters of *Bagisu*; it is only real men whose decisions are respected, even when they are logically unsound.

There is a challenge, however, on how to determine what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, thus making some scholars to argue that there is no culture that is the best, and so we can evaluate whether a certain culture is good or bad using the upper limit (ideal situation which we should aim) or the lower limit (accept what still identifies you). Christians are not expected to live in isolation since we are living in a growing multicultural and multireligious

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2. Kong, L. Geography and religion: trends and prospects. *Progress in human geography*, 14(3), (1990) Page 355-371.

3. Nepstad, S. E. *Convictions of the soul: Religion, culture, and agency in the Central America solidarity movement*. (Oxford University Press on Demand. 2004)

society, and the most recommended Christian ethical response to culture<sup>4,5</sup>, is the incarnation that carries the philosophy that “we are to be in the world but not of it” this agrees with the caution of John that *friendship with the World is enmity with God.1 John 2:15-16*

The dilemma here is that Christians face the challenge of navigating the tension between identifying and avoiding evil elements in culture and, at the same time, being part of the culture and agents of cultural transformation. And this has been the same case with Christianity and the “Imbalu” culture among the Bagisu also called *the Bamasaba*<sup>6,7</sup> (Wanyonyi, 2018) In eastern Uganda, the practice of Imbalu culture involves a lot of rituals which Christianity considers to be evil and satanic, and some scholars<sup>8</sup> termed them as ‘barbaric cultural’ practices, while the Europeans saw the continent as a dark one that lacked religion and sound morals, and thought that Africans and their cultural practices were so backward, satanic, and their morals needed to be transformed by the process of inculturation<sup>9,10</sup>. According to Van der Walt, culture includes our relationship with God<sup>11</sup>; and culture should not be “confined to man’s relationship to his fellow creatures, because human beings are not locked up in themselves or confined to this world but also have a relationship with the true God.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my study will examine the interaction of the Imbalu culture and Christianity. This study not only looked at the interaction but the Imbalu culture and Christianity but further probed the positive benefits of the Imbalu culture that *Bagisu* Christians can embrace for instance after traditional surgical procedure, the candidate is admonished and charged by the traditional circumcision surgeon to work hard, ensure food security and the security of the family, they are also charged to avoid indulging in sexual relationships with married women and many others as we shall realize.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the fact that Christianity has been embraced by many people in *Bagisu*, the Lord Jesus spoke out what is expected of Christians while on earth in these words. “*You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lump and put it under the bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand and give light to everyone in the house. The same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:13-16, NIV). A huge responsibility is placed upon Christians to

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4. Volf, MA *public faith: How followers of Christ should serve the common good.* (Brazos Press 2011).

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11. Van der Walt, B. J.. Morality in Africa: yesterday and today. The reasons for the contemporary crisis. *In die Skriflig*, 37(1), (2003) Pag.51-71.

12. Van der Walt, B. J.. Culture, worldview and religion. *Philosophia reformata*, 66(1), (2001) Pag 23-38.

live the life of Christ, endeavor to season and bring the flavor of Christ to this fallen and sick world.

However, Bagisu males are born with a cultural debt that they are always reminded of, which they must pay at a certain age through the enculturation process; these conditioning challenges the *Mugisu* male to strive for cultural recognition and competence. In the process of aspiring to fulfill cultural demands and responsibilities, the Christian male *Mugisu* finds himself in a rather juxtaposition or a situation of conflicting loyalty either to please the cultural demands, which involve making blood sacrifices to the dead ancestors plus visiting their graveyards, holding circumcision processions while half naked and smeared with yeast and goats' dung, and other rituals which are contrary to sound biblical teachings.

Several scholars from this community observed this struggle, especially during the even years when the *Bagisu* circumcise, many Christians become nominal<sup>13,14</sup> and it becomes difficult to differentiate between a born-again Christian and the unsaved. Also, during this time, the credibility of the gospel message of Christ presented by the church hangs in the balance, and people question the integrity and authority of those who claim to be preaching Christ<sup>15</sup> And yet they are the same, and their fruit is always the same as that of the non-believers.

*Imbalu* circumcision rituals among the *Bagisu* are intended to improve the transfer of cultural obligations and ideologies from older to younger generations, thereby strengthening cultural continuity. As Makwa (2010) has also noted, *Imbalu* circumcision rituals shape the *Bagisu* identity by distinguishing them as a race of "men" (*basani*). One becomes a "man" and is regarded as responsible and, in fact, a "real" *Mugisu* through circumcision, according to Shero (2014). The women's "true" identity is also defined by marrying a "real" man, one who is circumcised, much as this contradicts the biblical teaching, because that is just a social construct

Despite the *Imbalu* circumcision rituals' role in constructing cultural and social identities and relations, which are indeed human rights for the *Bagisu*, there is inadequate research on the impact of Christianity on the *Imbalu* circumcision culture in eastern Uganda. Nevertheless, there has been an inadequate examination of how Christian ideology impacts circumcision rituals among the *Bagisu*. This is the gap that this study would like to fill.

## 1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate reasons for the conflicts between the *Imbalu* ritual and Christianity
2. To explore the Bagisu definition of real men and women in relation to *Imbalu*
3. To find out the Christian definition of man and woman versus the *Imbalu* definition
4. To find out if there is a possibility for one to be a staunch *Mugisu* Christian

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13. Manana, F.. *Reversions in the African church: a case study of the Bagisu Christians of Uganda* (Doctoral dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary). (1996)

14. Masiga Simon. *The Concept Of Circumcision In Romans 2:25-29 And Among The Bamasaba Christians Towards Contextualization* . (Kampala: Uganda Christian University Mukono 2019),

15. Overdorf, D.. *Applying the sermon: How to balance biblical integrity and cultural relevance*. (Kregel Academic 2009)

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Review

Conflict of culture and Christianity has been a critical issue even during the times of early Christian thinkers like Tertullian, who took the most radical line by renouncing culture and agitating for isolation from society, which they considered as evil, a case in point, the Mennonites refusal to participate in politics and recruitment into the militaries of their countries<sup>16</sup>, to *Bagisu* Christians, the interactions between Christianity and the *Imbalu* circumcision culture gave rise to the dilemma of double identity, the *Bagisu* Christians practice their Christian faith during day-time and resort to *Imbalu* culture during dark hours. Literature presents two models of understanding the Bible and the African cultures; dialectic model which is expounded that “gospel and culture are opposed to each other in perpetual conflict with each other and are ultimately irreconcilable” and the second model being called “dialogical” where “culture and gospel are being viewed as two compatible entities that could and that should be reconciled” the scholar envisages harmony, dialogue that results into what he called as “mutual enrichment and efficiency”<sup>17</sup> The two models discussed give the researcher an interest in examining the extent of Christian influence in *Bagisu* land.

The struggle between culture and Christianity is a phenomenon that has existed right from the entry of Christianity into Africa, Christianity was viewed by Africans as the vehicle for exportation of western culture, the western mentality of looking at Africa as a mission field, it is still held that the perception of the Europeans towards Africa is not good and some white people, including the missionaries exploit black people in the name of Christianity<sup>18</sup> Some missionaries treated Africans as second-class human beings”. Some studies also showed that African Christian converts are in a dilemma of abandoning their culture, which is their sense of belonging, identity, and following Christianity, which, to some extent, is perceived as the extension of Western culture. The situation is heightened when the African Christian finds himself in this quite difficult situation<sup>19</sup>. With the *Imbalu* as the greatest cultural identity of the *Bagisu*, it’s important to understand how *Bagisu* who are Christians cope with being both *Mugisu* and Christian.

### 2.2 Empirical Review

#### 2.2.1 Impact of Christianity on circumcision

To appreciate the impact of Christianity on the *Imbalu* circumcision, it becomes paramount to see how missionaries perceived African culture, and specifically the culture of *Bagisu*, (Edusa-Eyison, 2026) observed that “everything in Africa was primitive, pagan, fetish and heathen in the eyes of Europe” it was therefore expected that for one to become a genuine Christian, one had to denounce their cultural practices and accept the European culture which was sadly infused with the Christian message, they might have done this knowingly or unknowingly but

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16. Richard Niebuhr. H. *Christ And Culture* . New York : (1st Harper Torchbook, 1956. 1985)

17. Ezeogu, E. M.. Bible and culture in African Christianity. *International Review of Mission*, 87(344), (1998)25-38.

18. Kato, B. H.. The Gospel, cultural context and religious syncretism. *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, (1975) 1217.

19. Onuzulike, U.. " African Crossroads: Conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity". *International Journal of the Humanities*, 6(2). (2008)

the constant remains that the western culture was imposed on Africans hence making Africans to deny their cultural heritage.

The first missionaries to come to *Bugisu* according to Pamela, were Rev. W.A Crabtree who were members of the church missionary society (CMS), they came to this region for a retreat but on seeing the lifestyle and culture of *Imbalu* practiced by the *Bagisu*, they sought for permission from their authorities to evangelize the region, Pamela notes that these missionaries were shocked because “Male circumcision was done in a very barbaric manner” it was considered to be barbaric because it was done publicly, without anesthesia, with unsterilized knives, accompanied with heathen rituals, drinking of *indali* (local gin distilled from molasses) and *busela* (fermented and made locally alcohol) very intoxicating as well as obscene dances. Rev Crabtree and his wife condemned the *Imbalu* culture because it contradicted the European concept of circumcision, which was mainly done for hygienic reasons. Inout of the hospital, they embarked on the task of transforming the *Imbalu* culture of *Bagisu* by establishing a mission in Nabumali. They built a church and a hospital and taught converts to read, write, and study the Bible. Their efforts were bolstered by the coming of Rev. J.B Purvis and his wife, the missionaries encouraged people to go for anaesthetized private circumcision done by medical practitioners contrary to *Imbalu* practice, in their view was immoral, an outstanding convert of their ministry was Rev. Edrisa K. Masaba who was the first *Mugisu* to join theological school in Mukono in 1921 according to Pamela and later played a key role in the transformation of *Imbalu* culture, instead of circumcising in the public eye of everybody even children, the missionaries introduced enclosures so that the *Imbalu* somehow became a private affair, they also regulated and reorganized it so that it was not done every year because children were expected to be in schools. The first medical circumcision was done in Bubulo Health Center, where boys lay on wooden beds facing the ceiling in 1938, and the practice spread to other places like Nyondo, Bududa, and others. Missionaries believed that medical circumcision would eliminate the evil *Imbalu* practices that had slowed the spread of the gospel in *Bugisu*.

Their attempts to transform the *Imbalu* culture were met with strong resistance from the *Bagisu* elders, who were passionate about it. For instance, the *Bagisu* treated with contempt all those circumcised medically, Pamela notes that such were considered as cowards(*baari*), dead(*baaf*), women (*bakhaasi*), and the logic to this was that medical circumcision eliminated pain which is a key component of *Imbalu* culture; men were considered *basaani burwa* (*basaani burwa*) (O 2013) who endured the grit of the knife without anesthesia, it was further contemptuously referred to as *Imbalu ye mwidwalillo*, meaning hospital circumcision, or better called *Imbalu iye bazungu*, meaning European circumcision. The *Bagisu* equally rejected the circumcision done by medical surgeons because they believed that traditional *Imbalu* surgeons were chosen by the spirits and had to perform certain rituals for confirmation.

The attempt by the missionaries to circumcise boys with anesthesia at schools without songs, drinks, and away from the home court yards or *khulwany* was also disrespected by the *Bagisu* because this too lacked critical components of a masculinized *Mugisu*, these components include a lack of teaching, no connection to the ancestral world through visiting the graveyards of the ancestors, and offering sacrifices to the dead. Consequently, such *Imbalu*, according to Pamela, was considered shallow and feminized, and all people circumcised in such a way were considered as traitors of the authentic *Bugisu Imbalu* circumcision ritual.

In summary, real *Imbalu* to *Bagisu* means that one endured the wrath of the knife without the use of anesthesia. The ceremony involved drinking *Busela* and *indali*, visiting the graveyards for the ancestors to connect the circumcised person with the spirit world, and the procedure is considered valid only if performed by a traditionally recognized surgeon.

### 2.2.2 Why the *Imbalu* circumcision conflicts with Christianity

The *Imbalu* culture entails several practice that contradicts Christianity, for instance, it involves visitation of the burial sites of the dead, sacrifice of goats and birds to the gods and spirits, illicit dance patterns that are sexual arousal in nature<sup>20</sup>, shameful sexual acts like “*khukhalagumulindi*”(performing the first sexual rite upon healing after circumcision also considered as purification without condom in this era of HIV/AIDS ), hatching (*khukhwalulukha*) which involves enchantment of the name of the traditional surgeon(*umukhebi*) who circumcised you with fire in your hand at night at the end of the circumcision year, payment of *bumagoki* after a circumcision mate circumcises the son, of which failure to pay casts spell on the circumcised child. All the above practices mentioned are considered satanic and have attracted rebuke from Christianity, making the *Imbalu* culture and Christianity to clash because the evangelical Christians see *Imbalu* as evil and “All the animal blood sacrifices, the reverence accorded to spirits and the other vices that unfold during the *Imbalu* season are a manifestation of how wicked this ritual is<sup>21</sup> therefore they emphasized that those practices bond *Bugisu land* with evil and they need to be stamped out. But as is the character in *Bugisu*, advice is least heeded when most needed, so we shall continue to live under this avoidable spell.” Christians, therefore, see the *Imbalu* culture as being satanic and a reason for the land’s misfortunes because of spiritual bondage; however, this practice is highly celebrated by the *Bagisu*, and the *Bagisu* elders see the *Imbalu* custom as their heritage as *Bamasaba*, and it will be, even for our posterity. Without our cultural heritage, we as a people or a community have no identity. Those who have been advocating for the abolition of our revered culture are under an illusion.” *Imbalu* is seen as a sense of identity, belonging, prestige, that is more embraced than Christianity, superior to the *Imbalu* as in terms of the object of worship, to Christianity being the true and living God.

Several researchers were baffled by how *Bagisu* were united by the *Imbalu* culture and wondered what made *Imbalu* more loved by the *Bagisu* than Christianity<sup>22</sup>one researcher said that “*circumcision rite is a platform for unity, it contains no elements of division, all people attend and participate with interest and concern, Christianity is for unity in its deepest sense but why is it that many people are not attracted to attending catechism classes? Why does Imbalu attract such large crowds where Christianity fails? The Imbalu ceremony than in the celebration of the masses?*” These are very authentic questions that need our attention, we should ask why Christianity has failed to influence the life and culture of *Bagisu*, and people who claim to be Christians participate in the *Imbalu* though there have been calls by the church to have *Bagisu* boys circumcised in the hospitals, this has not been accepted by those who belief in the *Imbalu* culture since that could cause the extinction, the identity and the pride of

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20. Masiga Simon. *The Concept Of Circumcision In Romans 2:25-29 And Among The Bamasaba Christians Towards Contextualization* . (Kampala: Uganda Christian University Mukono. 2019),

21. New vision, (press; 2014).

22. Walakira, L.. Circumcision ceremony among the *Bagisu*. *the second theological week August*. (1983)

*Bagisu*<sup>23</sup>. We should therefore ask, what is missing in Christianity that has to be addressed so that Christianity can be fully owned, embraced by the people of *Bugisu*, was Christianity clothed in the foreign culture that did not resonate with the *Bagisu* mindset? What evangelistic approach could disarm the harmful cultural practices of the *Imbalu* culture? There are some of the questions that this paper intends to examine.

### 3. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods research design using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions involving political leaders, religious leaders, cultural leaders, public servants, and Christians from the selected districts. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to select respondents. The researcher analyzed data both qualitatively and quantitatively. For the qualitative data, the researcher used a narrative analysis method, while the quantitative data were further sorted and coded into categories.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 The causes of conflicts between Imbalu and Christianity.

In examining the causes of conflicts between *Imbalu* and respondents, they were probed with several questions as tabulated below in Table 1.

**Table 1: Showing responses about the causes of conflicts between Imbalu and Christianity in Eastern Uganda, specifically Mbale and Manafwa districts (N=52)**

S/N	Causes of conflicts between Imbalu and Christianity	SD	D	A	SA	M	SD
		%	%	%	%		
1	<i>Imbalu</i> among the <i>Bagisu</i> involves offering sacrifices to the dead ancestors slaughtering the animal and smearing the candidate with blood and alcohol.	02	10	67	21	3.08	.621
2	The firmness/success of <i>Umusinde</i> during circumcision is attributed to the support of dead ancestors who are solicited by visiting relatives and graveyards during <i>Imbalu</i> dance.	00	10	78	12	3.02	.464
3	The participants of <i>Imbalu</i> dance are so much involved in immoral behaviours like moving naked and using obscene languages.	00	14	77	09	2.96	.484
4	The <i>Imbalu</i> culture requires cutting only boys of age 14-20 years only.	02	40	50	08	2.63	.658

23. Daniel, Kasomo, analysis of the rites of passage and their relation to Christianity, (2009); page 156-166

5	The singing and dancing of <i>Imbalu</i> ceremony promotes dancing half naked and speaking obscene words as a sign of braveness and promotion of culture.	06	28	50	06	2.75	.789
6	The boys who circumcise <i>Imbalu</i> are encouraged to perform the first sexual rite immediately after healing without using a condom.	00	53	35	12	2.58	.696
7	No clan members should not pass in front of the boy when going to be circumcised.	04	46	36	14	2.60	.774
8	The practice of traditional circumcision among the <i>Gishus</i> is the major cause of STDS and STI'S due to immorality involved.	14	44	28	14	2.42	.893
<b>Total mean</b>						<b>2,204</b>	<b>4.486</b>
<b>Av.M</b>						<b>2.75</b>	<b>.561</b>

The overall mean for all the items was 2.75, and the standard deviation was 0.561, implying that most of the respondents tended to agree that there are many reasons causing conflicts between *Imbalu* and Christianity in Eastern Uganda, specifically Mbale and Manafwa districts. It was found out that 88% of the respondents agreed that *Imbalu* among the *Bagisu* involves offering sacrifices to the dead ancestors through slaughtering animals and smearing the candidate with blood and alcohol (Mean=3.08, SD= 0.62). Results also revealed that the majority of respondents (90%) acknowledged that the firmness/success of “Umusinde” during circumcision is attributed to the support of dead ancestors, who are solicited by visiting relatives and graveyards during the *Imbalu* dance (Mean = 3.02, SD = 0.47). Results further indicated that 86% of the respondents acknowledged that the participants of *Imbalu* dance are so much involved in immoral behaviors like moving naked and using obscene language (Mean= 2.96, SD=0.484). Furthermore, 58% of the respondents agreed that the *Imbalu* culture requires cutting only boys of age 14-20 years (Mean= 2.63, SD= 0.658).

Also, 56% of the respondents agreed that the singing and dancing of the *Imbalu* ceremony promotes obscene dancing, moving half naked, and speaking obscene words as a sign of bravery and promotion of culture (Mean 2.75, SD = 0.78). Results also indicated that 53% of the respondents disagreed with the view that the boys who circumcise *Imbalu* are encouraged to perform the first sexual rite immediately after healing without using a condom (Mean= 2.58, SD= 0.69). Further still, findings indicated that 50% of the respondents agreed that no clan members should not pass in front of the boy when going to be circumcised (Mean= 2.60 SD=0.77). Lastly, findings indicated that 58% of the respondents disagreed with the opinion that the practice of traditional circumcision among the *Gishus* is the major cause of STDS and STIs due to immorality involved (Mean= 2.42 SD= 0.89).

When cultural leader 1 was asked about the importance of *Imbalu* rituals and worship of the dead, he revealed that:

*“Rituals are used to solicit for the power of the ancestors that help the boys to stand firm during circumcision. The practice is also the source of blessings by ancestors that enables the circumcised boys, now men begin carrying out the responsibilities of Bagisu men like marrying, hosting cultural ceremonies and taking over the responsibilities of their old parents. They also added that worshipping the dead is a sign of loyalty to their ancestors since they believe that the dead are still living and have powers over their successful stay on earth”.*

Also, cultural leader 2 observed that:

*“Christian male circumcision is different from traditional circumcision in many ways, for example he cited that, Christian circumcision lack the component of spiritual sacrifice as a way of respecting their ancestors which is catered for during traditional circumcision. He also added that Christian circumcision is optional and does not follow the set age bracket and seasons as opposed to the traditional circumcision. This makes the cultural leaders to condemn the Christian way of circumcising as baseless since it does not cater for initiation of boyhood to manhood and also is not in line with their traditional norms and values”.*

Nonetheless, in an interview with religious leader 1, concerning the time of circumcision, he noted that:

*“Boys should be circumcised when still young to avoid ritual sacrifices which they regarded as evil and satanic. They gave reference that Jesus was circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after birth and therefore followers of Christ should emulate the same. They added that the purpose of circumcision is to fulfill the Jewish believe and follow the law of mosses”.*

Also, during focus group discussion with Christians concerning ways in which Christians have modified *Imbalu*, group 1, said that:

*“Christians have modified Imbalu by replacing practice of rituals with prayers and warship before cutting the boys. They have also encouraged people to embrace safe male circumcision using aesthesia which painless and circumcision of infants to avoid obscene dances. They have also encouraged circumcision without dancing for three days which attracts crowds and immoral acts and have preached against misconceptions of sexual rites after circumcision which puts boys at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases”.*

#### 4.2 The *Bagisu* definition of real men and women in relation to *Imbalu*.

In examining the *Bagisu* definition of real men and women, respondents were probed with several questions, as tabulated below in Table 2.

**Table 2: Showing responses about the *Bagisu* definition of real men and women in relation to *Imbalu*, in Eastern Uganda, specifically Mbale and Manafwa districts (N=52)**

S/N	The <i>Bagisu</i> definition of real men and women in relation to <i>Imbalu</i> ,	SD	D	A	SA	M	SD	Comment
		%	%	%	%			
1	The <i>Gisu</i> real man is one who went through circumcision without using anesthesia as a sign of braveness and staunch <i>Mugisu</i> .	00	14	71	15	3.02	.542	
2	The <i>Gisu</i> real men and women are those who danced for three days while smeared with yeast and alcohol as they visited their relatives and performing different rituals before circumcision	00	04	76	20	3.15	.460	
3	The <i>Gisu</i> boys after circumcision moves around the village looking for girls to marry as a sign to validate his manness.	00	13	67	20	3.06	.574	
4	The <i>Gisu</i> girls prefer marrying the circumcised men whom they consider responsible and strong compared to uncircumcised.	00	21	58	21	3.00	.657	
5	A <i>Mugisu</i> girl should dress in a feminine way be polite and feel shy about some social issues.	04	30	48	18	2.79	.776	
C6	A <i>Mugisu</i> real man should be firm during circumcision, strong, aggressive, and bold.	00	33	42	25	2.92	.763	
7	A <i>Mugisu</i> man after <i>Imbalu</i> should begin building a house and mobilizing food resources in a home to enable him to own a family/marriage.	00	38	44	18	2.79	.723	
<b>Total mean</b>						<b>2,066</b>	<b>4,495</b>	
<b>Av.M</b>						<b>2.95</b>	<b>.642</b>	

The overall mean was 2.95 and the standard deviation was 0.64, implying that most of the respondents tended to agree that *Bagisu* define real man and woman using different ways as summarized in the table above. Data presented in Table 1 revealed that 86% of the respondents agreed that *Bagisu* define real men as those who undergo circumcision without anesthesia as a sign of bravery and staunch *Mugisu* (Mean = 3.02, SD = 0.54). Secondly, 96% of respondents agreed that, according to *Gisu* culture, real men are those who danced for three days while smeared with yeast and alcohol as they visited their relatives and performed various rituals before undergoing circumcision without anesthesia (Mean= 3.15, SD= 0.46). The results further indicated that 87% of the respondents agreed with the view that the *Gisu* real men are those who move around the village looking for girls to marry as a sign of validating their manhood after circumcision (Mean = 3.06, SD = 0.57). Also, 79% of the respondents agreed that real women are those who marry circumcised men, as they consider them responsible and strong compared to uncircumcised men (Mean= 3.00 SD= 0.66).

Another 56% of the respondents agreed that a *Mugisu* real woman should dress in a feminine way and be polite and respectful to elders (Mean = 2.8, SD = 0.77). Furthermore, 67% of the respondents agreed that real men are those who were strong, firm, aggressive, and bold during circumcision, while 33% disagreed (Mean = 2.9, SD = 0.76). Lastly, when respondents were asked whether building a house and establishing a family/marriage, after circumcision, a sign of a real man, 62% agreed (Mean = 2.80, SD = 0.72).

During interviews with clan leader 1, about the importance of traditional circumcision among the *Bagisu*, he revealed:

*“It is an initiation ceremony of changing from boyhood to manhood with the intention of producing real men who are courageous, strong, and bold enough to defend the norms and values of the Bagisu. Traditional circumcision is therefore used to prepare the person to inherit the cultural beliefs of their ancestors and continue worshipping and practicing them”.*

Also, interviews with cultural leader 3 about reasons why candidates of *Imbalu* visit their uncles before circumcision, most of them revealed that:

*“The main reason is to recognize and get spiritual blessings from the mother’s clan and her ancestors, get gifts from the maternal relatives, and get introduced to the mother’s relatives to avoid marrying from them”.*

However, during a focused group discussion with Christians about the effect of *Imbalu* dance among the *Gisu* youths, group 2, said:

*“Imbalu dances have caused more harm than good, as they explained that, during Imbalu dance, most youths are involved in alcoholism and many forms of drug abuse, leading to unwanted pregnancies, early marriages, defilement cases, and dropping out of school. They added that during these dances and visits to relatives, youths display disrespect for elders and engage in obscene dances and immorality, which undermines the initial aim of the circumcision ceremony.*

### 4.3 The difference in the definition of man and woman according to Christianity

In examining the differences in the definitions of man and woman according to Christianity, respondents were asked several questions, as tabulated in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Showing responses about the difference in definition of man and woman according to Christianity, in Eastern Uganda, specifically Mbale and Manafwa districts (N=52)**

S/N	The difference in the definition of man and woman according to Christianity	SD	D	A	SA	M	SD	Comment
		%	%	%	%			
1	Man is humanity created in Gods image.	00	14	73	13	3.00	.524	
2	Man is God's creation having dominion on all other creatures.	00	10	77	13	3.04	.484	
3	Being a man is having a strong relationship with God and serving others.	00	20	65	15	2.96	.593	
4	A man is a male who is circumcised	00	21	70	09	2.88	.548	
5	A man is one who is only married and has a family.	06	40	44	10	2.38	.750	
6	A person who believes in nature and inheritance of his parents' cultural demands.	04	42	44	10	2.60	.721	
<b>Total mean</b>						<b>1,686</b>	<b>3,620</b>	
<b>Av.M</b>						<b>2.81</b>	<b>.603</b>	

The overall mean was 2.80 and the standard deviation was 0.60, implying that most of the respondents agreed with the items posed below as definitions of man and woman according to Christianity. From the results in Table 3, 86% of respondents agreed that man is defined as humanity created in God's image (Mean = 3.00, SD = 0.52). Results also indicated that 90% of respondents agreed that man is God's creation and has dominion over all other creatures (Mean = 3.1, SD = 0.50). From table 3 still, 80% of the respondents agreed that being a man is having a strong relationship with God and serving others (Mean= 2.9, SD= 0.59). Also, the results revealed that 89% of respondents agreed that a man is a male who is circumcised (Mean = 2.9, SD = 0.54). This means that *the Imbalu culture does not recognize people who are circumcised in a hospital as men since they are rendered as cowards*. Also, 54% of the respondents agreed that a man is defined as someone who is married and has a family (Mean = 2.4, SD = 0.75), implying that manhood is defined by responsibilities such as marriage and family. Furthermore, 54% of the respondents agreed that a man is a person who believes in nature and in the inheritance of his parents' cultural demands (Mean = 2.60, SD = 0.72), indicating that a true man should believe in nature and in the inheritance of his parents' cultural demands.

Interviews with religious leader 3, concerning God's aim of circumcising every male among the Jews, showed that:

“Male circumcision is a sign of physical faith and covenant with God, which is in their flesh and everlasting. They observed that man who is made in God’s image should therefore take circumcision as a symbol of faith”.

Also, during the focused group discussion with Christians concerning the importance of spiritual circumcision of the heart, group 3, observed that:

“It is the transformation of the heart or human mind that responds positively towards the word of God. They added that spiritual circumcision of the heart also requires leaving the earthly things and following Jesus as the only savior. Those who have undergone spiritual circumcision, therefore, qualify to be men of God”.

Nonetheless, in an interview with religious leader 4, concerning Christian transformation of *Imbalu* among the practicing tribes indicated that:

“Some communities among Bagisu no longer practice rituals and sacrifices during circumcision. They carry out circumcision without dancing for three days; don’t involve alcohol and dancing around to visit relatives for gifts and soliciting ancestral powers for a successful ceremony.”

#### 4.4 How can Christianity effectively transform *Imbalu* culture without affecting the social fabric?

In examining the ways Christianity can effectively transform *Imbalu* culture, respondents were probed with several questions as tabulated below in Table 4.

**Table 4: Showing responses about the ways Christianity can effectively transform *Imbalu* culture without affecting the social fabric in Eastern Uganda (N=52)**

S/N	How Christianity can effectively transform <i>Imbalu</i> culture without affecting the social fabric	SD	D	A	SA	M	SD	Comment
		%	%	%	%			
1	Christian circumcision encourages candidates to practice SMC using aesthesia.	00	14	63	23	3.10	.603	
2	Christianity encourages conducting circumcision at established centres like schools, Churches, or health facilities other than homes.	00	12	61	27	3.15	.606	
3	Boys be circumcised when still young babies to avoid ritual sacrifices.	02	08	64	26	3.15	.638	
4	The circumcision process should be done privately other than exposing the male organ to public as they cut.	02	06	64	27	3.17	.617	
5	Traditionally surgeons should be trained to use sterilized surgical blades other their traditional knives.	02	17	54	27	3.06	.725	
6	Christians should support circumcision without practice of rituals.	02	25	50	23	2.94	.751	
<b>Total mean</b>						<b>1,857</b>	<b>3,940</b>	
<b>Av.M</b>						<b>3.09</b>	<b>.657</b>	

The overall mean was 3.1, indicating that most respondents agreed that Christianity can effectively transform *Imbalu* culture without affecting the social fabric, using different approaches as explained below. From the results in Table 4, it was found that 86% of the respondents acknowledged that Christianity encourages the practice of Safe Male Circumcision

using anesthesia (Mean = 3.1, SD = 0.60). Results also revealed that the majority of respondents (88%) acknowledged that Christianity should encourage carrying out circumcision at established social centers such as schools, churches, or health facilities, rather than at home, as a way of transforming Imbalu without affecting its social fabric (Mean = 3.15, SD = 0.61). Results also indicated that 90% of the respondents acknowledged that when boys are circumcised when still young babies, to avoid ritual sacrifices, will transform *Imbalu* without affecting the social fabric (Mean= 3.15, SD= 0.64). Similarly, 92% of the respondents agreed that the circumcision process should be done privately, rather than exposing the male organ to the public, as they cut (Mean= 3.17, SD= 0.72). Also, 81% of the respondents acknowledged that traditional surgeons should be trained to use sterilized surgical blades rather than traditional knives to transform Imbalu without affecting its social fabric (Mean = 3.1, SD = 0.72). Lastly, results indicated that 73% of the respondents agreed that Christianity should support circumcision without practice of rituals and sacrifices as a way of transforming *Imbalu* without affecting its social fabric (Mean=2.9, SD= 0.75), implying that Christianity should support circumcision without practice of rituals and sacrifices as a way of transforming Imbalu without affecting its social fabric.

During interviews with religious leader 5, concerning the Christian transformation of *Imbalu*, he responded that:

*“Most families are carrying out safe male circumcision and cut their boys when still young as a way of avoiding ritual practice and sacrifices. It has also helped to avoid expenses like spending on alcohol and feeding people for three days who camp at their parents’ home to dance with the boy”.*

Religious leader 6 noted that:

*“Traditional male circumcision is losing out because it is associated with drunkardness, criminal cases, shameful behaviors, and the spread of diseases due to immorality involved. They also observed that traditional male circumcision inflicts a lot of meaningless pain on young boys and also tempts the boys to think that they are mature, making them refuse schooling and end up causing teenage pregnancy and early marriages, yet they cannot sustain the families. They therefore encourage carrying out circumcision at established centers like schools, churches, or health facilities other than homes, and it is done medically without traditional dances”.*

Furthermore, interviews with the clan leader 2, about the relationship between Christian and traditional circumcision, revealed that:

*“Cultural circumcision is associated with many problems like over bleeding, painful cutting, spread of diseases, and moral decay among the youths, expensive in terms of feeding visitors who come to dance for three days, worship of the dead, which is discouraged by the Christians. They therefore support the circumcision without the practice of rituals.”*

## **5. Conclusion**

The study in objective one concludes that the responses effectively represented the causes of conflict between Imbalu and Christianity in Eastern Uganda, specifically the Mbale and Manafwa districts. This was observed when the overall mean across all items was 2.8, and the standard deviation was 0.6. This implies that traditional Imbalu (circumcision) and Christian

circumcision do not follow the same approach and don't agree on the mode of operation, which brings about conflicts between *Imbalu* and Christianity.

The study in objective two concludes that the responses closely reflected the Bagisu definition of real men and women in relation to Imbalu in Eastern Uganda, specifically the Mbale and Manafwa districts. This was observed when the overall mean across all items was 2.95, and the standard deviation was 0.64. This implied that the Bagisu define real men and women mainly based on traditional attributes like circumcision and marriage.

The study findings in objective three conclude that the responses reflect differences in the definitions of man and woman according to Christianity in Eastern Uganda, specifically the Mbale and Manafwa districts. This was observed when the overall mean across all items was 2.8, and the standard deviation was 0.60, indicating that most respondents agreed with the items presented in the table regarding differences in the definitions of man and woman according to Christianity.

The study findings in Objective four concluded that the responses strongly reflected how Christianity can effectively transform Imbalu culture without affecting the social fabric in Eastern Uganda, specifically in Mbale and Manafwa districts. This was observed when the overall mean score was 3.1, and the standard deviation of the mean was 0.66. This implied that most respondents acknowledged that Christianity could transform Imbalu culture without affecting its social fabric.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the research findings and conclusions, the researcher makes the following recommendations.

- a) The government, through the Ministry of Health, should formulate health guidelines and safety standards for Imbalu ceremonies to minimize risks such as infections and unsafe procedures.
- b) There should be collaboration between religious leaders and cultural leaders, especially the traditional surgeons, to promote safe and hygienic practices
- c) The Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development should set aside a fund to sensitize both Christian and traditional communities about the historical, social, and religious significance of imbalu.
- d) The youth department of the cultural institution should implement programs that prepare youth participation in imbalu in ways consistent with both health standards and Christian moral teachings

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