

# UNVEILING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE TREASURES OF BUGISU



*This monument of the legendary Wandulu wa Netuwa depicts the typical appearance of a youth in transition to manhood in Masaabaland*



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## Foreword

It is with great pleasure that I, on behalf of Mt. Elgon Culture and History Museum (MECHM), present these Research Findings of an exercise that was aimed at strengthening the capacity of the museum managers to carry out research on cultural resources. In Bugisu Region many heritage and cultural sites remain virgin and not mapped for appreciation and tourism exploitation. It was therefore a great opportunity for MECHM to make a contribution to knowledge that we believe will assist collaborators in Local Governments, young both in and out of school, tourism investors and visitors reading this compilation to benefit from that exercise.

Museums are non-profit organizations that depend for their operations on donations or gate collections from visitors especially students and tourists. When Covid -19 menace struck the world, Museums all over were the most affected enterprises leading to reduced operations and in most cases, the complete absence of physical activities or even closure.

We thank the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) whose support has helped MECHM not only to remain relevant but to add value to what otherwise would be left as a preserve of the Ministry of Tourism or Tour Operators. For this research exercise we thank CCFU for funding and developing the tools that our researchers used for collecting and profiling the findings from the field which covered the six Districts of Bugisu Region and Mbale City.

We believe that the Heritage Sites in Bugisu that the MECHM team identified can be supported by the District Local Governments (DLG), the Ministry of Tourism, and Investors for the benefit of the Tourism Industry, local communities and visitors but most importantly to enhance the appreciation of cultural resources in our development processes. The findings are suitable for integration as part

of the product diversification strategy for the development of Community-Based Tourism (CBT).

We encourage stakeholders and other interested parties to read this publication and to feel free to consult MECHM for any additional information or clarification.

**Francis Wanyina Bwayo**

Lead Researcher/Curator Mt. Elgon Culture and History Museum.

# Introduction



*Young boys preparing for circumcision*

Bugisu region, sometimes referred to as Masaabaland is found in eastern Uganda. Currently the region is composed of six districts including Bududa, Bulambuli, Manafwa, Mbale, Namisindwa and Sironko. The people in this region are known as Bagisu or Bamasaba and they occupy the well-watered western slopes of Mount Elgon, where they grow millet, beans, bananas, and corn for subsistence, and coffee and cotton as cash crops.

When we talk about the cultural resources of the Bagisu, it is only the imbalu (male circumcision) that quickly comes to people's minds, yet the Bugisu region is

endowed with diverse cultural resources that include cultural and historical sites such as religious landmarks, historical buildings, caves, mountains, mausoleums, rivers and mountains. Unfortunately, most of these sites are little known and rarely documented. Secondly, there is not a commonplace where the Bamasaba and other Ugandans - especially young people - can find sufficient information about the cultural resources of the Bamasaba.

In 2020, the Mt. Elgon Culture and History Museum (MECHM), with support from the Cross-Cultural Foundation, embarked on an initiative to conduct research and document important cultural resources in the Bugisu region. The museum, acting as a centre for research and heritage education, provides spaces and opportunities for the Bagisu, especially young people to access and learn about these important cultural resources which will contribute to the safeguarding of such resources.

The Mt. Elgon Culture and History Museum (MECHM) was founded in 2015 as the first voluntary agent of collection, documentation and preservation of the Elgon region's diverse cultures and heritage for development and posterity, and more so as a player in domestic cultural tourism and nature conservation. The museum is registered as a Community-Based Organization (CBO) that is anchored on four major objectives:

1. To collect cultural and heritage resources for display and exhibition for tourism purposes and preservation.
2. To research and document the cultural and heritage resources of the region for heritage education purposes.
3. To promote cultural and natural tourism with a focus on cultural and natural resources and eco-system conservation.
4. To research and compile economic, human, social, security and political history resources involving people and events in the region both past and present that are of significance for educational purposes and entertainment.

The ultimate aim of MECHM is to be the leading source of information in matters involving social, cultural and economic affairs of the different tribes/communities both within the Elgon region and beyond.

## The Partnership with the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda

In the course of 2017, in the process of seeking funding, MECHM established contacts with the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, who requested the cooperation of MECHM to identify and introduce heritage education clubs as part of extra-curricular activities in secondary schools in the Elgon region. The Museum founder Mr Francis Wanyina was named Coordinator for the programme and has since been co-ordinating six secondary schools in the Elgon region namely – Nkoma SS, Mbale SS, Mbale High, Bududa SS, Bulucheke SS and Manafwa High School.

It is that relationship that has recently graduated into a partnership that is intended to strengthen MECHM as a centre for research and heritage education. The execution of the partnership requires MECHM to identify and document potential cultural and heritage resources whose significance can be assessed, and the status of preservation and conservation efforts enhanced.

## Opening up the research potential

The partnership with CCFU is an opportunity for MECHM to open up the hitherto unexplored research potential of the Bugisu region in particular, and the Elgon region in general as a cultural tourist destination. This will enable MECHM to add value to the collected objects of significance for education, inspiration, conservation and preservation. It will also enable the purposive transformation of largely oral history of the Bagisu into written history for better appreciation, transmission and preservation.

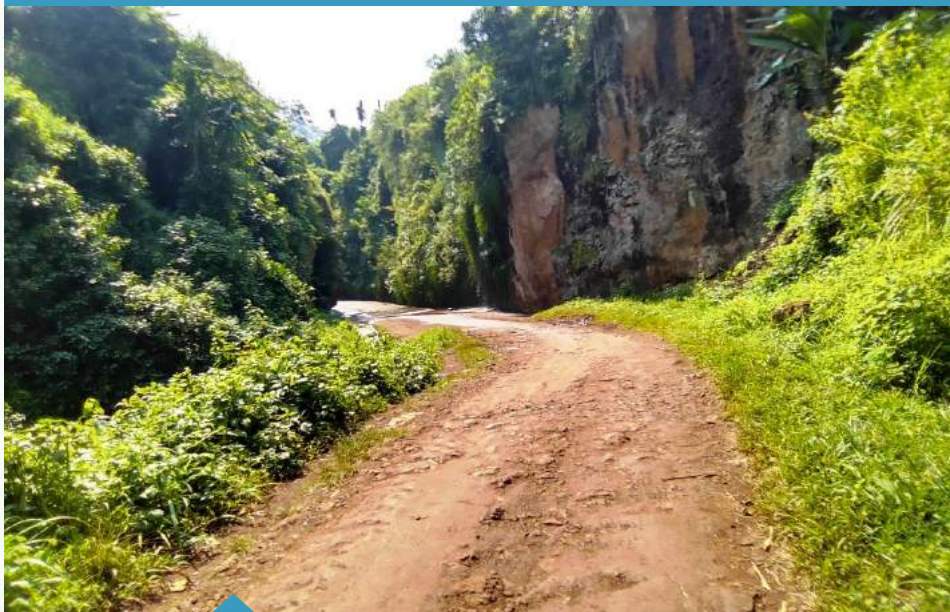
The data to be gathered from existing publications about the cultural heritage in Bugisu and surrounding areas will be documented, published and preserved in a digital format for sharing with other end users wishing to research about the cultural resources in Bugisu. More importantly, efforts will be made to encourage young people in Bugisu to access and learn about their cultural heritage through the museum and access it through the museum online platforms.

## Key Cultural Heritage Resources in the Bugisu Region

The recent field research in the region to document key cultural and heritage resources has identified several definitive lists of cultural, heritage and scenic attractions that are some must-see tourism activities. The criteria for selection of the resources were based on guidance by local community resource persons, while considering the cultural, historical and touristic value of chosen resources. The element of being beautiful, poignant and adorable was also considered during the selection of the most appealing cultural resources.

The cultural resources below are randomly presented, starting with those in Bulambuli District found in the north of Bugisu, next to Kapchorwa district.

### The Biritanyi Gorge



*Biritanyi Gorge is located seven kilometres along the Kamu-Bulago road in Lusha Sub-County, Bumwambu Parish in the Bulambuli District.*

The Biritanyi Gorge was cut through a hill and land owned by one Kimasi Tom with a portion about 60 metres long tarmacked to allow the Biritanyi River waters flow above the road surface instead of a bridge as they cross the road.

The beauty of the gorge is the paved 60 metres road in an S-shape that allows the water to cross on the surface making everybody travelling to Lush Sub-County to wade through. The beauty of this man-made tangible site is pleasing to the eye. The road is managed by Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA).

According to the local residents, it is believed that the water originally used to sink into some deep hole before re-emerging a distance away but the hole was blocked during road construction and hence the surface flows over the road.

The site is also an important transport link between the lowland and the upper Bulambuli (Bulago). The District has listed the gorge, the caves and water fall as some of its tourist attractions and already organises tours for staff team-building and promotion of domestic tourism.

The water flowing through the gorge is the source of the hitherto unexploited Sisiyi Falls down the ridge that will feature later in this report. The people down in the Simu valley also use the river waters for domestic purposes and irrigation.

Leisure visitors to the gorge have the choice of driving there or hiking with the starting point being the Restville Hotel in Muyembe where one may take a rest.

The walls of the gorge have acquired added beauty with water dripping and creepers growing along the walls.

#### Prospect

*The site is an important tourist site in that it is the only gorge where water and motorists share the same path for over 60 metres.*

## The Sisiyi Falls



The Sisiyi Falls are located in Simu Sub-County near Buyaga Town Council and is privately owned and managed by Dr. Patrick and Hellen Mutono.

The magnificent Sisiyi Falls form a white sheet of water that falls about 110 metres from the Butandiga ridge and are considered to be the highest and most beautiful waterfall in Bugisu. It is formed from the waters flowing through the Biritanyi gorge situated in the higher ground of the Butandiga Ridge on the road to Bulago.

This natural site is said to be popular among the Asian community who believe that the water possesses powers of curing several sicknesses, including emotional

ailments such as those arising from broken marriages, as well as body ailments. The Asians often visit the site to say invocation prayers at the falls.

During a circumcision year, water from this site is used for bathing the boys before circumcision. It is customarily and hygienically important to wash the penis before circumcision and every clan has designated points where this is done before the candidate proceeds for the circumcision.

Below the waterfalls, there are two reservoir tanks managed by the government for gravity water supply to the villagers below in the Simu valley.

### Prospect

*Sisiyi Falls, with the village above, is an unexploited wonder in this part of the Bugisu region. With a little marketing, this generally well-maintained natural site could provide a source of employment for hoteliers, guides and researchers. It would benefit significantly from concerted efforts in marketing to create visibility since it is a little off the tarmac road that leads to the better exposed Sipi Falls closer to the road in the neighbouring Kapchorwa district.*

## The Zebubu Cave



Zebubu Cave is located in Kagere village in Bulago Sub-County directly under Bulago Police Post in Bulambuli District.

The salty formation of the rock explains the cave's extensive expansion by human activities over the years while excavating the salt for feeding cattle, commonly known as *shilongo* in the Lugisu language. Animals like elephants and cattle have a liking for salty soil which has properties that aid in digestion.

It is believed that the cave was once used as a shelter for the people of Bulago. This site is still used as a shelter for people and animals during the rainy season.

The roof of the cave is soft and loose portions often fall to the floor.

## The 'Hanging' Spiders

The roof of the cave is covered by a network of cobwebs said to be many years old, woven by giant spiders measuring between 2 to 3 inches long, the largest species of spiders ever seen in the region.

Bulambuli Town Council has listed the cave as a tourist site although no entity has been established to develop the facility that could be of interest to researchers and herbalists.



### *Prospect*

*Although ownership of the cave could not be established, the land neighbouring the cave was sold by the community to Mr. Mazaki Tom, a white man, whose obvious intentions are to develop the site as a tourist development. The District Local Government of Bulambuli has a positive attitude towards developing the sites and the Restville Hotel management is equally supportive of the venture.*



## The Nakoko Cave



The magnificent storied Nakoko Cave is located along the Lusha-Bulago road in Nakoko village, Bulago Sub-County in Bulambuli District.

The cave site is claimed by Mr. Bernard Zerugoyi, who resides in the cave and owns the land around the cave up to the roadside.

The cave is a natural wonder with lower and upper floors and several underground rooms. The Zerugoyi family have over the years lived on the upper floor, which at one time was used as a safe place for keeping money by neighbouring coffee growers who reckoned the hidden cave would not attract thieves. The ground

floor is up to now used as a kraal for keeping goats, cows and pigs. Presently the upper floor of the cave is being used exclusively as a store for food.

Whereas Zerugoyi's clan members use some ground floor 'rooms' as a residence, there is also stone mining near the cave for construction work, which threatens the survival of the cave.

Whereas the sons and grandsons of Zerugoyi have built houses nearby, Mr. Bernard Zerugoyi still admires and stays in the cave and even cooks from inside. The cultural importance and beauty of the cave might however, be compromised by the ongoing stone mining that may need intervention by the District Local Government.

The edges of the cave are covered with overhanging creepers called *indelema* in Lugisu that the residents use as herbs as well as vegetables. It is locally believed by people and affirmed by herbalists that people who eat *indelema* rarely fall sick.

### Prospects

*On the positive side, the Bulambuli District Tourism Officer Mr. Wanade has listed Nakoko cave as a tourist destination and the District team already uses the site for team-building. This gives the facility the opportunity for tourism development and as a retreat site with facilities for camping and partying.*

## Kagyere Falls I



The small but beautiful Kagyere Falls I are found in Kagyere village in Bulago Sub-County below Bulago Police Post in Bulambuli district.

The land around the falls has been sold to a fish farmer by the owners, Mr. Mabiye Tom and his son Mazaki Tom. It is reported that the original owners of the land are still managing the place on behalf of the white man who is said to be planning to develop the site as a Tourist destination.

The community believes the falls were God-given to them to provide water for drinking and farming and are responsible for the cool atmosphere they enjoy

at Bulago village. The water that never dries up is also used by the residents for washing coffee.



### Prospect

*A section of the land below the falls has been developed into a fish pond by the fish farmer. The site is still in its natural state with the overgrown bushes.*



## Kagyere II Falls



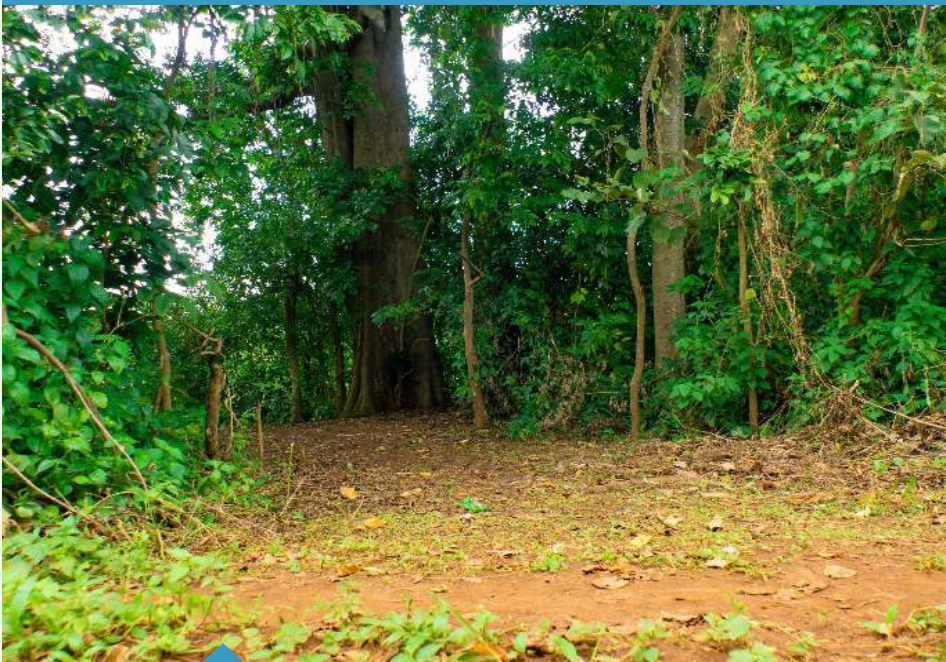
Kagyere Falls II is located about 100 metres below the Kagyere I falls in Kagyere village in Bulago Sub- County.

The beautiful site around Kagyere II is about 30 feet high but wide enough to provide beautiful scenery for tourists. It enjoys magnificent panoramic views with unspoilt terrain, making the site the best hidden intact scenery in that part of the Bugisu region.

The Bulambuli District Local Government has already identified the site as suitable for development as a tourist facility.

The community passed regulations to safeguard the site. People for example, are not allowed to bathe within the falls or ease themselves in the falls' waters since it provides drinking water. Farming is also restricted to beyond 100 feet away from the waters.

### Lishengelo (Kamashengelo)



The Lishengelo (Kamashengelo) found in Bugambi Sub-County along the Buteza road, Bulambuli district

The *Imbalu* or circumcision rituals are embedded in many activities that combine visitation to places for sacred mud soil (*mwitosi*) for smearing candidates and special sites for 'clearance' before circumcision. Every major clan maintains such sites for this purpose. Under Inda ya Mwambu (the lineage of Mwambu, one of Bugisu ancestors) in northern Bugisu such a clearance site is called *lishengero*, or *kamashengero* in the plural. The site (s) belong (s) to the clan and are revered possessions overseen by a clan representative with special cultural powers.

A *lishengero* is a small enclosure surrounded by huge trees said to be over a century old, where a snake is believed to reside and respond to calls by special intercessors deployed for the purpose. The snake, whose type is unknown, is said to appear in August of the circumcision year when the special intercessor is required to slaughter a goat for sacrifice. The candidates are ushered in after being smeared with mud entering from one side and exiting through the second, before proceeding for the actual cutting. It is believed that going through the sites strengthens the boys to withstand the pain during circumcision and it gives them luck thereafter

The trees in the sites locally known as *songati* and *murundu* are so tall and old that no one knows when they were planted.

Movement into a *lishengero* is restricted and it is believed that any violation of the restriction would cause madness or other health complications to the intruder. Ordinarily, a cultural leader must be present to perform a specific rite, such as slaughtering a goat to appease the spirits represented by the snake before entry is authorised

Some taboos include the exclusion of women and girls from the sites, the violation of which is believed to lead to barrenness. In the Bagisu culture, affirmative action was alien; women were considered inferior and excluded from certain activities perceived as a preserve for men. No one is allowed to cut down or even harvest dry branches of the trees in the *lishengero*, an act that would lead to bad luck or even death. The trees at these sites are considered to be sacred.

People who visit the sites outside the circumcision seasons often offer money or gifts to the resident cultural leaders, a sign that when properly marketed with

adequate signage, the sites would generate income through both domestic and foreign tourists especially students.

### **Prospects**

People who visit the kamashengelo also have the opportunity to see the Namagabwe Cave and Namatali Falls located 5 kilometres away in Buteza Sub-County. The Namagabwe caves lie near the Namatali falls, providing a vast natural scenery and potential tourist destination.

There is a need for signage at the junction on the main tarmac road to Kapchorwa and an information centre at an appropriate location in the District to provide essential information for local people and visitors to appreciate the hitherto unexploited rich resource in their midst.

### **The Lwandubi Inemba Site**



Mzee Nakwele Tsephaina, the caretaker of Inemba site which is located his land in Lwandubi village in Namabya Sub-County of Namisindwa District.

The *ineemba* is a ceremonial dance of sacred drumming and singing which closes the circumcision season. It is performed one or two months after the final ritual called *khukhwiyalula* and usually in the year following the circumcision year (*kwe bakhasi*) or year of women. The *ineemba* drummers are only found in a few clans and serve to confirm the 'men' and to close the circumcision season. The *ineemba* dance lasts for three days.

The dress code for the *ineemba* dance is composed of skin sheet (*Tsisumbati*) that the candidate wears and is swung from back to front when getting out of the house to indicate that the "*bumasaaba*" manhood starts from the front.

The drummers arrive on the site in the night and should not meet people on the way as that signifies misfortunes that have to be neutralised by the sacrifice of some animal, usually a goat.

The old man who leads the ceremony inherited the spirits from the forefathers and it is these spirits that motivate him to hit the drums every February of the odd year after circumcision.

Before the ceremony begins an axe blade is hidden at a road junction under thorny brushes "*mukwera*" and the candidates must search in these thorns at night, whoever finds the axe first is made to jump over it to get luck from the spirits and for the *ineemba* ceremony to begin.

It is forbidden for those who demonstrated fear during circumcision to beat the drums or even participate in the activities or else one would suffer madness or other ailments.

The significance of the *ineemba* attire i.e., *isumbati*, the animal skin worn by the candidates is for the appearance of *busani* or manliness.

The three-day dance is for launching the fellowship of the candidates into "*bamakochi*" a quasi-brotherhood that restricts any sexual relations with female relatives within the group. The activity qualifies the candidates as Bagisu (*Bamasaaba*)

## Prospect

*In the past, this crowd-pulling function was the forum for identifying one's future wife. For now, such sites are ideal for setting up permanent exhibition centres with facilities for selling artefacts and other goods for domestic visitors. The people who make the special ineemba drums reside in the neighbouring villages and would be an asset to make and popularise replicas of ineemba drums to sell as souvenirs.*

## The Nalufutu Cultural Site



The Nalufutu cultural site is located at Bunamubi trading centre at the junction of the Bunamubi - Butiliku road in Bunamubi Parish - Bududa District.

Nalufutu is a public ceremonial ground for the Kigai clan of *Inda ya Mubuuya* (descendants of Mubuuya, one of the three ancestors of the Bagisu). The multipurpose site is marked by a giant tree of unknown age that serves as a rendezvous centre for candidates from the mud smearing place (*Mwitosi*) half a kilometre away at Nalutungu near river Manafwa in which young boys wash their penises before they are circumcised.

The cultural site was established unknown years ago by Mauchi, the head of the Babulali clan. He started the site as a reception centre for visitors but also made it the central sacrifice area for the Bakigayi clan during the circumcision season. The tree is protected by norms and any dry branch can only be picked by a traditional caretaker, who is currently, Mzee Mutaba. The elders at the site believe that spirits from the tree give the boys courage to face the knife without fear before they are circumcised from Mulushya, the main circumcision ground for Bakigayi clan called “Lushya Iwa Mabala” located 500 metres from Nalufutu centre.

### Prospects

*The site which is situated in a growing trading centre at a road junction to neighbouring Bulucheke Sub-County which is ideal for the establishment of an information and exhibition centre for the promotion of domestic tourism in the whole of Bududa district.*

## Namashio Bull Fighting



*The Namashio site is located directly behind Bulucheke Secondary School, some two kilometres from Bunamubi.*

Namashio is famous for the bullfighting game that is a speciality of the area. The Namashio Bull Fighting Grounds are well known, even beyond the Bugisu/Masaaba region because of the peculiar and robust entertainment sport, the bull fighting that happens fortnightly in Namashio Sub-County in Bududa District.

The Namashio ground also features in circumcision for the Balutsekhe clan. It is believed that the Balutsekhe forefathers introduced bullfighting as a sport originally aimed at demonstrating the wealth and strength of individuals as well as their clan. It is said by some people that the bullfighting sport was introduced to replace human wrestling after some fatal accidents made it unpopular.

In later years, the element of betting came in where the winning bull takes the prize but more importantly for now it offers free entertainment to the large public.

### Prospects

*Besides the entertainment function, the sport brings several clans together and could be used to address other development challenges and promote social cohesion among the Bagisu.*

*The dual functions of Namashio – the fortnightly bullfighting and the “even year” imbalu rituals have made the place popular and recognised by the government of Uganda as a potential tourist attraction.*

*The crowd-pulling event is good for business but for now, only the bull owners and small vendors collect some money. The place needs security for spectators and the animals, as well as sanitation.*

## The Namasho Cultural Site (litosi)



Namasho public ground

The Namasho cultural site shares the same location with bull fighting and is a public ground where the *imbalu* candidates of the Balutsekhe Clan receive the mud (*litosi*) before proceeding for the cut on different grounds (*lushya*) in their villages.

This cultural space is revered in the belief that it is protected by a spirit in the form of a snake that is only visible to intercessors. It is claimed that every August of the circumcision year, a small bird hatches its two chicks (*khanyunyi khalule*) in the bushes around to signal the rituals here.

### Prospects

*The grounds provide an important example of how to use our indigenous knowledge systems and skills to protect the environment.*

## The Nashula Cultural Site



The Nashula site is located in Womara cell within Bududa Town Council along the Bududa circular road, just behind Wilbra Primary School in Bududa Town Council.

Nashula is a public site which serves as the *imbalu* ceremonial ground for the Mututa clan. It is believed that this *litosi* site has since time immemorial been used for smearing their candidates with mud from the spot. The sacrifice here is offered to the spirits to give boys from the Battuta clan courage to face the knife without fear. The Battuta clan believe that the boys who fail to go through these rites often become dull and at times run mad because the spirits are not happy with them.

It is also believed that such a person cannot participate in the rite of smearing the candidates with mud because if he does, the candidates may fear circumcision and suffer some ill will or misfortunes.

The site is a home for benign spirits in the form of snakes which do no harm to the people worshipping there. The circumcision candidates get good luck and courage from here. The site is managed by the *Buchirimo* cultural elders who become active especially during the month of August of the circumcision year. The location is recognised at the Sub-County and Bududa District as a cultural site and adequately protected from encroachers. The Bagisu culture considers women as inferior and they are often excluded in activities considered for men only and picking of firewood from the surrounding woodlot is forbidden.

### Prospects

*The Bududa District Headquarters has modern hotel facilities for tourists and a rich tourist resource base that urgently requires collective marketing efforts to attract more visitors. The District is the richest in Bugisu and has one of the biggest open markets in the region at the Bukigai Sub-County headquarters that attracts traders from as far as Kenya every Thursday.*

*The disaster relics of Nametsi where more than three hundred people lost their lives in 2010 and others in 2012 and 2019 are tourist attractions that should be packaged and marketed.*

## The Namisindwa Cave



The multi-layered Namisindwa cave is located in Bitotwa village, in Bupoto Sub-County of Namisindwa District.

The cave below Wanekali, the highest hilltop on Namisindwa ridge, is claimed by the Bakwambi clan, mainly because of its proximity to the land in the neighbourhood. The cave is said to be deep and dark with dripping water that has formed a pool from which at some point in the past, villagers used to fetch water for domestic use.

The natural formation of the cave with chambers and seats is quite a spectacle to behold. The site is a good hiking spot with a panorama appropriate for tourism development.

### **Prospects**

*Namisindwa ridge and cave are within the Uganda Wildlife Authority area. The Born-Again faithful use the cave for prayers. There is a need for local government in the area to create visibility for the facility and develop a clear route for visitors to use up and down.*

## Semei Kakungulu Heritage Site



*This historical house built in 1917 is located on the top of Gangama hill, seven kilometres north of Mbale City. Semei Kakungulu lived in this house until his death in 1927*



*The Kakungulu tomb located on Agama Hill in Mbale*

The Semei Kakungulu heritage site also includes the mausoleum, the house in which he was buried. Other facilities on the hill includes Semei Kakungulu Country Lodge on private land managed by the Kakungulu family.

“General” Semei Kakungulu was the first indigenous military commander deployed by the British government to capture the then Eastern Uganda that comprised Teso and the “wild territory” then called Masaaba country.

After successfully conquering Teso and Masaaba country, Kakungulu aspired to become a self-proclaimed Sultan of the land captured, initially in Busoga but he later opted to rule the region that became Bukedi. He was however, denied the opportunity and released from government service to settle in Mbale which he turned into a prosperous settlement by Asians and early Arab traders.

Semei Kakungulu is reputed to have created administrative units similar to those in Buganda and manned them with Baganda Chiefs and other officials who then dominated most of the civil and political affairs in the region.

The house that became his palace on Gangama Hill was built for him by one of the earliest Asian traders in Uganda called Allidina Visram in 1917. Kakungulu died in 1927 on his estate measuring 20 square miles donated to him as a bonus by the British for his loyal services.

Kakungulu founded a Jewish religion commonly known as *Bayudaya* who have a Temple on the hill with hundreds of followers. The site is therefore an important historic, religious and symbol of conquest. Several places in the City like Nkoma, Nkokonjeru, and Busajjabwankuba as well as administrative divisions like Saza, Gombolola, Muluka and Butongole still bear the Ganda names introduced by Semei Kakungulu.

### Prospects

*The Kakungulu site offers a good rest place with a good panoramic view of Mbale City and its environs. The tombs and the old house are well protected and managed under the leadership of the family members. The site is recognised and listed as a tourism facility by the Uganda Tourism Board. The Kakungulu family are erecting a Museum to complement the other operational facilities.*

### The Bukusu Prayer Mountain



*The Bukusu prayer mountain, previously a preserve of Dini ya Musambwa, is located in Lubola village in Nangalwa Sub-County, Nahindo Parish in the greater Bugobero, Manafwa District.*

V.G. Simiyu, in an article published by Gideon Were Publications, writes that, according to oral history, during the period 17<sup>th</sup> and 18 centuries, the Bukusu name was coined around Bukusu Hill in Bugobero where the Babukusu lived before migrating to present day Bungoma in Kenya.

The Bukusu hill, about 1000 ft. above sea level, belongs to the community around who are said to be descendants of one Maina. It is claimed that Maina, the forefather of the clans living in the greater Bugobero and western Kenya,

embarked on a mysterious journey through Bugisu land and settled down on this Bukusu hill whereby he fathered the clans around this hill and western Kenya.

It is said that in the early 1940s, Elijah Masinde, of Kenyan origin, spiritually 'flew' and landed onto Bukusu Hill where he was inspired by patriarch Maina to start the traditional religious faith called "*Dini ya Musambwa*". He later flew back to his origin in Kimilili where he lived and had a rough time with colonial powers who prohibited the faith because of its resistance against colonialism.

Elijah Masinde, a charismatic leader, who used his faith to fight against colonialism was a born agent provocateur and even after independence, Elijah often got into trouble with Kenyan government authorities, leading to his detention. Elijah died in 1987 after several stints in jail.

As a young man in the 1930s, Masinde was a well-known footballer who even featured in the regional league then called Gossage Cup played between Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika, present-day Tanzania. A myth is held among believers that at one time a football match ended prematurely when Elijah Masinde kicked the ball skyward and that the ball disappeared into the clouds. There being only one ball at the time, the match was called off.

Today the believers of *Dini ya Musambwa* number above 10,000 in Kenya and Uganda. They do not recognise Christianity but make reference to some books of the Old Testament. They maintain prayers at a shrine on the hill and believe that prayers made at the top of this hill always get answered. At the prayer spot, there is a bowl of "holy" water that never dries up and possesses powers to bring good luck. It is alleged that several intending political leaders vying for competitive positions visit the Bukusu hill where they sacrifice animals to receive blessings.

Bukusu hill has recently received another group of Born-Again adherents who have put up a temporary church in the neighbourhood to share in the spiritual blessings that Maina and his god exude to believers and followers.

Some of the taboos on the hill include: women in their periods are not allowed at the top of this hill; one must fast for 14 days before prayer; people are not allowed to wear shoes during worshipping or suffer the pain of misfortunes.

The site represents the strength and resilience of the African traditional religion to the community. The *Dini ya Musambwa* has been in existence for over seventy years (since 1948) and over thirty years since the death of the founder, the late Elijah Masinde (Maina's prophet) who died in 1987.

### Prospects

*This site could attract people out for curiosity as well as belief. There is a need for an information centre at an appropriate place in the District where a small museum could also publicise and popularise the site. The site already unifies the Bagisu from Uganda and the Babukusu of Kenya who come here periodically to worship at the top of this hill. It also unifies followers of the traditional religion and Christians.*

### Development through Tourism

The presence of two different faiths in close proximity on the same Bukusu hill is a rare phenomenon. It is reported that the Balokole group (members of the Pentecostal church) pray while facing east whereas the *Dini ya Musambwa* pray facing west. Kenya is a good example of unity in diversity and could be emulated to influence other sects to always co-operate. The site has potential for Religious Tourism development once an entry point is established with an accompanying information centre to guide visitors to the facility. We believe that Magale Township, a few kilometres to the Kenyan border at Lwakhakha could serve the role of the information centre.

## The Mutoto Cultural Site



The Mutoto cultural site, located seven kilometers to the south-east of Mbale City, is the home of the Bamasaba Cultural Institution called Inzu ya Masaaba (IYM). The site is co-managed with the Bamutoto clan, of Bunkokho Sub-County.

According to legend, Mutoto earned its status as a result of one Fuya from the area who revived the *imbalu* practice after it had faded away several years after the death of the founding father Masaaba, whose existence is estimated to have taken place between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Fuya is said to have had sickly male children from a woman originating from Barwa or of the Kalengin community. It is said that someday one Aramunyenye, Fuya's brother-in-law, while on a visit

empathised with the sick nephews and prescribed circumcision of his brother-in-law Fuya to obtain spiritual healing for the boys.

The *imbalu* revival by Fuya explains the current Bamutoto's claim to ownership of the Mutoto cultural grounds from then to date. In every circumcision year, Bamutoto are the first to circumcise before it is opened to the rest of Bamasaba or else ill will would befall any other defiant clan, such as the need for prolonged healing or at worst, they might suffer leprosy.

This gives the Mutoto community cultural strength. They believe that if they do not lead in the cultural festival (*imbalu*) the weather will not be favorable for their crops that year, there will be drought and heavy winds. In some incidences their forefathers appear to them in spirit form, whenever they dig around the site.

The name Mutoto is derived from a tree called *kumutoto* (bark tree). One of their clan leaders had a big plantation of such trees under which he used to hold important functions, hence the acquisition of the name Mutoto for the area. The Bamutoto believe that whenever the Bagisu have tried to shift the *imbalu* activity from this place, they have suffered misfortunes as was the case in 1968 when it was shifted to Maluku grounds, causing several candidates in that year turning into imbeciles.

The 26 clans in Masaabaland are expected to express themselves through the construction of huts at the site to serve as 'embassies' to the "Mutoto Cultural State". The youth use the place for games such as football and the politicians for campaigns. The site is generally good for recreation and heritage education.

There is a *muwule* tree at the spot called *Mubuwelele* (the place of the gods) where the Bamutoto Imbalu candidates receive the smearing mud (*mwitosi*) before they proceed for the cut near a cultural hut west of the plot.

## Prospects

*The site is protected by law as a cultural site and formally recognised by the Uganda Tourism Board as well as the District Local Governments of Bugisu. No planting of trees around is allowed and the building of permanent structures on the site is forbidden.*

*The site has potential for domestic tourism development once the local cultural institution gets organised. The entry point would be to establish an information centre at the Lukhobo in Maluku inside the City to guide visitors to this site and various other cultural facilities in the Bugisu region. The institution will also need a sustainable sensitisation programme on radio and District-based information offices equipped to keep heritage education alive.*

## The Nusu Hill



*Nusu hill is a conical hill located in Bushiayi Sub-County in Bududa District, a 40-minute hike from Kikholo, the starting point being below on the Bududa circular road, on the western part of the Mt. Elgon ranges.*

Nusu hill has steep slopes and angles in an area that is considered the landslide 'hot spot' in Uganda. The landslide threat notwithstanding, Nusu hill in Bududa District is one of the loveliest places in the Bugisu region. At the top of the hill, one is thrilled to witness high rise hills dotted like giant mushrooms with attractive farm plots along the hillsides.

Nusu hill gives a visitor coming to this incredibly photogenic site a 180-degree view of the plains of Manjiya and the banks of the mighty Manafwa river which

drains into river Mbologoma that flows into Lake Kyoga. The site lies about an hour's drive from the Mbale City Centre.

Nusu hill is a place of worship for members of the local community and it is revered as a sacred site. It is remembered for one of the worst landslide occurrences when, in August 1970, a massive landslide claimed the lives of over 60 circumcision dancers. An eye witness of the disaster, Mr. Wafutsayo presently living in Busamaga in Mbale City, recalls losing a sister called Wabulyu who persisted in following the dance party in the excitement of the *kadodi* dance which had just been introduced in Bulucheke for the first time from Budadiri in north Bugisu. He says that villagers spent weeks digging to recover bodies but many were never accounted for.



### Prospects

*The site has potential for domestic tourism development. The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) has developed a new shorter trek route from Bushiyi to Wagagai, Mt. Elgon Peak that has yet to be commissioned, awaiting the provision of local facilities. The best starting point for the climb would be the guest house in Bulucheke where facilities need to be upgraded to receive and accommodate visitors and serve as a kick-off point for both Nusu hill climbing and trekking to Mt. Elgon peak. The best times for climbing the peak is between October and March.*



### Wanale (Nkonkonjeru) Ridge



Wanale ridge/cliff, commonly known as Nkonkonjeru ridge towers above Mbale City to the east at an elevation of 2,347 feet above sea level.

The Wanale Ridge is an extended part of a 25 km long tongue of lava that flowed out of the side of the volcano after the cone collapsed to block the main vent. Legend has it that the name Nkonkonjeru was given to Wanale ridge because Wanale, the last-born son of Masaaba, reared only white chicken. The Wanale cliff is the source of two seasonal waterfalls called Nabuyonga and Namatsio that run westwards on either side of the City.

Wanale ridge is one of the most photographed landmarks towering above Mbale City Centre. The feature beckons both visitors and locals to perch atop its peak to

obtain a 180-degree view of the plains below. Promoters here often joke that no self-respecting visitor to the east of Uganda will leave Mbale City without snapping a picture of the Nkokonjeru/Wanale ridge.

One of the earliest foreign visitors to the ridge, Joseph Thomson, marvelled at seeing 20-million-year-old deep limestone caves with unusual design and seats naturally made by the creator. Many caves are so deep and dark inside that no one has ventured to explore the hidden treasures inside them. Hikers will be in “heaven” once they use either of two breath-taking trails of varying degrees of difficulty to the top of the hill.

### Prospects

*The first independent government of Uganda built a tarmac road to the top of Wanale/Nkokonjeru ridge and was said to have harboured dreams to erect an international hotel up there. The sight has great potential for erection of such a luxury hotel and cable cars for the leisure and pleasure of domestic and foreign tourists.*

## Key Historic buildings

### The Hindu Temple



*The Hindu temple located at the junction of Mbale-Tirinyi and Mbale-Soroti roads, opposite Mbale SS*

The Hindu Temple was designed by Civil Engineer and Architect Mr. Rashaikant. J. Patel. It was built in 1956 and opened on 26th December 1957 at a cost of Shs. 400,000/= fundraised mainly through Rotary Clubs. The temple has a capacity of 500 worshipper. The foundation stone was laid by Mr. Githdharbhai V. Kotecha in memory of his late father Mr. Vallbhdas Gordhandas Kotecha.



## Prospects

*The building presents opportunities for developing cultural and religious tourism in Mbale city*



### This Lukhobo Hall



*Lukhobo Hall is located next to Mbale local government offices*

The Lukhobo Hall was built by the Government of Uganda in 1949 after the African Local Government Ordinance (CAP 74) came into force next to District Offices with two wings, one for Bugisu and another for Bukedi. The hosting of two district administrative units in one compound was a source of conflict that involved contestation over land between Bagisu and Bagwere that persisted until 1967 when Bagwere were transferred to become part of Tororo District.

The building was donated to the Cultural Institution, the Inzu ya Masaaba (IYM) in 2010 and today serves as the Headquarters of the cultural institution.

### The Railway Station



*The railway station is located off Mbale-Tirinyi Road*

The production of cotton, coffee and processing of hides and skins in Elgon Region, mostly for export through the Port of Mombasa necessitated the construction of a Railway line from the coast of Mombasa to the hinterland. The Railway line reached Mbale, the then collecting Centre for cotton and coffee, in 1931. Until the early 1990s the trains used to ply this line from Kampala via Tororo to Gulu and Pakwach in west Nile.

The Mbale Railway Station building is a relic that needs to be preserved for posterity. The Uganda Railways Corporation has recently (2020) embarked on restoring the railway services on this section.

## Prospects

*The building presents opportunities for the development of cultural tourism in Mbale city. It also presents opportunities as a source of information for learners who are interested in learning about the history of Uganda Railway.*

## The King George VI Monument



*The monument is located in the heart of Mbale city*

This monument was built in 1932 in memory of King George VI. The monument, which has become the symbol of the city, given its central location in the heart of the city, was built by an Indian architect called Kassim Jamal Esquare.

### Prospects

*As an important historic landmark, the monument is one of the potential tourist attractions that should be presented to both local and foreign tourists*

## The Mt. Elgon Culture and History Museum



*The Mt. Elgon Culture and History Museum (MECHM) is located on Tom Masaaba Road off Tororo road and neighbours Oxford Secondary School.*

This encyclopaedic museum collects, documents and preserves cultural artefacts for education now, and as a knowledge and memory bank for future generations.

The purpose of the museum is to engage, educate and enlighten residents of every age, gender and race and socio-economic level with displays that will enable them to explore and view local, historical, cultural, scientific and artistic treasures that are hitherto underdeveloped.

At present the museum is the nearest source of information on cultural matters of the different tribes/communities in Eastern Uganda. The missing link, however, has been its inadequate competence to carry out research and documentation of cultural resources located within the cultural and geographical context of

the museum. This is being addressed with the help of CCFU in a project named “strengthening community museums as centres for research and heritage education”.

Our inquiries have revealed that only about 1% of the region’s school-going children and students can ever afford to pay for tours outside the region. We are pleased to bring services nearer the disadvantaged 99% who rarely afford to travel out of the Elgon region.

Besides research, there are plans to expand the current small library with books to be written both in the native languages and in English. The indigenous elites will be invited and encouraged to take advantage of this opportunity to contribute their talents in this area by writing for posterity.

The museum currently serves as a classroom for all ages and levels of education with interesting stories and curiosities to inspire, educate and entertain our visitors. It will also serve as a research centre on diverse heritage resources such as landscapes like mountains, rivers, swamps, lakes, forests, cultural sites, game reserves and National Parks that are currently threatened and suffer abuse by human exploitation in the region.

The history section of the museum encourages learning and enjoyment about culture. Spaces for creative activities and opportunities for volunteers to share their experiences and interesting untold stories with guests. The history section includes among others - family discovery days, colonial and post-colonial history of Mbale and surrounding areas, the rebel wars, the *magendo*, and the birth of *boda-bodas*.

The museum shall further carry out research and document stories of the shakers and makers of Mbale, actors and their activities, such as Ndoilelire, the Heroes Club, The Bugisu Cooperative Union, the Masaaba Cooperative Union, the women leaders of Mbale over the years, the Mayors, and pioneer African school leaders. Other topics include Mbale at night over the years, tourism, sports, faith life and growth of religion and sects, cultural diversities and other curiosities of local history, and radio shows.

## Circumcision (Imbalu) knives



*Circumcision knives preserved at the Mt. Elgon History and Cultural Museum*

Among the Bagisu, Imbalu is about cutting off the foreskin of the penis of the young adults - circumcision. These knives are some of the most important museum objects called ‘inyembe or ipalu’ and used by Umukhebi or surgeon who carries out the operation. Traditionally the surgeon carried three knives - one for a healthy candidate, one for syphilitic or sick and another as spare.

The bukhebi skill is acquired by way of possession through spiritual powers. It occurs in some clans and makes the possessor’s heart beat fast and make him restless whenever he hears the sound of Imbalu songs. The knives are not supposed to be touched at all if it is not the Mbalu season (odd year)

## Exploring the rise and fall of Mbale/Bugisu Region

One of the troublesome questions at present is the decline in the development of some regions in Uganda over the years. Did you know that Mbale/Bugisu or Masaaba country situated to the east of Uganda is about 2,450 sq km and is about

the same size as Zanzibar island? Whereas Zanzibar has a population of 1,303,569 (2012 census) with a GDP of \$860 million and per capita income of \$656, this compares with Masaaba with 1.6 population with unknown GDP had a per capita income estimated at below \$120 (2015). The reasons for this huge difference in economic performance may be ascribed to unexplored hidden opportunities that when discovered and exploited might improve the economic fortunes of the Bugisu region. With the ongoing efforts to strengthen the Mt. History and Cultural Museum as a centre for research and heritage education, it is anticipated to enhance the region's efforts to restoring a sense of belonging and pride in Uganda's shared history among the youth. It is also the museum's desire to trigger the urge to preserve our tangible and intangible heritage as an important pillar of sustainable development.

### **Prospects**

*The museum has adequate land for functions such as weddings, graduation and birthday parties. The museum has a garden which can accommodate up to 2,000 visitors under movable tents, and a playground for children with a capacity of 1000. The events provide opportunities for people to visit the museum.*

## **Conclusion**

The opportunity given to museum to conduct research on cultural and heritage resources in Bugisu has opened our eyes to a reality that we often underestimated. Through the research, it was discovered that Bugisu/Elgon region has diverse cultural resources that have not been documented or publicised yet, their cultural significance among the Bagisu cannot be under estimated. We hope that the experience gained during the research will enable us to document other important cultural resources for their better safeguarding.

The management of the museum extends its appreciation to the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda for enabling us to do the little we have done and hope that another opportunity can be extended to enable us to further document other cultural resources that could have been missed during this exercise.

The research and documentation of the cultural resources in Mbale has increased our desire to undertake further research on other hidden cultural, historical heritage resources that need protection, preservation and conservation.





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+256 (0)782101423

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