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MARGARET TROWELL SCHOOL OF INDUSTRIAL AND FINE ARTS
(MTSIFA)

**ART AND ETHNOBOTANY: THE VISUAL INTERPRETATION OF HERBS USED IN
BAGISU IMBALU RITUALS**


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**A GUIDEBOOK SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL
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DECLARATION

I, Kirabo Karen, declare that the content of this research is original and has not been submitted for any other degree award to any other university except Makerere University.

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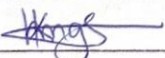
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DEDICATION

This report is dedicated to my biological and God-given parents, Mrs Wokuri Rosemary, Mr Ssentongo Hussein Lule, and Mrs Rosalee Martin, my family and all Bagisu.

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DEFINITIONS OF OPERATIONAL TERMS

- Bagisu:** A tribe in eastern Uganda living in areas around Mount Elgon.
- Mugisu:** A person who belongs to the tribe of the Bagisu.
- Lugisu:** The indigenous language of the Bagisu.
- Kadodi:** Bagisu traditional music.
- Imbalu:** The traditional practice of male circumcision among the Bagisu.
- Umuchebebi (singular), Bachebi (plural):** The traditional circumcision practitioner.
- Khuchebeba:** The act of cutting during circumcision.
- Umusinde:** A boy or any male who is not yet circumcised/a circumcision candidate, one who has accepted and is being prepared for circumcision.
- Khuyingila Imbalu:** To be traditionally circumcised.
- Malwa:** The Bagisu local brew made from sorghum.
- Painting:** A process of applying paint (oil, acrylics or water colour) onto a surface as either a protective coating or for decoration.
- Symbolism:** The use of a mark or character to represent ideas.

ABSTRACT

The study explored the intersection of art and ethnobotany by examining the visual interpretation of herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals (*Imbalu*) in Uganda. The study investigates how traditional herbal practices and their symbolic meanings are embedded within the cultural fabric of the Bagisu community, focusing on the functional role of these plants in the ritual process. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates ethnographic fieldwork, visual analysis, and artistic practice to document and interpret the cultural significance and visual representations of the herbs.

Through interviews with traditional herbalists, cultural practitioners and community elders, the study identified key herbs used in the *Imbalu* rituals, their roles in spiritual and physical healing, and their connection to Bagisu identity and cosmology. The research also incorporated creative practice as a methodology, producing a series of paintings that visually narrate the symbolic and material aspects of the herbs, and emphasising their importance in sustaining cultural heritage amidst globalisation and modernisation pressures.

This interdisciplinary study contributes to the fields of ethnobotany, art, and cultural studies by advancing knowledge of the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and visual arts in cultural preservation. It highlights the potential of art as a medium for documenting, interpreting, and revitalising endangered cultural practices while advocating for the conservation of both intangible heritage and biodiversity in the Bagisu region.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

This study focused on the visual documentation and interpretation of the herbs used in Bagisu *Imbalu* rituals. The intersection of art and ethnobotany offers a basis for the preservation and reinterpretation of indigenous knowledge systems in communities where cultural practices are deeply intertwined with identity. Ethnobotany, which is the study of the relationship between people and plants, goes beyond botanical classification, encompassing the cultural, spiritual, and symbolic meanings attributed to herbs (Okello et al., 2019). Among the Bagisu people of Eastern Uganda, circumcision is the initiation ritual considered to be the only way a boy turns into a man. It is a communal rite of passage to manhood intended for every young man in their teenage years, and is known as *Imbalu* (Ssebulime, 2023). *Imbalu* constitutes more than circumcision as an initiation rite to mark the transition from childhood to manhood; it also involves the Kadodi dance, songs, spirituality, fertility, and celebrations for 12 months, and it is considered to represent the identity of the Bagisu (Makwa, 2010). Rituals such as the *Imbalu* circumcision ceremony are deeply rooted in plant-based traditions that serve medicinal, spiritual, and symbolic roles in many African societies (Senyimba & Wamala, 2020). Yet the visual representation of these ethnobotanical practices remains underexplored in contemporary art discourse in Uganda.

Recent studies emphasise the need to document and revitalize indigenous rituals as globalisation continues to threaten their continuity (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2022). The study uses painting as a powerful medium to interpret, preserve, and communicate the Bagisu traditional practice of *Imbalu*. It provides an alternative epistemology that bridges historical narratives, ecological knowledge, and creative expression (Kasfir & Forster, 2013). Art plays a key role in cultural storytelling by engaging with ritualistic plants used in cultural practices like the *Imbalu* ritual. Plant art reveals the folk use of plants as an expression of the identity of a certain community (Marín et al., 2024).

This study thus positions itself at the intersection of ethnobotany and visual art practice, exploring how traditional herbal knowledge embedded in the *Imbalu* ritual can be interpreted, documented, and reimagined through painting. By foregrounding the cultural meanings and

aesthetic representations of these herbs, the research contributes to broader conversations around cultural sustainability, heritage preservation, and the role of creative practice in academic inquiry.

1.1 Background to the Study

Uganda has a variety of tribes, including Baganda, Banyankole, Basoga, Bakiga, Iteso, Acholi, Banyoro, Batoro and Bagisu, among others. The Bagisu are a Bantu-speaking tribe who live in the eastern districts of Mbale, Sironko, Manafwa, Bulambuli and Bududa. They are known for their traditional circumcision ceremony, called Imbalu, which marks the transition of boys into manhood.

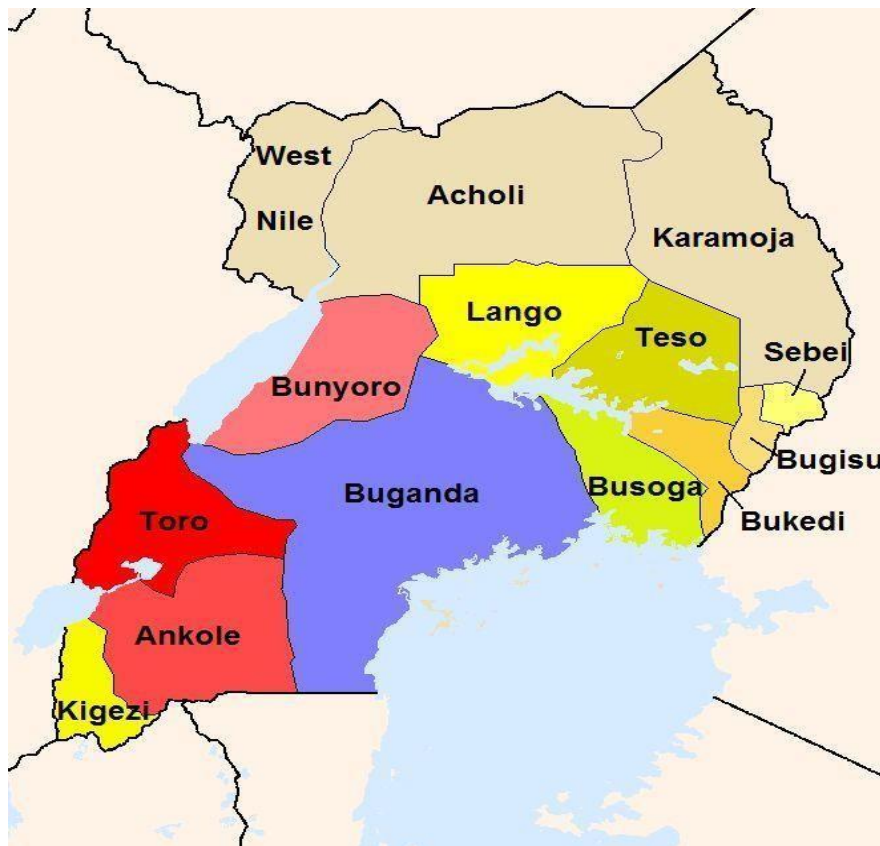


Figure 1: Location of Bugisu in Eastern Uganda

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=29126900593591310&id=100000942683700&set=a.835158643192217> Accessed: 09/ 06, 2024

The Bagisu are a heterogeneous community and their language is a product of the various cultural groups which mingled together in the general area of Mount Elgon. As a result of centuries of mixing, intermarriage and cultural interaction, the Bagisu finally emerged as a distinct cultural and linguistic entity. This final product was undoubtedly partly influenced by the cultures and languages of neighbouring societies (Were, 1971). The Bagisu speak a Bantu language known as Lugisu and there are many theories regarding their origin. One such theory traces the origin of the Bagisu to Shindu (Kintu), who is also the first Muganda (plural: Baganda) and is also a legendary figure in Basoga tales. The Bagisu believe that Shindu was created by God on Mount Elgon to subdue the earth, and that he gave birth to Masaba, the father of all Bagisu. This is why the Bagisu are also referred to as Bamasaba, and Mount Elgon as Mount Masaba.

Were concludes that the Bagisu are a heterogeneous community with Pygmy, Bantu, Kalenjin, 'Ethiopian' and Maasai blood. The earliest known ancestors of the Bagisu settled on Mount Elgon around the beginning of the 16th century, and the Maasai are reported to have been in the neighbourhood of the mountain. The list of the various ethnic groups which intermingled to produce the Bagisu could be extended to include any other early inhabitants with whom the newcomers came into prolonged and fruitful contact. The origin of the Bagisu is still a subject of debate, but all theories point to Mount Elgon as the place where the first Mugisu was created. The other people whom the Bagisu are believed to have emerged from migrated from different areas and settled on Mount Elgon.

History of *Imbalu*

The Bagisu are primarily known for their rich cultural traditions, especially the Imbalu circumcision ritual. This initiation rite is not only a passage to adulthood but also a spiritual and cultural achievement that defines masculinity and social responsibility. The Imbalu ritual is held every even year, and it integrates dance, songs, herbal medicine and spiritual practices. This offers a vibrant cultural display that highlights the community's identity. Male circumcision is practised worldwide in different countries either medically or traditionally. In Uganda, traditional male circumcision is widely practised in the east of the country and, to a small extent, in Western Uganda. The Bagisu are known as a nation of circumcised men

because they faithfully carry out this practice biennially, displaying their power and strong connection to their culture (Khanakwa, 2018).

The first circumcision is claimed to have been carried out in the village of Mutoto in Bungokho, in Central Bugisu. Since then, every circumcision year it is customary for circumcision to start in Bungokho before spreading to other parts of Bugisu, as further discussed in Chapter Two of this study. Now the practice is performed once every two years. However, postponement has come to be permitted in case of a national crisis or natural disaster, such as a prolonged drought, famine, epidemic and war. It is not easy to tell what the interval between one circumcision period and another may have been in the past. However, it is clear that the system was flexible and that the initiates were generally much older than they are today. Though circumcision experts are found in every clan, their work is not necessarily restricted by clan boundaries; often they perform their duties beyond the traditional boundaries of their own clans (Were, 1977).

Accounts differ slightly as to how and by whom the first circumcision was performed among the Bamasaba. Were mentions that during the circumcision ceremony the Bagisu sing 'Imbalu ya Nabarwa' (the circumcision of Nabarwa). Some people claim it was Nabarwa who started circumcision among the Bagisu by getting married to Masaba. Since Nabarwa came from a culture, that of the Barwa, where circumcision was a tradition, when they had children, who became the progenitors of all the current Bagisu clans, they were all circumcised. Nabarwa is believed to have carried out the circumcision herself, or to have instructed Masaba in the practice of circumcision. Conversely, Masaba himself could have been circumcised by the Barwa. Others claim that Nabarwa told Masaba that she would never get married to a man who was uncircumcised, so he agreed to undergo the initiation by Nabarwa's people (the Barwa). Since then, the Bagisu have faithfully kept up the practice of traditional male circumcision and all the accompanying rituals. Odutsa et al. (2019) also states that the performance of Imbalu circumcision rituals is associated with spirits from the clan of "Nabarwa", the wife of Masaba, who is believed to have seduced her husband to accept and be circumcised. He adds that to the Bagisu people, the practice of circumcision is very important as far as their identity is concerned, and it creates a special bond of unity between the men who have been circumcised in the same year.

Herbs

Herbs play a critical role in this tradition. They are used for medicinal purposes, symbolic purification and spiritual protection during the initiation process. Passed down orally, this herbal knowledge is deeply rooted in Bagisu cosmology and holds symbolic meanings reflecting life, resilience, and continuity. Plants have been used for medicinal purposes since time immemorial and, to this day, many of the important and familiar remedies originate in plants (Yaniv & Dudai, 2014).

Healing with medicinal plants is as old as mankind itself. The connection between man and his search for drugs in nature dates from the distant past. There is ample evidence of this from various sources: written documents, preserved monuments, and even original plant medicines. Awareness of medicinal plant usage is a result of the many years of struggles against illnesses, owing to which man learnt to seek out drugs in barks, seeds, fruit bodies, and other plant parts. Contemporary science has acknowledged their active properties and it has included in modern pharmacotherapy a range of drugs of plant origin, known by ancient civilisations and used throughout millennia. Knowledge of the development of ideas related to the usage of medicinal plants as well as the evolution of awareness has increased the ability of pharmacists and physicians to respond to the challenges that have emerged with the spread of professional services in facilitating human life (Petrovska, 2012).

The Bagisu circumcision rite existed for centuries before the existence of any hospitals or nonindigenous medical care in the region, and long before Uganda was colonised. During this era, only herbs were used to treat and embolden the circumcision candidates. *Ityanyi* (the indigo plant) has been used by the Bagisu to embolden the circumcision candidates for as long as the rite has existed. The plant is native to some parts of Africa, such as Tanzania and South Africa, and to China and tropical Asia. In these countries, it is used against digestive disorders and for the management of pain. This could be the reason why the Bagisu do not use any anaesthesia during circumcision since the herb is administered a few hours prior to circumcision. It also helps with inflammation, infections and cancer. *Ingulwe* (*Pyrrosia schimperiana*) is used for healing after circumcision, and it is native to Central, East and South Africa (Jaarsveld & J, 2017). *Crassocephalum Vittelinum* is used to stop excessive bleeding. In

other areas, it is used as medicine because of its antimalarial, antibacterial, cytoprotective, anti-inflammatory and hepatoprotective properties.

As a tool for cultural documentation, visual art provides a compelling avenue for preserving such intangible heritage. By interpreting the herbs and their uses through artistic expression, this study seeks to bridge the gap between cultural preservation and contemporary creative practices using painting, printing and mixed media art. Gorichanaz (2017) argues that an artwork is a document in itself and can be used as reference. (Kemp & Pallanti, 2017), talks about the relevance of the Monalisa Painting. The Mona Lisa painting by Leonardo da Vinci is over 500 years old, meaning that if the subject of this painting was one of cultural practices at the time it was produced, both the related knowledge and the record of it would still be in existence. This is evidence that art can be used to preserve knowledge, especially with regard to this important cultural practice that constitutes the identity of the Bagisu. There is a need to document the herbs used in the Bagisu circumcision rite, considering that the related knowledge is only being passed on orally and climate change is also taking a toll on plant diversity. This implies that the future of these herbs is uncertain since most of them grow on their own without human assistance.

Visual art preserves cultural heritage, tells stories and sparks dialogue, making it a powerful tool for cultural documentation. As Abdel Hay (2018) asserts: ‘The arts are an honest interface to learn about the cultures of the societies in the world.’

1.2 Problem Statement

While the Imbalu ritual is widely recognised for its cultural significance, there is limited scholarly documentation of the specific herbs used and their roles within the ritual. Even less attention has been given to visually interpreting this ethnobotanical heritage. This gap highlights the need for interdisciplinary studies that integrate ethnobotany and visual art to preserve and communicate this herbal knowledge. No study has been conducted to investigate which medicinal plants are used during the process of circumcision despite their widespread use and importance to the ritual, yet this knowledge is on the verge of being lost (Anywar & Nakitende, 2022). This study aims at contributing to documenting, thus preserving traditional

knowledge of these herbs and their role in the circumcision rite of the Bagisu using the visual arts.

In the rural areas of Uganda, close to 90% of the population relies on traditional medicine to meet their healthcare needs. They rely largely on herbal medicine because of its accessibility and affordability in these rural areas (Nalumansi, 2017 #108).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to document and visually interpret the herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals through visual art.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- i. To document the herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals and their ethnobotanical significance.
- ii. To explore the symbolic meanings of these herbs in the cultural and spiritual contexts of the Bagisu.
- iii. To create visual art inspired by the symbolic meanings of these herbs and their roles in the Imbalu rituals.

1.5 Research Questions

- i. What are the key herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals, and what are their roles?
- ii. What are the symbolic and spiritual meanings attached to the herbs?
- iii. How can visual art be used to document and interpret the symbolic meanings of the herbs and their roles used in the Imbalu rituals by the Bagisu?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study contributed to the preservation of Bagisu cultural heritage by documenting herbal knowledge and interpreting it through visual art. It also provided an understanding for interdisciplinary research that combines ethnobotany and art, encouraging other cultural groups to safeguard their heritage.

1.7 Justification of the Study

The study provided a distinctive description and documentation of the herbs used in Imbalu rituals of the Bagisu by integrating art and ethnobotany as a means of preserving cultural heritage and herbal knowledge.

1.8 Scope of the Study

Geographical scope: The Bugisu region in Eastern Uganda. The study covered the areas of Bugisu on the slopes of Mount Elgon, villages and Mbale City.

Content scope: The researcher focused on identifying the herbs used in the circumcision rituals, their roles, how they are applied and when they are applied.

Time scope: The research was conducted with in a period of two years.

1.9 Limitations

Challenges arose due to the sacred nature of herbal knowledge, requiring careful ethical considerations and community engagement.

The researcher faced challenges related to language barrier. Some words were drawn from deep Lugisu folklore which were difficult to translate in English or Luganda, so Luganda and some demonstrations were used in some scenarios in order to understand what the locals meant. Inaccessibility was also a challenge, especially for villages on top of Mount Elgon. The researcher had to hike in dangerous places so as to interview the Bagisu living in those areas.

1.10 Theoretical Framework

The study employed the symbolic interactionism theory because it explains how individuals create social reality through shared meanings, perspectives and interpretations, which helps explain how individuals interpret and give meaning to their social world (Nickerson, 2022). It also emphasises the importance of understanding the meanings individuals assign to their social activities (Del et al., 2020). This theory was used to describe the shared meanings attached to the herbs which were interpreted to give meaning to the social world and cultural identity of the Bagisu which is constructed through their symbolic relationships with the herbs.

1.11 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has presented the introduction and background of the study. It has provided the history of the Imbalu ritual and elaborated on its significance to the Bagisu people in Eastern Uganda. It has justified why the study of medicinal herbs and their roles in the Imbalu ritual. The next chapter reviews literature that relates to the Imbalu ritual and ethnobotany.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of the study was to document and visually interpret the herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals using art. This chapter aims at identifying and discussing literature related to ethnobotany and cultural practices in Africa, the Imbalu ritual and its symbolism, art and cultural documentation. Other, related literature provides the basis for the identified key herbs in the circumcision of the Bagisu.

2.1.1 Ethnobotany and Cultural Practices in East and South Africa

Ethnobotany explores the intricate connections between people and plants, particularly how various cultures have used and understood plants for generations. This field investigates the ways in which plants are woven into the fabric of cultural identity, healthcare, nutrition, rituals, and practical applications across the world. By focusing on the traditional knowledge held by indigenous and local communities, ethnobotany not only preserves valuable insights but also brings to light the sophisticated understanding that many cultures possess regarding their natural environments.

Traditional knowledge is crucial for ethnobotany because it offers a nuanced understanding of how different cultures perceive and utilise plant resources. This knowledge is not just about the practical uses of plants but also includes spiritual, cultural, and social dimensions. For instance, certain plants may be considered sacred or may play a central role in cultural ceremonies and rituals

(Lamy, 2024).

Ethnobotany is the study of the relationships between people and plants in cultural contexts. Ethnobotany creates an understanding of the symbolic and practical value of plants to people of specific cultural groups, which informs about the traditional knowledge and cultural practices that these plants are associated with. Ellen's study argues that ethnobotany is not

limited to documenting plant uses but also involves “understanding the cultural contexts in which these practices occur, including the rituals, beliefs and traditions that shape human interactions with flora” (as cited in Abrar and Sindagikar, 2024).

Ajao (2021) defines ethnobotany as the scientific study of the traditional knowledge and customs of a people concerning the various traditional uses of plants found in their environment. In Africa, ethnobotany is deeply entwined with traditional healing, spirituality, and rites of passage. The continent is comprised of different countries with different tribes that have various traditions and cultural practices, including circumcision rituals, and traditional knowledge of the herbs used in such cultural practices is vital for the perseverance and recurrence of these cultural practices.

The use of plants by indigenous and local communities comprises traditional ethnobotanical knowledge, which has been orally transmitted from one generation to another in most African countries. Ethnobotanists play an important role in documenting and showing the deeper connection that people have with plants as components of healing, spirituality and identity. According to Montagne (1997), ethnobotany is not just the study of how plants are used, but a holistic understanding of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), rituals, beliefs, and worldviews tied to plant life. The field has gained prominence as an essential way of preserving indigenous knowledge systems under threat from globalisation and ecological degradation (Pakia, 2006). Cultural practices often determine how specific herbs are selected and applied in rituals. In Sub-Saharan Africa, numerous ethnic groups incorporate medicinal plants into initiation rites, including birth, puberty, marriage, and death ceremonies. Cunningham (1993) emphasises that ritual use of plants is usually symbolic – reflecting ideas of purification, power, and protection.

By acknowledging the value of traditional knowledge, ethnobotany contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage (Eduard, 2023).

According to Maroyi (2021), “medicinal plants used to treat and manage circumcision wounds have remained an integral part of traditional practice in Eastern and Southern Africa.”

2.1.2 Role of herbs in healing and spirituality in the circumcision rite.

The selection, preparation, and ritual application of herbs are informed not only by empirical observation of plant properties but also by symbolic associations and ancestral traditions passed down through oral histories (Posey, 1999). In many African societies, including among the Bagisu, plant knowledge is traditionally passed down orally, often through ritual, performance and communal practice (Cunningham, 2001).

Different parts of the plant, such as the roots, stem, flower, branches, tubers, bulbs and leaves, have been used as medicine for thousands of years in various cultures around the world. Particularly in rites of passage, such as initiation ceremonies, the selection and application of specific herbs are often governed by long-standing traditions that reflect both spiritual and medicinal considerations. African herbal medicine is holistic in the sense that it addresses issues of the soul, spirit and body (Ozioma Ezekwesili-Ofilu, 2019).

In 2021, Maroyi identified 15 medicinal plant species used in circumcision primarily for their antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties, which are crucial for wound healing. Many of these species, particularly *Helichrysum pedunculatum*, *Boophone disticha*, and *Helichrysum nudifolium*, are frequently mentioned for their traditional use in circumcision. Maroyi emphasises that medicinal plants are crucial in healing after circumcision in most parts of Africa, with Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Namibia being good examples. He also shows how different plants are used for the same purpose. For example, the leaves of *Achyranthes aspera* L, *Aneilema pedunculatum* and *Helichrysum crispum* [L]D. Don are used for circumcision wound dressing in Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa, respectively. Similarly, in Uganda the Bagisu use the leaves of *Dracaena fragrans* (*Masinzi*) for the same purpose. Maroyi also notes that the Maasai of Kenya, as well as the Xhosa and the Zulu of South Africa insert the root powder of *Asparagus africanus* Lam into scarification on the legs to give strength and instil fearlessness. Scarification itself is a spiritual practice on its own, to which is attributed the generation of strength and courage or boldness, and is like a connection of the physical (the skin and legs) to the spirit. The same can be said of the root of *Ityanyi* plant used

by the Bagisu to embolden the circumcision candidate, and whose root is also tied on to the first or last toe of the candidate to protect him against witchcraft.

Traditionally among the Xhosa, the wound caused by circumcision is bandaged with mashed leaves of *Helichrysum pedunculatum* Hilliard & Burt., *H. appendiculatum* Hilliard & Burt. or *H. longifolium* DC. They use the dry outer covering of the bulb of the *Boophane disticha* herb to dress the wound. Since traditional circumcision carries a high risk of infection, the plants used to bandage circumcision wounds were tested in the laboratory against the common bacteria that infects circumcision wounds and were found to have antibacterial properties (Dilika, 1995). Studies by Meyer, Afolayan and Dilika (as cited in Kelmanson, Jäger and Staden, 2000) found that *Helichrysum aureonitens*, which is used to treat circumcision wounds by the Zulu, have antimicrobial activity and an antimicrobial compound. *H. pedunculatum* Hilliard & Brutt, distributed in Southern Lesotho and the Eastern Cape Province, is used by the Xhosa of Transkei (South Africa) to dress wounds after circumcision (Meyer & Dilika, 1996). Traditionally, the Pondos heat the leaves of *H. longifolium* over very hot ash before using them as a bandage to treat wounds after circumcision. Extracts from the shoots of *H. pedunculatum* have been reported to be active against a number of bacteria (Aiyegoro & Okoh, 2010).

Boophane disticha has been used in traditional medicine for centuries. The plant is used to stop bleeding after circumcision. The dry outer scales of the bulb are used as an outer dressing after circumcision, and are also applied to boils or septic wounds; they are often mixed with water, milk or oil to alleviate pain and to draw out the pus. According to the results of this study, the harvest volume of certain plant species is very high during the circumcision period, which shows that plants play an important role in the circumcision ritual in connection with healing. According to Hutchings (as cited in Nombewu, 2014), the outer skin of the bulb of *B. grandiflora* is used as a circumcision wound dressing by the Xhosa and reported to promote very rapid healing.

Traditional medicine is an integral part of the culture of the Maasai of Kenya, and its practice is learnt progressively throughout one's life. Knowledge is passed down orally from

generation to generation, often to trustworthy persons like first-born sons, who continue the tradition and practice. The Maasai use the root of the *Acacia nilotica* tree (local name: *Olkiloriti*) in traditional medicine to clean circumcision wounds by boiling the roots in water and using the boiled liquid to clean the area. The plant is also used for appetite enhancement, as a strength supplement, to facilitate digestion, and to treat arthritis and stomach-ache. This highlights the deep integration of herbal remedies into Maasai cultural and health practices, despite the growing influence of modern *medicine* (Kiringe, 2006). *Asparagus africanus Lam* (local name: *Empere E Papa*) and *Gymnosporia heterophylla* (local name: *Olaimurunyi*) are also used as an antibacterial agent to clean circumcision wounds by decoction, maceration or squeezing the bark, branches, roots and the stem. Documentation of such traditional medicine uses is vital, especially as local knowledge is under pressure from factors like agricultural expansion, population growth, and climate change, which threaten the availability of natural resources and the transmission of traditional wisdom (Nankaya, 2020).



Figure 2: Leaves as wound dressing after circumcision. 26 March 2016.

Source: Photo by Jorge Fernández/LightRocket via Getty Images.

Accessed on: 16th January 2024.

For the Yom tribe of Benin, West Africa, the circumcision ceremony is a very important rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. In Figure 2 above, a man circumcised in a traditional ceremony shows his penis wrapped in a banana leaf while he rests on a blanket in the shade of a tree.

According to de Wolf (1983), to the tribes of Western Kenya, herbs have spiritual roles. After circumcision, the Idakho “man” may not eat with his hands until the circumciser returns to wash them ceremonially with herbs three days after circumcision. Before then, the sister feeds him and his food leftovers are not to be eaten by anyone else. Now Idakho novices must confess their misdeeds and the circumciser gives them medicine to neutralise the bad effects of the violation of taboos. These herbs are believed to cleanse/purify the boy and mark his start into a new life of manhood. Also, the Sabiny (people of Sebei, Uganda) novices (circumcision candidates) after circumcision do not touch food with their hands, and this taboo lasts until the fourth day, when they wash their hands ceremonially with water mixed with herbs.

Among the Gusii of Kenya, while a candidate is being prepared for circumcision, an old woman or a young girl puts a mattress of twigs on which the candidate will sleep during the rest of his seclusion. The first two nights he sleeps on an old skin. In the afternoon, the tutor and his assistant dig up a clump of reedy grass while candidates and other lads who accompany them sing a special song. The grass is planted in the floor of the hut while the song is sung again. Water is poured over the hands of the novice and drips on to the grass while he sings the song himself for the first time. The grass has to be watered regularly and may not wither during the seclusion – all of this being part of the transition to manhood rituals.

Among the Logooli/Maragoli tribe, novices also sleep on twigs or leaves and wear *amavinu* leaves during their seclusion period. They wear leaves of sweet potatoes and paint each other with white clay. The boys who do this for each other remain special friends throughout their lives. An old man tells them how to behave during the operation and the period of seclusion. On the morning of the day of the operation they take a bath, wash away the white clay and throw away the leaves with which they had been clad.



Figure 3: Maasai boys entering the hut after circumcision for purification rituals.

Source: Photo by Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP via Getty Images.
Accessed on: 16th January 2025.

Among the Idakho, the coming out starts with shaving and washing of the candidates, who also put on short skirts made of reeds. First each novice runs up and down, accompanied by his tutor and his nurse, to be cheered by the crowd which has gathered at the seclusion hut. After that, they run away without looking back and go to a banana grove where they destroy the bunches and the leaves used in dance celebrations. The next day, the novices receive a new skin dress, a shield, and a spear, with which they try to hit a gate post. Also, simsim seeds are thrown over them by a married woman whose moral conduct must be above reproach, as a blessing. After all this, they are allowed to visit their parents and relatives, and to receive gifts. Before these rituals, they are considered unclean and very delicate.

Rituals, ceremonies and other traditions associated with plant use serve to pass on institutional memory and cultural internalisation to support knowledge generation, accumulation and transmission. Similarly, worldviews are important for delineating beliefs and cosmologies that

influence cultural values, and ethics for engaging with the natural world (Constant, 2018 #156).

These herbs play a vital role in the preparation and protection of the initiates. They are believed to purify the body and spirit, ward off evil, prevent infection, and aid wound healing. Though specific herbs used by the Bagisu are yet to be extensively documented, their usage parallels those observed among the Xhosa (South African) and the Tachoni (Kenyan) communities.

2.2 The Imbalu Ritual and Its Symbolism

According to Wabwire et al. (2024), Imbalu is more than just cutting the foreskin of a male organ. It is symbolic of a rite of passage which involves circumcision as part of the many rituals it encompasses and the word itself – “*Imbalu*” – has different meanings attached to it. The rite is commonly called “*kukwingira Imbalu*”, with the first word meaning “entering”, showing that previously one has been out and that Imbalu is the rite of passage (that ushers you into manhood) that every Mugisu male must go through, and those that do not go through it carry reproach and shame in society as not man enough or not part of the tribe. Imbalu, referred to as a sharp chopping object, a knife or panga (machete) is the apex of the ritual since it is carried out in a non-medical sense without medical practitioners as surgeons. It is a very painful procedure that is likened to fire burns, so withstanding this pain is proof that the man is able to overcome the challenges that he will face as he gets on with life. To prove their readiness for manhood and bravery to society, some boys, after the procedure, ask to add to the wound things like red pepper, salt and water while they dance and run around the village to show they can withstand any amount of pain. Secondly, Imbalu also means the reproductive male organ. The traditional surgeon in Lugisu is called “*umuchebi*” (the cutter), which comes from the word “*khucheba*” (cutting). The act of traditional circumcision in Lugisu is “*khucheba Imbalu*”, meaning “to cut the penis” and this denotes that “Imbalu” is the penis since it is what is being cut.

Dilika et al. (1995) state that circumcision is not just physical surgery but a cultural ceremony through which men are separated from boys. Among the Xhosa in South Africa, the men in this context are the ones who have been circumcised and the boys are the uncircumcised.

Though Imbalu is a traditional male circumcision ritual, its significance surpasses mere physical alteration; it also embodies spiritual transformation, social elevation, and ancestral connectivity. Male circumcision in Africa is a widespread practice, but its meanings vary regionally from medical intervention to religious or cultural obligation (Lawal, 2017).

Khanakwa (2018) points out that the ritual is a highly revered cultural event that fosters strong social ties. Pre-circumcision and post-circumcision rituals, including introductory dances, visitations to maternal uncles, and ceremonial cleansing enhance social bonds among initiates of a particular year. The communal nature of Imbalu is emphasised by the fact that initiates from different families within a clan are circumcised in the same open courtyard, reinforcing their identity as members of the same 'brood' or age set, locally known as *Bamakochi*. This shared experience is traditionally cemented by experiencing the pain together while entering manhood creates a powerful bond.

The ritual is performed in an open outer space, allowing the community to witness the initiates' endurance of pain. This public display serves as proof of bravery and a means for candidates to publicly overcome reproach and shame, demonstrating their courage to the entire society. Those who successfully go through the procedure are highly celebrated, respected, and given gifts, while those who fail or show fear for the knife bring embarrassment and shame to their families.

The Imbalu ritual happens every even year. The preparatory stage led by a Namwenya (instructor), who introduces candidates to their culture's ethnogenetic information, including ancestral history, norms, customs, ideologies and Isonja dance training, which starts in January goes on till late July. After this, the Namwenya selects the best dancers to represent their clans during the official launch of the Imbalu year in August after the sighting of the second full moon. This launch involves mass celebrations at the Mutoto grounds – a cultural site – where all Bagisu from all clans come together to witness the energy of the young boys. The boys are dressed in very short pants, and wear bells on the right thigh to make sound when they energetically jump, as well as wooden bangles, headgear, neckties, anklets of animal skin, chest beads and back tails made of cowry shells (Tera, 2025).



Figure 4: Circumcision candidates at the Mutoto cultural grounds, 2022.

Source: <https://www.ugandapressphoto.org/peter-tera-basani-barura-the-men-are-getting-out>,
Date accessed: 16th January 2025.

The Bagisu leaders and all the clans of the Bagisu Region come together on a selected day in August to dance and celebrate the boys who have decided to undergo the initiation. Mutoto is a cultural site in Bungokho which is believed to be the first place where circumcision took place; it is locally named ‘Inzu Ya Masaba’, translating as the house of Masaba (the first Mugisu/the father of all the Bagisu). The mission of this site is to preserve and promote the cultural identity of the Bagisu. Imbalu is the pride of the Bagisu, who celebrate it with a traditional dance (*kadodi*), folklore songs and drinking. The grand opening ceremony of the Imbalu season is celebrated here with masses of people attending, as seen below. The grounds host exquisite exhibits, engaging programmes, guided tours, and cultural extravaganzas. The

centre offers you a unique experience of the culture of the Bagisu, which makes it a treasured hub of knowledge, art and celebration of Imbalu.



Figure 5: Crowds at the Mutoto cultural grounds.

Source: online Accessed:
16th January 2025.

The Uganda Tourism Board of Uganda, in partnership with the local leaders of the Bugisu Region, organised a festival in 2024 in celebration of Imbalu ritual entitled ‘A Match to Manhood Imbalu Festival’ in August at the Mutoto Cultural Centre, which hosted dignitaries and kings from Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Bungoma, as well as Bagisu from all over Uganda. The centre collaborates with local artists and artisans to provide a platform for their work, helping to sustain traditional crafts and supporting local livelihoods. This shows how important and valued this rite is among the Bagisu and as a tourist attraction in Uganda.



Figure 6: Imbalu festival poster memoir Uganda. August 2024.

Source: <https://memoiruganda.com/Imbalu-festival/> Accessed: 16th January 2025.

Wabwire explains that the ritual involves extensive participation from family members and clans, who play crucial roles in identifying candidates, preparing for ceremonies, and welcoming the initiates back into society with their new status. This collective involvement reinforces familial and clan ties. The Inemba dance, performed by newly circumcised boys, marks the culmination of the ritual and serves to affirm their masculinity before the community. Initiates sing triumphant songs, demonstrating their readiness to fulfil men's obligations and mocking those who showed fear during the circumcision. Society views these initiates as strong and capable individuals ready to share men's space. During this dance, the circumcised "men" are allowed to get a woman of their choice from among the people who have come to enjoy the dance so as to fulfil their first manhood requirement as a Mugisu man

by being sexually active (Khanakwa, 2016). The social aspects of Imbalu as well as the performance of the public circumcision procedure became a concern to the missionaries and colonists, who believed that this practice was evil, in the light of the ritual sacrifices, ancestral worship, drinking local beer and immoral dancing, so they attempted to modify the practice with the help of some Bagisu. However, Imbalu muddled through amid such contestations. The practice was confronted by different ideas and forces at different of colonial and early postcolonial moments in Uganda but it continued to survive. In 1938, attempts were made to medicalise Imbalu as part of the European civilising project. Colonial officials and Christian missionaries attempted to appropriate the ritual through medicalisation by involving the use of anaesthesia and of medical personnel, as opposed to the *bachebi* (traditional surgeon), and by making it private in a hospital without a public audience to sanction the initiate's critical moment in life as a Mugisu. The act of public endurance of pain during the initiation is a crucial element symbolising bravery and contributing to the designation of an initiate as "*umusaani burwa*" (a brave man), an important part of the initiation which proves one's ability to endure the challenges of life (Matembu, 2024). For the Bagisu, beer drinking is a social activity and a major component of any ceremony, so during circumcision ceremonies the young and old adults drink freely as a way of celebrating the lives of the initiates. The Bagisu stood their ground and deliberately refused to appropriate Imbalu. As a result, the tradition still stands, fostering a shared identity and bond.

On the circumcision day, the boy is smeared with mud and homemade beer. He spreads his legs and firmly grips a stick placed on his shoulders, and unblinkingly looks at the sky, while people around him say words of motivation for him to take courage. The surgeon, applying no anaesthetic, takes hold of the boy and cuts him with a swift movement of his hands. A member of the boy's family has to collect the boy's cut-off foreskin to protect him from the threat of witchcraft (Muhumuza, 2024).



Figure 7: Imbalu at Kamu Village in Mbale, Saturday, 17th May 2025. Photo by Hajarah Nalwadda.

Source: <https://fox40.com/news/international/ap-international/ap-in-a-remote-ugandan-regiona-sacred-circumcision-ritual-faces-a-contentious-test-of-purity/> Accessed: 16/01, 2025.

Imbalu is deeply rooted in the Bagisu's spiritual beliefs, particularly concerning ancestors. An initiated man is believed to join the 'legion of ancestors' upon death, being welcomed by them. This belief underpins the practice of ritually circumcising deceased males who died uncircumcised, as it is considered abominable for a man to be buried without circumcision, which would cause disequilibrium in the journey of life and prevent the deceased from being welcomed by ancestral spirits. Visiting the graveyards of departed male ancestors from the paternal side during the ritual is meant to embolden initiates and affirm solidarity with the living-dead who have undergone Imbalu.

Imbalu is a critical stage in the life cycle, serving as an entry point to other life stages such as marriage, death, birth, and naming. It ensures that individuals are properly integrated into the cosmic order and can participate in fundamental rites of passage.

The *Bamakochi* (age-set) members, formed through the Imbalu ritual, are believed to possess significant spiritual authority, including the ability to bless or curse an errant member. This underscores the spiritual weight and communal accountability associated with the ritual (Kadodi ritual). A significant spiritual aspect is the ceremony where a paternal aunt shaves the candidate's hair, invoking ancestral spirits to appear and bless the candidate. This act highlights the belief in the continued influence of ancestors in the lives of the Bagisu people. The paternal aunt, given the title of 'female-father' (Papa Mukhwasi), holds a crucial spiritual role in this process (Wabwire et al., 2024).

The ritual involves purification rites, such as smearing with white corn flour or yeast and shaving hair, symbolising the loss of the old identity and preparation for a new one. Candidates undergo a 'metaphorical death' during which they are separated from a previous state of being, breaking with old practices and routines, and entering a transitional state where their old identity is dissolved and a new one is imminent (Khamalwa, 2007).

The long garland (*libombwe*) draped around an initiate's neck during the Inemba dance is believed to bring good luck. The number of creepers worn signifies the number of gifts received from relatives and friends, linking spiritual blessings with social recognition and prosperity. The Imbalu ritual is a holistic cultural phenomenon that deeply intertwines social structure with spiritual beliefs, guiding young Bagisu men through a transformative journey from boyhood to respected manhood, while reinforcing community values and ancestral connections.

The Imbalu ritual is believed to involve spiritual entities that guide initiates to be brave during the foreskin removal process. This spiritual motivation is seen as inherent to the Bamasaba identity, with children growing up with the understanding that circumcision is a spiritual imperative. The belief that male circumcision is spiritually motivated is a key reason why traditional practitioners, such as traditional surgeons, hold significant authority in shaping the cultural and personal identity of the people.

Some participants, particularly born-again Christians, express reluctance towards certain Imbalu rituals that involve the evocation of ancestors and evil spirits, viewing these aspects as incompatible with their Christian beliefs. However, they often still participate in other

practical aspects of the ritual, demonstrating a selective adaptation of practices based on their faith.

“Imbalu Muliro” (“Circumcision is Fire”) is a standard song for circumcision ceremonies, also performed at beer parties, and in the course of which men recall their experiences regarding circumcision. Running for political office, like circumcision, is a “trial by fire” that requires strength and determination in order to succeed. People want to test your strength to determine if you are capable of leading them. The contestant must convince his constituents that he can represent them. If one wins an election, one is equated with someone who has successfully undergone circumcision. All of the men agreed that it is difficult for one who is not circumcised to be voted into a political position. Such a person is considered a coward, one who cannot stand in front of the other (circumcised) men. The fieldwork brought these multiple interpretations to light, and builds them into the archive (Nanyonga-Tamusuza & Weintraub, 2012).

The Imbalu initiation rite celebration involves sacrificing animals throughout the circumcision year, making the Bagisu one of the most cohesive communities in East Africa, and thus differentiating them from the rest of the tribes in Uganda (Nafuma & Eric, 1991).

Among the Tachoni of Western Kenya, circumcision is not only a surgical act but a passage into sacred knowledge. The ritual includes the application of local herbs to cleanse and treat wounds, as well as symbolic objects like salt bags to ensure healing and spiritual protection (Kennedy, 1970). Even as many Tachoni have adopted Christianity or Islam, traditional circumcision rituals endure as markers of ethnic identity and spiritual resilience (*Tachoni Male Circumcision Rituals*).

In contrast, in Equatorial Guinea, circumcision is performed discreetly, often without communal involvement or prior knowledge of the initiate. This privatised approach reflects how cultural meanings can diverge significantly even within the same continent (*Tradition and Change in Circumcision: Practices in Equatorial Guinea*). Nonetheless, the intimate role of herbs as tools of healing and spiritual reinforcement remains a common thread across these varied practices.

The symbolic use of plants during Imbalu reflects broader African cosmologies, where natural resources are perceived as spiritual entities. The herbs used carry meanings of transformation, purity, and ancestral connection – attributes that are visually and ritually embedded within the circumcision process.

2.3 Art and Cultural Documentation

Art has historically functioned as a critical medium for the documentation, interpretation and transmission of cultural knowledge. In societies with strong oral traditions, such as those found across much of sub-Saharan Africa, visual and performative arts play an especially significant role in encoding and preserving intangible heritage, including rituals, plant knowledge, and spiritual cosmologies (Coombes, 2003; Kasfir, 2007). The intersection of art and cultural documentation thus offers a powerful framework for engaging with indigenous knowledge systems, particularly where formal written records are absent or inadequate.

Gorichanaz (2017) argues that art-making itself can be considered a form of documentation and finished artworks can be documents in their own way. They act as evidence in referencing something within a broader system and, under critical observation, it exposes how it references. An artwork is not limited to being documented about by different writers or curators, but it is also a document in its own right. By describing art-making in the terms of information science, as documenting, the author has sought grounds for deeper co-understandings between artists and information professionals. The article views the artist's work in a multidimensional way and, at the same time, challenges the predominant popular view of what a document can be.

The act of creating art can serve as a means of documentation, preserving experiences and memories that might otherwise be lost or suppressed. This form of artistic creation acts as insurance against forgetting. In South Africa, artists' engagement with their nation's past has been analysed for how their work intersects with broader debates on history and memory. Public monuments are often seen as static documentation of history. Art and documentation are not merely passive records but active agents in the construction and contestation of public memory, especially in societies grappling with traumatic pasts and forging new national identities. Visual art serves as a powerful medium for documenting and interpreting cultural

practices, particularly within indigenous knowledge systems. Through various global examples, visual storytelling transcends language barriers, preserving heritage and fostering understanding (Coombes, 2003).

Across various cultures and historical periods, art has frequently functioned as a primary means of documenting societal structures, beliefs, events, and daily life. For instance, traditional art forms often reflect and record cultural practices, power dynamics, and social changes within a community. The study of African art, for example, can reveal how aesthetic practices are shaped by historical forces like colonialism and how traditional forms are transformed into global commodities, highlighting complex representations and power dynamics. This transformation itself can be seen as a form of cultural documentation, illustrating the impact of external forces on indigenous artistic traditions (Kasfir, 2007). The artworks produced after the influence of colonial rule in Africa are used to interpret the impact or effects of colonial rule on artistic expression, as evidenced by the change in style and techniques used in the execution of the works. This involves juxtaposing the artwork before and after colonial influence in terms of subject matter since the colonial influence abandoned the traditional subject matter which was predominant before colonisation (Tinga Tinga Art, 2023).

Art reflects cultures and societies. The cultural legacy created through visual art bridges the gap between the past and the future by informing the present. Art offers invaluable insights into our roots, beliefs and artistic achievements over time, and future generations are thus able to understand cultural heritage, and this fosters a deeper connection to their origins and helps to cultivate a sense of continuity in an ever-changing world (Electic Gallery, 2023).

Murals have a long and rich history in Africa, dating back to ancient times. Some of the earliest known murals in Africa can be found in the tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs. Murals were also used by other African cultures to tell stories, celebrate religious beliefs, and document important information. African paintings are powerful tools of visual storytelling and cultural preservation, serving as visual narratives that complement and enhance African traditions. African paintings use visual language to communicate complex cultural narratives. This can be traced way back to before written language became prevalent. Visual art, such as

rock art and cave paintings – the oldest form of artistic expression – played a crucial role in documenting/recording and communicating history, mythology and social norms. The rock paintings in the Drakensberg Mountains in South Africa created by the San people date back some 20,000 years. They depict scenes of hunting, dancing and communal activities, giving a glimpse of how the San lived even to people that are not part of the San tribe as an example of long-lasting cultural documentation (Tinga Tinga Art, 2023). Painting is a tool of recording human history, conveying a wide range of stories, emotions, feelings, and, symbolically, the inner world, and also remains a tool of non-verbal communication (Preeti, 2013).



Figure 8: Rock art by the San of sub-Saharan Africa, 2025.

Source: <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/south-africa-rock-art-townley-bassett-spc-intl>
Accessed on: 20th June 2025.



Figure 9: Rock art showing a multitude of elands in the Drakensberg Mountains of South Africa.

Source: https://www.bradshawfoundation.com/south_africa/san_rock_art/index.php
Accessed on: 20th June 2025.

Uganda has over 20 rock art sites in different parts of the country, including Nyero rock paintings in Kumi District, which are comprised of figurative, symbolic and geometrical images. Rock art in Uganda serves a documentary function of identifying the authors of the paintings, who are believed to have been hunter-gatherers, Pygmies and pastoralists. Various research studies suggest that the function of the rock art paintings in Uganda must have been a journalistic one since most of them depict the daily life or activities of the people, such as hunting, worshipping their gods like the sun, and cultivating. Rock art provides a visible expression of the spiritual, social relations and gender synergies in Pygmy society (Namono, 2010). Rock art is a cultural documentary of the lives of early man which is understood by interpreting the meaning of symbols and images in the painting. This is evidence that visual art transcends language barriers to preserve cultural heritage.

The figure below is a picture of the Nyero 2 rock painting. The painting was done using a red pigment and depicts concentric circles as the dominant form, a canoe, human figures and faint lines.



Figure 10: Nyero rock painting in Kumi District. 14 March 2022.

Source: <https://www.ganyanasafaris.com/blog/nyero-rock-paintings/>

Accessed: 20th June 2025.

There is great antiquity of record-keeping in this part of the world, but the paintings about circumcision are evidence that in Egypt circumcision was practised at least as far back as the VI Dynasty, in 2340 –2180 BC (Ghalioungui, 1962: 95–7).

Circumcision was a common cultural and religious practice that dates back to at least 2686 – 2181 BC, and it had both cultural and religious significance. Male circumcision in ancient Egypt is well documented in scenes in the tombs and in the physical remains of Egyptian people from various periods. It was conducted in the pre-adolescent stage, possibly as an initiation rite to mark the transition from boyhood to manhood.

Figure 11 depicts three men on the left, with one holding the circumcision candidate and the other carrying on the circumcision in a squatting position. On the right, two men are depicted, the one being circumcised standing and the one doing the circumcision procedure squatting. The number of people in the artwork also shows that the procedure was not done publicly; possibly, it was carried out in the mountains or wilderness because of the animals seen in the background. This visual artwork acts as documentation of the Egyptian cultural heritage and tells a story of their cultural practices.



Figure 11: Scene of circumcision in Ancient Egypt. Old Kingdom, 6th Dynasty, reign of King Teti, ca. 2345–2333 BC. Tomb of Ankhmahor, Saqqara necropolis.

Source: <https://egypt-museum.com/circumcision-in-ancient-egypt/> Accessed: 20th June 2025.

African artists have documented and preserved their culture by drawing the inspiration of their artwork from their cultural heritage. The work provides a unique perspective on the African narrative, challenging dominant Western discourses and stereotypes. By exploring their history, traditions and experiences, these artists promote cultural diversity and offer alternative perspectives on the African past. As we continue to navigate the complexities of globalisation and cultural exchange, the work of African artists serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving cultural heritage and promoting cultural diversity (MoMAA, 2023).

Artworks represent traditional knowledge using indigenous imagery, which opens new ways to be informed and to learn about indigenous people, thus introducing traditional knowledge practices to the contemporary world (McMaster, 2025). The study, therefore, involved creating artworks that tell stories about the traditional herbal knowledge of the Bagisu used in Imbalu rituals, thus documenting the traditional practices and cultural heritage.

2.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the above chapter has provided insights into the role of ethnobotany in different communities, art as a form of documentation and communication, and the significance of the medicinal plants in initiation rites, shedding light on the work that researchers have studied in line with art and ethnobotany.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter explored the research design, data collection methods, documenting herbs used in Imbalu ritual and the creation of works inspired by the documented herbs.

3.1 Research Design

The qualitative research design focuses on exploring and understanding complex phenomena and the meanings attributed to them by individuals or groups. It is commonly used in fields where subjective experiences and interpretations are of interest. It is concerned with capturing the richness and depth of human experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. It involves gathering data through interviews, observation, focus groups, and analysis of documents or artifacts. These methods allow researchers to collect detailed, descriptive information about participants' perspectives, experiences, and contexts. This facilitates the basis for ethnographic research design of this study that involves studying and understanding the culture, beliefs, practices, and social interactions of a specific group or community. Researchers immerse themselves in the participants' natural environment for an extended period, often conducting participant observation, interviews, and document analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of the culture (Alam, 2023).

Additionally, (Ahmad, 2017) defines ethnographic research design as a systematic, intentional and organised approach to studying and understanding people within their cultural contexts and ethnobotany research design was used his to document traditional herbal knowledge and the indigenous uses of plants, enhancing the understanding of both biodiversity and cultural practices. This research employed a systematic collection of data through participant interviews that contributed to the identification and documentation of the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual through observation. This informed the creative practice of creating artworks inspired by the identified herbs and their roles in the Imbalu ritual, contributing to understanding of Bagisu cultural heritage.

This study constructed paintings through studio-based research inspired by the role of the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual. Thematic and narrative methods of research were employed to identify and explain the different herbs and their roles in the circumcision ritual. Experiments with various painting styles, such as objective study and surrealism using oil colour on canvas and acrylics on a few paintings were used to visually interpret the herbs. The researcher used painting to visually study and analyse the role of the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual and how they are used.

3.2 Sample Study

The study was centred on the Bagisu who, according to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), are over 2 million in number. The Bagisu people primarily inhabit the slopes of Mount Elgon in Eastern Uganda and are known for Imbalu (traditional male circumcision). The study mainly focused on documenting the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual, as well as their cultural and spiritual meanings. All respondents were all Bagisu, with most of them residing on the slopes of Mount Elgon and a few residing in Kampala. Three of these respondents were women, and the rest were men who had undergone circumcision and some of whom were circumcision practitioners.

This study employed purposive sampling, which involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals among a larger group that are especially knowledgeable and experienced in the field that the research is carried out. (Cresswell & Plano Clark, cited in Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling and snowball method guided the researcher in selecting key informants who had the desired information concerning the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual. These provided the researcher with resourceful information, such as by way of providing the herbs for observation, describing how they are used, and pointing out their symbolic and spiritual meaning in the Bagisu culture. On the basis of this information, the researcher documented the identified herbs and their ethnobotanical significance.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

3.3.1 Library and archival survey

A library includes any organised collection of books and periodicals in electronic format or in printed form, and any other graphic or audio-visual materials (UNESCO, 1970, as cited in UNESCO, 2020).

A library is a collection of day-to-day usable materials of knowledge and information, which include books and non-book materials scientifically organised and projected to supply library users' needs. Archives are collections of old records of antiquities and realia which are not recent but consulted whenever the need arises for referrals, for instance manuscripts, scrolls, artwork, photographs, and newspapers, among others (Sherri, 2010). Additionally, libraries are collections of books and other print or non-print materials organised and maintained for use. Archives exist to make their collections available to people, but differ from libraries in both the types of materials they hold and the way the materials are accessed (Schmidt, 2011). This method involved searching for information from sources like books, journals, magazines, newspapers and dissertations. The researcher acquired data for the study from the Makerere University Main Library, the Makerere University Institute of Social Research (MISR), and online libraries like My LOFT, Google Scholar and the Internet Archive. Theoretical and visual data concerning the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual was gathered from online journals, articles, newspapers and dissertations. Interviews were also carried out with elderly Bagisu, Imbalu practitioners and boys that used the herbs, all these were knowledgeable about the Imbalu ritual and the herbs used. These interviews were mainly conducted in Mbale, and in Kampala to a smaller extent. The information gathered was listed in a notebook and analysed, and the symbolism about the herbs identified were sketched and painted. The researcher noticed that the information about the herbs used for the Imbalu ritual related to only one herb (*Ityanyi*) without going into great depth, and that there was no visual data on the herbs.

3.3.2 Observation

Observation is one of the methodologies of ethnobotany where the researcher actively participates in the group being studied or have a representative from the group. The researcher may also use precision instruments prepared in advance or be flexible, and he may also

observe in a controlled environment or a natural setting. This method allows the researcher to collect data through participating in observed experiences when they occur, and the observed data is filtered through the interpretive lens of the observer (Wade-Berg, 2022). Ethnographers use participant observation to effectively generate large amounts of useful information by participating in behaviour from within and observing it from without (Fife, 2005). In the field, researchers pay attention, watch, and listen carefully. They use all their senses, noticing what is seen, heard, smelt, tasted, or touched. The researcher becomes an instrument that absorbs all sources of information (Neuman, 2007). The researcher used her own eyes and a camera to visualise the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual. The researcher's maternal village is in Mbale, and she was able to observe the Imbalu ritual from a young age. She also had the opportunity to learn about the plants used in the ritual. For example, from the *Ityanyi* herb, which has pinnate compound leaves, it is the roots that are used, from the *Ingulwe* herb, which has no stem, it is the powder scratched from the back of its parallel leaf, and from the *Lisikiyi* herb, it is flower, which is yellow in colour.

The researcher also visited Imbalu practitioners' homes, where she observed the dried *Ityanyi* and *Ingulwe* herbs that they stored for future use since they are the rarest, and *Ityanyi* was also burnt to ashes for preservation. The researcher also noticed some of these herbs, such as *Zikamama* and *Lukooli*, on Makerere University roadsides, and these were also common on the slopes of Mount Elgon and on the roadsides in the Mbale villages visited. The researcher further noticed that the *Masinzi* herb was used as a decorative plant in Mulago Women's Specialised Hospital and Yums Café in Ntinda. The researcher used this method because it clearly pointed out the visual aspects of the herbs which were used to create the paintings. The researcher used a camera to carry out this method, and the visuals gathered using this method were used to create a short video documentary.

3.3.3 Interviews

Interview is one of the methodologies of Ethnobotany and it was used to make it possible for the respondents to express their thoughts in their own words. Interviews are conducted with the purpose of collecting information about a certain topic or research question. They are deliberate conversations between two people set up to follow certain rules and procedures in

order to obtain the desired information. Both parties' the interviewer and interviewee know the general areas the interview will cover, and the interviewer has to first ask for consent from the interviewee to proceed with the conversation (Miller & Brewer, 2003). The researcher used this method to obtain information from the Imbalu practitioners (*Bachebi*) in Bungokho Village and the CW Mbale Eco Safari Zoo, the elderly men and women in Bungokho Village, the young and elderly men at the Semei Kakungulu Museum and in Mbale City, respectively, and the young men on Kigoowa Road, Ntinda. The researcher used an interview guide (Appendix B), accompanied with a voice and video recorder, a notebook and a pen to gather information. The researcher used this method because it was crucial in finding out more elaborate data concerning the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual, their roles, how they are administered, as well as their symbolic and spiritual meanings. The information obtained from this method was analysed, decoded and supplemented by the information obtained from observation, library and archival survey.

3.4 Studio Practice

The studio practice method was based on the findings from the observation, interviews, library and archival survey methods to create paintings. It involved sketching, drawing, canvas stretching and painting artworks inspired by the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual, their role, as well as their symbolic and spiritual meanings to the Bagisu. The researcher employed various styles of painting to carry out studio experimentation, as described below. The first step in creating the various paintings was making various sketches of the different creative ideas. The researcher used oil on stretched canvas for all the works.

Oil paint

Oil paint is an oil-based painting material that involves using pigments with a medium of drying oil as the binder and painting with them on a canvas. Oil paint takes long to dry, and it is thicker and heavier than other types of paint; so, in order to have a more fluid and spreadable paint, the artist has to mix oil paints with a painting liquid. Pure oil paints take a long time to dry compared to other paints (House of Art, 2021). The researcher used linseed oil mixed with thinner to create a fast-drying effect for the paint. One quarter of thinner was mixed with a half proportion of linseed oil. Then this mixture was gradually added to the thick

paint from the oil paint tube, then mixed together on a pallet using a pallet knife to create a brush spreadable paint that was used on canvas.

3.5 Data Analysis

The researcher mostly used thematic and narrative methods of data analysis to allow easy interpretation of data. These methods help organise the collected data into coherent categories that facilitate more understanding and synthesis of the findings from the respondents in the field (Dean, 2024). Visual analysis using narrative methods was used to evaluate the created artworks for their representation of cultural elements in line with the objectives and research questions. The visual work produced in the studio are presented with sketches and the different paintings done with their narratives.

3.6 Limitations

The available literature concerning the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual was limited and not comprehensive. As a result, most of the data had to be gathered from the interview respondents, who were supposed to be found in Mbale. The researcher thus faced a geographical limitation and Further more, some areas, such as the slopes and top of Mount Elgon, were inaccessible by all the available means of transport, leaving one with the sole option of moving around on foot. Furthermore, some of the herbs, such as *Ingulwe* and *Ityanyi*, are rare and are not known by most of the Bagisu, so the people that know them had to take many days looking for them in order to for the researcher to be able capture pictures of the herbs.



Figure 12: Climbing a metallic ladder (L) and a stick ladder (R) to the top of Mount Elgon.
Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 13: Getting to the top of the mountain (L), on top of the mountain (R), pointing down where Mbale City is located.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

3.7 Ethics and Integrity

There was maximum respect observed for the sacred nature of the rituals and herbal knowledge of Bagisu culture. All the pictures of herbs featuring in the study were taken with consent from the traditional practitioners, and the ones which were uprooted were provided by the practitioners themselves so that the researcher could have a look at the roots that the practitioners use. All the respondents mentioned in this study were interviewed by the researcher in person and their responses ethically used without alteration. The researcher asked every respondent for consent and all those included in the video captured agreed to feature in the video. None of the findings, conclusions, drawings or artworks presented in this study was intended in any way to demean or undermine the Imbalu ritual or Bagisu culture but entirely for research-driven purposes.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.

4.0 Introduction

The purpose of the study was to document the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual of the Bagisu and to visually interpret their roles in the ritual. This chapter presents findings that are designed in accordance with the objectives of the study. The data presented is as a result of analysis of the respondent's feedback through questionnaires, interviews and observation. The herbs are identified and thematically described according to their ethnobotanical significance among the Bagisu and their spiritual meanings. The chapter also presents and describes the paintings that visually interpret the role of these herbs and their symbolic meanings among the Bagisu. Fitzgerald et al. (2021) states that language is crucial for preserving cultural identity and heritage because when a language is lost, part of a community's identity and cultural heritage is lost. That is why the study retains the local names of the herbs and names the paintings produced in Lugisu.

4.1 Documenting herbs, their ethnobotanical roles, their symbolic meanings in the cultural and spiritual contexts of the Bagisu.

4.1.1 *Ityanyi*

Ityanyi is the Lugisu name of the herb used to embolden the circumcision candidate. It comprises different plant species but they all play the same role.



Figure 14: *Ityanyi* (*Cissampelous mucronata*).
Source: Fieldwork from Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 15: Dried *Ityanyi* herb.
Source: Fieldwork from Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The above type of *Ityanyi* is the strongest and the most “dangerous” compared to the other types of *Ityanyi*. The plant is used by all the candidates to embolden them and give them the desire to be circumcised. A small piece of the root is administered to the candidate a few hours before circumcision. It is a very rare plant to find and many Bagisu do not know what it looks like. Even circumcision candidates see only the root when it is being given to them under close supervision. It took a few days to find this plant. An *Umuchebe* (traditional surgeon) looked for it for two days and found it on the third day. He asked for a meeting involving only the two of us. This was because *Ityanyi* is a mystery to most Bagisu. Another man, aged 45 years, found it on the second day of the search.

All village people interviewed in the Bugisu Region said that after one chewed on the root, the heart started beating faster, and one felt the urge to be circumcised. In this moment, their heart’s desire was to be circumcised and they did not care about the surroundings; They just want to be cut without hesitation. One of them described it in terms of a pregnant woman undergoing contractions, whose body is thus telling her to push. This is the same thing that the plant does to the circumcision candidate. If the circumcisers delay in circumcising the candidate, he might circumcise himself. Even those who are scared of the impending circumcision acquire the courage and boldness to face the knife after chewing on this root. It is also used like Viagra by both women and men.



Figure 16: *Ityanyi* root tied on the big toe for protection.

Source: Fieldwork from Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

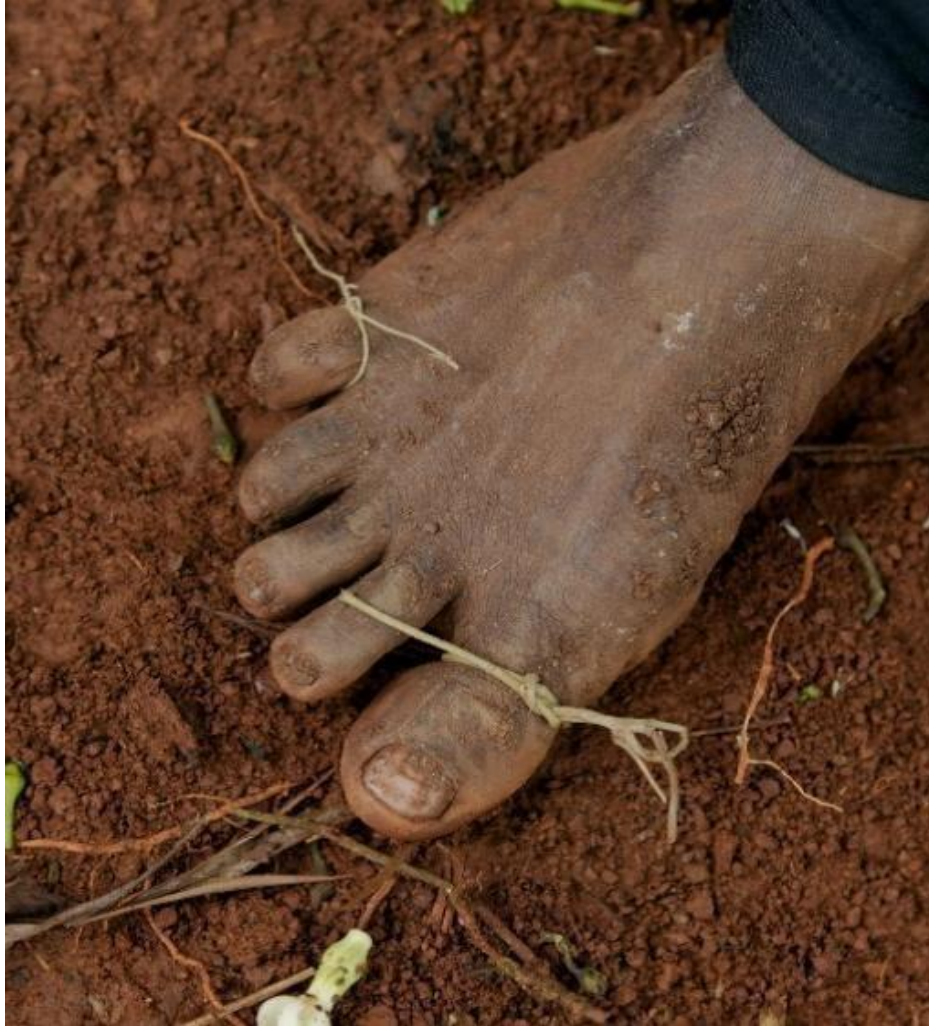


Figure 17: *Ityanyi* root tied on the big toe and the pinky toe for spiritual protection.

Source: Fieldwork from Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The root of the *Ityanyi* is tied on either the big toe or the pinky toe of the circumcision to protect the candidate from witchcraft. Since this is a big step in the candidate's life, some enemies may bewitch the candidate so that he fails to be courageous during the circumcision. This would bring shame on him and his family. So, when the toes are tied with *Ityanyi*, the witchcraft will not affect the candidate.



Figure 18: *Ityanyi* ash kept in a pot.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 19: The measure of *Ityanyi* ash given to the boy, on the circumcision knife.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The ash is given to the circumcision candidates a few hours before circumcision to embolden them.



Figure 20: *Ityanyi* (*Indigofera spicata*) root of the plant
Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 21: Leaves of *Indigofera spicata*.
Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

A small piece of the fresh root of the *Ityanyi* plant is given to the circumcision candidate to embolden them. Sometimes it is also crushed and added to *malwa* (local brew). The target is those candidates who have refused to undergo the Imbalu ritual because of fear of the pain.

When such candidates drink the ingredient unknowingly, they develop the desire to be circumcised, since the fear is gone.

4.1.2 *Ingulwe* (*Pyrrhosia schimperiana*)



Figure 22: *Ingulwe* plant.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 23: *Ingulwe* plant.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 24: Dried *Ingulwe* plant.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

This is commonly used in the healing process. It is very rare to find as well, and not known by most people. This is because most circumcision candidates now use medicine from modern healthcare facilities after circumcision.

The part of *Ingulwe* plant used is the fur on the back of the leaves, which are scraped off and put directly on the wound to aid healing. It also causes severe pain. One of the men said he had to wash it off immediately after they applied it to his wound because he could cope with the pain.

It is applied to the wound after every bath.

4.1.3 Lisiki (*Crassocephalum Vittelinum*)



Figure 25: Lisiki herb.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 26: The split flower of the *Lisiki* plant used after circumcision.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The flower of the *Lisiki* is split open and the furlike hairs (pappus hairs) are applied to the wound directly. They are applied to the spots where the blood is coming from. They stick together to stop the bleeding. Though this plant is common in the area, it is not used on all candidates, being reserved for only those whose bleeding is persistent. One of the boys said the pappus hairs are mixed with egg white and applied to the wound to stop bleeding.

4.1.4 Lukooli (*Centella asiatica*)



Figure 27: Lukooli herb.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 28: *Lukooli* plant.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The plant is mixed with water on the third day after the circumcision. The traditional surgeon pours this water for the candidate as he washes his hands as a form of purification while the former tells the latter the duties of manhood. After this ritual, the candidate is allowed to go out in public. However, before this he is given his own house to live in in solitude. Also, he will have his own saucepan, as well as his own plate and cup. However, he is not allowed to go to any crossroads.

4.1.5 *Masinzi (Dracaena fragrans)*



Figure 29: *Masinzi* herb leaves.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 30: Masinzi herb

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The silk-smooth leaves of the *Masinzi* plant are used as a dressing on the wound after circumcision to promote healing, prevent infection and minimise contact with foreign bodies.

4.1.6 *Tsimbukha* (*Abrus precatorius*)



Figure 31: *Tsimbukha* – the red and black seeds used in Kadodi.
Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 32: *Tsimbukha* leaves.

Source: Fieldwork in Mbale District. Photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The red and black seeds of the *Tsimbukha* plant are used during the *Kadodi* to make musical sound. The seeds are put in a calabash that the circumcision candidate holds, which he shakes while dancing. The seeds are also used as a family planning method among the Bagisu women.

4.2 Symbolism of Herbs in Imbalu Rituals

This involves discussion of cultural meanings attached to each herb and their connection to Bagisu cosmology. Highlighting how these meanings reinforce cultural identity and spiritual beliefs.

4.2.1 Spiritual connections

Plants have magical effects attached to them. They are used to expel evil and as lucky charms. They serve as a connection between the physical and the spiritual realm (van Andel et al., 2013). The *Ityanyi* herb (Figures 14 – 20) is a sacred herb among the Bagisu that is used for spiritual protection against witchcraft by tying the root of the herb on the toe of the candidate, where it stays until the procedure is done. The *Umuchebi* also uses this herb to instil courage and stamina by tying its root on the knife used to circumcise. A few hours before circumcision, the *Umuchebi* gives the *umusinde* the root of *Ityanyi* to chew on. He seductively tries to test him twice and feeds the root to him the third time. This act is believed to make an *umusinde* fierce and ignite in him the desire to be circumcised.

The respondents emphasised that “nga bahuweye *Ityanyi* unaniha hulila kamasika huba olihukana bakuhale Imbalu” after chewing on the root, they felt their heart racing and they only had one desire – to be circumcised with immediate effect. If hours passed without being circumcised, they starting crying. If a knife had been within reach, they would simply have circumcised themselves.

This herb is a mystery even to some Bagisu. They know its name and its use but they do not know how it looks because it is protected. One of the respondents who is a *muchebi* could only show it to me in private. I had gone to meet him with some village residents but he emphasised the importance of keeping the plant sacred because its spiritual significance in Imbalu. He said children were allowed to give it to one another in jest before they got old enough for circumcision. The use of *Ityanyi* herbs in Imbalu rituals helps preserve the tradition and cultural heritage of Imbalu, as this practice is passed down through generations, enabling the boys to go through the procedure without anaesthesia, thus fostering a sense of belonging and identity.

4.2.2 Ritualistic roles

As discussed in Chapter Two (2.2), the *Isonja* dance that marks the start of the circumcision season happens at the Mutoto grounds, where the first circumcision among the Bagisu took place. The circumcision candidates prepare for the ritual from January. In the lessons, they are

taught how to use calabashes to make sound that rhymes with drums and body movement. The calabashes alone cannot produce the required sound, so the candidates put dry *Abrus precatorius* (rosary pea) seeds inside the calabashes to produce the desired sound during this dance ritual.

Nambuba Wabwire et al. (2024) state that Imbalu involves a lot of ritualistic activities and the post circumcision rituals, include the ceremonial cleansing, hatching and the induction into the grades of men at the *Inemba* dance. The Lukooli herb (Figure 27 – 28) is used in ceremonial cleansing or purification after circumcision. Before this ritual, the boy is not allowed to touch anything that is communally used, he eats out of his own utensils, and he uses separate saucepans. Furthermore, he is not allowed to go to any crossroads, and is confined to his house. He is taken care of only by his sister, who is also the only one to cook for him.

This ritual takes place on the third day after circumcision because it is believed that the bleeding has stopped by this time. It is done by either the *Umuchebi* or a paternal uncle. The *Lukooli* herb is squeezed and mixed with water, which is then poured for the initiate as he washes his hands, symbolising purification and cleansing. Meantime, he is told the roles of a man, for instance, “A man takes care of his family.” He is given an axe, a hoe to cultivate and provide for his family, and a house to have a wife and reproduce. If he is still in school, he is advised to continue with education in order to have a bright future, and he is also advised to face life challenges as a man. Among the Bagisu, the *Lukooli* is not a mere plant but it holds a cleansing symbolism. It is also used postpartum by a nursing mother, who is also not allowed to touch anything before washing her hands using this herb.

4.2.3 Medicinal properties

Herbs are often selected for their healing properties, reflecting the community’s understanding of health and illness, similar to practices observed in other cultures. The Bagisu rely on these plants for their healing properties. For example, the *Ingulwe* (Figure 22 –24) is known for being very effective in healing a circumcision wound, though it inflicts a lot of pain. Some candidates, as mentioned in Chapter Two (2.2 para, 1), want to show off their bravery in a more extreme fashion, so they request that red pepper be applied to the circumcision wound

after the first layer of the foreskin has been cut off and the wound be drenched with water. They will then run around the village until the amount of water they decided on gets finished. After that, they will allow the last layer to be cut. This act of bravery will win them a prestigious position in their family, qualifying them to receive the bride price for their sisters and gifts like cows from the family and the community.

After this process, one needs an effective medicine to promote healing. The candidates thus use the powder scraped from the back of the *Ingulwe* herb, which is applied directly to the wound every day after bathing. Since the ritual circumcision of the Bagisu is a non-medical procedure, effective medicinal herbs have to be used to ensure healing. The fact that the practice is centuries old and was in existence even before the advent of Western healthcare practices is evidence of the effectiveness of the herbs in healing circumcision wounds. This is one of the key factors influencing the continuation of this tradition among the Bagisu.

4.3 Visual artwork inspired by the symbolic meanings of these herbs and their roles in the Imbalu rituals.

This section focuses on presenting and analysing the sketches and paintings inspired by the documented herbs used in the Imbalu ritual of the Bagisu, their ethnobotanical roles, and their spiritual and cultural symbolism using colour, texture and composition.

Objective study of Ityanyi plant.



Figure 33: *Ityanyi (Cissampelos mucronata)*

Medium: Oil paint on canvas, 2024.

Size: 73.5x51cm

Collection from the researcher's studio explorations.

This oil painting is part of my studio explorations into the intersections of ethnobotany, cultural heritage, and artistic practice. It presents an objective yet interpretive study of *Ityanyi* (*Cissampelous mucronata*), a creeping herbaceous plant with weak stems, spade-shaped leaves, and berries that range in colour from green to yellow and red. In rendering these botanical details with fidelity, I sought to highlight the plant's morphology while also using painterly techniques to gesture towards its deeper cultural resonances.

Within Ugandan indigenous knowledge systems, *Ityanyi* is more than a plant: it is a potent cultural resource. Its root is traditionally administered to boys as they undergo circumcision, a rite of passage that demands bravery and endurance. Thus, the plant becomes a symbol of resilience, fortitude, and communal identity. To evoke this sacred dimension, I employed blue strikes in the background. Rather than functioning purely as abstract formal elements, these painterly gestures articulate the aura of sanctity and reverence that surrounds *Ityanyi* within ritual contexts.

Compositionally, the work negotiates between naturalistic representation and symbolic abstraction. The plant occupies the foreground in studied clarity, almost as though extracted for scientific cataloguing, while the expressive background introduces a spiritual register. This duality mirrors my own methodological approach: as both researcher and artist, I position the canvas as a space where ethnobotanical observation and artistic interpretation converge.

In this sense, the painting operates on multiple registers. It documents the visual form of a culturally significant plant, preserves oral knowledge in pictorial form, and creates an aesthetic experience that honours the plant's sacredness. The work, therefore, resists being read solely as botanical illustration or as pure abstraction. Instead, it embodies a dialogic encounter between art, science, and cultural heritage, while situating my role as a painter-researcher within this triangulation.



Figure 34: *Umusinde*.

Medium: Oil paint on canvas, 2024.

Size: 90x80cm

Collection from the researcher's studio explorations.

In 'Umusinde', the artist draws upon the roots of the *Ityanyi* plant to embody the figure of a boy poised for circumcision – a ritual marking the passage from childhood into manhood. The transformation of roots into a human form conveys the deep interconnection between nature and culture, suggesting that strength and resilience are not merely innate but nurtured through both the environment and tradition.

The boy's stance – legs apart, fists raised captures a moment of vulnerability framed as courage. This posture embodies defiance against fear and pain, qualities demanded by the initiation ritual. The absence of anaesthesia, and the embrace of suffering as part of growth, are underscored visually through the raw, fibrous texture of the roots. Here, the natural toughness of the plant echoes the expected endurance of the initiate.

The stems of the *Ityanyi*, transformed into ritual ornaments, further emphasise the cultural layers of identity. Ornamentation, often celebratory in nature, is juxtaposed with the solemnity of pain, creating a visual tension that mirrors the rite itself, at once communal and personal, joyous yet grave.

Ultimately, 'Umusinde' becomes more than a botanical study or a depiction of a boy; it is an allegory of transformation. The painting situates the body as a site of negotiation between nature and society, tradition and individuality, fragility and strength. Through this work, the artist interrogates the symbolic power of plants in mediating human experiences, while also preserving a cultural narrative that links endurance, masculinity, and belonging.

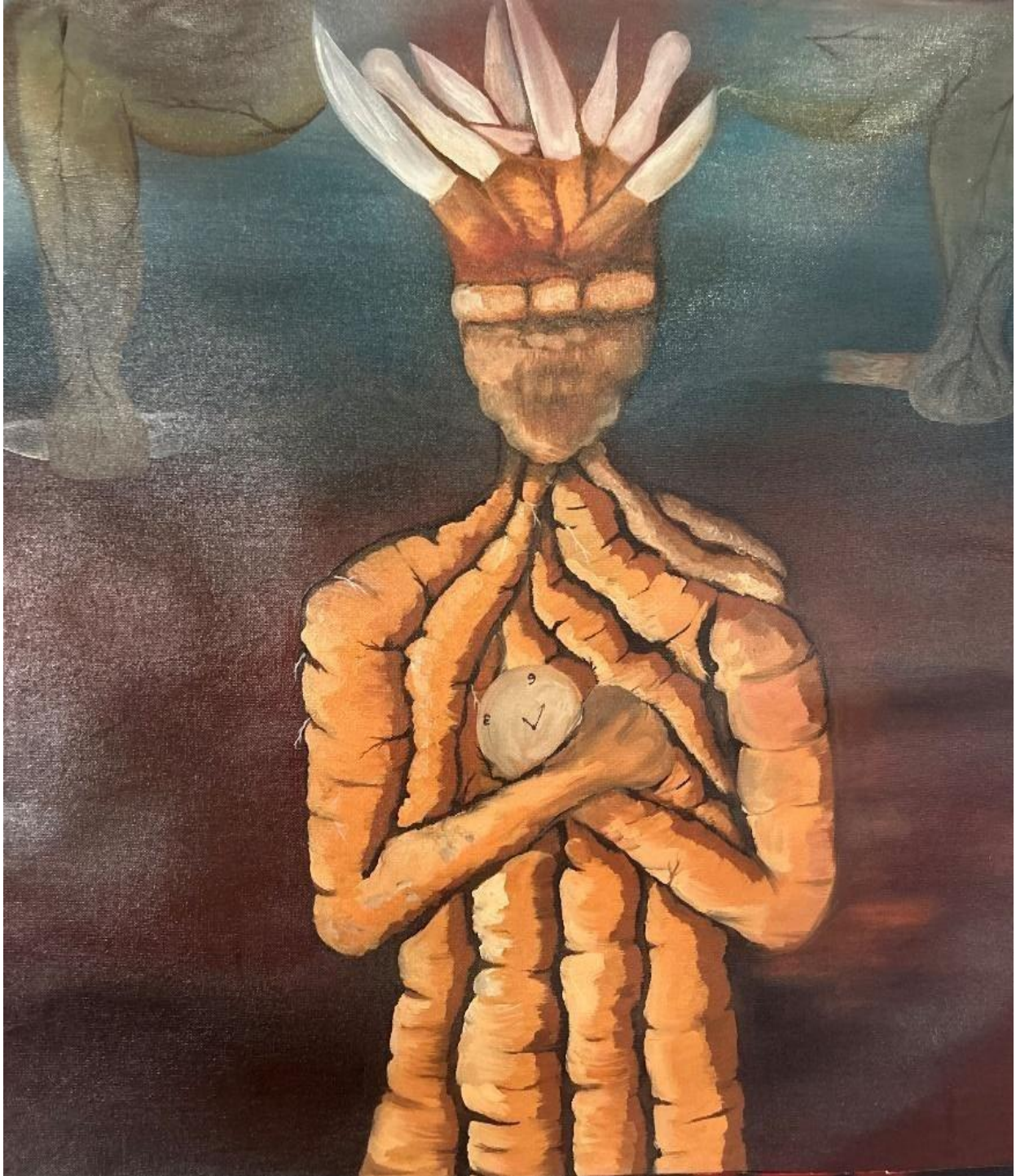


Figure 35: Umusinde 2.

Media: Oil paint on canvas, 2024.

Size: 87x83cm.

Collection from the researcher's studio explorations.

‘Umusinde 2’ explores the psychological and physical effects of the Ityanyi herb on circumcision candidates, capturing the intense anticipation, desire, and readiness induced by its administration. In this painting, the clock embedded in the chest of the boy functions as a temporal metaphor: it visually represents the acute awareness of time passing and the increasing urgency of his desire to undergo circumcision. The clock embodies both anticipation and the inner tension of waiting, evoking the psychological state triggered by Ityanyi.

The knives depicted on the head symbolise the central focus of the candidate’s thoughts – the circumcision knife – which dominates his consciousness immediately after ingesting the herb. This imagery reflects the preparation, fear, and courage intertwined in the ritual experience. The exaggerated biceps in the background signify physical readiness and strength, visually amplifying the corporeal aspect of endurance that the ritual demands. The boy’s arms holding a stick emphasise restraint and composure, illustrating the discipline required to remain motionless during the procedure.

From a compositional perspective, the painting balances internal and external elements: the internal mental struggle is conveyed through symbolic objects like the clock and knives, while the external display of strength is expressed through anatomical exaggeration and posture. The artist employs a deliberate contrast between warm and cool tones, with the clock possibly glowing to draw attention, symbolising the urgency of desire, while the muted background emphasises the candidate’s isolation in his inner experience.

The work integrates ethnobotanical knowledge and cultural ritual in a visual narrative. By focusing on the effects of *Ityanyi*, the painting illustrates how indigenous knowledge is not merely functional but transformative, affecting psychological, spiritual, and physical states. ‘Umusinde 2’ becomes a dialogue between body, mind, and cultural heritage, communicating the ritual’s layered meanings to an audience who may not directly experience the practice. Through symbolism, composition, and colour, the artwork situates the herb as a central agent of human transformation, linking ethnobotanical knowledge to embodied cultural experience, and highlighting the intricate interplay of anticipation, bravery, and spiritual readiness within the Bagisu circumcision tradition.

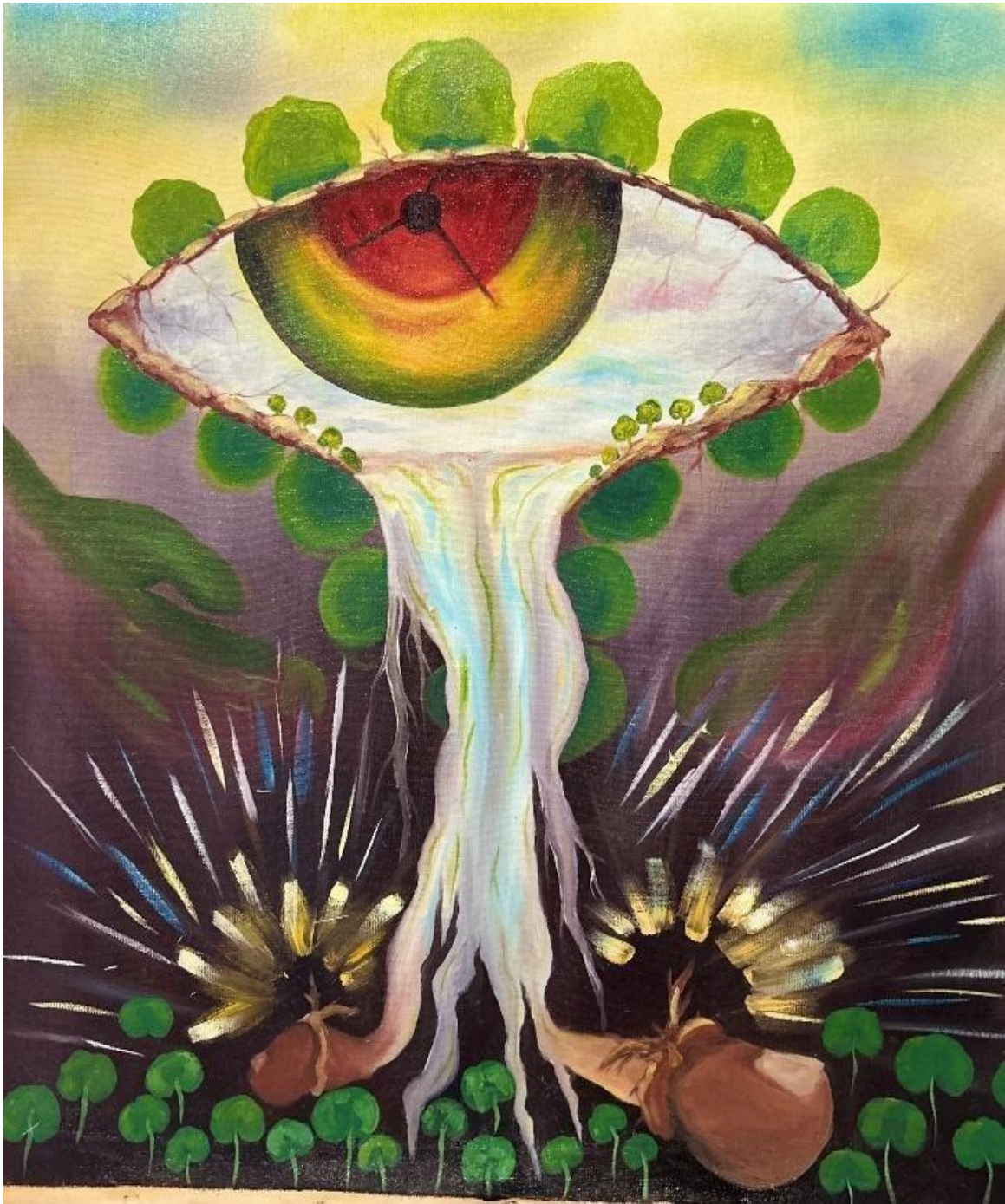


Figure 36: Imbuka.

Medium: Oil on canvas, 2024.

Size: 80x70.5cm

Collection from the researcher's studio
explorations

The green circular leaves of *Lukooli*, mixed with water, indicate cleansing, rebirth, and the boy's initiation into manhood. The water symbolises dual meanings: the literal tears shed during anticipation and the symbolic washing of hands as preparation for adult responsibilities. This dual symbolism conveys the integration of physical, emotional, and spiritual transformation, central to the ritual. The presence of the *Umuchebi* instructing the initiate reinforces mentorship, cultural guidance, and knowledge transfer.

Artistically, 'Imbuka' employs a dynamic interplay of colour and line. Bright, vivid colours radiate outwards, emphasising protection and spiritual energy, while curved, circular lines in the leaves and water create rhythm and movement, signifying purification and emotional flow. The contrast between soft, flowing forms and the rigid representation of eyes and toes underscores the tension between vulnerability and protection, fear and guidance.

This painting functions as both ethnographic documentation and visual interpretation. It emphasises the inseparable link between indigenous plant knowledge and cultural ritual, illustrating how the Bagisu integrate botanical practices into spiritual, psychological, and communal dimensions of circumcision. The work demonstrates the capacity of visual art to translate abstract concepts – such as protection, purification, and emotional transformation – into accessible, symbolic imagery. Through composition, colour, and symbolism, 'Imbuka' communicates the sacred, protective, and transformative power of herbs, situating them within a culturally and spiritually rich narrative.

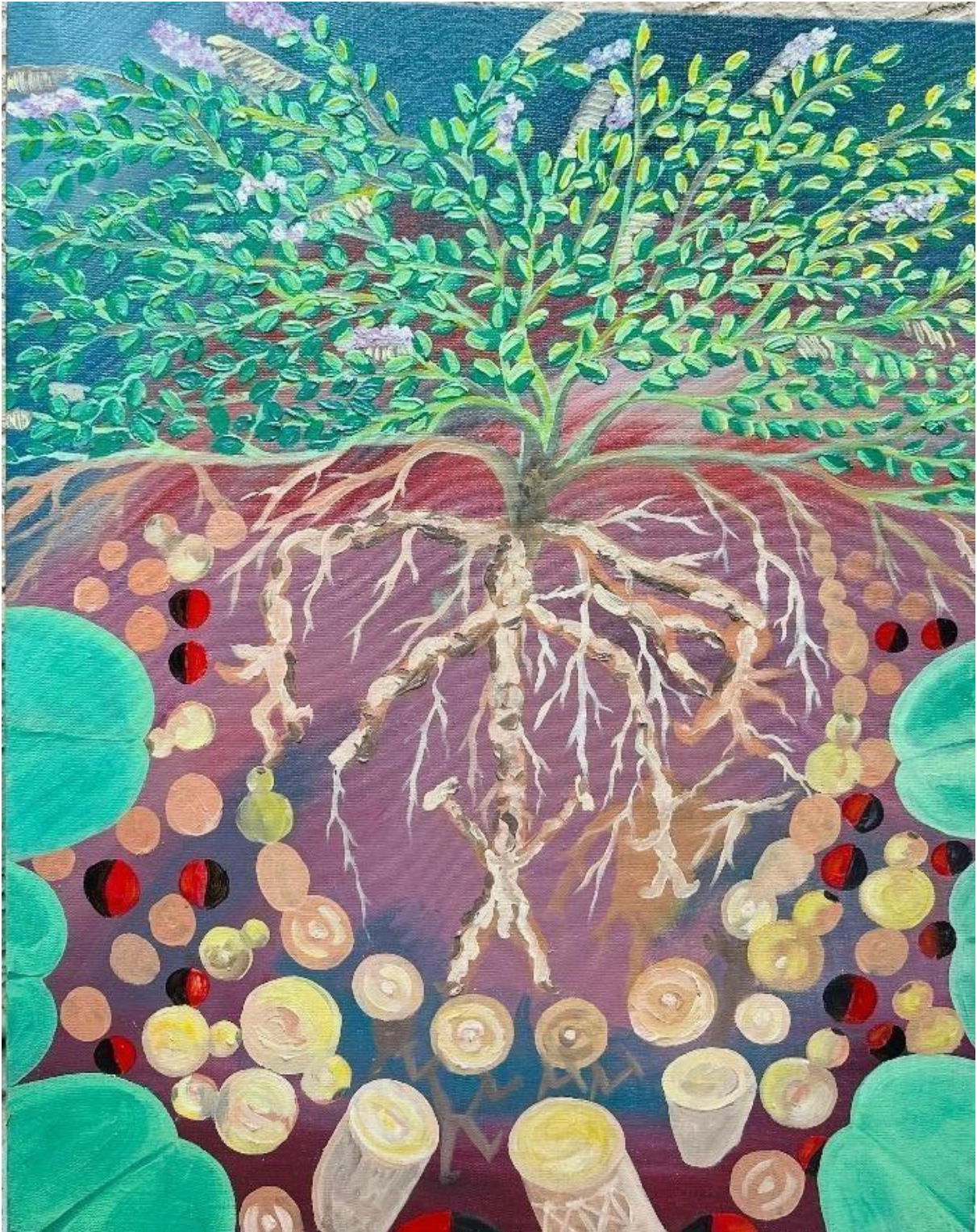


Figure 37: Kadodi.

Media: Oil paint on canvas, 2024.

Size: 75x60cm.

Collection from the researcher's studio explorations.

‘Kadodi’ captures the celebratory and communal aspects of Bagisu circumcision, emphasising the cultural performance and ritualistic music-dance elements surrounding the initiation process. Central to the painting is the *Umusinde*, the initiate, enveloped by a throng of participants engaged in dancing, drumming, and celebration. The composition employs a clear spatial hierarchy: the middle ground with movement and energy, reflecting the vibrancy and collective enthusiasm of the *Kadodi* dance, while the foreground and background integrate botanical and cultural symbols.

The *Tsimbukha* seeds serve a dual function: symbolically, they represent the cyclical nature of life and tradition; practically, these seeds are used in calabashes to produce sound, connecting ethnobotanical knowledge to performative culture. The inclusion of the tree roots and seeds in the painting visually anchors the ritual to its indigenous, natural context, showing how plant-based materials facilitate both ritual sound and cultural memory.

The rhythmic patterns of dancing figures, calabashes, and crowd formations generate a sense of motion and continuity, mirroring the energy of the *Kadodi* performance. Colour and line play pivotal roles: red and black circular motifs of the *Tsimbukha* seeds contrast with the earthy tones of the dancers, creating visual emphasis on ritual implements and movement. The painting’s perspective situates the viewer within the communal space, allowing an immersive experience of the ceremony, while guiding the eye towards central symbolic elements.

Culturally, ‘Kadodi’ underscores the communal reinforcement of tradition, the celebration of initiation, and the integration of plant knowledge into music and ritual. The painting portrays not just the physical dance but also the transmission of heritage, the sensory experience of rhythm, and the connection between people, plants, and cultural identity. Through dynamic composition and ethnobotanical symbolism, the artwork positions the *Kadodi* as both performance and cultural pedagogy, emphasising how rituals sustain collective memory, identity, and indigenous knowledge.



Figure 38: Kamalesi.

Media: Oil paint on canvas, 2024.

Size: 72x51cm.

Collection from the researcher's studio explorations.

The two flowers of *Lisikiyi* are used to stop bleeding. They are placed next to each other to represent a blockage they make to stop the bleeding. The inside of the yellow flower has fur-like hairs (pappus hairs) that are applied to the wound directly and they stick together to form a blockage for the bleeding to stop, as shown in the top left of the painting like ferns flowing towards the blood. Its leaves are portrayed on the lower foreground. Though this is a common plant in the area, it is not used by all candidates – only those whose bleeding is persistent. On the right is the leaves of *Ingulwe*. With this plant, it is the brown fur-like particles scraped off the back of the leaves that are used. They are applied directly to the wound to cause healing. *Ingulwe* is also the herb that inflicts the most pain among all the herbs, but it also has the best healing results. In the middle, the light blue and white depict the healing that happens after using this plant. The path to healing has some black part to represent the pain involved using *Ingulwe*. These two plants – *Lisikiyi*

Ingulwe – facilitate healing, thus the blood in the upper middle ground is stopped by these plants.

‘Kamalesi’ focuses on the healing and medicinal aspects of the Bagisu circumcision ritual, highlighting the functional and symbolic roles of the *Lisikiyi* and *Ingulwe* plants. In this painting, the two *Lisikiyi* flowers are depicted side by side, symbolising the blockage they create to stop bleeding, which is both a literal and metaphorical representation of control, protection, and restoration. The furry inner parts of the flowers are applied directly to wounds, while the leaves in the lower foreground anchor the plants within their natural environment, connecting human ritual to ecological knowledge.

Ingulwe, represented on the right, introduces a narrative of pain and transformation. The brown fur-like particles applied to wounds cause unspeakable pain, yet they are essential for effective healing. The light blue and white hues symbolise recovery and purity, while the black areas indicate the unavoidable pain in the healing process. By juxtaposing these colours, the painting communicates the duality of ritual: suffering and restoration, danger and protection, after circumcision.

The composition reflects a layered understanding of the ritual process. The upper middle ground, showing bleeding, illustrates the efficacy of these plants while emphasising the transition from injury to recovery. Symbolically, the plants act as mediators between human

fragility and resilience, reinforcing the intertwined relationship between ethnobotanical knowledge and cultural ritual. The spatial organisation guides the viewer's attention from the immediate trauma (the bleeding wound) to the broader process of healing, highlighting both the physical and spiritual dimensions of care.

Through line, colour, and symbolic placement the painting conveys movement, growth, and restoration. Curved lines in the flowers and leaves evoke the natural healing processes, while the contrasting colours articulate tension between pain and relief. The work situates ethnobotanical knowledge as a key agent in sustaining health and cultural practices. 'Kamalesi' thus bridges art, ritual, and science, demonstrating how indigenous plants are integral not only to physical healing but also to reinforcing cultural continuity and respect for nature.



Figure 39: Ityanyi Kyomuwendo.

Media: Oil paint on canvas, 2025

Size: 91.5x77cm.

Collection from the researcher's studio explorations.

‘Ityanyi Kyomuwendo’ celebrates the sacredness and exclusivity of the *Ityanyi* plant within Bagisu culture. The painting emphasises secrecy and knowledge transmission: the blindfolded figures represent the broader community who cannot identify the plant, while the two individuals in the background, adorned with *Ityanyi* on their heads, symbolise the elders and *Umuchebi* who hold ancestral knowledge.

The composition conveys both accessibility and restriction. Figures in the foreground are blindfolded, creating a visual tension that highlights the plant’s spiritual and esoteric significance. The background figures, illuminated or rendered in contrast, act as mediators between secrecy and revelation. Colour use reinforces symbolism: muted tones for the uninformed, and brighter highlights for those with knowledge, establishing a hierarchy of understanding.

The work explores knowledge, sacredness, and authority, illustrating how ethnobotanical expertise is embedded within social and spiritual structures. ‘Ityanyi Kyomuwendo’ visualises the protection of cultural knowledge, positioning the plant as a symbol of communal identity, spiritual authority, and continuity. The artist’s use of line, layering, and visual perspective guides viewers through a narrative of discovery, respect, and reverence, bridging the material and symbolic dimensions of the ritual.



Figure 40: Umusetisa

Media: Oil paint canvas, 2025

Size: 90x80cm

Collection from the researcher's studio explorations.

‘Umusetsa’ depicts post-circumcision initiation emphasising social obligations, cultural norms and the transformative power of *Ityanyi*. The plant on the rope holding the man’s leg symbolises ritual guidance, tying the initiate to communal expectations. The distant journey to sleep with a woman is represented by geographical markers Mount Elgon and a building symbolising Kampala thus illustrating spatial separation and adherence to ritual law.

The small bed and bright sky signify the brevity and public awareness of the act. The man and woman’s heads replaced by *Ityanyi* plants signify sexual vitality and the plant’s aphrodisiac properties. Compositionally, the painting balances narrative elements: foreground details anchor the personal experience, while background landscapes provide context, linking ritual to place.

Colour and line create narrative clarity: earthy and natural tones for the rope and mountains convey grounding and reality; bright highlights signal ritual significance and public oversight. Through this visual storytelling, ‘Umusetsa’ communicates adherence, transformation, and the symbolic potency of *Ityanyi* in life-cycle rituals, merging ethnobotanical knowledge with human experience.



Figure 41: Imbalu.

Media: Oil paint on canvas, 2024

Size: 86x86cm

Collection from the researcher's studio
explorations.

'Imbalu' focuses on post-circumcision healing practices, particularly the *Masinzi* plant used as wound dressing. The painting emphasises protection and restoration: green and yellow silky leaves symbolise comfort, safety, and efficacy. The composition centres the plant's application to the wound, creating a direct visual correlation between plant and healing

Colour reinforces meaning: green represents life and renewal; yellow denotes protection and care. Smooth textures highlight the tactile quality of *Masinzi*, inviting viewers to understand the physical and symbolic intimacy of the ritual. The painting emphasises the integration of plant knowledge in safeguarding health, illustrating how botanical practices sustain life, reinforce cultural identity, and maintain ancestral knowledge.

Herbs used before circumcision



Figure 42: Imbalu.

Media: paint on canvas, 2025

Size: 162x112cm

Collection from the researcher's studio explorations

'Imbalu' captures pre-circumcision celebration. The upper tree branches are populated with dancing figures, banana leaf adornments, and musical instruments, signifying communal joy and ritualised socialisation. Drinking local brew and the inclusion of age markers (14 and 15) situate the ritual within its cultural and temporal context.

The heart with rolling tears and the root figure with a clock head highlights the psychological anticipation and spiritual protection afforded by *Ityanyi*. Compositionally, vertical and horizontal planes guide the viewer's gaze through both celebration and ritual preparation. The painting emphasises the integration of ethnobotanical knowledge, temporal awareness, and emotional experience, reinforcing the ceremonial complexity of *Imbalu*.

Herbs used during and after circumcision



Figure 44: Khucheba.

Media: Oil paint on canvas

Size: 110x85cm

Collection from studio explorations.

This painting, 'Khucheba', visually narrates the critical stages of healing and bravery within the Bagisu circumcision ritual. The middle ground prominently features the Lisiky plant – its flower and leaves – that is used to stop bleeding. Here, the tip of the male genital organ is surrounded by red pepper, linked through flowing blue streams of water to the dancing figures, symbolizing both the pain endured and the cleansing, transformative process of healing. The jerrycan with water flowing out with the figures of people dancing on the streams of water as a symbol of celebration reflects the courage, resilience, and communal support demonstrated during the ritual, emphasizing the collective participation in the young initiates' journey with bravery, as explained in Chapter two (2.2).

Around the edges of the painting, the tip of the male organ is rendered in green, representing the healing effects of the *Ingulwe* plant, which is applied after circumcision to accelerate recovery. The interplay of red, blue, and green colours embodies the tension between pain, cleansing, and restoration, while the composition – layered in foreground, middle ground, and background – guides the viewer through the narrative of physical endurance, spiritual protection, and cultural continuity.

The painting employs symbolism extensively: water signifies purification and rebirth; red peppers convey pain and bravery; green represents restoration and life. The figures' movements, intertwined with botanical elements, illustrate the inseparable link between human experience and plant-based knowledge within Bagisu culture. By capturing these layers of ritual practice, 'Khucheba' acts not only as a visual document of cultural heritage but also as an artistic interpretation of resilience, spirituality, and the sacred role of herbs in maintaining community traditions.

Herb used after circumcision



Figure 43: Umusaani.

Size: 151x122cm

Media: paint on canvas, 2025.

Collection from studio explorations

'Umusaani' is a vivid visual exploration of the space between boyhood and manhood within the Bagisu circumcision ritual. The composition uses colour, texture, and symbolic imagery to narrate the stages of social and cultural transition. The primary colours yellow, blue, and pink dominate the canvas, representing innocence, vulnerability and the naive stage of boyhood. The subtle tint of red hints at latent potential and the impending transformation, aligning with colour theory principles where red conveys energy, vitality, and the spark of change.

At the centre, the swash textures layered in green, gold, brown, and purple mark the transformative moment of the ritual. These colours evoke growth, fertility, stability, and spiritual significance, while the dynamic brushwork suggests movement and the fluidity of identity. The green signifies renewal and the purification process, gold reflects social value and achievement, brown grounds the figure in cultural continuity, and purple symbolises maturity and respect within the community hierarchy.

Narratively, the painting captures three days post-circumcision, when the boy undergoes cleansing with *Lukooli* water, a symbolic act of purification. He is ceremonially entrusted with the tools of adulthood – the hoe, panga, and axe. These objects rendered in earthy tones and positioned centrally signify responsibility, labour, and provision, marking the boy's entry into the social and economic duties of a man. The upper right corner depicts the crossroads the boy was previously forbidden from approaching, emphasising the ritual boundary between childhood and communal participation.

Further, the conferral of property and livestock, a house, goats, matooke, or even a cow communicates societal recognition, continuity, and the integration of the initiand into adult networks. Compositionally, the painting balances figurative narrative with abstracted colour symbolism, employing line, form, and gesture to create a rhythm that mirrors the passage from one life stage to another.

'Umusaani' thus operates at the intersection of ethnography and visual art, translating the complex interplay of ritual, socialisation, and individual transformation into painterly language. Through the deliberate use of colour theory, symbolic iconography, and textured composition, the work embodies the duality of continuity and change, encapsulating both the communal and personal dimensions of initiation.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented findings based on the study objectives. It has presented results from the analysis of respondents' feedback through questionnaires, interviews, and observation. The chapter ends by presenting the interpretation of the creative studio-based artworks that emulate documentation of the herbs used during the Imbalu ritual among the Bagisu.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to document and visually interpret the herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals using art. This chapter focuses on discussing the findings in the field as far as cultural heritage is concerned and how visual art is one of the best tools to document the herbal knowledge of the Bagisu.

5.1 Ethnobotanical Heritage as a Cultural Asset

Preserving herbal knowledge is crucial for the continuity of traditional practices and maintaining cultural identity for communities that rely on these practices, in the way the Bagisu rely on the Imbalu for their pride and identity. In the field, the traditional practitioners of Imbalu, referred to as Umuchebi in the research, were asked about the measures they employed to preserve the herbal knowledge of the plants used in the Imbalu ritual, especially the sacred ones like Ityanyi. They explained that a father who is a practitioner shares this knowledge with one of his sons, but on condition that he is also chosen by the ancestral spirits to become a traditional surgeon as well. This is because being a surgeon is not a choice one makes, but it is, instead, the spirits that choose the person they want to carry on the practice. Therefore, herbal knowledge of sacred plants like Ityanyi is only shared with the chosen ones. Correspondingly, during the fieldwork one of the practitioners who were interviewed undertook a two-day search for the Ityanyi plant. Meanwhile, the wife of the Umuchebi stated “Imbalu ngayolele akatuya mangu kamalesi huba kimyoyo kimuyetaho hukatuya”; meaning that during the circumcision season it is easier to find the herbs because the spirits help him to locate the herbs. He later found the herb and asked to meet with me privately so he could show it to me. He did not want the children who took me to his home to see the plant, significantly emphasising that this plant is a cultural treasure to the Bagisu and very important with regard to the traditional practice of Imbalu.

I also asked two male respondents who were not practitioners but also knew what the Ityanyi plant looks like how they came to know it since most people did not know how the plant looks (refer to Chapter Four (4.2.1)). One of these men revealed that he had been very close to his late

grandfather, who was a traditional practitioner, and that that was how he got to know the plant. The second man stated that he also got to know how the plant looks from his father, who was a practitioner. He emphasised that “Ityanyi yahumanyibwa bulimundu ta huba abaana banyala bakirambisa bubu” which translates that this herbal knowledge is not shared with everyone in the Bagisu community because it is believed that children may put it to wrong use. However, other herbs were known by most people in the community, including young boys and women. This is how the Bagisu have managed to sustain their cultural identity through preserving herbal knowledge for the future generations. Only one old woman knew all the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual. Notably, this was because her father was a traditional surgeon and she made it a point to know the plants, their use and how they are used.



Figure 44: Mukwasi Fred, aged 55 years, learnt about the Ityanyi herb from his father.
Source: Fieldwork photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 45: Florence Mutonyi, aged 64, knew all the herbs used in the Imbalu ritual.

Source: Fieldwork photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

5.2 Art as a Medium for Cultural Preservation

Visual art serves as a powerful medium for documenting and communicating intangible cultural heritage by preserving cultural narratives and enhancing their relevance in today's society. Visual art preserves cultural heritage, tells stories and sparks dialogue, making it a powerful tool for cultural documentation. As Abdel Hay (2018) asserts, "The arts are an honest interface to learn about the cultures of the societies in the world." The Imbalu ritual is a very artistic and symbolic ritual, in the light of the ornaments that the circumcision candidate wears and the folklore associated with Imbalu ritual. The pictures below show sculptures portraying the Kadodi dance during the Imbalu season. They transcend aesthetics by portraying the energy, movement, accessories worn by the circumcision candidates during the Imbalu ritual, and their position on raised ground, so that they are separate from the drummers and the women dancing.

The sculpture also shows the geographical location of the Bagisu, portrayed by the huge rocks placed around the sculpture. The artwork is set up in the middle of Mbale City, on a roundabout connecting major highways, making it visible to those entering and leaving the city. This shows how much the Bagisu treasure Imbalu. The sculptures communicate the cultural heritage of the area and represent the identity of the people of Mbale City.



Figure 46: A Kadodi sculpture view while leaving Mbale City. Unknown artist.
Source: Fieldwork photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 47: A Kadodi sculpture view while coming to Mbale City. Unknown artist.

Source: Fieldwork photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The Bagisu use visual art on their houses as decoration, much as they have no artistic training. This also makes visual art suitable for documenting their cultural heritage since it is something they appreciate. During the field study, some of the houses in the villages visited had designs. This also constitutes part of the Imbalu ritual preparations, where the houses in the homestead of the circumcision candidate are decorated with white and brown clay, cow dung and charcoal to make designs. Usually, two contrasting colours are used, one on the upper part of the house and the other on the lower part. This is one of the researcher's childhood memories regarding the circumcision season, in which she also participated by fetching white clay and decorating a house.

The figures below show the visual artworks on some of the houses found during the field research in the villages of the Bugisu.



Figure 48: Painting on a white clay background by the residents of Bungokho Village.
Source: Fieldwork photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.



Figure 49: An *Umuchebi*'s store for herbs used in the Imbalu ritual on the slopes of Mount Elgon.

Source: Fieldwork photo by Karen Kirabo, 2025.

The above figure shows the store of one of the traditional surgeons interviewed during the field research. The house is designed with texts “INZU YA MASABA” which translates the house of

Masaba, “the father of all Bagisu”. This resonates with what was explained in Chapter One (1.1 para. 1) in connection with the origin of the Bamasaba/Bagisu. In the figure, arrows from the word “Masaba” outline the number of sons he had, who make up the clans of all Bagisu. There is also the exhortation: “Love your culture” and an outline drawing of a mountain representing Mount Elgon with the word “Lujinji”, which translates to “mountain” in English. This house is a visual documentation communicating the history of the Bagisu, and their geographical location. It also encourages the viewers to love their culture, meaning the house owner loves his culture and urges other people to do the same. All this information is hand-painted, making painting one of the best visual forms of art to document the herbal knowledge of the Imbalu ritual as used in this study.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to document and visually interpret the herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals through visual art. To address this purpose, the researcher engaged three objectives, namely: i) **To document the herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals and their ethnobotanical significance;** ii) **To explore the symbolic meanings of these herbs in the cultural and spiritual contexts of the Bagisu;** and iii) **To create visual art inspired by the symbolic meanings of these herbs and their roles in the Imbalu rituals.** In order deal with these objectives the researcher considered the following research question: i. **What are the key herbs used in Bagisu circumcision rituals, and what are their roles?;** ii) **What are the symbolic and spiritual meanings attached to the herbs?;** and iii) **How can visual art be used to document and interpret the symbolic meanings of the herbs and their roles used in the Imbalu rituals by the Bagisu?**

By answering this question in **Chapters Four, Five and Six**, the the intervened in new wassy in the sense that has provided an understanding linking Art and ethnobotany through interdisciplinary research which is an interesting building block that can be emulated in connection with other cultures in Uganda and elsewhere by making contributions to the understanding, documentation, and interpretation of the herbs used in the Imbalu circumcision rituals of the Bagisu people through visual art.

Through combining ethnobotanical knowledge with artistic expression, the research demonstrates that traditional herbal practices are not only functional but also culturally and aesthetically significant. The findings underscore the critical role of herbs in sustaining the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of Imbalu, highlighting their importance in preserving the cultural identity and heritage of the Bagisu community.

6.1.1 The *Imbalu* ritual and the role of herbs

The *Imbalu* ritual stands as a cornerstone of Bagisu cultural identity. Beyond being a rite of passage, it embodies the community's values, social cohesion, and historical continuity. One of the most striking features of the ritual is the expectation for boys to endure circumcision without anaesthesia, showcasing bravery and resilience. In this context, herbs play multiple roles:

Arousing desire and motivation: Certain herbs stimulate the candidate's psychological readiness, helping him embrace the ritual without fear. Facilitating healing post-circumcision, herbs are used to stop bleeding, prevent infections, and promote physical recovery.

Purification and spiritual protection: Herbs are integral to cleansing the body and protecting the candidate from spiritual harm.

This study documents key herbs, including *Ityanyi*, *Ingulwe*, *Lukooli*, *Lisikiyi*, *Masinzi*, and *Tsimbukha*, emphasising their diverse functions. By recording this knowledge, the research contributes to the preservation of indigenous practices that have traditionally been transmitted orally, often limited to close relatives or apprentices of traditional surgeons.

Furthermore, the study establishes that these herbs serve as rich sources of artistic inspiration. Their visual characteristics, such as colours, shapes, textures and symbolic meanings, offer opportunities for creative interpretation, connecting cultural knowledge with artistic practice.

6.1.2 Interpretation of herbs through visual art

A central contribution of this research is demonstrating the capacity of visual art to interpret and communicate ethnobotanical knowledge. The paintings created during this study translate the properties and cultural significance of the herbs into visual narratives that depict the herbs' functions in emboldening the circumcision candidate, illustrating their roles in stopping bleeding, aiding healing, and providing spiritual protection, as well as in purification and initiation processes, making intangible aspects of the ritual tangible. By integrating principles of colour theory, composition, and symbolic representation, the artworks provide a multisensory experience of the *Imbalu* ritual, bridging the gap between scientific documentation and cultural imagination. The study demonstrates that herbs are not solely medicinal tools, but that they are also cultural symbols, vessels of identity and catalysts for artistic creation.

In conclusion, the research highlights the transformative potential of interdisciplinary approaches. It does this by combining ethnobotany and visual art, which contributes both to the academic study of indigenous knowledge and to the practice of contemporary art. The findings show that documenting and interpreting herbal knowledge can preserve cultural heritage while offering aesthetic, educational, and creative value.

6.2 Recommendations

Bugisu should institute community-led initiatives to document and preserve their herbal knowledge, which could provide the younger generations with information about these plants since most of the plants are self-grown and are only preserved by drying and being burnt into ash. Furthermore, the herbal knowledge is only transferred to the people close to the traditional surgeons. There is need for a better preservation method in the face of the ongoing climate change and the fact that the plants used are not replanted.

Advocacy should be mounted for governmental and non-governmental support for documentation, preservation, and artistic projects which provide funding, training, and platforms for cultural practitioners and artists to collaborate.

There is need for collaborations between artists and cultural practitioners from Bugisu who know a lot about the culture and traditions of the community. This could help in exploring the rich cultural heritage of the Bagisu that has a lot of potential for artistic inspiration in connection with all the rituals that are associated with the Imbalu. The different art mediums that could be used would include sculpture, ceramics, photography and design, thus promoting cultural preservation.

Further research should be carried out to investigate the downside of some rituals that are involved in the Imbalu for example having a one-night stand with a woman from a far place after circumcision and its health risks like HIV and unwanted pregnancies.

Further research about the influence of colonial projects on the Imbalu tradition as mentioned that Semei Kakungulu was the one who influenced the even year tradition.

The documented herbs should be investigated for pharmacological properties, which could be used to produce medicines to treat other illnesses in different parts of the world.

Other scholars should explore the intersection of traditional practices and modern pharmaceuticals and imbalu rituals.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Herb List and Description

Herb list and descriptions

Local name (Lugisu) (Scientific name)	Herb use	How it is administered	When is it administered
1. Ityanyi (<i>Cissampelous mucronata</i>)	Spiritual protection and emboldens circumcision candidate.	A piece of the root is tied on the first and last toe. The candidate chews on the root.	Before circumcision on the circumcision day
2. Ingulwe (<i>Pyrossia schimperiana</i>)	Wound healing	The back of the leaves is scratched and the particles are put on the circumcision wound.	After circumcision
3. Lisiky (<i>Crassocephalum Vittelinum</i>)	Stops bleeding	The inside of its flower is pinched and put on the bleeding vein.	After circumcision
4. Masinzi (<i>Dracaena fragrans</i>)	Wound dressing	The leaf is tied around the wound.	After circumcision
5. Lukooli (<i>Centella asiatica</i>)	Purification/ cleansing	The leaves are mixed with water and the candidate washes his hands with this water.	Three days after circumcision
6. Tsimbukha (<i>Abrus precatorius</i>)	Making musical sound	The seeds are put in the calabash to make sound.	During Kadodi dance

Appendix B: Interview Guide

TITLE: Art and Ethnobotany: The visual interpretation of herbs used in the Bagisu Imbalu rituals.

1. Bakisu baliho ni Kamalesi Kamakisu khesi barambisa humbalu?
2. Malesi khina ko?
3. Kamalesi ka bakarambisa baryena?
4. Kamalesi karamba muhaso shina?
5. Nanu ukaraho era akarambisa lina?
6. Kamalesi ka kamanyisha shina eli bakisu?
7. Kamalesi bakamisa wayena, abandu bakabyala namwe bakawetsa busa?
8. Khamalesi ka bulimundu wakamanya namwe ta?
9. Lwashina?
10. Khamalesi mukabiha muryena, kanyala kawawo nga mukatuya ta?

Appendix C: Observation Checklist

1. How do the herbs used in the Imbalu rituals look like?
2. Where are the herbs found?
3. What distinctive features do these herbs have like flowers, leaves, stems or roots?
4. Which parts of the herb are used?
5. How are these herbs used?
6. In what quantities are the plants used?
7. How are the plants preserved and where are they kept?

Appendix D: List of Some Respondents

NAME	GENDER	PLACE OF INTERVIEW
1. Mabonga Derrick	Male	Mbale
2. Mukhwasi Peter	Male	Bungokho Village
3. Wamono Simon	Male	Bungokho Village
4. Mukhwasi Fred	Male	Busaano
5. Kuloba Benard	Male	Eco Resort Hotel
6. Wokuri Rosemary	Female	Salaama, Munyonyo
7. Mutonyi Florence	Female	Slopes of Mount Elgon
8. Mafabi George	Male	Kigoowa, Ntinda
9. Wahatiya Johnpaul	Male	Kigoowa, Ntinda
10. Masaba Musa	Male	Mbale
11. Wambede Gerald	Male	Nabumali
12. Silali Moses	Male	Nabumali
13. Wamboka Henry	Male	Muruba
14. Mwambu Vincent	Male	Bunasikye
15. Namono Rachel	Female	Bunasikye
16. Wakhooli Peter	Male	Ibukwanamba
17. Wadudu Moses	Male	Ibukwanamba
18. Mabulu	Male	Muruba