



**THE SPIRITUAL SPACE OF MUBENDE HILL IN UGANDA: RETHINKING  
“AWAKA W’ENSI AW’OMWEYIMIRIZE, MAAMA NAKAYIMA” AS A  
SYMBOL OF RITUAL AND SPIRITUAL PERFORMANCE**

**By**

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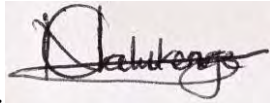
September 2024

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## Declaration

I, Claire Nalukenge declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nalukenge', is centered within a light gray rectangular box. The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

.....

Signature

...September 2024.....

Date

## Acknowledgments

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## Glossary

Abalongo	Fourth partition of the sacred tree
Abasese	Water spirits
Amakula	Thanksgiving gifts
Bachwezi	Eighth partition of the sacred tree
Baganda	The people from the Buganda kingdom
Balyammere	Many people at the sacred site
Bamweyana	Eleventh partition of the sacred tree
Bannalongo	Seventh partition of the sacred tree
Basazamazima	Advocates for the truth
Basazima	Short form for Basazamazima
Bassalongo	Sixth partition of the sacred tree
Buganda	The largest kingdom in central
Ebigali	Initiators of amakula
Ekibya	Clay bowl
Ekyanzi	Bachwezi cup
Kitinda	Seventeenth partition of the sacred
Kiwanuka	Fourteenth partition of the sacred tree
Lubowa	Nineth partition of the sacred tree
Luganda	Language spoken by the Baganda
Mubende Hill	Houses the Omweyimirize tree
Muganda	Singular for Baganda
Muhumuza	Omweyimirize title from the western
Mukasa	Sixteenth partition of the sacred tree
Mukongozi	Spirit medium

Mulyammere	One person at the sacred site
Musoke	Thirteenth partition of the sacred tree
Nabinene	Tenth partition of the sacred tree
Nabuzaana	Fifth partition of the sacred tree
Nakayaga	Twelfth partition of the sacred tree
Nandaula	Third partition of the sacred tree
Ndahura	First Bachwezi King of Bunyoro
Nsumbi	Small water pot
Nsuwa	Large water pot
Olwendo	Calabash for drawing water from the pot
Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima	Spirit of Nakayima
Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's partition	First partition of the sacred tree
Omweyimirize tree	Sacred tree at Mubende Hill
Omweyimirize	Defender, of the sacred tree
Ssewamala	Fifteenth partition of the sacred tree
Taata Ndaula	Second partition of the sacred tree
Uganda	A country in East Africa
Wanema	Eighteenth partition of the sacred tree

## Abstract

This doctoral dissertation in art history investigates the dynamic relationships between ritual objects, rituals, spiritual performances, and their representations in specific cultural contexts. The main research question is: How do the ritual objects at Mubende Hill shape and communicate the meanings of the rituals, considering their performative contexts and embodied interactions? This thesis examines the ritual objects at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in Uganda, which have various meanings and associations for different groups of people. It critically analyses how related objects are interpreted and represented by select Ugandan contemporary artists, including the 2019 history students of Margaret Trowell of Industrial and Fine Arts and the Uganda Museum. The difference between the above components is that the spiritual space, the artists, and the students represent objects as animate, whereas the Museum represents objects as obsolete. The spiritual space of Mubende Hill is a living space where people engage with ritual objects such as calabashes, clay pots, bowls, milk containers, and coffee beans in performative ways. Some of these objects are placed in various partitions of the sacred Omweyimirize tree at the spiritual space, and the objects become efficacious when engaged with through spiritual and ritual performance.

In contrast, the Uganda Museum exhibits objects as inanimate, static, and enclosed in glass compartments. As such, the objects are rendered inactive. I examine the way the museum exhibits, frames, and labels these objects, and how this shifts people's relationships with ritual objects. In contrast, I also analyze how selected Ugandan contemporary artists and the 2019 history students represent similar objects through their artistic practices, thereby opening up the meaning of these objects. This thesis addresses the critical need for a comprehensive reading and representation of objects within their living social and cultural contexts, a focus often overshadowed by museums.

In trying to grapple with questions of representations of objects, I employed qualitative research methodologies, including extensive fieldwork, analysis of primary and secondary sources, participant observation, interviews, and photographic documentation<sup>1</sup>. The primary

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<sup>1</sup> Photographic documentation of the object-ritual and spiritual performances was only achieved through personal interactions and participation. As elaborated in the Methodological Framing and theory around methodology section, I had to first immerse myself within the practices of the *Balyammere* for trust to be gained. Moreover, I participated in other

information was gathered from individuals at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, Uganda, specifically the ritual specialists and the *Balyammere*, select contemporary Ugandan artists, and final year 2019 art history students from the Makerere Art School and select individuals from the Uganda museum. By comparing objects within their original contexts to decontextualized objects in museums and artistic and scholarly representations of objects, I analyze various art historical approaches to objects that grapple with issues of object representation, functionality, purpose, performance, and the movement of objects. I utilize this analysis of objects to critique colonial and contemporary neo-colonial approaches to ritual objects and develop decolonial understandings of objects that are embedded in personal experiences, stories, and narratives of text accompanied with visuals from the *Balyammere*'s object-ritual and spiritual performances.

The study argues that ritual objects possess active agency, extending beyond mere aesthetic appreciation, and they are intertwined within their performative spiritual and cultural contexts. Analyzing these objects and their roles in rituals and spiritual performances allows us to deeply comprehend their meanings and significances as embedded in cultural, spiritual, and social fabrics. The study emphasizes a need for art histories that prioritize African-based scholars at the forefront of knowledge production and appreciate diverse, non-Eurocentric perspectives, suggesting a multidisciplinary approach to understanding art. A deeper understanding of the relationship between objects, rituals, and spiritual performances cannot only expand the knowledge in art history but also suggest alternatives to conventional object perspectives and practices, arguing for a comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and inclusive approach to understanding objects and art within their performative contexts.

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activities like sweeping, cleaning utensils and grass replacement. Engaging in these acts and the object-ritual performances made photographic documentation much easier. I had “somehow” become more of an insider though needed to engage in the performances daily to gain the position of an insider (xxxii). The word somehow relates to the fact that even though I was always granted permission (verbally) by the spirit medium and the *Balyammere* in context at that time, the ritual specialist and the *Balyammere* preferred the Tour Guide (Moses Sentongo) to document on my behalf. In this way, Sentongo becomes a co-author [collaborator] in the documentation of visuals in this thesis a concept known to be emphasised by Tomaselli and Dyll-Myklebust (2015:359) where research participant [Sentongo] becomes both a producer and consumer of the visuals documented.

## Introduction

This art history PhD study critically analyses interactions between human individuals and objects located at the Mubende Hill cultural site in Uganda. More specifically, it provides an in-depth analysis of the ways in which the *Balyammere*<sup>2</sup> relate to and engage with objects employed in ritual performances at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill located 3½ kilometers off the Kampala-Fort-Portal Road. There are specific rituals performed at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. These rituals occur at and around a sacred tree, known in this research as the Omweyimirize tree, a term detailed further in Chapter Four. The *Balyammere* regard the Omweyimirize tree with high esteem, considering it a vital symbol of their spiritual and ritual practices. The study challenges the conventional views inherited by a colonial and Eurocentric approach to the study of ritual objects within the context of Africa broadly and Uganda more specifically. This conventional approach tends to separate ritual objects from the situations and contexts in which they are used, placing them within Museums and spaces that decontextualise them. I argue that the depth and richness of these objects cannot be fully understood if they are separated from their performative contexts and that they acquire meaning and significance when they are used for their intended purposes. For this reason, the study poses the question: How do the ritual objects at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill constitute and communicate meaning through their use in performance, emphasising their inseparable connection to their contexts of performance and embodied interactions within this spiritual space?

Over the years, thousands of individuals have flocked to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in Uganda, which is home to the Omweyimirize tree, to perform rituals through ritual and spiritual objects and connect with them to enhance their ritual and spiritual wellness. The performances are carried out daily, according to the current Local Council 1 Chairman Fred Sebatta<sup>3</sup>, and usually, they serve three purposes: Firstly, for enlightenment about today,

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<sup>2</sup> Balyammere is the plural for the singular word *Mulyammere*. Balyammere is a title used at the spiritual site of Mubende Hill to refer to all human beings who engage in food intake no matter their status, whether specialists, ordinary people, or Basazamazima. Both the titles of *Mulyammere/Balyammere* are derived from the Ganda words '*okulya emere*', translated as eating food.

<sup>3</sup> I acquired a face-to-face interview with the Local Council LC1 Chairman Fred Sebatta at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill on November 1, 2020, regarding the spiritual space, ritual objects and their performances.

tomorrow and the future, and for intersection and guidance. Secondly, for prayer, deliverance, and healing; and thirdly, for spiritual power, treatment, and tourism.

The primary aim of the study is to explore the connection and interaction the *Balyammere* have with sacred objects and performances within the spiritual realm of Mubende Hill, as they seek healing and wellness of a spiritual nature. The ritual and spiritual objects which the *Balyammere* interact with include the Omweyimirize tree, clay pots (small and big), clay bowls, calabashes, Bachwezi<sup>4</sup> cups, cloths, and coffee beans as elaborated in Chapter Five. Through an in-depth analysis of the ways through which people engage with ritual objects and their related spiritual and ritual performances, the thesis argues that the ritual and spiritual objects and their respective practices gain meaning when used within their practices, hence, meaning is flattened when they are separated. The rituals and spiritual objects associated with the Omweyimirize tree are a manifestation of the Bachwezi people's belief system, which connects them to their ancestors and serves as an avenue for people to access their spiritual health.

This connection with their ancestors serves as a basis for understanding why people seek out and engage with the Omweyimirize tree for ritual and spiritual purposes. The study also analyses how the *Balyammere* relate to ritual and spiritual objects in their daily lives, as well as how they interpret and contextualize the performances of ritual and spiritual activities about the Omweyimirize tree. The Omweyimirize tree represents an ancient cultural tradition of the Bachwezi people, and its importance is evident in how it is passed down from generation to generation. I argue that the tree and its associated object ritual and spiritual performances cannot be fully appreciated unless the contexts in which they are practiced are considered for meaning-making.

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<sup>4</sup> According to oral tradition as narrated by my primary school teachers, the Bachwezi founded the Bunyoro-Kitara empire between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Bachwezi were believed to be demigods, meaning they never died but disappeared and possessed supernatural powers. The first Bachwezi king was Ndahura whose headquarters were at Mubende Hill. Perhaps the supernatural powers of the Bachwezi are the reason for the continued object-ritual performances at Mubende Hill

While ritual and spiritual objects and their performances at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill remain the primary focus of the study, it also examines how contemporary Ugandan artists expand their artistic practices and tell indigenous stories through their work by engaging with/referencing objects related to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. The works of Ivan Yakuze, Philip Kwesiga, Bruno Serunkuma, Richard Kabiito, Emmanuel Eroku, Donald Nantagya, Rose Kirumira, Fred Mutebi, and Sanaa Gateja are analysed in depth in relation to the artworks of the 2019 history of art students from the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts to comprehend how these artists have engaged with and reimagined similar objects in contemporary contexts to generate more complex meanings in contrast to problematically flattened meanings. In doing so, the study suggests a need for new art histories that are decolonial, that delink from Western perspectives, and that place Africa-based artists and researchers at the forefront of the creation of knowledge about Africa (Simbao 2017; Simbao et al 2017).

The thesis also investigates the ideology behind the placement of ritual objects in museums, with reference to the Uganda museum, where archaeologist Eric Lanning (1953) recontextualised vessels and beakers from the spiritual space of Mubende Hill to the Uganda museum. By scrutinising the rationale of exhibiting the above objects, including the Nakayima diorama. I draw parallels between the treatment of objects as either inanimate or animate, exemplified by clay pots, bowls, calabashes, and queen Muhumuza's attire, within Mubende Hill's spiritual setting and the museum environment. This comparison aims to comprehend the meanings of these objects in both contexts. Therefore, the thesis explored how different people assigned different meanings to the same/similar objects in different contexts. The thesis further analyses the recent debates over the return of ritual objects from Western museums to their locations in Africa. Chapter Four examines in-depth how people engage with ritual objects in their ritual and spiritual performances. By examining how these objects are enacted within the present context of the spiritual realm of Mubende Hill, I contextualise *Balyammere's* narratives about objects and their contribution to knowledge generation through ritual and spiritual practices. This is for not delinking objects from their performances.

## 0.1 Research Question and Goals

This doctoral research in art history examines how ritual objects at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in Uganda are involved in, and shape performances for ritual and spiritual healing. I argue that objects cannot be understood separately from their performative contexts, but rather as integral parts of the dynamic and embodied interactions that constitute their spiritual spaces. The study calls for new art histories that challenge colonial narratives, that break away from Western views, and prioritise Africa-based artists and researchers as the main producers of knowledge about Africa (Simbao 2017; Simbao et al 2017). The objectives of the study are:

- i. To examine the context of objects at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill versus the context of objects at the museum. I question the ideologies behind the act of placing objects in a museum and examine interpretations of the objects in both contexts. Also, I analyse the ways in which select contemporary Ugandan artists engage with similar objects and the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, and I consider the ways in which these contemporary artworks enable new art histories that emphasise and promote indigenous knowledge production.
- ii. To analyse and discuss object ritual and spiritual performances, through various theories and concepts from different disciplines. I draw on theories from art history, anthropology, museology, performance studies and postcolonial studies. I examine how objects and performances are related and interpreted in different contexts.
- iii. To provide a historical and cultural context of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill and critique the lenses through which the histories of this space have been written. Most of the existing texts reveal Western perspectives of representation and identification of knowledge. My research provides an alternative insight to critique and supplement the existing narrative by including indigenous oral histories.
- iv. To carry out an in-depth examination of the ways in which people engage with ritual objects in relation to their ritual and spiritual practices. By focusing on the ways these objects are performed within the context of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, I narrate the *Balyammere*'s stories of objects and analyze the meaning of these objects within object-ritual and spiritual performances at the Spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

I create indigenous stories and textual narratives that intertwine with images of ritual objects, aiming to connect the objects to their original contexts. This approach ensures that the analysis of these objects remains rooted in their performative uses without severing that connection.

## **0.2 Literature Review**

This literature review examines how colonialism and Eurocentric views have imparted the understanding of African ritual objects, particularly in Uganda. It emphasises the loss of cultural heritage and the need to decolonize knowledge, research and educational institutions, thereby prioritising African scholars as pioneers in the production of knowledge. Focusing on the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, the need for reading ritual objects within their performative cultural and spiritual contexts is expressed.

### **0.2.1 Colonial Shadows on Ritual objects**

The colonial and Eurocentric conventional approach to ritual objects is connected to the colonisation of Africa and the extraction of knowledge, objects and resources from their indigenous cultural, social and spiritual contexts. This approach has led to the loss of cultural heritage and misinterpretation of African cultures within art history studies (Ogbechie 2005:65) and within research approaches (Smith 1999:20). Eric Christopher Lanning, an archeologist for instance removed some ritual objects (see Chapter One section 1.2) he obtained from the Omweyimirize tree and placed them into the Uganda museum (1953). Additionally, in a report titled ‘A modern masterpiece in Uganda: Uganda National Museum Conservation Management Plan Keeping It Modern, Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife, and Antiquities of the Republic of Uganda’, Ssebunya and Eppich (2021:13) cite Sir Harry Johnston who instructed the collection of ethnographic objects from different regions of Uganda, as a key figure in the establishment of the museum. The explicit intentions behind the collection and relocation of objects by Lanning and Johnston remain ambiguous. Lanning's photographic documentation caption, “VESSELS AND BEAKERS FROM MUBENDE HILL, UGANDA *Reconstructed by the Uganda Museum*”, suggests a displacement for reconstruction purposes. While I criticise Lanning's decision to relocate the

vessels and beakers from Mubende Hill to the Uganda Museum, which changed their original context, I recognise that this action significantly contributed to raising public awareness about these objects. It was in the Uganda Museum that I first encountered these objects. This encounter in the museum provided me with the opportunity to engage with the objects and their history, thus acting as a point of departure for my study.<sup>5</sup> I argue that the meaning of the above-relocated objects is better understood within the context of ritual and spiritual practices at the Mubende Hill and not within the Uganda museum.

During face-to-face interviews on August 12, 2023, and August 20, 2023, at the Uganda museum, archivist Alice Nanyombi and curator Nelson Abiti provided divergent perspectives: Nanyombi clarified that the objects Lanning decontextualised were for historicisation, while Abiti asserted they were intended for preservation for future generations. In a broader context, Nur Sevenscan (2016) offers a general viewpoint on museum Object exhibition, emphasising that objects are often collected based on the notions of "visual interest and the desire for rational knowledge". Ritual objects are often decontextualised when they are removed from their cultural, social and religious contexts and presented as aesthetic or historical Objects within museums. Scholars have criticised the decontextualisation of these objects in museums. For instance, Ogbechie (2005:62) uses the example of Mbari, a ritual complex of the Owerri-Igbo people in Nigeria, to show how museum collections and archives "fossilize" objects and their cultural practice and meaning, while ignoring their contemporary transformations and adaptations. Ogbechie argues that Mbari is not a static or fixed form of art, but a "gestur[al] mode whose structure and efficacy lies in its relationship to the user's affective speech" responding to historical circumstances and social needs (2005:67). Achille Mbembe (2001) highlights the power dynamics regarding ritual objects and colonialism. Mbembe suggests that this process of decontextualisation serves to reinforce the dominance of the colonising culture over the colonised and perpetuates a narrative of cultural superiority

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the study focuses on the decontextualisation of vessels and beakers by Lanning (see section 1.2) as a starting point to explore the significance of these objects in their indigenous ritual and spiritual context at Mubende Hill. However, the study does not extensively engage with the excavated pots in the museum, but rather ponders on the broader issue of decontextualisation and the loss of meaning that occurs when ritual objects are removed from their original settings. The study discusses how similar objects known as *nsuwa* (Figures 4.8 and 4.11) are brought to life through the stories of Olwaazi and Ggumbas in Chapter Four. Further research is therefore recommended in studying the vessels so that they are recontextualised, the state in which they were before displacement and whether similar pots exist. Besides, as noted from formal conversations at the Uganda museum Abiti (2021&2023), Nanyombi (2023) and Ongwen (2023) clarified that there is less existing information regarding the vessels and beakers in relation to their decontextualised and restoration state (section 1.2.1)

(2001:2). Mbembe further argues that the decontextualisation of ritual objects in museums perpetuates a colonial mindset and reinforces the power dynamics of the colonial past. Ciraj Rassool in addition discusses the epistemic work of decolonisation and restitution in relation to museums within the context of South Africa. In reference to the District Six Museum in Cape Town, Rassool (2006:9) argues:

Making the District Six Museum in Cape Town serves as a powerful tool for remembering and confronting the injustices of apartheid within the histories of District Six, the experiences of forced removal, and with memory and cultural expression as resources for solidarity and restitution ...through visual documentation....Through being more provocative and undermining convention, as a direct consequence of criticism and questioning, the Museum boldly and deliberately recreated its 'live, generative space', ensuring that it refused to become an object, to be consumed, merely looked at and left behind untouched....

In the above citation, Rassool describes some of the ways in which the District Six Museum actively resists the kind of fossilisation and decontextualisation of objects that often occurs in the process of *museumification*. This is done by using personal stories, visual documentation, and creating an interactive space, ensuring that the history it presents is not detached from its context or passively consumed. Rassool (2006), Ogbechie (2005), and Mbembe (2018) question the validity of museum collections as sources for knowledge production and advocate for the decolonisation and restitution of objects. This perspective considers notions of history, power dynamics, and communities in the context of museums. The assertions made by Ogbechie (2005), Mbembe (2018), and Rassool (2006) are relevant to museums in a Ugandan setting, including the Uganda Museum; aligning with these scholars' perspectives on decontextualised museums, this study contends that the removal and display of objects from the Mubende Hill Spiritual Space disconnect these ritual objects from their original ritual and spiritual contexts.

## **0.2.2 Ritual Objects Performing in Context**

Several scholars justify the importance of reading objects in relation to how they are performed within cultural, social, and religious contexts. For instance, theologian Aloysius

Muzzanganda Lugira (2009:74) notes that “[ritual objects] enhance the effectiveness of ritual acts of prayer, music, and dance...during community celebrations and festivals for thanksgiving, purification, and communion ... link[ing] humanity with superhumanity”. Similarly, the philosopher and theologian John Samuel Mbiti (2015:143) notes that “without [ritual objects] rituals would not be as meaningful ... objects embody the beliefs attached to the rituals”. Both Lugira (2009) and Mbiti (2015) suggest the interrelatedness between ritual objects and their performances in connecting both the human and spiritual realms within the broader contexts of spirituality in African cultures. John Roscoe a missionary and anthropologist offers a more specific perspective on ritual objects and performance regarding Baganda spirituality. He asserts that the Baganda believe that ritual objects have supernatural powers, hence treating them with utmost respect and reverence. Roscoe suggests that the Baganda view ritual objects as active supernatural power agents that influence their [performances] of and within religious rites and ceremonies (1911:326).

In her book *African Vodun, Art, Psychology and Power*, Suzanne Preston Blier (1995:2) analyses the artistic expressions and cultural meanings of vodun, a religion and worldview that originated in West Africa and spread to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade. Blier places emphasis on the performative aspects of African art and how objects are not static but actively involved in rituals, ceremonies, and cultural performances. Blier emphasises the dynamic relationship between objects, the human body, and the environment, emphasising how these elements interact in various rituals and performances. She also notes the importance of engaging with objects in the contexts where they are made and used, including their use in rituals. Her work contributes to a deeper understanding of the performative dimensions of African art, challenging Western-centric perspectives and highlighting the cultural richness and complexity of artistic practices in Africa.

In relation to the Tiv people of Nigeria, art historian Robert Farris Thompson describes the way in which objects are brought to life through dance. He clarifies that an individual has the ability to set a top in motion or artistically twirl a cutlass, stating, that "dance" in this context extends beyond the human body. Thompson further affirms this expansive view of dance, common in sub-Saharan Africa, where dance is not confined to the human form but, in specific settings, can incorporate objects, imparting autonomy to them within artistic

expressions, intensifying the vitality required for an image to function as a work of art. Thompson describes the history of the arts of Africa as "a history of *danced art*" highlighting the significant connection that exists between objects and movement (1979: xiii). In addition, Thompson argues that the Yoruba people preserved their cultural identity through music, dance, religion, and art in the face of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. He claims that Yoruba culture gave them a way to understand and overcome the forces that threatened to destroy them. He sees the Yoruba diaspora as a sign of their collective resilience and willpower.

Art historian Ruth Simbao (2006:27) adds to the above discussion by analysing the relationship between objects and performances specifically through the lens of Africa within a Zambian context. She examines the meanings that are embedded with the complex relationships of the Luba-Lunda and Lunda-Kazembe crowns of North-eastern Zambia used during royalty ceremonies. Simbao argues that the meanings of the various crowns rest within how they are made and used with regard to materiality and assemblage through time and space in and out of relationships during the *Mutomboko* ceremony. This study reflects on the concept of art histories that do not separate objects from their performances and prioritise African scholars in knowledge production (Simbao et al 2017:13-14). Prominent within African art history discourse is Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie's argument concerning the dynamism and agency of objects in his article '*The Historical Life of Objects: African Art History and the Problem of Discursive Obsolescence*' (2005). Ogbechie (2005:63) disrupts conventional methods of analysing and categorising Objects and their meanings within diverse collections; prompting a reconsideration of our current comprehension of objects, proposing a perspective that views them as "historical agents" possessing agency and enduring influence over time. He uses the case of Mbari architecture among the Owerri-Igbo of Nigeria, suggesting that these ritual objects were involved in a gestural form of cultural practice in response to historical changes and contingencies, Ogbechie challenges the idea of objects being static representations of culture (2005:67).

The ideologies surrounding objects connected to context and performance have been made based on scholarly disciplines (theology, philosophy, and art history) and geographical contexts (America, West Africa, Central Africa, and Southern Africa) as highlighted above. Nevertheless, there is a lack of comprehensive studies on Uganda, particularly concerning the

spiritual space of Mubende Hill, except Emmanuel Eroku's Master of Fine Art dissertation in 2019. Eroku undertakes the decolonisation of Nakayima (Figure 0.1), overturning her colonial depiction as a wicked goddess through the portrayal of her in a range of diverse artistic representations inspired by the Nakayima tree at the sacred site on Mubende Hill (Figure 3.1) and the Nakayima diorama in the Uganda museum (Figure 2.5).



*Figure 0. 1:* Eroku Emmanuel, Nakayima Garment of Activism II (2018). Fabric, 3mm wire, binding wire, aluminium foil, barkcloth, printing paste on barkcloth, manilla paper, synthetic hair. 50cm x 50cm x 213cm. Photograph by Eroku Emmanuel (Eroku 2019).

In his work, Eroku presents these pieces as a means of reimagining Nakayima's power and identity, utilising art as a tool to reclaim his narrative. While Eroku's thesis covers elements of the Mubende sacred site and Nakayima diorama, akin to those explored in this study, there are some distinctions. Eroku expresses this through artistic representations whereas this art history PhD study takes a different approach. It interprets the same elements as Eroku but utilizes oral history to narrate the interactions between *Balyammere*, Catherine Nabukeera (Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium), and the spirits (Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, Ndahura, Bassalongo, and Bannalongo) concerning object-ritual and spiritual

performances, conveyed through oral tradition stories. This emphasis on the use of oral tradition aligns with the need to decolonise research and knowledge production within the global south.

### 0.2.3 Decolonising Knowledge, Research and Education Institutions

Scholars like Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a law and sociology professor have discussed the need to decolonise knowledge globally. De Sousa Santos (2007:45), as per the Fernand Braudel Center review critiques the Western-centric model of modernity, labeling it “abyssal thinking”. This concept establishes a stark division between metropolitan and colonial societies, effectively excluding the latter from the sphere of knowledge (2007:46). He proposes an alternative paradigm called the "ecology of pieces of knowledge", which aims to foster dialogue and solidarity among various forms of knowledge, especially those originating from oppressed and marginalised groups (2007:67).

Walter D. Mignolo, a decolonial scholar critiques the hegemony of Western knowledge systems and advocates for the recognition and legitimation of other forms of knowledge production. In his publication *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, he argues that the modern/colonial world system has produced a global order that marginalises and dehumanises non-Western peoples and epistemologies (Mignolo 2011: xxiv). Mignolo proposes the decolonisation of knowledge as a way of challenging the Eurocentric assumptions and structures that shape the production and validation of knowledge (2011:82). He defines decolonisation as the process of “delinking from the colonial matrix of power” and as epistemic disobedience, breaking the rules imposed by the rhetoric of modernity (2011:119). He suggests decolonial thinking based on the two pillars of geopolitical epistemology and biographic political epistemology (2011:118). In her 1999 work, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori scholar in the fields of education and indigenous studies, emphasises the importance of decolonisation within research methodologies. Smith critiques the colonial legacy of Western research, which has been used as a tool to exploit, oppress, and erase the indigenous peoples, their history, and cultures (1999:21). She advocates for a deconstruction of research methods, which entails “reclaiming, reformulating and reconstituting indigenous modes of knowing, doing and being; as well as conducting cooperative and respectful research with indigenous communities (1999:128). For Smith, decolonising knowledge means “empowering” indigenous peoples (1999:177).

Taking educational institutions created by the colonial masters as the point of departure, Mahmood Mamdani, a Ugandan academic advocates for the need to decolonize universities. Mamdani argues that “the African university began as a colonial project – a top-down modernist project whose ambition was the conquest of society”. He further asserts that the university was on the frontline of the colonial ‘civilising mission’. Mamdani undermines the [top-down modernist] agenda from the inside, by performing a series of actions that examine the historical heritage, rejecting some aspects, and modifying others<sup>6</sup>(2019:51). Kenyan writer and literary critic, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986:4) supports the decolonisation of academic literature and languages within universities, challenging the top-down modernist agenda by critically engaging with historical heritage, rejecting certain aspects, and modifying others from within<sup>7</sup>. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, the Congolese philosopher and writer, advocates for decolonising one of the languages (namely art) used within African academic institutions as a means of communication. Mudimbe (1988:19) critiques the Western narratives<sup>8</sup> that have enforced a colonial epistemic system that has excluded and silenced African ways of knowing and being. He further suggests a different approach that is based on a critical dialogue between African and Western traditions, and that acknowledges the diversity and complexity of African realities (1988:36).

Mudimbe's claim regarding the problematic Western discourse on African art (1988:19) relates to the need to decolonise art history and education within a Ugandan context; a concept that has received more attention in the field of teaching art [art education] than in the discipline of art history. Art education in Uganda was introduced by colonialists who had

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<sup>6</sup> Mamdani criticises the post-independence academic debates, drawing on the experiences of Makerere University and the University of Dar es Salaam, as well as the contributions of intellectual figures like Ali Mazrui and Walter Rodney. Mamdani's analysis delves into the role of the university and the scholar in shaping an independent intellectual discourse, free from colonial legacies. This reflective process is part of a broader endeavor to redefine and reorient the African university's mission in the context of decolonization and knowledge sharing (2019:48).

<sup>7</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o decolonises African universities by rejecting the use of the English language as the primary medium of instruction which commenced when he shifted from writing in English to writing in Gikuyu, highlighting the importance of using indigenous languages in literary works such as “Decolonising the Mind” (1986:xiii). Thiong’o further criticises the portrayal of African cultures through a colonial lens and emphasises the need for authentic African cultural representation (2).

<sup>8</sup> Mudimbe illuminates the concept of "colonial library," a metaphor for the Western-centric knowledge system that has historically depicted Africa as an exotic 'Other.' This system is rooted in colonial-era literature, history, and anthropology, which often portray African societies from a skewed European perspective (1988:188). Mudimbe identifies three pivotal efforts undertaken to encapsulate and authenticate the entirety of the African narrative. These include the assimilation of Islamic narratives and resources into the recently broadened repository, the establishment of a collection of indigenous texts, and the significant re-evaluation of anthropological credibility.

their motives and intentions (Kyeyune 2003:31). Founded in 1939, the Makerere Art School holds the distinction of being the first art institution in East Africa, as well as on the African continent. The school's initiation was led by Margaret Trowell, who had received her training at the Slade School of Fine Art at London University. Trowell's art curriculum was built around the art of her Western background (specifically of the Middle Ages), and to reinforce the supposed superiority of European art (2003:59). It is important to note that even if formal art teaching was the order of the day at the Makerere Art School, Trowell was also conscious about maintaining the identity of her students hence laying grounds for her Africanisation rhetoric (2003:77). The Makerere Art School has contributed significantly to shaping the Ugandan contemporary art scene through its graduates. Despite this, some alumni are proponents of decolonizing art education within Uganda's curriculum. Maria Kasule Kizito a painter and sculptor as cited by Bamaturaki Musinguzi (2019) the *Ugandan Monitor* newspaper editor argued that:

I strongly feel that more than ever before, we need to decolonise art education. Art plays a vital role in all societies. Men are led and governed by the use of symbols. That is why countries have national emblems, national anthems, flags, and coats of arms. All these are artworks. Art is the expression of society and if it is, then it must reflect the souls of the people where it is produced, where they are coming from, and what they want to be today and tomorrow.

Reflective of Kizito's call to symbolic renegotiation in pursuit of a decolonised present is Emmanuel Eroku's MFA dissertation, which challenges the negative portrayal of Nakayima, a powerful indigenous goddess and healer, who has been marginalized and demonized by colonial narratives. Eroku achieves this decolonial symbolic renegotiation through artistic representations with materials such as barkcloth, cowrie shells and hide, all materials that were demonised by colonialists (2019:21). In so doing Nakayima's power and identity, are reclaimed, as is her story as a valuable part of Uganda's cultural heritage and knowledge systems. He argues that this is necessary to revise Buganda and Uganda's histories, re-envision pre-colonial women's liberation, empowerment, and identity, and reclaim their power (2019:22).

In an online article produced by the Start Journal for Contemporary Art on the African Continent titled *Decolonizing Art Education on the Continent: Brief for the Launch of 'Another Roadmap Africa Cluster'*<sup>9</sup> (2015) at Nagenda International Academy of Art and Design the author discusses the challenges and possibilities of decolonising art education in Africa. During the launch of the cluster, the Academic Registrar at the Academy, Ms. Nalumansi Agatha, clad in a *gomesi*<sup>10</sup> chose to address the audience of English literates from across the continent in her Luganda mother tongue. This could suggest that Nalumansi used Luganda and her genealogy recitation as a way of reclaiming her cultural identity, resisting the colonial legacy of language imposition and the dominance of English as the medium of instruction and discourse in art education<sup>11</sup>. However, Nalumansi's act provoked mixed reactions from the audience particularly within the indigenous community. Daudi Kalungi, (2015) Director of Kampala Art Biennale, saw it first as “absurd” and later as a “performance”; Conceptual artist Henry Mzili Mujunga (2015) considered it, “awkward”; Ugandan visual artist Eria Sane Nsubuga (2015), described it as “futile”; and visual artist Samson Ssenkaaba (2015) called it “pointless”.

The pressing need for African scholars to take a leading role in shaping knowledge becomes evident, especially as the discourse surrounding African art continues to evolve. Mbembe” (2016:95) argues that “whether one likes it or not, Africa is firmly writing itself within a new, decentred yet global history of the arts...[while] breaking with the ethnological paradigms that will have corseted it into primitivism or neo-primitivism”. Prioritising the voices and perspectives of indigenous scholars is crucial in achieving a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the contemporary art scene (Simbao 2017:1; Simbao et al 2017:12). This perspective aligns with broader discussions on the decolonisation of art history, emphasising

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<sup>9</sup> Another Roadmap Africa Cluster is a global network of researchers, curators, visual artists, and writers from Uganda and across the globe who aim to critically examine and transform the paradigms and practices of arts education focusing on specific contexts and histories of the continent.

<sup>10</sup> A *gomesi* is a traditional attire worn by Baganda women. In the precolonial era the *gomesi* was made from barkcloth before the Indian introduced cotton.

<sup>11</sup> Nalumansi's use of Luganda in articulating African heritage is a crucial act of cultural preservation and decolonisation. It challenges the colonial legacy that prioritises English and suppresses indigenous expressions, thereby asserting the importance of native languages in scholarly and cultural narratives (Thiong'o 1986:4, Bhattacharya 2016:1). Her recitation of genealogy in Luganda not only aids in historicising African contexts but also provides art historians with vital, culturally authentic interpretations of African objects, countering Eurocentric biases and ensuring an authentic understanding of these objects within their indigenous cultural contexts (Milligan and Tikly 2016:277; Shivakumar:2021).

the importance of diverse perspectives and voices in shaping the narrative (Grant and Price 2020:9; Butler and Hahn 2021:2). The Eurocentric biases entrenched in traditional histories are increasingly recognised as limiting and distorting the understanding of ethnographic practices (de Sousa Santos 2021:21). Therefore, a shift towards Africans telling their own stories about the arts of Africa becomes not only a matter of representation but a crucial step in fostering a more accurate and inclusive interpretation of art.

#### 0.2.4 Ritual Objects and Healing

Ritual objects<sup>12</sup> and performances<sup>13</sup> are pervasive in human history, but their meanings and functions are often elusive. Historically, theoretical scholarships regarding ritual objects, ritual and spiritual performances emphasise the interconnectedness of ritual objects, rituals, and spiritual performances in generating meaning, aligning with the perspectives of scholars such as (Eliade 1959, Mbiti 1975, Blier 1995, Lugira 2009, Patera 2012,) who argue that ritual objects are imbued with power within various ritual acts, gaining meaning through rituals. This study borrows from Blier's argument regarding the power that lies within bocis [sculptures]. Writing in relation to bocis from Nigeria, Blier emphasises the social power that lies in these objects. She asserts that "Bocis, were not merely intended to be reflections of violence and danger. But rather were thought to offer important strategies for responding to the difficult social conditions in which people found themselves at this time". She further states that the bocis "were not indifferent or adiaphoric to the sufferer's plight but observed

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<sup>12</sup> In the context of this study, ritual objects are understood as sacred objects or substances revered for their healing power and performance within the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in Uganda. Objects like clay pots, bowls, milk cups, calabashes, coffee beans, ghee, and milk are believed to possess the power of the ninety-nine spirits residing in the *Omweyimirize tree* (see chapter one for definition). These objects are utilized in various healing rituals, including *Amakula* (gifts to the gods as a form of thanksgiving), skin rejuvenation, conception and childbirth, facilitated by the spirit medium of *Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima*. This study suggests that ritual objects can be an effective tool for healing as echoed through the studies of (Mbiti 1990; Blier 1995; Lugira 2009; Mpofu et al 2011). The spiritual power of these objects helps to connect the Balyammere with their inner resources and promote healing on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level.

<sup>13</sup> Performance in the context of this study refers to rituals and spiritual ceremonies conducted as forms of expression mediated by objects to communicate and embody sacred or cultural narratives. These performances are not merely acts of representation (see Chapter Four for further discussion) but are believed to enact a transformation or convey spiritual power through deliberate interactions with sacred objects such as clay pots, bowls, milk cups, calabashes, coffee beans, ghee, and milk. This interaction is both an act of communication and a means to achieve a specific state of being or purpose within the ceremonies, emphasising the inseparable connection between the object and the spiritual in such practices. See Mbiti (2015) Introduction to African religion and Makukula (2022) on Art, Objects and Belief Systems among the Wangoni of Tanzania for elaboration on transformative power and integral of objects within ceremonial practices.

as a means of readdressing wrongs and dissipating attendant anxiety” (Blier 1995:27). Like the Bocis sculptures, ritual objects such as clay pots, bowls, milk cups, calabashes, coffee beans, ghee, and milk at the Omweyimirize tree are imbued with power from the ninety-nine spirits at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. This power is meant for healing the *Balyammere* from skin ailments, reproduction, fertility, and financial issues for wellness purposes (elaborated on in Chapter Four).

This emphasises the intrinsic nature of ritual objects and their role in facilitating healing on physical, emotional, and spiritual levels (Roscoe 1911; Appadurai 1986; Blier 1995; Peltzer 1998; Okwaro 2013; Mokgobi 2014; Mbiti 2015). Moreover, the examination of the immanence of the sacred and its grounding in daily embodied spiritual performance, as emphasised by scholars like Tsuru (1998), Gradle (2007), Lugira (2009), Mbiti (2015), Binder (2016), and Laylo (2022), underscores the importance of spiritual performances as an indicator of society's spiritual capacity. This perspective challenges the dichotomy between the secular and sacred worlds (Gradle 2007:1502), emphasising the pervasive influence of spiritual performances in shaping societal attitudes and status towards art (Laylo 2022:76). In response to Laylo’s view regarding the influence of the ritual and spiritual over art, this study contributes to the field of African Art History by arguing against the separation of objects from their respective performances because the objects gain meanings when performed (elaborated on in Chapter Four). This study sheds light on the cultural and historical significance of ritual objects and their role in facilitating healing, emphasising the interconnectedness of ritual objects, rituals, and spiritual performances in generating meaning (Summers-Effler 2006:135; (Kaptchuk 2011:1; Monteiro and Wall 2011:236). By examining the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, this research provides insights into the intricate interplay between ritual objects and the spiritual realm, transcending the boundaries of time and place (Mpofu et al 2011; Mokgobi 2014).

The healing role of object-ritual and spiritual performances is a key theme within African traditional healing practices and spirituality. Mokgobi challenges the common misconception that traditional medicine practitioners primarily revere ancestral spirits instead of acknowledging a supreme deity. He urges for a more nuanced understanding of the complex and diverse practices of traditional African healing (2014:1). Elias Mpofu, Karl Peltzer, and

Olaniyi Bojuwoye (2011:4) draw parallels between African civilizations and the profession of psychotherapy, emphasising the psychological and therapeutic dimensions attached to ritual practices and performances. Lugira (2009:66) and Mbiti (1990:43) assert that in African religion, healing is a religious activity often attributed to God.

Some scholars emphasise the crucial role that ritual objects hold in the subjects of cultural and societal narratives. Gazin-Schwartz (2001:263), for instance, draws attention to the profound interlocking of material culture, ritual, and everyday life, hinting at the complex nature of ritual objects. This aligns well with this study's focus on understanding the relationships among these elements of ritual objects, ritual and spiritual performances within a specific cultural context, of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Patera (2012:3), confirms the notion that ritual objects are more than mere physical items. He sees them as crucial mediums of religious communication, intertwined with the divine. This position connects directly to the study's intent to examine ritual objects not just as physical entities, but also as carriers of deep-seated religious and symbolic significance. Mbiti (2015:134) in a similar vein, singles out the integral role of rituals in health, healing, prevention of harm, and purification, showcasing their function as practices transcending conventional Western medical paradigms. However, according to Blier (1995:5) "bocis [sculptures] function in conjunction with ... vodun energies both in protecting humans and in offering avenues of individual empowerment and change". In the same manner, according to this study, the ritual objects (clay pots, bowls, milk cups, calabashes, coffee beans, ghee, and milk) are directly linked to their object-ritual and spiritual performances through reverence mediated by Catherine Nabukeera (Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium).

The literature review has unpacked the impact of colonial and Eurocentric approaches on the interpretation and relocation of ritual objects, leading to a loss of cultural heritage and misinterpretation of objects. The critical need to decolonise art history and research methodologies, advocating for the inclusivity of indigenous knowledge systems and local narratives has been highlighted. Emphasis has been placed on the interconnectedness of ritual objects and their performative contexts, foregrounding their role in spiritual practices. By examining the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical meaning of ritual objects, advocating for their

contextual interpretation within their performative contexts. This approach not only challenges the static representation of these objects in museums but also calls for a more nuanced and authentic understanding of ritual objects, led by African scholars and voices.

### **0.3 Methodological Framing and Theory around the Methodology.**

This section delineates the ideological approaches I employed in gathering and analysing the information in this doctoral dissertation. This study centres on the multiple ways meanings are formulated through interactions with ritual objects associated with the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. The study further situates select contemporary Ugandan artists in relation to the discourse around the objects that are found at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill and related objects housed in the Uganda museum. The study's methodology is based on the principles outlined in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's text "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples" (1999), which addresses decolonising research methodologies. Additionally, it draws on the insights from Sociology Professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos's work "Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide" (2015).

I am a Ugandan engaged in studying art history and visual culture. This background positions me with the opportunity to explore the rich and diverse cultural heritage of Uganda more specifically the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, Africa and to contribute to the global discourse on art and culture. The spiritual space of Mubende Hill is a lived sacred space where I immersed myself within the *Balyammere*'s object-ritual and spiritual performances not only to acquire knowledge but to learn from the *Balyammere*'s experiences within object-ritual and spiritual performances. So, throughout this thesis I use oral history, to historicise and narrativise the *Balyammere*'s object-ritual and spiritual performances to produce new forms of indigenous meaning and knowledge.

Smith above critiques Western research paradigms and practices that have been imposed on indigenous peoples and cultures, and the need for developing methodologies that respect and affirm indigenous ways of knowing and being, and thereby support a decolonial purpose. Smith departs by defining the term research as a "dirty" word because it has been used by the

colonisers to justify and perpetuate harm against Indigenous peoples through exploitative and unethical practices. She advocates for a decolonising approach to research that accounts for indigenous principles, perspectives and priorities, informed by indigenous ethics, protocols and relationships and that seeks to empower indigenous people as agents of change (1999:1). As a Ugandan who, in some ways, is a member of the community [Baganda] being researched I conducted this research from an insider's perspective [Muganda] (1999:137) while acknowledging that in other ways I was not part of the immediate community [spiritual space of Mubende Hill]. While any outsider/insider status is complex due to differences in age, sex and religion (Naaeke et al 2011; Weider 2004), indigenous researchers need to research within their communities (1999:137). In this regard, I theorise this doctoral research as a researcher based within my community with an emphasis on indigenous ways of knowledge production.

De Sousa Santos (2015) aligns with Smith (1999) in emphasising knowledge decolonisation. De Sousa Santos contends that prevailing knowledge in the global North has suppressed the diverse ways of knowing in the global South, asserting that the pursuit of global social justice must involve a parallel effort for global cognitive justice. To succeed, this struggle requires a new kind of thinking, a postabyssal thinking (de Sousa Santos 2015:124). Such a pattern entails a new transnational political culture embedded in new forms of sociability and subjectivity (2015:48). He proposes a decolonial approach to epistemology that recognises and values the pluralism and diversity of knowledge production in the world. Grounded in de Sousa Santos's decolonial viewpoints on knowledge production, this art history dissertation, theorized by an African scholar, aims to generate knowledge from the lived object-ritual experiences of the *Balyammere's* stories. This is accomplished through a historical contextualization in texts complemented by visuals. The meanings of the object-ritual and spiritual performances are not fixed but fluid within various contexts (Mudimbe 1988:202; Hountondji 1996:41-42; de Sousa Santos 2018: viii). Beginning with myself as the focal point, this study emphasises the development of new art histories led by African scholars, aiming to create knowledge that breaks away from colonial and Eurocentric paradigms (Simbao et al 2017:13-14).

I employ qualitative methods to study how people and things interact in complex ways. I focus on the ‘depth rather than breadth interactions’ as suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2005:2), the authors of “Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data”. In September 2020, while waiting for the President<sup>14</sup> to reopen the cultural institutions still under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I made several trips to interview the selected nine contemporary Ugandan artists. The artworks of these artists were largely influenced by their cultural, social, political, and economic connotations (as elaborated in Chapter One). Structured and semi-structured questions were incorporated into a flexible interview schedule for my research participants (Two) at the spiritual space; for the nine artists outside and within Makerere University; and at the Uganda museum. The questions in the semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility and co-creation of meaning (Seven) in a way that respected the participants’ narratives and their views. This study relies primarily on individual stories of people's interactions with objects, focusing on indigenously embedded experiences and ways of interacting with objects. It is complemented by secondary sources, enriching the understanding of these interactions. Russell Bishop as quoted by Smith (1999:166) clarifies that “storytelling as a research tool is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing the 'diversities of truth' within which the storyteller rather than the researcher retains control. Bishop (cited in Smith 1999:145) further suggests that the indigenous community becomes a story that is a collection of individual stories, ever-unfolding through the lives of the people who share the life of that community”.

In that regard, on September 9, 2020, I went to Ivan Yakuze's<sup>15</sup> house where his studio is located, and interviewed him about his barkcloth works. I visited Makerere University and conducted face-to-face interviews with several artists on September 30, 2020 (Philip Kwesiga<sup>16</sup> and Bruno Sserunkuma<sup>17</sup>; Richard Kabiito<sup>18</sup>; Emmanuel Eroku<sup>19</sup>; and Donald

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<sup>14</sup> The current Ugandan president Yoweri Kaguta Museveni authorised the reopening of cultural institutions during the first Covid 19 pandemic lockdown.

<sup>15</sup> Ivan Yakuze is a Ugandan visual artist, a former student at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts and whose studio is based in Nansana municipality in the Western part of Kampala district. He has extensively worked with barkcloth as a canvas with a combination of different found objects.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Kwesiga is a Ugandan, currently a researcher and Professor of Art and Industrial Design at Kyabongo University. He is a former student of the Makerere Art School currently known as the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts. As a visual artist, he specialises in ceramics, painting and graphic design.

<sup>17</sup> Bruno Sserunkuma is a Ugandan visual artist and senior lecturer at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts specialising in ceramics.

Nantagya<sup>20</sup>). Then, on January 11, 2021, I had an online conversation with Rose Kirumira<sup>21</sup> and a face-to-face conversation with Fred Mutebi<sup>22</sup> at his home. I concluded the artist interviews with an email interview from Sanaa Gateja<sup>23</sup> on February 2, 2021. I analysed how these artists (re)presented objects directly/indirectly related to those at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill through their artistic practices, thereby expanding the meaning of these objects. Each artist provided their perspective on what/why/how they (re)presented specific objects such as clay pots, clay bowls, calabashes, and cloth within specific artworks. The data analysis results reflected social, cultural, political, and economic perspectives on object engagement.

I visited the spiritual space of Mubende Hill and began fieldwork from October 1 until November 30, 2020, and from December 27, 2020, until January 7, 2021<sup>24</sup>. During the former period specifically the month of October, I engaged in personal observation because it allowed me to gain an insider's perspective on the meanings and values that *Balyammere*<sup>25</sup> attach to their practices, as well as the taboos therein. With personal observation, I was able to carefully understand the object-ritual, cultural and religious sensitivities (Smith 1999:176; Coffey 2018:72) of the *Balyammere* at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill especially since I

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Kabiito is Ugandan art historian, painter, sculptor and graphic designer within the Department of Visual Communication, Design & Multimedia (DVCDM) lecturer at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts Makerere University

<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Eroku is a Ugandan and former student at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts. His MFA dissertation was titled, 'Decolonising Nakayima as a Wicked Goddess, Revisioning Her Power, and Identity: Reclaiming Her/Story Through Artistic Representations' (2019).

<sup>20</sup> Donald Nantagya is a Ugandan structural design lecturer and former student at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts Makerere University. In this study, I draw upon some of his Master of Fine Arts (MFA) work to illustrate the connections and disparities between his work and that of the history students in 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Rose Kirumira is a Ugandan sculptor, writer and senior lecturer and former student at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts Makerere University

<sup>22</sup> Fred Mutebi is Ugandan visual artists specialising in print making, painting and is a former student at the Makerere Art School. He has produced several artworks with barkcloth as a canvas for both his painting and printmaking artworks.

<sup>23</sup> Sanaa Gateja is a Ugandan multimedia visual artist known as the 'Bead King' who has produced massive tapestries using natural materials such as paper beads, barkcloth and sisal.

<sup>24</sup> I received financial assistance to undertake the fieldwork at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill as a recipient of funds for the field research from Professor Ruth Simbao through the National Research Foundation/Department of Science and Innovation (NRF/DSI) SARChI Chair programme in Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa

<sup>25</sup> Balyammere is the plural for the singular word Mulyammere. Balyammere is a title used at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill to refer to all human beings who engage in food intake no matter their status, whether specialists, ordinary people, or Basazamasima [a Luganda word meaning 'sisters']. Both the titles of Mulyammere/Balyammere are derived from the Ganda words okulya emmere, translated as eating food.

was an outsider in terms of my gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. The object-ritual and spiritual performances at the spiritual space involve delicate aspects of complexities with reproduction and skin (elaborated on in Chapter Five).

Personal observation also helped me avoid imposing my assumptions or biases (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:205; Coffey 2018:67) on the *Balyammere*'s object-ritual performances that I studied and learned from, and instead focus on [insider] views of the *Balyammere*. I acknowledge the complex and dynamic positionality as an insider-outsider (Smith 1999:137; Bernard 2012: 203; Coffey 2018:80) and that it influenced my interactions with the *Balyammere*'s object-ritual and spiritual performances as elaborated below. On the one hand, I was an insider because I shared some aspects of their cultural and historical background as a Ugandan and a Muganda. On the other hand, I was an outsider because I did not belong to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill's indigenous community. Anthropologist Abby Forster argues that native anthropology offers a critique of dominant anthropological practices by opposing the customary position of natives as objects and countering Eurocentric domination in academia. She states further that at the same time, native anthropologists have been strong in voicing the fluidity of identity, demonstrating that every researcher is both an insider and an outsider (2012:14). It is important to note that in this research I am not trying to analyse the various debates within insider/outsider anthropological research but rather trying to highlight their existence.

This study draws from James Patrick William, a cultural sociologist's definition of personal observation that proposes an unobtrusive method of studying social world aspects without participating directly with the participants. Williams further clarified that nonparticipant observers are sometimes *co-present* and other times may not be present within a naturalistic setting with the research participants (2008:561). Giampietro Gobo (2011:16), a Sociologist, adds to William's observation noting that the latter notion does not account for the co-present/present nature of the observer by mentioning that in personal observation a researcher observes his/her subjects "from a distance without interacting with them. This co-present methodology serves as the foundation for observing the *Balyammere* as they engage in their daily activities of prayer, thanksgiving, and homage with objects around the Omweyimirize tree.

During the first month of October, I established a daily schedule. I did not rush into participating in the sacred object-ritual and spiritual performances of the *Balyammere*. I arrived at the spiritual space every day by 7:00 a.m., greeted the *Balyammere* who had gathered in groups or individually, swept the grounds, and washed utensils, milk vessels, and any other ritual objects that needed cleaning as the days went by. I used to partake in these activities while ensuring I did not lose focus of my observations of object-ritual and spiritual performances of the *Balyammere*. Whenever I got a break between the activities, I would sit on my mat and make notes of my observations with pen and paper. This was my pattern until on October 21, 2020, when a *Mulyammere* named Lydia,<sup>26</sup> who seemed mentally unwell, approached me and asked loudly:

Nyabo, lwaki buli lunaku okwata peni n'olupapula? Biki byoba owandikako? Lwaki otuwandikako? Pulesidenti yagalawo amasomelo naye gwe oliwano ne peni ne mpapula buli kaseera owandika, biki byo wandika nga amasomelo bagagala? [Madam, why do you always hold a pen and paper daily? What do you always write about? Why are you writing about us? The President closed the schools, but you are always here with a pen and paper writing. What are you writing when the schools were shut down?].

I was startled and terrified by this confrontation as she had drawn everyone's attention. I respectfully asked for her forgiveness and replied, "Madam, I come in peace. I am writing this material strictly for study purposes. I unintentionally made notes on the spiritual premises while writing, and that incident marked the last time I did so. Lydia considered it disrespectful, and others may also have found it improper, it was a startling, daunting, and instructive experience. DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland (1998) emphasise that participant observation necessitates an open mind, a non-judgmental attitude, and a keen interest in learning from others. The authors further assert that observers must be sensitive to different situations, acknowledge potential errors and cultural shocks, observe, listen carefully, and be prepared for surprises and the unexpected (1998:266-267). Reflective on the above

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<sup>26</sup> To protect the identity of this *Mulyammere*, I use an English name, Lydia, instead of her surname. In addition, I will occasionally use fabricated names in this thesis mainly in Chapter Four without specifying which ones are authentic and which ones are not for anonymity purposes.

observations, I learned about the practices of the *Balyammere* more respectfully and beneficially to both the *Balyammere*, the ritual specialists, and myself. Lydia rebuked my fieldwork documentation at the sacred site, raised questions about who then has the research right, and indeed made observations of the *Balyammere* and ritual specialists at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill challenging.<sup>27</sup> In this vein of critical self-reflection, was the ethical question as to what information I should include if I write about these individuals, and what I should disregard?<sup>28</sup>

Participating in daily activities on the spiritual space's premises did not necessitate my acquiring an insider's position. Despite belonging to the same socio-linguistic group and clan as some *Balyammere*, I was still an outsider to some. To gain the *Balyammere*'s confidence, I had to be persistent and join their daily rituals, which involved placing myself in a sacred space's experiences. This is what Simbao (2017:1) calls "situating", a term that implies both physical and metaphorical alignment with the specific situations informed by lived experiences. Echoing Simbao's perspective, my journey necessitated a departure from Kampala to immerse myself in the sacred space of Mubende Hill to learn from the *Balyammere*'s personal experiences. While I engaged intimately with the object-ritual and spiritual performances, I aligned myself with the locale's spiritual and ritual narratives, which facilitated my acquisition of potential interviewees. Throughout the second month of November 2020, I had to participate in alternative ways of gaining the *Balyammere*'s trust. I engaged in participant observation in the ritual performances of thanksgiving by eating food

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<sup>27</sup> Lydia's unexpected actions compelled me to find alternative methods for observing and learning about the *Balyammere* and ritual specialists' practices. I adapted by documenting my observations from memory with pen and paper, a process akin to creating "written photographs," as described by Kawulich (2005:3). This approach was undertaken upon returning to my accommodation suite, allowing for reflection and detailed documentation.

<sup>28</sup> As observed throughout this methodology section, I address the issue of censorship by being highly self-critical in determining what information to document and share about the *Balyammere* and ritual specialists. I acknowledge the need to respect the rights to representation of these individuals and ensure that documentation serves both their interests and mine by using fake names to narrate the stories of the objects in Chapter Four. This involved deciding what information to include or disregard, particularly in light of the incident with Lydia, which highlighted the potential for perceived disrespect. Additionally, while documenting the stories of the objects in Chapter Four, I made sure I write about the narratives in a way that does not inflict harm on readers of my thesis because of the sensitivity of the object-ritual performances discussed therein. I made sure I used fake names (Olwaazi, Ggumbas, Okuzza Obugya, Nakitto) to narrate the object-ritual and spiritual stories of the *Balyammere* because of the sensitivity of the performances. Besides, I could not use the *Balyammere*'s real names because of how I learned about them (see Introduction of Chapter Four for elaboration). I based on trust acquired through personal interactions and observations of ritual performances to gain *Balyammere*'s consent as Smith (1999) suggests. Smith notes that consent indicates trust, with the expectation that it will either be returned or continually renegotiated- "a dynamic relationship rather than a static decision" (1999:136). I also made sure that I carried my ethical clearance letter and the consent forms (for formal conservations) whenever I went to the field for further affirmation of trust.

and fruits, singing, dancing, drumming, praying around the tree, sowing seeds around the tree (okusiga), laying a new carpet of spear grass within the tree partitions and the various fireplaces, and purchasing food items such as milk, bread, sugar, and plantain for the individuals at the spiritual space (elaborated on in Chapter Five). These acts exemplify the concept of “seen face” according to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999:15) who states that being visible to others, attending significant cultural events and presenting oneself reinforces one's belonging and credibility in a community. After directly participating in the ritual and spiritual performances, I believed I had earned the trust of the *Balyammere* and ritual specialists, but this was different because there was still a gap or a difference between the insider and outsider perspectives (Smith 1999:15). Besides, in some cases, there were *Balyammere* who only interacted with the object-ritual performances for a day or two and thereafter left the site. In that regard, gaining rapport was challenging. Nonetheless, I acquired the trust of at least some *Balyammere*, though not all, because people's capacity to trust varies. As a result, locating prospective participants was challenging.

At the beginning of my research, I intended to interview the late spirit medium Restetuta Nalubega, but she passed away in May 2020 before I began fieldwork. Her granddaughter, Catherine Nabukeera, succeeded her subsequently. During my first trip to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, from October to November 2020, I conducted ten interviews, one from each *Mulyammere*. I acquired two interviews from the specialist *Balyammere*, Moses Ssentongo (tour guide) on November 11, 2020; and Catherine Nabukeera (the acting Nakayima spirit medium) on November 21, 2020; and eight from the ordinary *Balyammere*. Among the later eight interviews, one was from a group of five Basazamazima<sup>29</sup> (Charles Sekyanzi, Fred Ssekate, Mary Katusabe, John Ssemanda, and Geoffrey Ssebuma) on November 16, 2020. The other seven interviews were each obtained from Fred Sebatta, the Local Council 1 Chairman (November 18, 2020); Tasha (November 19, 2020); Kadidi (November 20, 2020); Shaliwa (November 23, 2020); Ibra (November 26, 2020); Dudu (November 12, 2020); and Don (November 29, 2020).

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<sup>29</sup>According to an interview I had on November 16, 2020 at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill with a group of five *Balyammere* who go by the title *Abasazamazima* shortened as *Basazima*, informed me that the title *Abasazamazima* refers to a group of people at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in charge of safeguarding the Mubende Hill and general maintenance of the home of daddy and mommy, what the study terms as the spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

Among all the above-mentioned interviews, eight proved meaningful for my PhD study; and four significant interviews occurred during my second fortnight trip from December 27, 2020, to January 7, 2021. These interviews were specifically with Harriet (January 3, 2021), Kinyomo (January 4, 2021), Musawo (January 5, 2021), and Kalisa (January 6, 2021), the *Balyammere* with whom I had interacted during my first trip but was unable to acquire interviews with at that time. It surprised me to find that the *Balyammere* with whom I interacted during my first trip were ecstatic seeing me again. This made acquiring potential participants easier than during my first trip. Did I seem more of an insider and less of an outsider during my second trip? Moreover, what does this mean for the researcher and the research subject in terms of gaining trust and learning about the practices of the *Balyammere* and the ritual specialists? The *Balyammere* and the ritual specialists respected researchers like me more after prolonged periods at the spiritual space's premises. The departure-return idea was more fulfilling to the *Balyammere*, deepening the trust-bond relationship, and granted me the opportunity to acquire several follow-up conversations from Ssentongo (January 25, 2021), Omutaputa (January 3, 2021 and May 2, 2022) either via WhatsApp or direct recorded mobile phone calls regarding information about the spiritual space of Mubende Hill that needed clarity.

During my absence at the spiritual space, my research assistant, also the tour guide (Moses Sentongo) and Omutaputa updated me on the spiritual space's activities and any upcoming events that I needed to be aware. Moses informed me of the scheduled inaugural ceremony for the Nakayima spirit medium on December 16, 2021. In line with the Nakayima spirit medium, I needed to conduct more research in Western Uganda to trace the trajectory of this title due to its fluidity in terms of the various linguistic aspects. I took a trip to Kabale/Kaharo in Western Uganda (December 8-12, 2021) to acquire some interviews in line with the various titles such as 'Nyakahima', 'Nyakahuma', 'Nyabingi', and 'Muhumuza' attributed to the spirit of Nakayima. Before embarking on this trip, I contacted Angel Busingye<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Angel Busingye is a long-time colleague with whom I studied Primary and Ordinary education levels. I contacted Busingye because she was born and raised in Kabale/Kaharo districts of Western Uganda, where the potential interviewees also resided and where the Nakayima spirit titles of Nyakahima, Nyakahuma, Nyabingi, and Muhumuza are applied. Besides, Busingye was conversant with the local languages of Lukiga/Lunyankole, mainly spoken by the people who reside in the above Western Uganda districts and differs from the Luganda language of the researcher.



*Figure 0. 2: A photographic documentation of the current acting Bachwezi King Bashir Mulema. Photograph by Rwaboni Owomugasho (2022). Photograph courtesy of Rwaboni Owomugasho.*

During this research, Busingye helped me make calls regarding how to locate potential participants. The potential interviewees needed to be knowledgeable preferably having witnessed or encountered the women mentioned above with these titles to acquire meaningful interviews. Unfortunately, most of the knowledgeable long-lived individuals had passed away. Regardless, Busingye helped me acquire four prospective interviewees: John Balidi, John Basingwire and William Ntindimwebwa (December 9, 2021) and Regina Bashukana (December 11, 2021), but only three were beneficial to my study. Another relevant interview I acquired from this trip was from Bashir Mulema, current Bachwezi King (Figure 0.2). One might question the possibility of me contacting the current Bachwezi King, Bashir Mulema. Individuals occupying senior roles frequently need assistance in reaching out and arranging appointments. Mulema's sister, Rose Namatovu, initiated my meeting with him. I got to know Namatovu in 2018 because I used to buy herbal medicine from her, and I remained in touch when I relocated to Rhodes University to pursue my doctoral degree. Before embarking on the Kabale/Kaharo trip, I had an audio conversation on December 1, 2021, with Namatovu via WhatsApp, informed her about my research, and that I was searching for potential participants. She informed me that she has a brother called Mulema who engages in ritual and spiritual activities though she had not seen him for a while. Because Namatovu and Mulema

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were relatives, it was easier for Namatovu to help me request an interview from the brother. She helped me contact Mulema, who was initially skeptical about a possible interview from someone he was unaware. After continuous calls from the sister, Mulema finally agreed on a face-to-face interview, though this was on the condition that I had to travel with the sister to interview him. So, I traveled to Igongo Cultural Center in Mbarara with Namatovu on December 8, 2021, to interview, Mulema, the current Bachwezi king.

To conclude our meeting, Mulema informed me about his supposed officiation of the Nakayima spirit medium's inaugural ceremony scheduled for December 16, 2021, at Mubende Hill, where the Nakayima tree resides. Due to the uncertainty of the possibility of acquiring more potential respondents since the intended respondents had passed and the costly nature of the trip, the trip lasted for the estimated time. However, I remained in touch with the respondents for follow-up interviews and possible recommendations. Despite the short nature of the trip, accompanied by the few meaningful acquired interviews, this trip provided more depth about the Nakayima from a Western Uganda perspective<sup>31</sup> which this study used to relate the above titles with the Central Ugandan title of Nakayima. Besides, a better understanding of the spirit medium's ceremonial dress code was elaborated upon by Regina Bashukana, which climaxed in the reconstruction of Queen Muhumuza's attire. This reconstructed attire helped generate meaning derived from the varied connections between the reconstructed attire of Queen Muhumuza and the attire of the Nakayima diorama in the Uganda museum.

The controversies surrounding the Nakayima spirit medium became so pronounced during the inaugural ceremony held on December 16, 2021, at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. The contestations for this seat lie between the granddaughter of the former spirit medium Catherine Nabukeera, Mary Katusabe (Omusazamazima), and Buganda as a kingdom. King Bashir Mulema graced the ceremony as the guest of honor and the officiator of the Nakayima. King Bashir Mulema inaugurated Mary Katusabe as the Nakayima within the

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<sup>31</sup> In Western Uganda, the Buganda title 'Nakayima' changes to titles such as 'Nyakahima' / 'Nyakahima' / 'Nyabingi' / 'Muhumuza'. This suggests that these titles vary according to the linguistic context of the current spirit medium's location. The title remains constant but adapts to the language of the spirit medium's whereabouts. Moreover, the Nakayima can emerge from any region of the country and the world, resulting in different names for the spirit (Nalukenge:2022).

premises of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. One important thing to note, though, was that the ceremony did not take place within the official partition of the Nakayima at the Tree, though it was within the premises. Besides, there was no representative from the rival parties. Catherine Nabukeera, the current spirit medium, carried on with her everyday duties of attending to the *Balyammere* within the Nakayima's partition. How was the rightful Nakayima determined, especially considering that the opponents were not present at the ceremony? Were they invited but did not attend, or were they not invited at all?

I proceeded with the research process and traveled to Western Uganda, Kaharo, between April 15th and 18th, 2022, to reconstruct Muhumuza's attire. The reconstructed attire was slated for the above dates, but unfortunately, the process proceeded until April 24, 2022, due to the tedium of the creation process. Ninety-eight-year-old Regina Bashukana led a group of nine individuals in the generation of the attire. This process broadened my knowledge regarding the various information about people's perspectives concerning the Nakayima, more so from a Western Uganda perspective<sup>32</sup>. The reconstruction of Muhumuza's attire revealed ideas of embodiment and ceremonial clothing for the royals and ordinary society people in ancient times and, most importantly, exhibited the multifunctionality that the attire embedded. The attire was ceremonial and acted as a blanket in times of need. This attire was used as an entry point to discuss and relate the politics that surround the Western Uganda perspective of Nakayima with the Central Uganda version of the Nakayima and the Nakayima diorama in the Uganda museum. The analysis of both garments and their significant corporeal performance was conducted and discussed in more detail in Chapters Three and Four. In what way do the titles Nyakahima, Nyakahuma, Nyabingi, Muhumuza, and Nakayima correspond to the exhibited attires of Muhumuza in the diorama at the Uganda Museum, considering both temporal and spatial dimensions? What impressions and connotations are formed by the contexts of the two attires? Are perceptions and meanings context-dependent, and if so, what does that imply?

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<sup>32</sup> As per Footnote 20.



*Figure 0. 3:* A photographic documentation of the Bachwezi drums. Photograph by Rwaboni Owomugasho (2022). Photograph courtesy of Rwaboni Owomugasho. The image shows seventy-two drums of varying sizes, colors and sticks on top of each depicted forming the map of Africa specifically with three drums placed amidst them during the Drum Event which brings people closer to God in all Bachwezi nations.

The contested meanings regarding the spiritual space of Mubende Hill further emphasise the importance of the former Bachwezi rule at the spiritual space in this study. Besides, it clarifies the questionable existence of the Bachwezi, as exhibited in chapter three by some historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists. So, in line with the Bachwezi's questioned existence, this study engaged more with the current Bachwezi king, Bashir Mulema, through interview conversations as highlighted above and attended ceremonies that portrayed the existence of the Chwezi empire. *The Drum event that unites people with God in all Bachwezi nations* (Figure 0.3), conducted from May 10-12, 2022, dismisses assertions about the non-existence of the Bachwezi empire, kingdom, or state, as explained in chapter four of this thesis. These ceremonies provided this research with authentic information about the history, culture, and identity of the Bachwezi. Centuries after its supposed disappearance in the fifteenth century, Bashir Mulema's reign as the king of the Bachwezi was formally inaugurated with the introduction of the Chwezi regalia, including drums (Figure 0.3) and the flag (Figure 0.4), along with the accompanying anthem. Why is the Bachwezi's existence questionable even though they exhibit traces of history in the form of a king, flag, and anthem? What happened to the kingdom and the Bachwezi people during this extended *non-existential period*? I contacted King Bashir Mulema for follow-up conversations and clarity

on questions that required more information. Gathering information from individuals in positions of authority often involves additional effort due to information control. King Mulema regulated the information discussed in this research, asserting the authenticity of his information while dismissing all other accounts as inaccurate.



*Figure 0. 4:* A photographic documentation of the current acting Bachwezi King Bashir Mulema. Photograph by Rwaboni Owomugasho (2022). Photograph courtesy of Rwaboni Owomugasho. The image shows two gentlemen one on the left and the other right about to raise the Bachwezi flag. The flag has horizontal strips of colors yellow, blue, and white with symbolisms of the sun at the top, long-horned cattle at the bottom right corner, and a crested crane at the bottom left corner of the flag.

In line with the above contestations, this research required more depth and knowledge about the various stakeholders managing the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Before this research, I had set out to interview Ministers of Culture Janat Mukwaya (Uganda) and Sylvia Mazzi (Buganda), respectively. However, that was not possible due to their busy schedules. I contacted Stephen Nyombi (former Executive Director of Buganda Heritage Tourism Board-BHTB), who informed me that the abovementioned ministers I had selected would not have provided me with the information I needed directly concerning the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. These individuals could have provided me with general information about cultural institutions rather than the spiritual space.

Hence, Nyombi suggested individuals within the Buganda culture whom he believed possessed knowledge about the spiritual space. On February 4 and 5, 2021, I engaged in in-person discussions with Saava Mugerwa and Grace Mukisa Kayongo from Buganda Cultural Routes and Mosses Batemyeto, an Officer in the Buganda Tourism Ministry, respectively. The insights gained from these conversations served as a foundation for stakeholder narratives, offering both the perspectives of those in positions of influence and more personal narratives about the spiritual space. Personal in the sense that the individuals above provided views about the spiritual space that reflected their faith and that of their forefathers and the respect they revered for the spiritual space as opposed to the space being a tourist site.

Apart from data collected in the above manner, relevant data was also collected through participation in recent conferences, workshops, and talks that mainly focused on indigenous knowledge and museum studies. Among these gatherings was the *Indigenous Knowledge Conference and Intellectual Property Rights in Africa and the World (IK21)* conference held from November 8-11, 2019, organised by the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. This conference was intended to celebrate the International Year of Indigenous Languages and Nelson Mandela's legacy of advancing social inclusion. The purpose of this conference was to bring a diversity of scholars and practitioners together to explore, debate, and discuss indigenous knowledge and its relevance to epistemology and society and to continue South Africa's journey to deepening inclusivity in learning and research. At this conference, I acquired the contact details of the guest speaker John Harry Stanfield II, Chair of African Studies at the University of Mauritius, for a follow-up interview. We initially had a brief conversation during lunch break about decolonisation. Stanfield reckoned, "Mark my words just like I said during my speech, Africans should stop stressing about decolonisation, and yet we are still colonised. It should not be a question of wanting it but rather living it. We need to first decolonise ourselves." Responding to Stanfield's assertion, this thesis is based on oral tradition, oral narratives, and oral stories of how people interact with ritual objects during ritual and spiritual performances to generate meaning hence putting traditional African rituals and spiritual performances at the forefront of knowledge production.

Besides, other gatherings provided crucial information concerning museums and collections, specifically within the perspectives of Uganda and the diaspora. These gatherings included

the Winter Seminar Series Online Webinar by the Center for African Art and Archaeology held on February 16, 2021, where Nelson Abiti, the curator for ethnography and history at the Uganda National Museum, presented "Rethinking the Ethnography of Tribal Art in Uganda: The Mato Oput ritual practice, salvage, violence, and reconciliation". The Mato Oput is a traditional Acholi ritual where a drink is prepared from a tree (Oput) by grinding the tree roots to produce a reconciliatory drink that is shared by all parties in a conflict. The rituals in this study involve corporeal symbolic actions like touching, drinking, smearing, pouring, and eating, depending on the specific object utilized for wellness purposes. Another workshop/launch I attended was on March 3, 2021, by the Education, Justice, and Memory Network (EDJAM) as the official launch of Edjam in Uganda. The launch, #2 JUSTICE was framed as a conversation hosted by Nelson Abiti with Ciraj Rassool, a senior History professor at the University of the Western Cape South Africa, and Pablo de Greiff, an academic and human rights activist; chaired by Francis Nono the Edjam field office coordinator. EDJAM is a collaborative international group of researchers, educators, and civil society organizations working in arts, education, and heritage. This workshop elaborated on how mobile exhibitions have provided a platform for individuals and communities within the war-torn areas of Uganda to interact with museum objects specifically relating to conflict and reconciliation and narrate personal stories of these objects for healing purposes. This workshop resonates with this study in that it acknowledged human-object relationships and context by bringing museum collections related to conflicts closer to the people and communities who experienced the disputes.

In addition, the Department of History Archaeology and Heritage Studies at Makerere University, in collaboration with the Uganda Museum from May 6-7, 2021, held a workshop themed "Remaking a National Museum" to deliberate on ways of advancing the role of museums in transforming societies as part of the supra-national research platform "Remaking Societies Remaking Persons Forum (RSRP)" supported by the Andrew Mellon Foundation. An online discussion entitled "Decolonize the Museums" by Shimrit Lee, an educator, curator, and author of *Decolonize Museums* (2022) took place on July 23, 2022. Both the previous workshop and this talk emphasised the importance and necessity of a decolonial museum, both within a Ugandan context and on a global scale. This study delves into these concepts extensively in Chapter One. Moreover, it focused on critiquing the Uganda museum as it holds essential ritual objects that belonged to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, (as

elaborated on in the proceeding chapters). In June 2021, this study sought to seek information regarding the ritual objects (vessels) that were removed by Lanning to the Uganda museum from the spiritual space in which they were found; and thereby decontextualised, obliterating information about the Nakayima diorama as well as other useful visual texts related to the spiritual space. I acquired an interview from Nelson Abiti (2021), the Curator of Ethnography at the Uganda Museum who provided insightful information about the Nakayima diorama's original spiritual space and related objects. While there, I photographed visuals of the vessels and beakers, the Nakayima diorama, and the miniature objects housed together with the diorama. I had a conversation with Abiti (2021), and he informed me that reconstruction of the vessels and beakers is still underway because they tried to reconstruct the objects but have yet to be successful. Nelson (2021) also asserted that these vessels and beakers were only exhibited once in 1953. Surprisingly, the vessels and beakers are kept in the museum storage and await reconstruction. Additionally, Wartson Atutwatse, the museum's archivist, contributed valuable resources to this study in July-August 2020. He provided journals, newspapers, books, and pamphlets. These materials supported the study's discussions on spiritual spaces, museums, ritual objects, spiritual wellness, and performances (see Chapter One). The most problematic issue that still lingers in the Uganda museum, which this study observed, was the socio-linguistic categorisation of museum objects and the fact that the museum remains colonial in terms of its setting and curation.

This thesis draws on a diverse range of sources, including media articles, academic journals, digital content, literature, and visual media, alongside interviews with artists, *Balyammere* ritual specialists, cultural experts and museum professionals. These resources substantiate the thesis's claims and affirm the significance of oral traditions in knowledge dissemination within a decolonized African context, as noted by Bishop (Smith 1999:145). The data acquired from most of the above sources of information over the past years, more so archives revealed that ritual objects have always been and continue to be separated from their respective ritual practices. In contrast, raw data from the interviews revealed the importance of meaning created by not separating ritual objects from their intended performances within their original contextual framework. The students' and artists' choice of using similar objects was shaped by the cultural, social, political, and economic significance of these objects. Additionally, they were motivated by the desire to create art that resonates globally, influenced by the 'art for art's sake' concept. Nassireddine Dida, an assistant lecturer at the

University of Ecahid Hamma-Lakhdar-El Oued Algeria notes that “art for art’s sake” is an ideology used to suppress literary works that challenge colonialism and capitalism. It is seen as a strategy of domination to blind the oppressed to the realities of their situation (2022:61). In relation to this study, this ideology is explored in section 1.4.2.1 exploring how contemporary artworks by Ugandan students from the Margaret Trowell of Industrial and Fine Arts and select Ugandan artists reimagine ritual objects, highlighting their artistic value beyond their functional use. The visual arts in Uganda have historically grappled with recognition, often overshadowed by the utilitarian emphasis on education and societal development. This struggle is exemplified by President Museveni's reported remarks in the online *Uganda Monitor* newspaper, dismissing art courses as "useless" within academic institutions (2014). Such a stance reflects a broader undervaluing of the arts, which contrasts sharply with the "art for art's sake" ideology above that champions art's autonomy and its right to exist solely for its aesthetic contribution to society. The tension between these perspectives highlights the ongoing debate about the role of art in Ugandan society and its educational system.

#### **0.4 Thesis Structure**

This doctoral thesis in art history comprises an introduction, four main chapters, and a conclusion developed from four objectives structured as follows: Chapter One investigates the contextual shift in the meaning and significance of objects, contrasting the spiritual essence of ritual objects at Mubende Hill in Uganda with their often-distorted representation in museums. It highlights how contemporary Ugandan artists including the 2019 history students from the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts reinterpret these objects, challenging colonial narratives and affirming indigenous spirituality. Chapter Two focuses on the theories that frame ritual and spiritual performances, guiding the analyses and discussions of the thesis. The chapter draws on various theories and concepts from art history, anthropology, museology, performance studies and postcolonial studies to examine the analyses and discussions on objects and their performative contexts. Chapter Three focuses on Mubende Hill's historical and cultural significance, this chapter seeks to challenge Western biases in the representation of this sacred site. It aims to enrich the narrative by incorporating indigenous oral histories, offering an alternative perspective that revises the existing understanding of this spiritual space. Chapter Four centers on the role of ritual

objects in the ritual and spiritual practices at Mubende Hill. This chapter examines how these objects are utilised and valued within ritual and spiritual performances. It emphasises connecting these objects to their original contexts and meanings, resisting isolation from their performative uses for a holistic understanding. The thesis climaxes with a conclusion which highlights the key points of the thesis and explains the relevance of the information of this art history research and how it is applicable or related to the world views.

This study contributes to the field of African art history by examining the ritual objects and performances at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in Uganda, highlighting their cultural and historical significance, their role in facilitating healing and well-being, and their dynamic and embodied interactions with the human and spiritual realms. It also challenges the conventional colonial and Eurocentric approaches to the study of ritual objects that separate them from their performative contexts and meanings and calls for new art histories that prioritise indigenous perspectives and knowledge production. The following chapter delves into the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings that inform this study, as well as addresses the ethical and practical challenges encountered during the research process and how they were resolved.

## Chapter One

### **From Sacred to Secular: How Objects from Mubende Hill Lose Their Context and Significance in the Museum as Reflected in the Works of Select Contemporary Ugandan and Visual Art Students**

This chapter explores how the meanings and values of objects change when they are removed from their ritual and spiritual contexts and displayed in museums. It focuses on the case of specific vessels and beakers that were decontextualized from Mubende Hill, a spiritual space in Uganda that contains various objects related to ritual and spiritual performances for healing purposes. It critically examines the ideologies and interpretations that inform the museumification of these objects, and how they differ from the indigenous understandings and practices. It also discusses how some contemporary Ugandan artists engage with the objects and the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in their artworks, and how they create new art histories that emphasise and promote indigenous knowledge production.

#### **1.1 Uganda Museum and Ritual Objects**

The concept of a museum is not fixed, but rather subject to different interpretations and perspectives depending on the context and purpose of its definition.<sup>33</sup> The International Council of Museums (ICOM) (Museum Definition 2022), which is a global network of museum professionals and experts defines a museum as a not-for-profit, permanent<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For further information on different interpretation of museums see Ivan Karp who has published a lot about museums in Africa, Karp, I. and Kratz., C. A., 2015. The interrogative museum. In *Museum as process: Translating global and local knowledges*, edited by R. A. Silverman, 279–298. New York: Routledge. Ciraj Rassool has published a lot on museums, heritage and repatriation, Rassool, C., 2022. Rethinking the Ethnographic Museum. In *African Futures*, edited by Clemens Greiner, Steven van Wolputte, and Michael Bollig, 27, pp.56-66. Kim Gurney has published on alternative art spaces and ways of exhibiting art in Africa, Gurney, K., 2023. Breathing Room: Working Principles of Independent Art Spaces in African Cities. *African Arts*, 56(1), pp.26-41.

<sup>34</sup> The aspect of museum permanence as clarified by ICOM, and further by UNESCO and The Uganda Museum and Monuments Act, 2023 is subject to debate. the term "permanent" can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the context and the perspective of the museum. Some museums may be permanent in terms of their physical location and structure, but not in terms of their collections, exhibitions, or programs, which may change over time to reflect the needs and interests of their audiences. For instance, during a workshop I attended in 2021 at the Uganda museum for the launch of the Education, Justice, and Memory Network (Edjam), a collaborative international group of researchers, educators, and civil society organizations working in arts, education, and heritage. Edjam focuses on mobile exhibitions of collections that relate to war from the Uganda museum by bringing the objects closer to the war-tone communities of Northern Uganda as a form of healing through reconciliation. Similarly, O’Brassill-Kulfan (2023:35) notes that the Museum of Homelessness (MoH), a UK-based social justice project collects and shares stories of homelessness through various forms of creative expression. O’Brassill-Kulfan clarifies that MoH does not have a fixed location or building, but rather operates as a mobile and flexible platform that engages with different communities and spaces across the country (2023:25). For more information see

institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. ICOM (Museum Definition 2022) further states that by being open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing (Museum Definition 2022). ICOM's definition emphasises the social role and responsibility of museums, as well as their multifaceted functions and activities. It also highlights the importance of ethical and professional standards, as well as community engagement and participation. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Uganda Museum and Monuments Act offer a somewhat similar definition to that of ICOM.

According to UNESCO (Museum 2023) a museum is a permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conducts conservation, research, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for education, study and enjoyment. UNESCO's definition is similar to ICOM's in terms of the core functions and objectives of museums, but it also adds the dimension of development, implying that museums contribute to the social, economic and environmental progress of society. It also specifies that museums deal with both the heritage of humanity and its environment, suggesting a holistic and integrated approach to culture and nature.

The Uganda Museum and Monuments Act of 2023, (Uganda 2023:sec 3) which is a legal framework that regulates the establishment, management and operation of museums and monuments in Uganda defines a museum as a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage which is open to the public, accessible and inclusive and fosters diversity

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O'Brassill-Kulfan, K. (2023). 'People First': Interpreting and Commemorating Houselessness and Poverty. *The Public Historian*, 45(1), pp.25–50.

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2023.45.1.25>. Therefore, MoH and the Uganda museum challenge the idea that museums need to be permanent to be legitimate or effective, and instead demonstrates how museums can be responsive, adaptable, and participatory in addressing social issues and promoting social change.

and sustainability; operating and communicating ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities; offering valid experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. This definition is almost identical to that of ICOM, except for replacing the word "varied" with "valid" in relation to the experiences offered by museums. This could imply that museums in Uganda are expected to provide authentic and reliable information and interpretation of their collections and exhibitions. However, within the context of this study, a museum is a space of cultural preservation, education and dialogue serving as a repository of the diverse and rich heritage of the different ethnic groups in Uganda, as well as a platform for sharing and learning from their histories, values and practices, in this way fostering intercultural communication and understanding among the various communities in Uganda, as well as between them and the wider world. This study's definition reflects a more specific and contextualised perspective on museums in Uganda, focusing on their role in preserving and promoting<sup>35</sup> the cultural diversity and identity of the country. It is important to note that this study's definition does not aim to unpack all the possible ways of understanding a museum, but rather to establish the scope of this study. In that way, I adopt a particular perspective of what a museum is within a Uganda museum context.

Museums similar to spiritual spaces such as the Mubende Hill offer a space where the public can interact with objects of cultural or ritual significance and by doing so, are a source of valuable information. Hence, most museums serve as public educational establishments. Their role as educational establishments encompasses not just the acquisition, conservation, and exhibition of Objects but also serves as a principal hub for researching the objects<sup>36</sup> within their collections (Fangzhangyi Chen 2023:2). As they function as such, they become a center of focus on how they perform their role to educate the public on its respective cultural

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<sup>35</sup> The term preservation can have different meanings depending on the perspective and context of the people involved. Regarding my study, for the Balyammere who use objects in daily ritual and spiritual practices (see Chapter Five), preservation means maintaining the functionality and the symbolic value of the objects, even if this implies some wear and tear or mold over time (see subsection 3.2.1 Reviving the Animate: Charting the Course of Vessel Restoration). Yet, for museums as clarified by the various definitions within this study from ICOM, UNESCO and the Uganda Museum and Monuments Act, 2023, preservation means conserving the physical and aesthetic aspects of the objects, even if this implies limiting their access or use. Therefore, preservation is not a fixed concept, but a relative one that depends on the goals and values of different stakeholders.

<sup>36</sup> In this study, I define objects not as lifeless materials but as entities that hold an active role within their cultural and ritual contexts. Borrowing from Ogbechie's (2005:62) notion of "historical agents", objects embody and produce meanings, influencing and participating in the cultural and ritual narratives they are part.

heritage viz a viz the intricate processes of displaying, framing and labeling the objects. The notion of removing objects from their indigenous home cultural sites and placing them in museums has been critiqued by several scholars such as (Smith 1999:21; Kankpeyeng et al 2011:206; Nannyonga-Tamusuza, and Weintraub 2012:74; Mbembe 2018:4).

### **1.1.1 The Uganda Museum: A Colonial Construct Reflecting Indigenous Cultures.**

The Uganda Museum in Kampala is not only a repository of Uganda's cultural heritage, but also a testimony of its urban history and development. As stated in a report by the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife, and Antiquities of the Republic of Uganda (Ssebunya and Eppich 2021:13), the museum's origins date back to 1902 when Sir Harry Johnston, the Special Commissioner of the British Protectorate, directed the gathering of ethnographic objects from various regions of the country. It was officially opened to the public in 1907 at Fort Lugard in Old Kampala under the leadership of Sir Hesketh Bell<sup>37</sup> (Kyeyune 2003:52, Ssebunya and Eppich 2021:13). The museum's collection represents Uganda's colonial past and post-independence identity, as well as its ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. But at the same time, the museum building itself is a remarkable example of modernist architecture<sup>38</sup>, situated in an African context, designed by German architect Ernst May in 1945 (Ssenkaaba 2013; *Namakula* 2013; Musinguzi 2021). May's design reflects his vision of urban development and conservation, as well as his appreciation of local East African designs. He combined organisation, structure, and individualism with features of regional architecture, and created recreational areas near residential spaces. The museum building remains one of his major works in East Africa and attracts thousands of visitors every year. Ernst May's architectural work was so influential and climaxed in the Ernst May exhibition.

The 2013 Uganda Museum exhibition titled, "Ernst May Architecture and Urban Planning in Kampala," highlighted May's impact on Kampala's architecture and urban development during colonial times. The exhibition displayed May's architectural work across Germany,

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<sup>37</sup> Sir Hesketh Bell was then the Governor of Uganda when the museum was opened to the public in a small Sikh Temple under the Botanical Forestry and Scientific Department.

<sup>38</sup> Modernist architecture is characterized by the utilitarian deployment of contemporary materials, adherence to functionalist design principles, and the deliberate avoidance of traditional historical styles and decorative elements, predominantly in structures from the twentieth century (Ssebunya and Eppich 2021:8)

Nairobi, and Uganda, and examined his vision for Kampala's growth, contextualising the city's current evolution and modernisation challenges (Ssenkaaba 2013; Namakula 2013; Musinguzi 2021). The purpose of founding the protectorate museum as it was called at the time was partly to promote colonial rule in Uganda through an ethnographic project where objects of different socio-linguistic groups<sup>39</sup> were collected, exhibited and displayed to further the description of pragmatics as a basis of the modern nation-state of Uganda (Uganda Protectorate 1939:5; Deming 1966:2). In this way, the Uganda Museum was established as part of the colonial project of collecting and displaying African cultural objects for the benefit of the British Empire. Abiti (2021:36) contends that the museum, rather than serving the interests of the indigenous people, was designed to showcase the view of colonial administrators, foregrounding the diversity and exoticism of the people of Uganda. In this way, the museum functions as a tool of domination and control, by implying British authority and legitimacy in possessing and interpreting the material objects of the colonised population (2021:37). In addition, the Uganda museum project also realised the objective of dividing the indigenous people into groups that would be easily administratively governed (Abiti 2019; Mamdani 2012). The punitive methods<sup>40</sup> used to acquire the objects resulted in their dismal storage in crowded and dim rooms in Entebbe's first protectorate museum (Otunnu 2016:82). Although the objects were later transferred to Kampala at the Sikh Temple Museum built by Sir Hesketh Bell, their cramped display in wooden and glass cabinets insinuated the detachment of the objects from the indigenous communities (Smith 1999:56). Yet, the indigenous communities had no interest in the museum collections because the colonial administration intentionally relabeled the objects (Trowell 1957:72). This was perhaps because the public was never made aware of the role of museums within communities (Kyeyune 2003:53). Furthermore, the indigenous<sup>41</sup> audience was unhappy with the presentation of the objects because the colonial administrators misinterpreted the cultural objects with negative attitudes as witchcraft or fetishes hence the museum term of *Enyumba y'Amayembe*, [the House of Charms] (Kyeyune 2003:53).

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<sup>39</sup> The examples of groups represented in the Uganda museum include the Ganda, Soga, Kiga, Lugbara, Madi, Acoli, Karamoja, Lango, Teso, Nyoro, Gisu, Vima, Amba, Toro and Hima

<sup>40</sup> During the collection of the objects for the ethnographic museum as directed by the colonial authorities, some people were detained whereas others lost their lives (Abiti 2021:33).

<sup>41</sup> I use the word indigenous because it recognises the deeply rooted cultural, historical and spiritual relations that individuals and communities have with their land (Smith 1999:6)

The colonial administration engagement with ritual objects, many obtained through punitive actions and several through coercive methods as relics of primitive society (Thomas 2016:340), points to the decontextualising of objects in the museum space. Even in circumstances where the ritual objects are displayed as installations of religious and spiritual significance like the Nakayima installation (see section 2.4 in this Chapter), the ensuing rivalry over the ownership of the spiritual site at Mubende Hill and the holding of the ritual objects at the museum, signify colonial injustice in postcolonial Uganda (see section 3.8 in Chapter Three). The regalia were looted by the British colonial rule after the murder of Omukama Kabalega of the Bunyoro-Kitara kingdom who had resisted colonial rule in the western part of Uganda from the 1870s to 1898 (Otunnu 2016:91-93). Against this backdrop, varied perceptions of the museum objects arise: are they symbols of colonial injustice in a colonial setting or are they ritual objects still infused with spiritual significance? Within the latter framework, the broken pots and vases stored in crowded conditions at the museum present an incongruous image of ritual objects, starkly contrasting with similar items at Mubende Hill. The ritual objects at the Mubende Hill are carefully tended to by the *Balyammere* who use them in the respective ritual activities. The objects are placed within specific partitions (see Chapter Four) for use in ritual and spiritual performances. As such, the audiences that interact with the objects perceive them as a representation of the deities. So, the objects are transformed from sacred symbols to cultural commodities when they are relocated from their contexts to the museum setting.

Conversely, I contend that the socio-linguistic practices of the colonial-era object display continue to shape how the Uganda museum exhibits objects. By presenting these objects as art, the museum reverberates the colonial view of indigenous communities as primitive and reinforces the artificial divisions of socio-linguistic groups that were imposed by the British administration (Abiti 2021:31). As such, Peterson (2015:5) argues that the establishment of the Uganda Museum should be understood as part of the process by which British colonial rule was enforced. In the contemporary context, remnants of such divisionism persist, with the prevailing public perception being that these objects are associated with specific socio-linguistic groups rather than being considered objects of the spiritual realm. While objects of particular socio-linguistic communities might not resonate equally with individuals who speak other languages, this lack of personal relevance does not lessen the overall cultural importance of these objects.

### **1.1.1.2 Loss of Meaning**

The ideology of removing objects from their original location or context makes them acquire different meanings (Kankpeyeng et al 2011:206; Barringer and Flynn 2012:21). It involves issues of cultural heritage, identity, representation, ownership, and power. As Neil Brodie and Kathryn Walker Tubb (2003:1-2) argue, the removal of cultural objects from one context and their placement in another can cause irreparable damage to the cultural whole of which they were originally a part, while at the same time altering the value and significance of the object itself. This is especially evident in the case of African objects that were looted, stolen, or appropriated by colonial powers or other agents, and are now displayed in Global North museums or private collections (Mataga 2018:57). For this specific study, Eric Lanning decontextualised the vessels and beakers from the Mubende Hill and took them to the Uganda museum for restoration and reconstruction (Lanning 1953:180).

Because of this, several African scholars, activists, and artists have challenged the dominant narratives and representations of these objects and have sought to reclaim their agency and voice in the production and dissemination of knowledge about Africa. For example, Liberian academic Robtel Neajai Pailey (2016) calls for locating the 'African' in African Studies, by acknowledging and engaging with the diverse and dynamic intellectual contributions of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. Furthermore, some African artists and storytellers have used visual media to create new meanings and expressions for these objects and to challenge the colonial gaze that has often distorted and devalued them. For instance, an article titled “Visual Activism in Africa: The New Storytellers” by Carnegie reporter Aruna D’Souza (2019) from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, showcases some examples of visual activism in Africa, such as photography, film, animation, and digital art, that aims to capture the complexity and diversity of African realities.

### **1.1.2 Restitution of Cultural Objects**

The problem of decontextualising socio-linguistic or spiritual objects in museums has given birth to a public outcry for the restitution of these objects to their indigenous homes (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, and Weintraub 2012:74; Smith 2013:21; Mbembe 2018:4; Stevenson

2019:230-231). Western museums typically justify their holdings by claiming to have the appropriate equipment for the preservation of objects while African museums do not (Nevadomsky 2018:58; Woldeyes 2019; Tijani 2022:209). Achille Mbembe (2019), a Cameroonian historian and political theorist has often reiterated the need for the West to return these objects to Africa; while frequently emphasising the need for simultaneous acknowledgment of the damage and injustice perpetrated by the culprits (2019), numerous essays have recently emerged in both continental and international publications to stimulate discourse on this matter. Yet, the discussion surrounding the repatriation of cultural property is a topic with a long history, as noted by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr (2022:22). In their writings, Savoy and Sarr reveal that conversations about restitution took place right after independence, during the post-colonial period. They focus on key events that spearheaded the debate, for example, the 1973 Watershed speech by Mobutu Sese Seko President of Zaire that inspired the discussion on the return of colonial-era assets to their original home and resulted in the first UN resolution on the subject (2022:18). To offer additional context to the topic, Savoy and Sarr further explore the evasive and hesitant reactions of certain Western museums to restitution processes in the post-colonial era, with museums frequently withholding information about their inventory of socio-linguistic objects, or legislative bodies in respective countries failing to pass proposed amendments to counter the unlawful possession of cultural property (2022:55). However, restitution also faces many challenges and controversies, such as legal obstacles, logistical difficulties, political tensions, or cultural differences (Mario Laarmann, Clement Nde Fongang, Carla Seemann and Laura Vordermayer 2023:7). In examining the Uganda Museum's decontextualised objects within the context of this study, one wonders whether there is a law that protects such objects. Originally integral to spiritual practices and believed to possess healing power for the *Balyammere*, these objects have been stripped of their ceremonial function. Therefore, decontextualised objects in institutions like the Uganda Museum must be considered for restitution, to restore their ceremonial significance and maintain the cultural integrity of the *Balyammere* to which they belong.

## **1.2 Journey to the Uganda Museum: Trace the Journey of the Vessels and Beakers from Mubende Hill to the Uganda Museum.**

Several scholars have expressed interest in conducting research into the Objects and practices of Mubende Hill, and more so archaeologists as seen in chapter three of this study which contextualises the spiritual space of Mubende Hill highlighting the problematic ways in which the history of the space has been researched. After conducting an extensive archaeological research study in 2020, two Makerere University students (Charles Kinyera Okeny and Gilbert Gumoshabe), in collaboration with Elizabeth Kyazike from Kyambogo University, critically examined archaeological trends in Uganda from 1920 to 2018. Influenced by the Iron Age period and its impact on the Western Uganda environment, this study follows the works of Rev. Gervasme Mathew (1953), Eric Christopher Lanning (1953, 1966), and Merrick Posnansky (1961), all with a particular focus on unraveling the Bachwezi myth. It is important to note that Mubende Hill has also drawn the attention of scholars such as Emmanuel Eroku (2019) and history students from the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts who have conceptualised the objects at Mubende Hill and more so the spiritual space into astonishing works of art (see section 1.4 of this chapter). However, this section of the study specifically focuses on Lanning and the objects he decontextualised from the Mubende Hill, which this study refers to as *nsuwa* (pots) thus resonating with (Figures 4.8 and 4.11) in Chapter Four.

In his article, “Some vessels and beakers from Mubende Hill, in Uganda”, archaeologist Lanning (1953:181) reported the unearthing of three almost complete vessels within proximity of a giant forest tree. These vessels were found upright in a sloping bank of red soil, beneath layers of soft laterite and topsoil. Notably, all three vessels were badly cracked, attributed to both the pressure of the earth and the intrusion of roots. Following their extraction, these fragments were transported to the Uganda Museum for restoration. In a subsequent article in 1966, ‘Excavations at Mubende Hills’, Lanning provides further photographic documentation of excavation near an ancient ditch and an [Omweyimirize tree], which he refers to as “the witch tree”<sup>42</sup>. Here, two large pots were discovered resting upright

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<sup>42</sup> The use of the term “Witch tree” by Lanning reflects a Eurocentric and Christian colonial perspective that decontextualises and potentially misrepresents the spiritual and cultural beliefs of the Mubende Hill and its Balyammere community. This terminology fails to acknowledge the indigenous meanings and values associated with the Nakayima tree, as it is known by the Balyammere and as the Omweyimirize tree in this study. Such terminology is similar to the colonial administrator’s unjust framing of objects within the Uganda Museum as *Enyumba y’Amayembe*, or “the House of Charms” (5), and the depiction of Nakayima as a wicked goddess (xxiii). Smith (1999) refers to this as “dirty” research methodologies used by colonizers to exploit indigenous people (xxxii). Therefore, my study critiques and subverts colonial ideologies regarding objects and their respective contexts of performance for effective meaning-making. It also discusses the need for decolonizing methodologies and respecting indigenous ways of knowing and being (xxxiii).

in compact red soil, with a third globular pot also found, decorated with a roulette design and smears of red paint – intriguingly, these vessels contained fragments of other pots, cowrie shells, animal bone fragments, and small querns (1966:155). The relocation of the *nsuwa* from Mubende Hill to the Uganda Museum was not clearly stated by Lanning other than his decontextualisation of the objects for restoration<sup>43</sup> (1953:180).

During a private conversation Nanyombi (2023), affirmed that Lanning recontextualised the pots during a period when Europeans, particularly missionaries, were actively discouraging the “African way of life”. In that regard, objects such as pots, horns, barkcloth, and cowrie shells were 'captured' in service of a colonial agenda, which led to the founding of the Uganda Museum. This was under Sir Harry Johnston's directive to collect ethnographic objects across the country, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. And yet, during a face-to-face conversation at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, Musawo (2020) clarified that when a clay object, more so a pot crack or breaks at Maama Nakayima’s palace, it is not thrown away but rather kept in a special place at the spiritual space known as *ekiwumuliro*<sup>44</sup> (Figure 1.1). *Ekiwumuliro* is loosely translated as “where to rest from”. Musawo further gave an example of *olugyo* (pot shard) oftentimes used by some *Balyammere* to extract *emumbwa*, a herb used by pregnant women taken during pregnancy to reduce labor pains (Namarome 1998; Kamatenesi-Mugisha and Uriga 2007) while at the spiritual-space but only upon being instructed by Maama Nakayima. Moreover, Mbiti (2015:115) lamented that during funeral rites within some African societies, pots are deliberately broken in houses to indicate the loss of someone and as a way of coming to terms with the agonies and sorrows of death hence ritualising death. So, this clarifies that the meanings of pots are not fixed (Mudimbe 1988:202; Hountondji 1996:41-42; de Sousa Santos 2018: viii-ix). The pots acquire a different meaning when they crack or break, in this state they become sherds that are used for *emumbwa*, a medicinal herb discussed above. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the pots that Lanning extracted are thought to be from a sacred space; the proximity of the vessels (pots) to the giant forest tree and “the witch tree”, coupled with their contents

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<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that during my fieldwork trip to the Uganda Museum in June 2021, I observed the archives of the vessels. I ascertained that the vessels are currently stored in the museum storage. Nelson Abiti (Curator of Ethnography Uganda museum) informed me that efforts were made to reconstruct the vessels, though they cracked again.

<sup>44</sup> *Ekiwumuliro* can mean a place where an object is stored after it’s damaged, serving its end purpose. *Ekiwumuliro* can also mean a place where an object rests after cracking or breaking before transitioning to serve another purpose, as in the case of the pot shard above (*olugyo*).

(Lanning 1953, 1966), suggests they may have held significant religious or cultural value for the people who originally placed them there (Mbaya and Chetty 2012:574-575; Ngobese 2018:5). Lanning and colleagues, including Schmidt (1990), Reid (1994), and Pennacini (2009), were cognisant of the religious significance of Mubende Hill, driven by their keen interest in unraveling the enigmatic Bachwezi empire. Nevertheless, the relocation of vessels and beakers from their original religious context at Mubende Hill, as indicated by this study, might have disturbed their cultural and spiritual importance for the indigenous community, which views Mubende Hill as a sacred site. This presents an ethical challenge often encountered in archaeology balancing the pursuit of knowledge with respect for the cultural and religious beliefs of the indigenous communities who have a stake in their heritage (Smith 2013:17; Kinyera et al. 2020:18).



Figure 1.1: Ekiwumuliro. Photograph by Claire Nalukenge (2020) This image shows several ritual objects such as calabashes, a spearhead, a charcoal stove, baskets, a cup, cotton cloth, barkcloth, a mat, a jerrycan, a *kikooyi* [cotton cloth], smoking pipes and pots placed beside a tree surrounded by thickets within the premises of the Omweyimirize tree.

In the traditional African context, items such as vases, beakers, and sherds are construed as utilitarian objects with a role in ritual ceremonies. Their association with religious or cultural rituals imbues them with perceived spiritual powers. On other occasions, they are associated with particular gods or deities (Patera, 2012:2-15). Outside the spiritual space, in museums, it

has been argued by some scholars that these objects lose their meaning because of the manner they are handled, displayed or framed (Brodie and Tubb 2003:1-2; Kankpeyeng et al 2011:206; Barringer and Flynn 2012:21). It is upon this argument that numerous petitions have been made to return the “looted” Objects many with spiritual or divine connotations to their original home (Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub 2012:74; Smith 2013:21; Mbembe 2018:4; Mataga 2018:57; Stevenson 2019:230-231;).

The Objects in the Uganda Museum, acquired from the Nakayima sacred space on Mubende Hill in 1953 (Lanning 1953:180), can be considered obsolete primarily due to the methods employed in obtaining them. As previously explained in this chapter, the objects were seized through force during conflicts with indigenous communities (Ssebunya and Eppich 2021:13). The forcible acquisition of these objects by colonialists generated resentment within the indigenous community, resulting in the desecration of the ritual items. Besides, the 1966 abolition of the monarchies was underway as the indigenous people were no longer able to exercise their religious beliefs with ritual and spiritual object affiliation (Kyeyune 2003:197; Nakazibwe 2005:11). Consequently, this interfered with the spiritual spaces as they lost their sanctity, and the objects ceased to be regarded as sacred (2005:142). This state is compounded by how objects were damaged on being removed from the site by colonial administrators such as Lanning (1953:181). Indeed, the objects were stored in cabinets and treated as items of minimal value (Otunnu 2016:82). The desecration of spiritual spaces resulted in a loss of sanctity, diminishing the reverence once held for sacred objects (Nakazibwe 2005:1420). This situation was exacerbated by the colonial administrators' mishandling of these objects. Upon removal, the items suffered damage (Lanning 1953:181) and were subsequently stored without due care, relegated to the status of trivial Objects (Otunnu 2016:82).

While the museum objects were later transferred to the ethnographic museum, later renamed the Uganda Museum, the process of cataloging the objects rendered them as relics of a ‘primitive society’ (Abiti 2019; Kyeyune 2003:24; Nakazibwe 2005:6). In many cases, the catalog was developed from the descriptive work of the colonial administrative officers, the police and the judiciary services (Trowell 1957:72). Young police recruits were known to provide information used for the labels of the individual Objects, also assisting in the

illustration of indigenous knowledge (74). The information provided was important in realising the objectives of the museum project aimed to 'civilize' natives within an enlightened ethnographic framework. However, it overlooked crucial indigenous knowledge. This oversight weakened the basis for future cultural restoration and preservation efforts in Ugandan society (Abiti 2021:35). I conclude that the denial of indigenous communities access to their sacred objects, coupled with the dependence on the elite to provide information for their interpretation to audiences, relegates these objects to a position of minimal significance.

### 1.2.1 Reviving the Animate: Charting the Course of Vessel Restoration

Regrettably, there is a dearth of information regarding the specific restoration efforts undertaken for the vessels (pots locally known as *nsuwa* as per this study) that archaeologist Lanning displaced in 1952 from Mubende Hill to the Uganda museum. This was confirmed in interviews with current museum officials Nelson Abiti<sup>45</sup> (2021 and 2023), Alice Nanyombi<sup>46</sup> (2023), and Dismas Ongwen<sup>47</sup> (2023). They further highlighted the limited documentation of the objects brought into the museum during the early years of 1952 when Lanning displaced the vessels to the museum for restoration (Abiti 2021 and 2023, Alice Nanyombi 2023, Dismas Ongwen 2023). In a conversation with Ongwen (2023), he provided an in-depth account of his methodology for collecting and preserving ethnographic objects such as pots. He meticulously ensures that no fragments are left at the original site, then proceeds to clean the pots using soap and a sponge, a process akin to cleaning household utensils. The pots are then sun-dried over a colorless plastic bag, and subsequently either incorporated into an existing collection (Figure 1.2) or subjected to restoration procedures if necessary. This comprehensive process stresses the importance of preserving the original state of these ethnographic objects while ensuring their longevity for future generations to appreciate.

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<sup>45</sup> Abiti Nelson Adebo is the curator of ethnography at the Uganda museum and has written extensively about the museum objects.

<sup>46</sup> Alice Nanyombi is the archivist at the Uganda museum interviewed regarding the decontextualised Mubende Hill objects.

<sup>47</sup> Dismas Ongwen is the archaeologist at the Uganda museum responsible for collecting ethnographic materials and restoring the objects that require reconstruction.



Figure 1.2: Photographic documentation of a partially restored pot. Photograph by Claire Nalukenge (2022). This is an image showing a cracked pot with its fragments from the late Iron Age working within the Uganda museum compartment which is undergoing reconstruction.

Moreover, Ongwen's comparison of cleaning ethnographic objects to household utensils suggests that these objects were formerly created for everyday use. Many ethnographic objects, such as pots, were indeed used in daily life (Kwesiga, 2005:137, Lugira 2009:95 and Tumusiime, 2012:113) or for special occasions like rituals (Lugira 2009:95, Mbiti 2015:22, Mataga 2018:57). However, it's important to note that while the original use of the pots may have been commonplace, once they become part of a museum collection, their context changes. They are no longer functional objects but have become historical Objects (Kankpeyeng et al 2011:206; Barringer and Flynn 2012:21). This shift in context often necessitates a change in how they are handled and cared for. Yet, within this study, the green-like algae/mold on the large pots within Bannalogo's partition (Figure 4.8) and the small pots within Bassalongo's partition when viewed up close at the Omweyimirize tree attest to their test of time as used for generations. Turner (1973:1100) and Olupona (2014:139) argue that rituals and symbols hold significant roles within specific cultural or religious contexts in certain African cultures.

Throughout my entire fieldwork trip at the spiritual space of Mubende in October-November 2020, the pots within Bannalogo and Bassalongo's partitions retained their algae coloration state within and outside the object-ritual and spiritual performance (see Chapter Four of this study). While mold is generally harmless, in either the context of museums or sacred spaces, it produces spores that can cause a variety of health issues, including allergic reactions and respiratory problems (Chauhan et al, 2022). Therefore, the presence of mold on a ritual object might raise concerns about the health risks associated with its use. Within museum contexts such as the Uganda museum, the objects are cleaned at certain periods to prevent them from acquiring mold (Ongwen 2023). Yet at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, mold on pot is part of the object-ritual and spiritual performances. Therefore, understanding and interpreting the restoration of the vessels which were decontextualised from Mubende Hill to the Uganda museum for reconstruction requires a nuanced approach that considers their original use, their current state, and the cultural or religious context in which they are used. This underlines the complexity and richness of studying ethnographic objects and the importance of preserving them for future generations.

### 1.2.2. Post-Exhibition Fate: An Exploration of the Vessels' Journey Post-Display

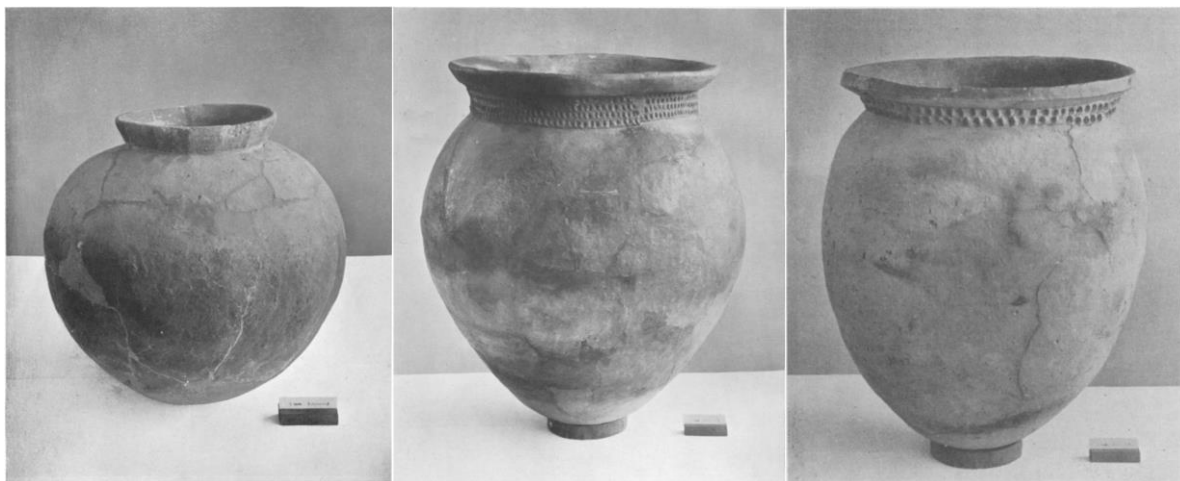


Figure 1.3: Photographic documentation of vessels excavated from Mubende Hill, Uganda and reconstructed by the Uganda Museum. Photographs by Eric Christopher Lanning. (Lanning 1953: Hill181-182).

Following their restoration (Figure 1.3) between 1952 and 1953, the vessels displaced from Mubende Hill to the Uganda museum were displayed at the entrance of the museum as part of the history collection (Abiti, 2023; Nanyombi 2023). This display, curated by Clause

Wachmann, was part of the “ethnographic collection” and was open for public viewing. Regrettably, no records are capturing the public’s perception of these displaced cultural objects. The vessels remained on display until 1956 when the museum was closed for roof renovation (Rivard 1984:11, Ssebunya and Eppich 2021:62; Abiti 2023; Nanyombi 2023). Tragically, the vessels were damaged during this renovation, suggesting a prioritisation of the building’s structural integrity over the preservation of its contents. Upon completion of the museum renovation in 1958 (Ssebunya and Eppich 2021:62) the vessels were removed and contextualised to the museum storage (Figure 1.4), where they await a second reconstruction phase (Abiti, 2023; Nanyombi 2023).



Figure 1.4: Photographic documentation of the damaged cracked vessels within the Uganda museum store. Photograph by Claire Nalukenge (2022).

While on display, the vessels provided an opportunity for museum visitors to interact with the objects and learn about their history (Nanyombi 2023). Nanyombi further argued that it is better to preserve cultural objects in the museum, more so during times of conflict because it prevents them from damage and better preservation for future generations. This study contends that there is a conflict between maintaining the spiritual and physical integrity of the objects such as the vessels above within the museum context that purports to preserve objects. The displacement of the vessels to the museum storage has resulted in them being hidden, detached, and devoid of interaction, reducing them to mere objects gathering dust and cobwebs (Reid 2017: xxii). This is in stark contrast to their spiritual significance within the

context of Mubende Hill,<sup>48</sup> where, even in their cracked state, the vessels hold meaning through their involvement in object-ritual and spiritual performances.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the current state of the vessels within the museum storage does them an injustice, rendering them hidden and lifeless. I argue for a more respectful way of preserving and exhibiting objects such as the vessels above of cultural importance in the museum, which involves showing them in their damaged condition so that visitors can engage with them regardless.

### **1.2.3. The Power of Place, Object, and Ritual: The Spiritual Animation of the Vessels from Mubende Hill**

Objects discovered at the Nakayima tree on Mubende Hill are believed to be imbued with spiritual powers. The vessels, referred to as *nsuwa* as discussed in Chapter Four (Figures 4.8 and 4.11) of this study, transcend their mere material existence and, rather, attain a spiritual animation, fundamentally interwoven with the locale of their origin [spiritual space of Mubende Hill]. These *nsuwa*, imposing in their diverse forms and hues, are remarkably arranged within the partition of Bannalongo's spirits<sup>50</sup> in an entourage-like manner (with clay pots on either wall of the partition with a space in between). The *nsuwa*, bearing a distinct resemblance and intrinsic essence, are allocated a specific role and purpose within the spiritual premises of this sacred space. Moreover, these particular *nsuwa* are inextricably linked to the spirits known as Bannalongo, (See Olwaazi and the Ggumbas stories in Chapter Four) becoming central instruments in object-ritual and spiritual performances, as elucidated in the ensuing chapter. It is crucial to note that the choice of *nsuwa* employed in these rituals is contingent upon the specific ailment, problem, or the nature of gratitude the medium seeks to convey to the deities. This is even exemplified within the various stories of Olwaazi, the Ggumbas, Nakitto and Musa where a *Mulyammere* who wishes to engage in prayer first

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<sup>48</sup> See section 1.2.1 for an elaborate discussion.

<sup>49</sup> see also Chapter Four, section on Bannalongo.

<sup>50</sup> Bannalongo's spirits are located in the seventh partition of the Omweyimirize tree, where they keep large containers of water for drinking. Some clay bowls are covered with clay pots, and one has a calabash on top of a clay bowl. Bassalongo's spirits are in charge of conception, as elaborated in the stories of Olwaazi and the Ggumbas in Chapter Four. In the stories, the females (Olwaazi and Ggumba2) drink water from a clay bowl, whereas males (Ggumba1) drink water from a calabash. The clay bowl and calabash symbolise female and male reproductive organs, respectively.

acquires a dream to engage in the object-ritual performances (see Chapter Three <sup>51</sup> and throughout the stories in Chapter Four<sup>52</sup>).

In the course of these sacred rituals, an extraordinary transformation occurs, a metamorphosis that endows the *nsuwa* with spiritual force elevating them beyond the realm of mere utilitarian objects commonly found in households (Kabiito 2010:6). Before any interaction with these sacred objects, the *Balyammere* are required to undergo a purification ritual in the form of a dream (see Chapter Four section 4.1) to initiate them into object-ritual and spiritual performances. Furthermore, a code of taboos regulates the conduct of the spiritual mediums who routinely engage with these sanctified objects (Mbiti 1975:37-38; Lugira 2009:138). Within the sacred premises of Mubende Hill, these *nsuwa* are perceived as living entities (Ogunleye 2014:217), each bearing the essence and vitality of the spirits that dwell within Bannalongo's partition. This partition houses spirits that mediate reproduction and conception of the *Balyammere* through association with objects such as large clay pots [*nsuwa*], a clay bowl and a calabash for healing aspects of incapacities of conception and childbirth. As alluded to previously, the *nsuwa*'s vitality<sup>53</sup> and sanctity are derived from their active participation in object-ritual practices, endowing them with a divine aura that transcends their mundane origins. Conversely, a stark disparity exists when one endeavours to consider related objects housed within the Uganda Museum. In their current state and context, these objects are devoid (Reid 2017: xxii) of their previous divine potency, rendering them relics of cultural tradition (Thomas 2016: 340), yet incapable of imparting spiritual significance to the

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<sup>51</sup> Every Mulyammere who visits the spiritual space of Mubende is screened through a dream process by the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium [Catherine Nabukeera] to ascertain their rightful intentions while at the spiritual space.

<sup>52</sup> A dream is the entry and exit point for the Balyammere to partake in the object-ritual and spiritual performances. For instance, the Okuuzza Obugya story involves using a warted calabash to facilitate skin healing. Similarly, Olwaazi and Ggumbas' narratives utilise a large clay pot, bowl, and a calabash for addressing fertility disorders. Nakitto's story employs interaction with *mulenzi* (a small long neck textured clay pot) to ensure the birth of a male child. Lastly, Musa's account of thanksgiving includes offering coffee seeds, milk, ghee, a bible, and bread to the spirit of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, in gratitude for a vehicle that aids his daily activities.

<sup>53</sup> Reverend Placide Tempels' work titled "Bantu Philosophy" emphasises the "vital force" as a central concept in Bantu ontology. This force is seen as the essence of being, influencing all aspects of life and existence. Similar to the *nsuwa* at Mubende Hill, which are perceived as living entities with divine vitality, Tempels describes how Bantu people view objects and beings as imbued with "vital force" through rituals and traditional practices. Just as the *nsuwa* lose their vitality when removed from their sacred context, Tempels notes that the vital force is deeply tied to cultural and spiritual practices, losing its potency when disconnected from these traditions. Both Tempels' concept of vital force and the vitality of the *nsuwa* contribute to a broader understanding of African existential metaphysics, where life and spiritual essence are interconnected and central to existence (1959:24-25).

broader public. This, in turn, places them in peril of being relegated to the annals of antiquated and obsolete Objects, no longer bearing relevance to the spiritual world.

In conclusion, the profound transformation of objects into vessels of spiritual significance is unequivocally contingent upon their maintained involvement in object-ritual performances within the sacralised space of Mubende Hill. In this captivating interplay of place, object, and ritual, we witness the metamorphosis of the ordinary into the extraordinary, the mundane into the sacred. The *nsuwa*, as symbolic conduits of this metaphysical journey, epitomise the captivating confluence of the spiritual and the material and underscores the inherent dynamism of cultural Objects in the realm of the sacred.

### **1.3. Intersecting Traditions: Analyzing Engagement with the Nakayima Diorama and Muhumuza's Reconstructed Attire in Ugandan Cultural Spaces**

In this section, I explore the intersection of indigenous traditions, colonial influence, and contemporary artistic practices through an analysis of the Nakayima diorama and Muhumuza's reconstructed attire. Both artworks serve as crucial cultural symbols that exhibit the resilience of Ugandan and Buganda's spiritual and political identities. The Nakayima diorama, created during the colonial era, reflects the complex negotiation between indigenous knowledge and colonial mediation, while Muhumuza's reconstructed attire, created in a contemporary postcolonial context, reclaims Uganda's and more specifically Buganda's history and spiritual authority. In examining these two works, this section seeks to unpack how select Ugandan artists and cultural enthusiasts engage with cultural, spiritual, and historical figures to navigate the evolving landscape of identity and resistance in Ugandan cultural spaces.



Figure 1.5: Ssekintu Charles Morris, (1948). “Clothing, Ceremonial Dress Nakaima Priestess of Mubende Hill”. Plaster of paris, beads, barkcloth and hide. Photograph by Claire Nalukenge (2021). The Image shows the Nakayima diorama in the Uganda Museum surrounded by some other objects that Eric C Lanning reconstructed from Mubende Hill to the Uganda museum in 1953.

The Nakaima diorama, created by Ssekintu Charles Morris in 1948 (Figure 1.5) (Kakande 2008:105; Abiti 2023b), represents a critical space for analysing the intersection of indigenous traditions, colonial influence, and modern artistic expression in Uganda. Ssekintu’s creation took shape during a period of colonial rule, while he was a student under the guidance of Margaret Trowell at Makerere Art School (Kyeyune 2003:67,292; Kakande 2008:105). Trowell, known for her Christian missionary background, profoundly influenced the integration of both Christian and indigenous elements in the art produced by her students (Kyeyune, 2003:56; Kakande 2008:105). Therefore, Ssekintu’s work, including the Nakaima diorama, must be understood within the dynamics of the colonial context. This diorama exemplifies the negotiation between Ssekintu’s artistic agency and the colonial expectations that governed his education and artistic production at the time. The push and pull between indigenous identity and colonial rule are evident in the way Nakayima is represented, reflecting both cultural heritage and external influences.

The cultural context of the Nakaima diorama is thus defined by colonial mediation. Ssekintu's artistic representation was shaped by the expectations of the colonial regime, yet it equally reflected his understanding of indigenous traditions. As Kakande (2008:105) observes, the diorama portrays Nakayima in traditional barkcloth, a material deeply embedded in pre-colonial spiritual and cultural practices, but which also carried colonial political symbolism. Barkcloth, historically used in Buganda long before the advent of colonialism, was

progressively replaced by cotton textiles introduced by missionaries and colonial administrators (Nakazibwe, 2005:28). The symbolic inclusion of barkcloth in the diorama, therefore, suggests a critique of the socio-political and cultural shifts taking place at the time, reflecting Ssekintu's nuanced response to the imposition of colonial values on Ugandan society. Kakande (2008:106) clarifies this when he quotes Jorgensen (1981:84) who laments that the farmers realised that mercantile processors and exporters of agricultural produce (mainly cotton), together with the colonial administration through its Price Assistance Fund, continued to offer low prices to the peasant farmers while making large profits on their products. The diorama's contextualisation within the colonial era, marked by trade disputes and cultural transformations, stresses the layered narratives embedded in Ssekintu's work.

At the heart of this analysis is the question of whether Ssekintu's artistic vision was driven by his sensibility or by the dictates of colonial authorities. The Nakaima diorama was indeed commissioned by the Uganda Museum, an institution that, during colonial times, sought to present indigenous culture through a distinctly colonial lens (Abiti, 2023). However, this does not entirely diminish Ssekintu's artistic agency. While colonial authorities framed the creation of the diorama, Ssekintu's choice to depict Nakayima in traditional Ugandan materials like barkcloth and beads demonstrates his deep connection to indigenous cultural practices. These materials were not arbitrary choices but were central to the rituals and identity associated with Nakayima, further signaling Ssekintu's engagement with his cultural roots. The diorama's materiality such as barkcloth, beads and hide and the time it was sculpted further, denote the relegation of cultural objects in favor of Christianity yet the above cultural objects were exchanged for trade within Uganda and the East African coast (Nakazibwe 2005: 28). Perhaps, Ssekintu used barkcloth to communicate the Baganda's social and political grievances (Nakazibwe 2005:10) caused by the Arabs. Moreover, Victoria L. Rovine (in Nakazibwe 2005:10) asserts that clothing revivals across the world have been employed as a protest against the economic, political, and religious policies of a ruling class. Kyeyune (2003:217) further asserted that although barkcloth as of today has lost many of its practical functions, it nonetheless still lives in the identity and consciousness of the Ganda.

This tension between colonial supervision and cultural knowledge reflects a broader struggle for indigenous artists working within colonial structures. Ssekintu's decisions regarding

material and design are representative of a complex negotiation between adhering to colonial expectations and asserting cultural identity. Ogbechie (2005:62) stresses this tension by arguing that African artists working during the colonial period often operated within the frameworks imposed by colonial powers but subtly embedded their cultural meanings within these works, thus maintaining a sense of indigenous agency amid colonial control. Ssekintu's work aligns with this argument as his diorama, though commissioned within a colonial structure, remains a strong testament to indigenous traditions and beliefs (2005:67).

The Nakaima diorama does more than represent the priestess of Mubende Hill; it captures the spiritual power believed to be inherent in the Nakayima figure and her connection to the Omweyimirize tree, a symbol of unity and resilience among the Baganda people. There exists a palpable tension between the colonial commodification of indigenous spiritual figures (Olupona 2014:140) and the deeply held spiritual significance of Nakayima as a protector of her people (Omutaputa 2020; Sentongo 2020). In this sense, the diorama functions both as a product of colonial intervention and as a representation of spiritual defiance. By depicting Nakaima, Ssekintu engages with a figure whose authority was marginalised by the introduction of colonial Christianity, as noted by Eroku (2019:1). The diorama's emphasis on Nakayima's spiritual authority points to the continuity of indigenous belief systems that endured despite colonial efforts to undermine them (2019:1).



Figure 1.6: Queen Muhumuza’s reconstructed ceremonial attire, (2022). Bashukana [98-year-old woman] and group [footnote 36]. Beads and hide. Photographs by Basam Mukwaya (right and middle) and Emmanuel Niwabigaba (left). This image shows Claire Nalukenge in the right and middle photographs and Regina Bashukana in the left photograph, wearing Queen Muhumuza’s reconstructed attire.

When analysed alongside Muhumuza's reconstructed ceremonial attire (Figure 1.6), created in 2022, the Nakaima diorama becomes part of a broader narrative of how artists engage with historical figures to navigate cultural and spiritual identities (Enwezor 1997:22). While Nakayima is portrayed as a figure deeply connected to both pre-colonial and colonial narratives, Muhumuza is depicted as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. Muhumuza’s attire, recreated by a group of cultural enthusiasts<sup>54</sup> led by Bashukana Regina, reimagines her legacy as a leader who actively resisted German and British colonialism (Rutanga 1991:32). Both Nakaima and Muhumuza, although different in their historical and spiritual significance, embody the enduring cultural authority of Ugandan women during times of profound upheaval (Gray 1934:67; Tumusiime 2012:37).

<sup>54</sup> The group members who participated in creating Queen Muhumuza’s attire included Bashukana Regina, Keremensiya Kiinahiirwe, Nalukenege Claire, Basam Mukwaya, Niwabigaba Emmanuel, Ayebazibwe Prudence, Gumoshabe Aidah, Tumubwine Hope, Twinomujuni Naree, Karungi Joventah and Ahariziira Simon

The materiality of these two artworks barkcloth and beads in the Nakayima diorama, and hide and beads in Muhumuza's attire illustrates a shared reliance on traditional Ugandan symbols to express identity and resistance, as depicted in Figure 1.15. These materials not only root the figures in their cultural origins but also emphasise their roles as symbols of resilience and spiritual leadership (Thompson, 1983:16). The material choices in both works reflect the artist's engagement with cultural continuity (Nakazibwe, 2005:17), even as these figures occupy different roles within Ugandan history.

The distinction between colonial and contemporary artistic intentions is evident in the comparison between the Nakayima diorama and Muhumuza's attire. Ssekintu's diorama was created under the constraints of colonial influence, where indigenous expressions were often mediated by external expectations. In contrast, the reconstruction of Muhumuza's attire occurred in a postcolonial context, where the artists had the freedom to explore African history and spirituality without the direct imposition of colonial ideologies. While Ssekintu's work balances the pressures of colonialism (Uganda National Cultural Policy 2006 1.0; Eroku 2019:1) and the retention of indigenous identity (Kakande, 2008:105), the modern recreation of Muhumuza's attire is a deliberate act of reclaiming African history, presenting Muhumuza as a symbol of resistance and empowerment, free from the influence of colonial narratives (Eroku, 2019:22).

The reconstruction of Muhumuza's attire using traditional materials such as hide and beads reflects her authority and the symbolic weight of her role. Hide, traditionally used in making garments for warriors and leaders, conveys strength and authority, aligning with Muhumuza's legacy as a leader who defied colonial powers. Beads, often used in various African societies for spiritual and cultural purposes, further underscore her spiritual role. In many African contexts, including among the Banyankole and Baganda, beads were historically associated with protection, status, and divine connections. According to Kyewalyanga (1992:54), beads are often used in rituals as symbols of power and spiritual authority, thus reflecting Muhumuza's connection to both the political and spiritual spheres.

Moreover, the incorporation of beads into the attire mirrors the spiritual aspect of Muhumuza's leadership, highlighting how her authority extended beyond political resistance to encompass spiritual leadership. This is particularly significant, as Muhumuza's defiance of colonial forces was deeply rooted in her belief in divine guidance and protection, which she imparted to her followers during resistance movements. Rutanga (1991:34) notes that Muhumuza was seen as a prophetic leader who inspired her people through both political and spiritual channels, making her a multi-dimensional figure in Ugandan resistance history. Thus, Muhumuza's reconstructed attire serves not only as a symbol of her leadership in resistance but also as an expression of her spiritual authority, which was central to her ability to mobilize and inspire her people.

This emphasis on the spiritual aspects of leadership aligns with the broader cultural significance of Ugandan women as both political and spiritual figures, particularly during times of colonial disruption. Both Muhumuza and Nakayima represent the convergence of spiritual and political authority, though they occupy different roles in Ugandan history. In creating Muhumuza's attire, the artists not only reclaim an important historical figure but also reinvigorate the spiritual and cultural significance of traditional Ugandan leadership, free from colonial distortion. The act of reconstructing her attire becomes a powerful statement about the continued relevance of indigenous symbols and their role in shaping contemporary cultural identity.

Conclusively, the Nakayima diorama and Muhumuza's reconstructed attire represent two converging traditions. On the one hand, the diorama reflects the colonial imposition on cultural production, while on the other, Muhumuza's attire revives and reclaims indigenous spiritual and political authority. Both works highlight the resilience of indigenous identities, illustrating how they have adapted and thrived despite external pressures, be they colonial or postcolonial. These intersecting traditions emphasize the enduring relevance of Ugandan cultural and spiritual practices, whether framed by colonial intervention or freed through contemporary art.

## **1.4. Exploring Object Performance in Visual Arts. The Works of Selected Contemporary Ugandan Students and Artists.**

In this section, I explore object performance in visual arts through the lens of select contemporary Ugandan artists' artworks in relation to the 2019 bachelor of art history students' works from the Margaret Trowell School. I critically analyse their artistic and student art practices, emphasising the connection to Mubende Hill's spiritual space, and advocate for art histories centered on African scholars leading in knowledge production.

### **1.4.1 Contemporary Scene of Ugandan Visual Art: A Call for African-Centric Art Histories**

The trajectory of Ugandan visual art, particularly from the mid-1990s to the present, reflects a profound connection between artists and their cultural heritage. This inclination towards indigenous cultural inspiration can be traced back to the influential teaching methods of Margaret Trowell at Makerere University (Kyeyune 2003: 48). Trowell, a pivotal figure in Ugandan art education, advocated for the incorporation of local art-making practices and themes, leaving an enduring impact on her students (Kyeyune 2003:23-24; Wolukau-Wanambwa 2014:101).

Following Trowell's departure, artists such as Pilkington Ssendo<sup>55</sup>, Francis Xavier, Nnaggenda and Phillip Kwesiga continued this tradition, drawing inspiration from their ancestral roots. For instance, Pilkington Ssendo's post-graduate degree work was deeply influenced by his Muganda heritage, and having royal connections (Kyeyune 2003:217). This artistic norm, rooted in cultural heritage, is mirrored in the works of Richard Kabiito<sup>56</sup>'s students from the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts Makerere University, as evidenced in the preceding subsections, plays a significant role in fostering the interrelation between indigenous culture and art. His approach involves immersive field studies of cultural sites, providing students with a firsthand experience of cultural sites, ritual

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<sup>55</sup> Pilkington Ssendo was a student of the Makerere Art School in the 1960s. He became a painting lecturer at Makerere Art School in 1982 upon attaining his master's degree and later became head of the school from 1988-1996. See Kyeyune (2003:110&214).

<sup>56</sup> Richard Kabiito is an art historian, painter, sculptor and graphic designer within the Department of Visual Communication, Design & Multimedia (DVCDM) lecturer at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts Makerere University.

objects and how people interact with them. Through these engagements, students establish a meaningful connection with their cultural heritage, subsequently channeling this inspiration into their artistic endeavors.

In tandem with this, the call for a re-evaluation of art histories in Uganda gains prominence. The imperative for African scholars to take a leading role in shaping knowledge becomes evident, especially as the discourse surrounding African art continues to evolve. Scholars argue that prioritising the voices and perspectives of indigenous scholars is crucial in achieving a more nuanced and authentic understanding of the contemporary art scene (Simbao 2017:1; Simbao et al 2017:12). This perspective aligns with broader discussions on the decolonisation of art history, emphasising the importance of diverse perspectives and voices in shaping the narrative (Grant and Price 2020:9; Butler and Hahn 2021:2). The Eurocentric biases entrenched in traditional art histories are increasingly recognised as limiting and distorting the understanding of non-Western art practices (de Sousa Santos 2021:23). Therefore, a shift towards African-centric art histories becomes not only a matter of representation but a crucial step in fostering a more accurate and inclusive interpretation of contemporary art.

#### **1.4.2. Incorporating Mubende Hill's Ritual Objects into Art"**

Groups of final year 2019 art history students from the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts together with their lecturer Kabiito Richard embarked on a one-day trip to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. The purpose of this visit was for the students to acquire inspiration for generating artwork in the form of coursework as mandated by their lecturer for examination purposes. The various groups recreated different ideological aspects regarding the spiritual space of Mubende Hill and its object-ritual and spiritual practices and exhibited the final artworks at the Makerere University Art Gallery from May 13 to June 13, 2022.

The generated artworks closely resembled their various group experiences, interactions, and ideas regarding the original context of the spiritual space in terms of themes, materials, techniques, and subjectivity employed in the making of the various artworks. The students'

approach to engaging with the objects and their performances while generating the artworks can be described as primarily focused on replication, offering straightforward representations of these objects. This replication is mainly to capture the real stories as experienced in the original spiritual space through engaging with the exact objects they encountered while at Mubende Hill. Perhaps any alterations by the students would change the meanings of the intended messages they wanted to disseminate. This is similar to what Kabiito (2010:27) refers to as generating meaning based on tradition as the original referent. Hence, the students replicated their exact experiences of the objects based on the tradition of Nakayima, its associated objects and practices. However, within the contemporary art industry, established Ugandan artists demonstrate considerably more advanced approaches in their artistic practices when compared to students. While students often focus on recreating what they encounter at Mubende Hill, resulting in direct mimicry of the original cultural objects, established artists offer a more critical and innovative stance as expressed in sections 1.4.2.2 below. I examined the students' artworks, focusing specifically on grouped works to facilitate citation and referencing of all group members.

#### 1.4.2.1. Expanding Scholarly Practices through Cultural Engagement



Figure 1.7: Bare Respect, Group A, (2021). Cotton Fabric and Traditional Object Installation Art, 16 x 0.5m. Photograph by Herbert Makabayi (2021). The image shows a long cotton fabric with shoes placed in a trail towards a sculpted tree-like object on the left surrounded by various cultural objects.

The students' incorporation of Mubende Hill's ritual objects into their artworks reflects a deep engagement with cultural practices, offering a distinctive contribution to contemporary African art. For instance, *Bare Respect* (Figure 1.7) by Group A students<sup>57</sup> is a remarkable installation art that demonstrates the student's ability to engage with cultural practices in a meaningful and respectful way. The artwork consists of a long cotton fabric with shoes of different brands and sizes arranged in a trail that leads to a sculpted log tree with two horns, covered with barkcloth and surrounded by various traditional Objects on a grass carpet. The artwork invites the viewers to interact with it by removing their shoes before approaching the tree, which is a cultural taboo associated with the Nakayima tree<sup>58</sup>, a sacred site for the Baganda people in Uganda. The Nakayima tree is believed to be the dwelling place of different gods who grant blessings and solutions to people from diverse backgrounds, religions and social statuses<sup>59</sup>. The act of removing shoes is therefore symbolic, as it signifies a collective homage to the cultural norms of the Nakayima tree and a recognition of its spiritual significance.

The interactive element of removing shoes within the installation transforms the viewers from passive observers to active participants, who experience the artwork not only visually but also physically and emotionally. During a recorded conversation<sup>60</sup> regarding the *Bare Respect* installation critique by Kabiito and Group A students, the students (2023) clarified that “the

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<sup>57</sup>Group A students (Makabayi Herbert, Mugalu Hakeem, Naginda Lydia Cindy, Namutosi Rebecca, Apio Caroline Sherry, Atekaniza Nelson, Kalungi Edwin, Lubega Farouk, Luyimbazi Ibrahim and Wantimba Swaibu)

<sup>58</sup> Some restrictions are regarded as taboo at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill that every *Mulyammere* whether ritual specialist must abide. These include respecting the spear grass carpet within various tree partitions by taking off shoes, not engaging in sex acts while at the spiritual space, not shedding blood is accepted within the premises of the sacred space and women in their periods not allowed within the male spirit's partitions while in their periods. See Chapter Three section 3.5 (Balyammere as Living Human Recipients of Spiritual and Ritual Performance) regarding the taboos associated with the Omweyimirize tree.

<sup>59</sup> The spiritual space of Mubende Hill welcomes all sorts of people from within Uganda, across the borders and globally. This is because it is not a discriminative sacred space as it accommodates Balyammere from different religious backgrounds, of different sexes, ages and political or social status. This diversity concept is elaborated further in chapter three within section 4.5. *Balyammere* as living human recipients of spiritual and ritual performance and more so within the definition of *Balyammere*.

<sup>60</sup> This was a conversation between Dr. Richard Kabiito and students of Group A. The students had a face-to-face critique of their artwork *Bare Respect* with Dr Kabiito on May 13, 2021, at the Makerere Art Gallery. This must be reflected in the reference list.

act of interacting with the artwork as displayed by the various students and people within the gallery shows how the taboo is revered, we have brought the Nakayima experience to your convenience though in a gallery space, but the feeling and presence is there". The students hence create a sense of unity and harmony, as they show that despite the differences in culture, religion and social status, people can share a common respect and reverence for the Nakayima tree and its cultural taboo.



Figure 1.8: Childhood memoire, Xenson Ssenkaaba, (2023) Installation, 620 x 1240 x 100 cm. Photograph by James Wasswa (2023). (underground8808 Uganda-Ghana-Swiss Exchange 2023)



Figure 1.9: Childhood memoire, Xenson Ssenkaaba, (2023) Installation, 620 x 1240 x 100 cm. Photograph by James Wasswa (2023). (underground8808 Uganda-Ghana-Swiss Exchange 2023)

This interactive concept is also echoed in the installation and performance titled *Childhood memoire 2023* by Samson Ssenkaaba<sup>61</sup> artistically known as Xenson (Figures 1.8 and 1.9) which embodies both active and passive meanings. The performance (Figure 1.9) takes on a dynamic contextual significance, incorporating barkcloth with text, creating 19 enclosure-like structures surrounded by metallic bars worn by male figurines. Ssenkaaba, the artist, sings while being accompanied by traditional dancers and drummers on the streets of Masaka Road. The audience includes school children, pedestrians, boda bodas [motorcycle taxis], and cars, who act as both passive and active objects respectively. The combination of barkcloth, metal, music, dance, drummers, boda bodas, cars, and people suggests evolution. The passive state of children and pedestrians is reflected in the performance, while the boda bodas and cars take on an active state of transit. Barkcloth, one of the first clothing items in Buganda after the hides, has encountered other cloths such as *kikooyi*, cotton, and silk.

<sup>61</sup>Samson Ssenkaaba, a former student of the Makerere Art School is a conceptual and visual artist, musician, filmmaker and poet who works in various media, including installations, videos, paintings and graffiti. African cultures influence his work, more so his own Ganda culture, the vitality of African dance and hip-hop, and the creativity of the unconventional.

Masaka district, known as one of the leading producers of high-quality barkcloth<sup>62</sup>, affirms this evolution. The text on the barkcloth suggests that the barkcloth is trying to say something to the audience, though it is difficult to piece together the exact words. Maybe the complexities in trying to piece the words together were intentional and resonate with the challenges barkcloth has faced and continues to face within different contexts through time and space amidst its continuity journeys (Nakazibwe 2005:17). This is further suggested within the performance as indicated by the embodied figurines encompassing the barkcloth enclosure-like structures with metallic bar borders and the sort of empty or fallen barkcloth enclosure-like structures within the installation on the façade.

The presentation integrates traditional and modern components, underscoring the reciprocal influence and shaping of tradition and contemporary aspects in the creation of meaning (Kabiito 2010:21). The performance becomes a lived experience for the artist, audience, and artwork itself, bringing the artwork to life as if it has been danced as stressed by Simbao (2008:6). The installation (Figure 1.8) then attains a passive contextual meaning when it is displayed on the façade of Masaka gallery. The artwork at Masaka gallery becomes passive when displayed on the facade, allowing pedestrians and vehicles to glance at it from a distance. The 19 barkcloth enclosures are arranged to resemble draped figures, evoking a sense of death. Additionally, the placement of the artwork in a gallery context signifies a passive state, as galleries often ‘box’ objects and artworks, reducing physical touch and performative action (Reid 2017: xxii).

Both the Group A student work and the example of the contemporary artist, Ssenkaaba, challenge viewers to reflect on their cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values. They also encourage viewers to consider how the above aspects relate to those of others. This reflection is achieved by fusing various traditional Objects, such as barkcloth, dance, and drumming, with contemporary objects like cotton, metallic bars, and shoes. This suggests that within contemporary society, different values and beliefs coexist and sometimes clash. The Group A students and Ssenkaaba might have used similar objects to execute their artworks such as

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<sup>62</sup> This context is, according to the artist Samson Ssenkaaba, conveyed during a phone conversation about his *Childhood Memoire* (2023) installation and performance on November 30, 2023. Xenson further confirmed that he used to reside in Masaka during childhood.

barkcloth but the barkcloth acquires different meanings in different contexts. In the students' work, it becomes a representation of Baganda culture because it was clear to the students that the Nakayima tree welcomes individuals from diverse backgrounds, including the Baganda<sup>63</sup>. However, in Ssenkaaba's artwork and performance barkcloth becomes a representation of both culture and a memory rekindled. The Group A students and Ssenkaaba thus expand scholarly practices through cultural engagement, as they explore the complex and dynamic relationship between culture and society, expressed through object and audience in shaping the meaning of the artwork and how this participatory approach contributes to the evolving narratives around cultural spaces, objects and art.



Figure 1.10: Heavens in Nakayima, Group B, (2021), Calabash, gourds, strings, light bulb and music (Enya), 1 50cm by 155cm. Photograph by Elisha Ward Otomanya (2021).

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<sup>63</sup> This Baganda's affiliation is also stressed by Ssekintu's Nakayima diorama as elaborated in this chapter one section 1.3. Intersecting Traditions: Analysing Engagement with the Nakayima Diorama and Muhumuza's Reconstructed Attire in Ugandan Cultural Spaces.

Akin to *Bare Respect* (2023) and *Childhood memoire* (2023), *Heavens in Nakayima* (2023) (Figure 1.10) by Group B students<sup>64</sup> introduces a fusion of traditional and contemporary elements in expanding scholarly practices through cultural engagement. *Heavens in Nakayima's* spatial arrangement is a captivating multi-dimensional artwork that skillfully creates a celestial representation blending assembled and staged elements including, calabashes, gourds, beads, cotton strings, light bulbs, and the enchanting music of Enya. It is suspended by delicate cotton strings, supporting a large gourd lampshade adorned with hanging white beads, surrounded by eight smaller calabashes and gourds. The deliberate use of calabash, gourd, and bead materials, deeply rooted in African culture and religion, is juxtaposed against the inclusion of modern elements such as light bulbs and the ethereal melodies of the Irish musician, Enya. Mbiti (2015:22) explains that African art found on calabashes serves as a medium to express religious ideas. In the Bamenda region of western Cameroon, large and intricately decorated calabashes from Nigeria were highly valued (Kopytoff 1986:76). The well-polished gourd, with its appealing shape and reddish-brown color, has become a symbol of beauty among the Muganda people, as reflected in the simile 'mulungi nga ndeku', meaning "as beautiful as a calabash" (Lugira 1970:67). It is no surprise that Stephanou (2021) observes that the shape of the calabash resonates with that of the female body, symbolising womanhood. This resonates with the present study, particularly within the narratives of Olwaazi and Ggumba in chapter four, where the calabash is employed as a sacred ritual object symbolising reproduction. However, in Okuzza Obugya's story, the calabash takes on a different symbolic meaning as a rejuvenating object for the skin. Similarly, within the Kikuyu tribe of Kenya, the calabash and gourd hold ritual significance, serving as vessels for honey-beer and milk, respectively, during community processions as part of religious rituals (Lugira 2009:8). Furthermore, in a face-to-face interview conducted with Donald Nantagya (2020) shared his interaction with calabashes during his pursuit of a fine art master's degree in 2015. He was drawn to their fruit-like nature, natural brown color, soft texture, and his previous experiences with them.

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<sup>64</sup> Group B students (Amatsiko Saul, Nalubega Rosemary, Nyanzi John Bosco, Murungi Benitah Alexandra, Nabukalu Hadijah, Nabaterrega Mercy Gloria, Gwokyalya Fedderess, Katusiime Doreen, Mbabazi Angel, Otumanya Elisah Ward and Namuddu Moreen)

*Heavens in Nakayima's* (2021) spatial arrangement, with calabashes suspended mid-air by strings, evokes a sense of floating celestial bodies. It mirrors the heavens a realm that transcends earthly existence echoing themes of spirituality and transcendence. The incorporation of light bulbs within the calabashes illuminates them from within, casting an intimate glow that brings their engraved surfaces to life. This illumination also signifies enlightenment and revelation, as each calabash tells its unique narrative while contributing to the collective story unfolding within this celestial representation. Group B students engage with the calabashes in the installation, *Heavens in Nakayima* (2021) in a similar style by engraving signs on them. Group D students in *Nakayima the Rooms of Mystery* (Figure 1.13) and contemporary artist Donald Nantagya's *Omuti ogubala ensimbinebikomo I* (Figure 1.11) also employ a technique of engraving on the calabashes as part of their artistic approach. However, while both groups of students interact with the complete forms of the calabashes and gourds, Nantagya employs a different approach by dividing them in half, resulting in the creation of bowl-like objects, rings, and symbolic engravings on these items. This manipulation serves as a representation of the rewards that the Kabaka (King) of Buganda bestows upon his subjects within the Buganda kingdom. Nantagya's interpretation of calabashes in this manner is influenced by his expertise in printmaking, as revealed in a personal conversation. On the other hand, the students engage and view the calabashes and gourds as symbols of identity associated with the Nakayima tree, intending to preserve tradition.



Figure 1.11: Nantagya Donald, Omuti ogubala ensimbinebikomo I (2012), mixed media 155 cm x 93cm. Photograph by Nantagya Donald. 2015. Tapestry Design Visual Expressions derived from the royal titles of the Kabaka, M.A. Thesis, Makerere University).

Conversely, the drooping white beads portrayed on the central calabash within *Heavens in Nakayima* (2023) (Figure 1.10) carry a symbolic meaning of authority attributed to the Nakayima spirit and the spirit medium, [Mukongozi]. This is discussed further in Chapter Three, section 3.4. Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima represents a spiritual and ceremonial performance over the *Balyammere* at the Omweyimirize tree. This is reflected in the prominent position and large size of the central gourd adorned with white beads within *Heavens in Nakayima*. The central gourd is surrounded by smaller calabashes and gourds, also serving as symbols of political power for resilience against colonial rule. Within the context of the artwork *Heavens in Nakayima*, the white beads represent symbols of social power in the form of the Nakayima spirit and its spirit medium<sup>65</sup> which holds the highest status at the Nakayima tree (also known as the Omweyimirize tree in this study; and whom the students encountered during their visit.

<sup>65</sup> (referred to as Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima and Omukongozi, Catherine Nabukeera respectively in this study)

Enya's music selection adds a sonic element that complements the visual experience of the *Heavens in Nakayima* (2023) artwork. Both *Heavens in Nakayima* (2023) and Xenson Ssenkaaba's *Childhood Memoire* (2023) installation utilise music to enhance the visual experience. On the other hand, Xenson Ssenkaaba's *Childhood memoire* (2023) artwork is further enlivened through music and dance, while Group B student's *Heavens in Nakayima* (2023) is 'brought to life' through illumination. This aligns with Mushengyezi's (2003:116) notion of artists contributing significantly to Ugandan art by creating a blend of indigenous and modern elements using indigenous and Western [materials or concepts]. Besides, Kabiito's (2010:139) remix concept serves as a prominent representation of music, dance, and drama, strategically bridging the past and present by highlighting specific locales. And, what, Makwa (2010:4) observes that music and dance in imbalu circumcision rituals have transcended their original contexts and acquired new meanings in different settings, such as interschool music and dance competitions and political rallies. However, the artworks, *Heavens in Nakayima* (2023), *Childhood Memoire* (2023), and *Bare Respect* (2023), differ in their level of interactivity. Ssenkaaba's *Childhood memoire* is passive when displayed on the facade but becomes active when performed and danced. Group B's *Heavens in Nakayima* (2023) invites viewers into a contemplative space; while Group A's *Bare Respect* (2023), like *Childhood memoire* (2023), encourages interaction by inviting the audience to participate in the act of taking off their shoes. In my view, these three artistic creations successfully explore the fusion of tradition and modernity, while employing both tradition, elements of modernity and in some cases encouraging audience participation. They prompt reflections on identity, heritage, and transformation, offering unique perspectives on contemporary African art. In doing so, they broaden scholarly and artistic endeavors by incorporating cultural narratives, as elucidated in the following discourse.

#### **1.4.2.2. Narratives of Cultural Resilience and Fertility**



Figure 1.12: Group C *Mother Fertility* (2021). Clay, bark cloth, tree branches, banana fibers, millet, cowrie shells. Photograph by Ssemugenyi Allan (2021). The image shows a raised representation of the Nakayima tree on barkcloth, the tree branch is wrapped in barkcloth, with cowrie shells hanging on the branch and others at the base of the branch, the base of the tree has fruit like pods five on the right and four on the left each housing a banana fiber doll wrapped in barkcloth with a cord around the waist feeding on millet.

*Mother Fertility* (Figure 1.12) by Group C<sup>66</sup> students depicts a narrative-driven approach, drawing inspiration from the Nakayima's role in fertility (as elaborated in chapter four sections 4.4 and 4.5). The depiction of a tree branch wrapped in barkcloth, set against a white background and serving as the central focus, reveals the natural hues of the barkcloth. This becomes the focal point around which other elements revolve, acting as the starting point for the exploration of the fertility narrative within *Mother Fertility* (2023). Trees have long been associated with fertility (Mbiti 1990:132; Lugira 2009:68; Szabo 2022; Tyler 2022), symbolizing the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, as well as the connection between the earthly and heavenly realms (Tyler 2022). Tyler further argues that this symbolism arises from the fact that trees have their roots in the ground while their branches and leaves reach toward the sky. Lugira (2009:67-68) explains that in Buganda, the placenta is buried under a certain tree after a child is born. This tree becomes sacred until its fruits are ready. Then, the child's paternal grandmother organizes a special feast to celebrate. The themes of life, death, and rebirth, which are embodied by trees, resonate with the nature of the barkcloth material used in *Mother Fertility*. *Mother Fertility* (2023) suggests that barkcloth acquires two meanings of both death and life by entirely wrapping the representational tree with barkcloth it is suggested that some sort of death has occurred; while also signifying through the

<sup>66</sup> Group C Students (Ssemugenyi Allan, Ssebanenya Jordan, Noki Patience, Nakabirwa Janat, Konde Hassan, Tendo Gloria, Mulindwa Ronnie, Nasirumbi Joan, Nabbale Gloria Tendo)

rejuvenation associations of barkcloth that life and fertility are being represented. This wrapping technique can be associated with the Baganda tradition of wrapping dead bodies in barkcloth for preservation in the afterlife (Nakazibwe 2010:329; Gateja 2021; Mutebi 2021).

By naming the artwork *Mother Fertility*, the artist skilfully encapsulates the theme of fertility, allowing it to resonate deeply with the viewers. Besides, the title of the artwork *Mother Fertility* reflects on the title ‘goddess of fertility’ attributed to the spirit of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima in this study (reflected on in this Chapter’s conclusion, Chapter Three sections 3.1 and 3.7). That is why the Group C students revealed in a critique conversation with their lecturer Kabiito (2021) that their work was inspired by the Nakayima tree fruit. This inspiration led to the creation of clay fruit-like bowls in *Mother Fertility*. Additionally, the students were moved by a heartwarming story from one of the visitors of Booma village, Mubende district, who was unable to bear children for almost five years. The woman was advised to pay a pilgrimage to the Nakayima tree. Shortly after her pilgrimage, she was blessed with a child and went back to give thanks to Nakayima.

The Group C students' inspirational pilgrimage story above is echoed within the stories of Nakitto, Olwaazi and Ggumbas in chapter four. Mbiti (2015:197) clarifies that people conduct pilgrimage across national borders and oceans for the sake of religion. The exhibition, held from May 13 to June 13, 2022, coincided with Uganda’s public holiday on June 3, which commemorates the Martyrs who died for their faith (Nakazibwe 2005:143; Lamport et al., 2018; Atemanke 2021). The religious context and the title of Group C’s *Mother Fertility* (2023) suggest that the students used barkcloth to symbolise motherhood, referring to Nakayima, known as Maama (mother) in this study. Knowingly or unknowingly trying to commemorate their faith and that of the fallen martyrs. The use of barkcloth in this artwork symbolises motherly virtues such as nurturing and protection. Additionally, it represents religious reverence and mourning, reflecting its cultural significance (Nakazibwe 2005:214). In keeping with this dual role in representing both life and death, the represented barkcloth tree in *Mother Fertility* (2023) is sculpted to appear sparse in branches and leaves, suggesting fertility incapacities; and yet stands amidst symbols of fertility also represented by the barkcloth tree leaves and nine cowrie shell divisions attached at the tree base. The nine cowrie shell divisions at the tree base reference fertility in that they mimic root-like structures

intended for growth and stability. Additionally, nine cowrie shell divisions are accompanied by clay fruit-like bowls (five on the right and four on the left). The nine cowrie shell divisions together with the clay fruit-like bowls may suggest the nine most celebrated partitions for the object-ritual performances at the Omweyimirize tree, which are the partitions of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, taata Ndaula, Abalongo, Nabuzaana, Bassalongo, Bannalongo, Bachwezi, Nabinene and Mukasa (as Chapter Three section 3.3 further elaborates). The number nine is also reiterated within the object-ritual and spiritual performances narrated within the stories of Olwaazi, Musa and the Ggumbas (elaborated on in chapter four). The juxtaposition of the barren tree and symbols of fertility encapsulates a dialectic tension between absence [death] and presence [life]. Each clay fruit-like bowl, containing a banana fiber doll with a cord around its waist, creates the impression of nourishment, growth, and regeneration, signifying ideas related to fertility and motherhood in women. This research interprets the clay fruit-like bowls utilised by Group C students to create the *Mother Fertility* (2023) artwork as expressive mediums, serving as carriers for banana fiber dolls with cords around their waists, simulating the act of feeding on millet. Millet exemplifies fertility and abundance, ensuring the survival and growth of the fiber dolls. These dolls, in turn, epitomise the feeding and nurturing of offspring.

*Mother Fertility* (2023) conveys compelling narratives of cultural resilience, where the representation of a barkcloth-wrapped tree branch symbolises this enduring strength. This resilience is intertwined with the prolonged existence demonstrated by both the barkcloth and the Nakayima tree (referred to as the Omweyimirize tree in this study). Nakazibwe (2005:1) confirms that barkcloth has been in existence since the late eightieth century, with some theories dating its existence to the origins of the Buganda kingdom. Yet, the epoch of the Nakayima tree remains a subject of contention, with varying perspectives and sources contributing to the debate. Oral traditions propose ancient origins, linking it to the Bachwezi dynasty (Ssentongo 2020), the creation of the world (Tasha 2020) and varying years – five hundred, six hundred, and one thousand years (Ibra 2020). Conversely, oral history suggests four hundred years (Ballarin et al. 2013:53); and scientific tests dating specimens to six hundred fifty years (Batte 2012) suggest more recent origins. The above varying estimates reflect the diverse and complex history attributed to the Omweyimirize tree.

Moreover, the Omweyimirize tree as clarified in Chapter Three sections 3.1 and 3.2, has long been used as a symbol of unity and resistance. The tree, atop Mubende Hill, served as headquarters for the former Bachwezi empire of Bunyoro Kitara ruled by King Ndahura in the 15th and 16th centuries before it became an administrative colonial centre. In this context, the barkcloth tree embodies resilience within Mother Fertility. It draws inspiration from Mubende Hill, the Nakayima tree, and enduring object-ritual and spiritual practices, highlighting the ability to adapt and thrive despite external influences. The aspect of resilience speaks volumes about the spiritual space and the *Balyammere* [translation] who interact with it even during trying times. During my first field research days in the COVID-19 era, when cultural sites reopened, some *Balyammere* wore barkcloth pieces for object-ritual performances. In my first month of participant observation on October 29, 2020, I met an elderly woman, whom I will refer to as Joyce for anonymity. Joyce, wrapped in a piece of barkcloth over her *gomesi* [Baganda traditional attire] and wearing a cowrie shell bangle on her right hand, came to me and asked;

Lwaki gwe oyambala masiki wano ewa Maama? Nze kasta nandika okulinya olusozi oluja eno ewa Maama nga masiki njijako kubanga manyi wentandikira okulinya bwenti, mba ng'asigiddwako amafuta... hoo... ate bwe ngatako luno olubugo, nakakomo mbeera mugumu nnyo.

[Why do you wear a mask here at mother's place? For me when I start climbing up the Hill that leads to my mother's place, I remove my mask because I know the moment I start climbing, I assume an anointing of oil! ...indeed...if I complement this with my barkcloth and this bangle, I acquire extreme spiritual protection].

Joyce's statement, "I acquire extreme spiritual protection," relates to the continuity of barkcloth and cowrie shell cultural symbols. Her practice of removing her mask and wearing barkcloth during her pilgrimage to the sacred space speaks to the enduring belief in the protective and empowering attributes of these materials. This connection between the tangible [barkcloth and cowrie shells] and the intangible [spiritual protection and resilience] heritage is central to both the *Mother Fertility* artwork and the ongoing object-ritual performances at Mubende Hill.



### 1.4.2.3. Identity Restoration and Mythical Representation

Group D's<sup>67</sup> artwork *Nakayima the Rooms of Mystery* (2021) (Figure 1.13) and Group E's<sup>68</sup> *Obulungi bwa Maama Nakayima* (2021) (Figure 1.14) serve as explorations of identity restoration through mythical representation. These artworks honor Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, a spiritual healer and guardian of Mubende Hill, by restoring Mubende Hill's indigenous stories and cultural identity.

*Nakayima the Rooms of Mystery* employs intricate symbolism (metal, wood, barkcloth and calabash) to depict the enigmatic aspects of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's legacy. The artwork invites viewers into a metaphorical journey through the "rooms" of the Omweyimirize tree which bring to life or actualising the meaning of the object-ritual performances. This aligns with Nkiru Nzegwu's assertion that art can act as a medium for reclaiming suppressed histories and rearticulating identities disrupted by colonialism (Eroku 2018:21; Nzegwu 2012:16). By reimagining the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima within

<sup>67</sup> Group D: Kironde Louis, Kisakye Esther Namuddu, Nirwoth Consolate Okwir, Nyabigambo Bernadatte, Oroma Prisca, Muwangunzi Joshua, Ojera Charity, Ahumuza Rolland, Lincoln Kaleebi, Nakiwala Diana Sembatya, Ssebagala Farouq

<sup>68</sup> Group E: Mirembe Faith, Navuma Esther, Nandugu Goni, Ageno Neomi, Nassuna Mariam, Namuddu Sylvia, *Namakula* Tracy, Namulema Christine, Namirembe Josephine

contemporary artistic expressions, the students challenge the erasure of indigenous identities and promote a resurgence of cultural pride. Similarly, *Obulungi bwa Maama Nakayima* (The Beauty of Mother Nakayima) celebrates the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of Nakayima. The artwork emphasises her role as a symbol of feminine strength, wisdom, and resilience. This portrayal resonates with Mary Nooter Roberts' exploration of female representations in African art, where women are often depicted as embodiments of social and spiritual ideals (Roberts 2017:2). By highlighting Nakayima's beauty and significance, the students restore her prominence in cultural consciousness, countering patriarchal narratives that have historically marginalized women's contributions in African societies.

*Nakayima the Rooms of Mystery* and *Obulungi bwa Maama Nakayima* artworks together employ mythical representation as a strategy for identity restoration, reaffirming the importance of indigenous knowledge systems. Okot p'Bitek emphasises the necessity of returning to native philosophies and mythologies to truly understand African identities, arguing that Western interpretations often distort these concepts (p'Bitek 2011: xix). Through the revitalisation of Nakayima's myth, the students contribute to a decolonial approach that seeks to reclaim and celebrate African heritage (Eroku 2019:21). Furthermore, the re-engagement with myth in these artworks contributes to the broader discourse on postcolonial identity in African art. Okwui Enwezor notes that contemporary African artists navigate the complexities of history and modernity by reinterpreting traditional symbols and narratives. By bridging past and present traditions, the artworks offer nuanced perspectives that acknowledge historical roots while addressing contemporary societal issues, thus facilitating a generational discourse.



Figure 1.13: Nakayima the Rooms of Mystery, Group D (2021). Metal, wood, barkcloth and calabash. Photograph by Louis Kironde (2021).



Figure 1.14: Group E, Obulungi bwa Maama Nakayima, Group E (2021). Beads, cowrie shells, cotton, satin kikooyi, barkcloth, gourds, coffee beads, baskets, a drum, shells, a vase, spears, shoes and grass. Photograph by Tracy Nampeera (2021).



Figure 1.15: The Identity of Nakayima: From a drawing to sculpture, Group F (2021). Paper, charcoal, barkcloth, cowrie shells, cotton cloth, clay and colorless plastic. Photograph by Lydia Nangombi (2021).

The artwork *The Identity of Nakayima: From a drawing to sculpture* (Figure 1.15) Group F<sup>69</sup> (2021) acquires a dual identity capturing Nakayima as both a historical and mythical figure. The transition from drawing to sculpture symbolises the fluidity of Nakayima's resilience embodiment of spiritual and cultural elements in Buganda and broader Ugandan society. The use of barkcloth, cowrie shells, and clay in this sculpture further anchors Nakayima's identity in indigenous materials that are culturally significant in Uganda. Nakazibwe (2005: 214) argues that barkcloth has been integral to Buganda's cultural history, often used in ceremonies related to both life and death. By wrapping the sculpture in a barkcloth, the students evoke the duality of Nakayima as a figure who transcends life and death, symbolising continuity and protection. This aligns with the portrayal of Nakayima as a spiritual protector and healer in Ugandan traditions, particularly through the practices conducted at the Nakayima tree on Mubende Hill (Ssentongo, 2020).

<sup>69</sup> Group F: Mwetesie Joab, Zalwango Monica, Nangombi Lydia, Namaganda Vanessa, Aturinzire Suzan, Ssempebwa Frank, Mpongona Suzan, Danana Emmanuel, Omara Issac, Nyakayisiki Zoe

In the broader context of African art, Ogbechie (2005) emphasizes the role of contemporary African artists in reclaiming and redefining identities through their work. He notes that by engaging with historical and spiritual figures, artists can restore narratives that were disrupted by colonial histories. *The Identity of Nakayima* echoes this process of reclamation. Nakayima, once reduced to a mystical symbol in colonial accounts, is restored to her rightful place as a figure of power and agency through this artwork. The transformation of her image from a flat drawing to a three-dimensional sculpture mirrors the restoration of her identity, making her more present and tangible to the community. Thematic similarities are drawn between *Nakayima the Rooms of Mystery* (2021), where Nakayima is depicted in various spiritual "rooms" that signify her multi-faceted identity as a protector, nurturer, and spiritual guide. In *The Identity of Nakayima*, the students similarly foreground her multi-dimensional nature by using cowrie shells, a symbol of protection and femininity in many African cultures (Mbiti, 1990:132). These shells, often used in divination and spiritual practices, further assert Nakayima's role as a mediator between the human and spiritual worlds.

The progression from drawing to sculpture also speaks to the larger discourse of African art as performative, as noted by Blier (1995:2) in her work on Vodun art. She argues that African art is not static but actively participates in rituals, ceremonies, and cultural expressions. *The Identity of Nakayima* takes on a performative role as well, as the sculpture not only represents Nakayima but also invokes her presence, bridging the gap between myth and reality. This performativity is central to understanding Nakayima's identity, as she is not just a figure of the past but a living presence in contemporary Buganda spiritual practices. Furthermore, the artwork can be seen as a response to the call for decolonizing art history in Africa, as advocated by scholars like Achille Mbembe (2001:2). By reimagining Nakayima through a Ugandan lens, the artists reject the colonial framing of her as a primitive or mystical figure and instead position her as a symbol of strength, resilience, and cultural continuity. This aligns with Mudimbe's (1988:19) critique of Western narratives that have historically distorted African identities. The students hence reclaim Nakayima's image in a way that honors her spiritual significance, perpetuating the broader movement towards decolonising African art and restoring the cultural narratives that were suppressed during colonisation (Eroku 2019:22).

The student's coursework discussed above demonstrates a commendable effort to engage with Mubende Hill's ritual objects and spiritual space, pushing the boundaries of contemporary African art. The artworks expand scholarly practices and offer a platform for reevaluating established and colonially motivated art histories. In essence, this analysis emphasises the evolving nature of artistic expression (Eroku 2019, Nantagya 2012 and Ssenkamba 2024), where the above-select contemporary artists and groups of art history students (Groups A-F) navigate a balance between preserving cultural heritage and pushing boundaries to contribute meaningfully to broader social dialogues. Mubende Hill's ritual objects serve as both a source of inspiration and a canvas for artists to conceptualise narratives that transcend the immediate cultural context, highlighting the transformative power of contemporary art in challenging, redefining, and expanding cultural narratives. As the discourse around African art evolves, these critiques contribute to a more robust and nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between contemporary art, cultural heritage, and spirituality. This exploration stresses the imperative role of African scholars in shaping knowledge about their cultural practices and artistic expressions.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

Conclusively, Chapter One has provided a critical survey of the significance and interpretation of objects in both the Uganda Museum and the spiritual space at Mubende Hill. The chapter questions the ideologies behind decontextualising objects from their original cultural and spiritual contexts and placing them within a museum setting. Analysing various perspectives, including those of the indigenous communities, the chapter illuminates different interpretations of these objects in both museum and cultural environments. The chapter also investigates how certain Ugandan artists and students engage with objects tied to the Mubende Hill spiritual space, using them to extend their artistic practices, conserve and further local narratives. It argues that such practices contribute to the generation of fresh, decolonised narratives about these objects and their origins. The need for new art histories that radically shift from Western-centric viewpoints and foreground African artists and researchers in the dispensation of knowledge about Africa is accentuated. The chapter makes a compelling call for further exploration and restoration of the original contexts and interpretations of such objects, enabling them to reclaim their authentic significance and cultural importance.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Framing Ritual Objects and Healing**

This chapter considers how ritual objects, as well as ritual and spiritual performances, are framed, researched, and analysed within the study. I consider the relationship between objects and the body when it comes to ritual and spiritual performances. I look at the way in which the “museumification” of these objects alters how they are experienced (Nooter 2012:1). These mechanisms of representation “fossilize cultural practice” and sever the link between the body and object (Ogbechie 2005:62). In doing this, the meanings of the objects are altered and their perceived efficacy in the facilitation of healing is undermined. I emphasise the interconnectedness of ritual objects, rituals, and spiritual performances, which play a role in facilitating healing. This chapter begins with an introduction to the multifaceted realm of ritual objects. It explores their significance as conduits of ritualistic expressions, unveiling the ways in which these objects serve as catalysts for transformative experiences within the context of the Mubende Hill Spiritual Space.

Gazin-Schwartz (2001:264) notes that it is “difficult to understand complex relationships existing among material culture, ritual and everyday life”. Costin (2007:1), argues that the classification of objects as "ritual" is not exclusive to the context of religious rituals, as certain items, like vases used for offerings, can be found in both ritual and household settings. Ruch Gerhart (2018: vii) describes ritual objects as material substances that exist outside oneself and become potent and efficacious through human behavior. Ritual objects are characterised by their association with rituals and prayers directed towards deities; they are not separated from, but rather part of ongoing ritual practices performed at precise places and times (Patera 2012:19). Moreover, as Lan (2018:7) argues, the way we handle an object is determined by the category we believe it belongs to, rather than some sort of objectively ‘true’ classification. Mbiti (1975:141) defines ritual objects as items used in performing specific rituals, such as ritual dresses, masks, and staffs, which are often considered sacred. In Uganda, ritual objects are used by various ethnic groups in specific rituals (Abiti 2021:1). For example, the Bagisu people of Eastern Uganda use thigh bells, forehead circlets, and headgear, in their Imbalu circumcision ceremonies (Makwa 2010:88). Lugira (1970:116)

distinguishes ritual objects as venerated sacred objects and items used in ritual performances, acknowledging the potential overlap between the two categories. For the Baganda, an ethnic group from central Uganda, objects designed for ritual use may not differ in shape from ordinary objects, posing challenges in distinguishing the ordinary from the sacred.

In the context of this study, ritual objects are understood as sacred objects or substances revered for their healing power and performance within the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in Uganda. Objects like clay pots, bowls, milk cups, calabashes, coffee beans, ghee, and milk are believed to possess the power of the ninety-nine spirits residing in the *Omweyimirize tree*. These objects are utilized in various healing rituals, including *Amakula* (gifts to the gods as a form of thanksgiving), skin rejuvenation, conception and childbirth, facilitated by the spirit medium of *Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima*. This study suggests that ritual objects can be an effective tool for healing. The spiritual power of these objects can help to connect people with their inner resources and promote healing on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. The study's characterisation of objects aligns with the perspectives of scholars such as Eliade (1959), Lugira (1970), Mbiti (1970), Patera (2012), and Ruch (Gerhart 2018), who argue that ritual objects are not simply physical objects, but rather they are objects imbued with power through various ritual acts. It is through this process of engaging with the objects that they gain meaning and are attributed with power by those who believe in them and the rituals they perform with them.

## 2.1 'Dancing' Objects

In *The Thing Itself*, Arjun Appadurai (2006:15) confirms that “persons and things are not radically distinct categories”. The boundary that exists between an object and the body of the person using that object is not easily defined. We consider humans to be animate, alive, and breathing while an object is often considered dead, inanimate, static. This way of characterising the distinction between subject and object positions the subject in a position of power, the subject can *act* on the object. One can fill a vase with water, carve a log into a bowl, or form a cup out of clay. In this framework, the human subject has complete control over the uses, contents and appearances of material objects. The objects are not perceived as being able to ‘act’ on the subject. The object is positioned as static, lifeless, or dead. The

object is thus brought to life by the subject. Robert Farris Thompson (1979: xiii) speaks of “dancing” an object which can be interpreted to mean that the subject ‘brings the object to life’ by making it move and by using it within ritual practice. Another possibility is to consider the notion of the subject dancing *with* the object. The importance of movement, dynamism and change within ritual is noted by Simbao (2007:26) in reference to Lunda Kazembe performance and the Akatasa and Cibangula crowns in Zambia. Simbao (2007:26) explains that “the meanings associated with these crown assemblages and their specific materials—mostly beads and cloth combined with various animal parts—dynamically shift through time and space, in and out of relationships”.

In the process of removing the ritual objects from the site and the context in which the rituals take place, the relationship that exists between the object and the body is altered. According to Meier (2008:9) “when material culture is moved from one setting to another, its translation is a complex space and moment of reinvention”. Viewing an object in the context of a museum, especially if placed within a cabinet or vitrine ‘reinvents’ the object as a specimen to be looked at and studied. Rituals involving objects are multi-sensory aesthetic experiences that involve bodies in relation to other bodies in addition to sound, texture, taste and sight. They take place in social contexts and one can argue that their ability to facilitate healing is connected to the sense of connection and belonging they promote. Suzanne Preston Blier (1995:55), highlights the “symbolic” function of certain ritual objects, particularly *bocio* sculptures among the Fon and Ayizo of West Africa. These objects are seen as potent mediators, capable of influencing events and metaphysical forces, exemplifying their role as “catalysts” in shaping cultural narratives and healing (Preston Blier 1995:215). Salamone (2004:370) adds to the symbolic understanding of objects by stressing their practical utility within rituals, emphasising their function in facilitating religious ceremonies. This study places emphasis on the ritual objects' role in the immediate healing process. Within the context of the Congo, a group of objects known as "*mpoongo*" served as a representation of "*Bankita*" or "*Nkita*" spirits and the method used by society to free people from demonic influence characterised as *nkisi*—the holy objects endowed with invisible power (Kitewo 1998:86). These objects act as conduits of spiritual power and healing.

The Nuer and Ndembu Zambian cultural perspective, as elucidated by Alubafi and Kaunda (2019:1), reveals how ritual objects undergo shifts in meaning during rites of passage, illustrating the evolving interpretations and purposes of these objects. In this research, ritual objects and substances such as coffee beans, ghee, milk, and Bachwezi cups transition between *ebigali*<sup>70</sup> and *amakula*<sup>71</sup> performance contexts. They serve as catalysts in *ebigali* and reach their climax in *amakula*, foregrounding their roles in spiritual practices.

Numerous rituals are performed using objects to ensure good health, to heal, to prevent harm to health, to purify individuals and dwellings, to safeguard people, animals, and crops (Roscoe 1911:273; Mbiti 2015:134). Thus, many different diseases are treated through ritual healing that is organised and facilitated through ritual objects and spiritual performances in Africa where a ritual is active in a variety of social situations (Okwaro 2013:16). Alubafi and Kaunda (2019:1) however note that the majority of African religious objects, mostly concentrate on the symbolism behind ancestor objects and their themes rather than on the interaction between ancestor objects and meaning-making in relation to communal well-being. This study agrees with Alubafi and Kaunda's view by critically analysing the symbolisms within the various object-ritual and spiritual performances at the Omweyimirize tree and considers ways in which the *Balyammere* engage and interact with the performances to generate meaning. The object-ritual performances at the Mubende Hill Spiritual Space are both personal and communal and geared towards healing purposes. The rituals become personal before a *Mulyammere* receives their healing blessing, as in the stories of *Okuzza Obugya*, *Ggumbas* and *Nakitto* (chapter 4). The ritual performances then become communal after a *Mulyammere* has been healed, as in the *Amakula* (thanksgiving) act exhibited in Musa's story (elaborated on in chapter 4). These stories are brought to life through ritual performances such as smearing, sipping, drinking, galloping, kneeling, praying, singing, dancing, clapping and drumming mediated using specific objects of coffee beans, ghee, milk, seeds (millet, simsim and sorghum), warted calabash, *Kyanzi*, *Lwendo*, *Kibya*, *Nsuwa* and *Mulenzi* within designated spirit partitions. This perspective highlights the fluidity of ritual objects, transitioning from personal healing to communal thanksgiving, contributing to the

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<sup>70</sup> *Ebigali* are offerings brought before a *Mulyammere* receives any kind of healing for an intended ritual and spiritual performance.

<sup>71</sup> *Amakula* are offerings brought after a *Mulyammere* has healed from an ailment during a ritual and spiritual performance.

understanding of how ritual objects can serve multiple functions within a dynamic cultural and healing context.

## 2.2 The *Mizimu* Spiritual Realm

It is fair to acknowledge that status and attitudes toward art are assessed as a particular measure of society's spiritual capacity and the undertaking of spiritual performances (Laylo 2022:76). Binder (2016:1) explores the role of arts in spiritual performance, both as a means of expression and as a source of inspiration. He argues that spirituality and creativity are intertwined and that they can help us understand what it means to live a spiritual and creative life (2016:1). He also emphasises the importance of personal experience in studying spiritual performance through arts.

During spiritual ceremonies, a medium becomes a vessel for ancestral spirits. While in this state, the medium often speaks in a manner that appears nonsensical to others. Only the priest, acting as an interpreter, can comprehend the true meaning behind the medium's words. The priest frequently clarifies and explains the messages conveyed by the media afterward. The medium would be allowed to rest and sleep off the effects of the encounter as soon as the deity's spirit had left (Roscoe 1911:275). For example, the idea of *nganga* might be connected to that of *molili*, which is comparable to the soul of either humans or animals. By engaging in the trance dance while being possessed by *molili*, the *nganga* executes a healing ritual (Joiris1996:245). Such *nganga* beliefs are not considered to be indigenous to the traditional Baka belief system, but rather recent borrowings from the local agriculturalists (1996:245).

While making spiritual performances, God is referred to by the *Banyankore* people of Western Uganda in Eastern Africa as 'the Creator who creates everything, sets things in order, and gives new life'. In the context of spiritual performances, the Baganda people recognize Lubaale Mukasa as a deified hero or a human who has achieved godhood. Among the Ankore people, the name "Byamuhangi" holds significance during spiritual ceremonies. It translates to "they are of (or for) the Creator." Parents present this name to their male children, signifying their belief that the child is a divine creation of God. The name *Muwanga* means "the one who puts things in order" among the Baganda. It is derived from the myth that when

the sun and moon were at odds one day, and darkness descended across the nation, the people cried out to God for assistance (Mbiti 2015:25). It is believed that there are spirits everywhere, people may sense them wherever they are said to be and there is nothing on earth that is not inhabited by spirits, not an object, nor a creature. Lugira (2009:48) notes that a thing becomes more closely associated with spirits the more that it inspires through size, beauty, or strength (Lugira 2009:48). However, the goal of religion for many Ugandans is to make life worthwhile for individuals and the communities in which they live and so too is the purpose of the utilisation of spiritual objects (Mbiti 2015:82).

During my Primary School education, particularly in the Religious Education (RE) class, we studied various world religions, including the spiritual beliefs of the Ugandan people, particularly the Baganda. It was emphasised that the Baganda practiced a religion centered around the reverence of spirits or gods before the introduction of Christianity in the late eighteenth (Kizza 2010:37) and early nineteenth century (Lugira 1970:150). Lugira (1970: 109) clarifies the above account by stating that the Baganda had great belief in spirits termed '*mizimu*' (spirits of departed humans). Roscoe (1911:271) however, contributes to the *mizimu* spiritual realm by providing other spirits/gods other than the *mizumu* within Baganda spiritual beliefs, which he terms as religion. Their objects of veneration and worship were fourfold including deities (*Balubale*), fetishes (*Mayembe*), amulets (*Nsiriba*), and ghosts (*Mizimu*).

Joseph Tabawebbula Kivubiro (1998:102), a cultural historian, noted that the Baganda believed that the cosmos was a divine hierarchy of spirits organised into a pyramid or conical structure according to the status of their occupants. This structure consisted of a Divine ancestry of five elements; with *Katonda* [God] at its apex, *Balubaale* [Divinities], *Emizimu* [Spirits of the ancestors], *Emisambwa* (Landscape Spirits), *Mayembe* and *Nsiriba* [Guardian Spirits], (1998:102). Although all these were regarded as spirits, Kivubiro (1998: 103) further notes that *Katonda* functioned in the spiritual realm while the rest of the spirits functioned mostly in the earthly realm.

Kivubiro's (1998: 103) view depicts a close relationship that the Baganda had with God, putting him first above all things. Indeed, this relationship goes deeper in the Baganda creation story of Kintu (the first King of Buganda) which was constantly told to my siblings and me during family gatherings, and further reinforced during Religious Education teaching

in Primary School. Kintu and his wife Nambi are believed to be the first humans on earth with whom the Baganda and God share a close bond. In this *Ganda* creation story, it is believed that *Gulu* [the creator of all things] lived in heaven [*Ggulu*] with his many children, including a daughter called Nambi. At a point in the narrative, Nambi encountered Kintu and his cow on earth when she and her brothers came down to play. Nambi was puzzled by Kintu's loneliness and asked her father, Gulu, whether she could be his wife. Gulu first refused to bless their marriage but later gave them his blessing. Nambi, together with her chicken and its millet feed, proceeded down to earth to live with Kintu to this day.

According to Kivubiro (1998:103) while Kintu, the prominent ancestor of the Baganda ethnic group, did not possess an ancestral palace of his own, he was associated with the Butonda [Heavens] ancestral palace of Katonda [God]. This connection was established through his marriage to Katonda's daughter, who became the maternal ancestor of all Baganda (1998:97). Kintu's marriage to Nambi acquired him a personal relationship with the Baganda's greatest divinity, *Katonda* setting a precedent for the basis of future relationships between the Baganda and *Katonda* (1998:100). This spiritual way of life is still being portrayed across the various ancestral palaces of Buganda including the King's palaces (*amasiro*), general palaces such as *Ttanda*, *Ssesse* and the spiritual space of Mubende Hill which is the focus of this study. Ancestral spirits known as *mizimu* [ancestors] are believed to continue to roam the physical realms of Baganda's ancestral palaces.

This study notes the cosmology of the ninety-nine spirits within the *Omweyimirize* tree partitions (see chapter three) but is delimited in focus to the four primary and physical spirit partitions visible in the tree buttressing at the *Omweyimirize* tree that belong to the ninety-nine partitions as discussed in the object-ritual and spiritual performance stories in chapter four. This dual appearance exists because the *Omweyimirize* tree spirits were once living humans who became spirits, thereafter, acquiring the latter title *Mizimu*. These spirits then acquired the further title of *Misambwa* because they later settled in various landscapes such as rivers, lakes, trees, and stones (Mbiti 1975: 11; Lugira 2009:8; Kivubiro 1998:106). A good example is this study's famous tree (*Omweyimirize*), which houses the spirit of *Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima* (elaborated on in chapter one). However, as seen in Chapter Three, some *Balyammere* offer different perspectives gathered from interviews and

conversations with them at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill which houses the *Omweyimirize* tree (Ssentongo 2020; Ibra 2020; Musawo 2021). Ssentongo (2020) and Ibra (2020) specifically referred to the spirits at the *Omweyimirize* tree as *Emisange* (plural) or *omusange* (singular). *Emisange* is translated as “*the ones we meet*” (used in the context when *Balyammere* physically encounter the spirits). Musawo, (2021) however, referred to these spirits as *Emisangwa* (plural) and *Omusangwa* (singular). *Emisangwa* means “*the ones whom we found in existence*” (in the context of the *Balyammere* having found or encountered spirits already in existence). While acknowledging the dual nature of the spirits at Mubende Hill as both *Mizimu* and *Misambwa*, this study specifically examines the *Mizimu* in their current form, emphasising the *Balyammere*’s titles of *Emisange* and *Emisangwa*. The study does not delve into the physical context encounter of the spirits mentioned earlier by the *Balyammere*; instead, it concentrates on the dream context encounter, as the object-ritual and spiritual performances at Mubende Hill primarily revolve around dreams. This is reflected in the use of the term *Kuloota Emisange* (dreamed spirits) in the plural and *Kuloota Omusange* in the singular (dreamed spirit). These *Balyammere* (Ssentongo 2020; Ibra 2020; Musawo 2021) further recognise the disappearance and reappearance nature of the spirits at the *Omweyimirize* tree, which resonates with the Bachwezi super-nature narrative (elaborated on in chapter three). Kivubiro (1998:106) confirms that the Baganda spirits had a magical ability to travel anywhere, to appear and disappear. He further stated that the spirits were believed to have the ability to enter with ease any part of the universe or earth, including the landscape, its subterranean regions, and the creatures within it. The apparition and manifestation of spirits at the *Omweyimirize* tree highlight the significance of spiritual performance within the *Balyammere* community. This demonstrates their profound adherence to object-ritual practices dedicated to the worship of the ninety-nine spirits, facilitated by the esteemed spirit medium Catherine Nabukeera. Through their spiritual beliefs, the *Balyammere* embrace object-ritual and spiritual performances with the primary objective of achieving healing and well-being.

### **2.3 Healing from Object-ritual and Spiritual Performances**

Representations of the ritual healing process place a strong emphasis on “relatedness, empathy, and spiritual transformation” as fundamental tenets (Alram-Stern, Blakolmer, Deger-Jalkotzy, Laffineur and Weilhartner 2016:188). This perspective emphasises the

pivotal role of spiritual change in the development of healers' relational and empathic skills. Consequently, many spirit healers, following a spiritual transition, adopt the practice of "radical empathy," wherein the distinctions between the healer and the patient dissipate into a unified field of emotion and experience (Koss-Chioino 2006:1). These diverse roles healers play emphasise the cultural and spiritual significance of indigenous healers, further reinforcing that healing practices are deeply embedded within broader cultural contexts such as the spiritual space of Mubende Hill which is the focus of this study. Although the healing at the spiritual space does not involve the mixing of various herbs as the alleged act of most indigenous healers, within this study healing is performed with the guidance of a spirit medium who intervenes on behalf of the *Balyammere* between the physical and spiritual realms. Moreover, Mbiti (2015:134), accentuates the performance of numerous African rituals, which serve diverse functions, including the promotion of good health, healing, prevention of harm to health, fertility enhancement, purification of individuals and dwellings, and protection of people, animals, and crops. One can note that these rituals are integral to the healing process and substantiate that healing practices encompass a wide spectrum of functions, transcending conventional Western medical paradigms.

Contrarily, Peltzer (1998:61), examines the psychological behavior patterns within rituals, which draws parallels between African civilizations and the profession of psychotherapy. Peltzer bases this connection on the distinction between person-oriented and object-oriented interactions (Peltzer 1998:61). This emphasises the psychological and therapeutic dimensions attached to ritual practices and performances. On the other hand, Miller, Gall, and Corbeil (2011:1) consider the spiritual aspect of individuals introducing the concept of "praying with sacred objects", and posit it as a significant feature that fosters a sense of life purpose in the face of substantial life stressors. This notion further reinforces the argument that traditional healing practices are deeply rooted in spirituality, and they offer individuals a means to navigate life's challenges with a profound sense of purpose. In line with this study, it is this sense of purpose that motivates several *Balyammere* to pay a visit to the Omweyimirize tree to engage in various object-ritual and spiritual performances because they specifically visit the spiritual space with an intention. Besides, this intention is manifested on the account of the *Balyammere* first acquiring a dream of paying a visit to the spiritual space to take part in the object-ritual and spiritual performances which involve acknowledging the profound connection between the material and the divine maintaining communication between the

physical and spiritual realms. The symbiotic relationship between the everyday material world and the spirit world, as conveyed through related symbols, rituals, and cultural indicia, creates a unique context that defies such distinctions (Foley 1985:1). Transformative rituals, characterized by embodied actions, are often sporadic occurrences within specific social milieus, further underscoring their distinctive nature (Rinallo, Borghini and Bamossy 2012:1).

Within communalistic social structures, characterized by environmentally conscious lifestyles and a profound emphasis on spirituality in worldview, the significance of both natural and supernatural healing is palpable. Moreover, beliefs, attitudes, and actions related to illness exhibit remarkable interconnectedness across various African contexts. These shared elements, coupled with the prevalent use of religious or spiritual healers in the treatment of illness, highlight the culture-specific nature of theories regarding the “supernatural etiology” of ailments (Monteiro and Wall 2011:236). Rituals, as powerful cultural constructs, not only evoke collective emotions but also serve as the bedrock for culture, morals, and values. The cognitive abilities of individuals are harnessed to engender interactions that elicit emotions, creating intricate patterns of interaction, emotions, symbols, and engagement over time (Summers-Effler 2006:135). Healing rituals, as complex phenomena, render individuals receptive to the influence of authoritative cultural authorities, endowing traditional healers with the capacity to impart creative, emotional, sensory, moral, and aesthetic information through tangible symbols and ritual practices. This integration of the patient's unique narrative with common cultural mythology unfolds within an environment charged with hope and uncertainty, culminating in a profound drama of evocation, enactment, embodiment, and appraisal (Kaptchuk 2011:1). In the context of this study, the dynamics of object-ritual and spiritual performances come to the fore as pivotal agents of healing, predicated upon the whole-hearted surrender of the *Balyammere*, who place their faith in the transformative potential of specific rituals. As elucidated through the narratives of Musa, Okuzza Obugya, Olwaazi, Ggumbas, and Nakitto, expounded upon in the subsequent chapters, the attainment of desired healing outcomes by the *Balyammere* necessitates their meticulous engagement with specified objects, adherence to prescribed protocols, and the embodiment of behaviors congruent with established norms.

## 2.4 Ritual Objects and Oral Research

How an object or ritual is characterised and written about is naturally connected to the methodological tools that have been used to engage with that object. The practice of removing objects from their original contexts and displaying them in museums, often without proper acknowledgment of their sources and meanings is considered deeply problematic (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, and Weintraub 2012; Smith 1999; Mbembe 2018; Stevenson 2019). This practice not only deprives the objects of their cultural and historical significance but also tends to reinforce colonial and neo-colonial narratives that marginalize and exoticize African cultures. This study argues that objects be read and analysed in the context in which they are used. When objects are removed from their original location or context, they acquire different meanings (Kankpeyeng et al 2011; Barringer and Flynn 2012:21). As a Ugandan who, in some ways, is a member of the community being researched, I conducted this research from an “insider’s” perspective while acknowledging that in other ways I am not part of the immediate community and thus to some extent an “outsider” (Smith 1999:137).

While any outsider/insider status is complex due to differences in age, sex and religion (Naaeke et al 2011; Weider 2004), it is “important for indigenous researchers to carry out research within their communities” (Smith 1999:137). I wrote this Ph.D. as a researcher based within my community with an emphasis on including local oral histories and stories of the *Balyammere’s* object-ritual and spiritual performances. This approach is in sync with the sacred nature of the object-ritual and spiritual performances as opposed to the act of removing the objects or decontextualizing which is considered sacrilegious to this community. The notion of sacrilege reverberates with Smith’s (1999: 1) assertion that Eurocentric research is a “violent act”. Smith (1999:3) asserts that the act of research *on* indigenous communities by colonial-minded researchers (in this context art historians), undermines communities of indigenous people. She, therefore, asserts that “the word itself ‘research’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the world’s vocabulary” (1999:1). At the same time that one acknowledges that the term “research” has negative connotations within previously colonised spaces, it is also important to note that “research” is not something that only Europeans and Americans do. All communities engage in “disciplined and curious inquiry” to learn and advance their understanding of the world in which they live (Appadurai

2006:167). Thus, while it is important to consider the legacy of extraction and violence associated with colonial research in global south contexts, this should encourage indigenous scholars to take ownership of research in their communities.

Research needs to be reconceptualised such that it “includes indigenous knowledge practices and local ways of knowing and becomes available to individuals within the groups and communities being studied” (Strand, M., Rivers, N., Baasch, R. et al 2022: 3). In ‘The Right to Research’ Appadurai (2006:167) notes that the colonial approach to research tends to position it as “a high-end, technical activity, available by training and class background to specialists in education, the sciences and related professional fields”. This approach is concerned with classification and scientific observation and has a tendency to treat people as objects to be looked at, examined and studied. In arguing for the right to research, Appadurai (2006:167) notes that "all human beings are [...] researchers since all human beings make decisions that require them to make systematic forays beyond their current knowledge horizons”.

The process of engaging in research into one’s community and the “act of writing” about this research “rebuilds integrity that was taken from indigenous people” (Hansen 2012:1). Hansen further notes that “the ability to control language, theoretical approaches, and how past events are notated provide effective strategies that empower ethical research”. Within the context of this study, I belong to the Baganda ethnic group that is closely associated with the Nakayima fable, thus in theory I have a certain amount of leverage to overturn or subvert stereotypes or colonized thinking about this space including the ritual objects and performances that inhabit it. The most important source of information for this study though not limited to secondary sources is oral stories and lived experience of ritual. This poses a challenge in terms of formal accuracy since it is hard to verify or authenticate specific information provided by respectful sources. This challenge is synonymous with research that is conducted on indigenous communities or practices where the primary source of information may be an elder or group of elders who rely on their memory to narrate facts to the researcher (Smith 1999:72). There are also the data hierarchies that have been developed through research embedded in colonial practices. Oral information such as stories and myths have historically been considered unreliable forms of information whereas written text is perceived as irrefutable evidence

(101). Thus, the way in which the objects and rituals are recorded and documented by archaeologists such as Lanning is positioned as more accurate and more ‘truthful’ than the stories and oral communication of lived experiences shared by the ritual specialists at this site. In the course of this research, I have documented and transcribed *Balyammere*’s narratives in-depth, subsequently transforming them into written data for further analysis. These narratives remain the most important source of data, holding the highest value in the data hierarchy. Despite examining various data forms, I persistently regard the stories conveyed by the *Balyammerre* at the site as the paramount source of information, anchoring the research findings within their lived experiences.

The way in which research is gathered and received impacts how that research is framed and represented. The symbolic aspect of objects often poses complex and dynamic meanings that transcend their material form. To understand the symbolic aspect of ritual objects, it is necessary to examine the context in which they were used and interpreted. In his article "The Historical Life of Objects: African Art History and the Problem of Discursive Obsolescence", Ogbechie (2005:62) explores how objects can be understood as “historical agents” that embody and produce meanings in different contexts. He argues that objects are not passive or inert, but rather active and dynamic, capable of transforming their symbolic nature according to the changing discourses and practices that surround them. He challenges the dominant paradigms of African art history that have often reduced objects to static categories or representations of culture and proposes a more nuanced and relational approach that considers the historical life of objects as a process of negotiation, appropriation and reconfiguration. Ogbechie (2005:62) uses the case of Mbari architecture among the Owerri-Igbo of Nigeria, a ritual complex that is largely extinct and whose archival inscription is open to debate, “to question the validity of canons that fossilize cultural practice” and prevent alternative interpretations. He argues that Mbari architecture was not a static or fixed form of expression, but a gestural mode of cultural practice that responded to historical changes and contingencies (Ogbechie 2005:63). This study hence observes that ritual objects at the Omweyimirize tree are not merely passive representations of spiritual forces, but active agents that mediate between the human (*Balyammere*) and the divine realms (the ninety-nine spirits at the Omweyimirize tree). This study questions discourses such as those presented at the Uganda museum that continue to separate objects from their respective practices from the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, thereby altering their meaning. This study considers linking

object-ritual and spiritual performances by narrating the oral stories of the objects as told by the *Balyammere* who engage in respective object-ritual and spiritual practices through oral history to narrate meaning/knowledge in this art history study. Ogbechie (2005:68) further notes that “the time has come to revisit the archive of African art history to re-examine how its objects/subjects of study are located in indigenous and discursive histories”.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The presence and interaction with ritual objects and spiritual performances have dominated many cultures across the world for centuries. For these communities, it is the way they express, identify and connect with the outside world. Within the context of the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima tree, central to this study, the object-ritual and spiritual performances at the Mubende Spiritual Space apart from providing divine interventions to a multitude of believers that flock to the abode every single day of the week, the objects re-emphasise the spiritual and divine connection between the outside world - where spirits live and the real world where human beings and ritual objects reside. Indeed, Nakayima is believed to possess a dual identity, both as a spirit living in the outside world and as a living deity “the goddess of fertility” living inside the spiritual realm. To demonstrate her human incarnation, sacrifices are offered to her in the form of milk, coffee beans tied in packs and ghee. It is believed that the spiritual goddess partakes of such nutrition as observed from the routine offers made at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

The act of providing sacrifices at the spiritual space is a performance that connects *Balyammere* to the spirits who act as mediums to the goddess Nakayima (see Chapter Four). The sacrifices are made with ritual objects including milk gourds, clay pots, calabashes and clay bowls. Preceding these sacred activities is the dream (*Kuloota*) that either leads the *Mulyammere* to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, initiates them into the object-ritual and spiritual performance, or dictates the number of days a *Mulyammere* spends at the spiritual space while engaging in the performances and when to depart the spiritual space. Again, the dream here is a symbol of the connection between the *Mulyammere* asking for healing or giving thanksgiving (*Amakula*) to the spirits and the spiritual realm. In this regard, the spiritual world at the Omweyimirize tree, like any other sacred space is perceived as powerful

therefore determining not only the potent power of the ritual objects involved in the performances but also the destiny of the *Balyammere*.

## Chapter Three

### **Contextualising the Spiritual Space of Mubende Hill Uganda: Awaka Wensi *W’Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima.***

This chapter provides a historical and cultural context for the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Based on previously published research on Ganda cultural history and ethnography (Ballarin, Kiriama, and Pennacini, 2013; Lanning 1953; and Hoelsing 2021), this chapter provides a detailed analysis of the location of the Spiritual space of Mubende Hill Uganda. Additionally, the spiritual space of Mubende Hill's history is discussed not as a recitation of written accounts about the spiritual space but rather as an investigation into local ways of knowing and retelling histories. As a result, I set out to interact with and recollect oral histories and local narratives from the ritual specialists and other respondents, including the Basazima<sup>72</sup> and *Balyammere*<sup>73</sup>. Utilising these accounts as a foundation and informed by previously published research (Posnansky 1961; Lanning 1953 and 1966; Schmidt 1990; Robertshaw 1994; Robertshaw et al 1997; Ballarin et al 2013; Hoelsing 2021) about the spiritual space, I wrote this version of the history of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. The Omweyimirize Tree and its significance are also unpacked. I then analyse the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayimas’s role as a superior Ganda spiritual deity and spirit medium. In so doing, the difference between the Nakayima spirit and the spirit medium venerated through the reigning Nakayima spirit medium Catherine Nabukeera is elaborated on. Further, I define the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima as a symbol of ritual and spiritual performance. In addition, I discuss the *Balyammere* as living human recipients of ritual and spiritual performances. Through my research engagement and interactions with *Balyammere*, I too earned the title *Mulyammere* which is the singular of *Balyammere* – becoming an *insider* (Smith 2013:5). As this chapter draws to a close, I discuss the political shifts that relate to the

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<sup>72</sup> Basazima is the short form for the word Basazamazima, which means “makers of fair judgment.” Basazamazima (Basazima) is the plural for the singular word Musazamazima, shortened as Musazima. Basazima, as they call themselves, are a group of Balyammere at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill who, together with the rest of the Balyammere, come to engage in prayer and maintain the general cleanliness of the sacred space. Basazima group members are: Charles Sekyanzi, Fred Ssekate, John Ssemanda, Geoffrey Ssebuuma and Mary Katusabe. It is important to note that Katusabe rivals the current Omweyimirize mama Nakayima’s spirit medium (Catherine Nabukeera) for the position of the spirit medium (*mukongozi*). Also, the Basazima consented to having a group interview to avoid miscommunication.

<sup>73</sup> Balyammere is the plural for the singular word Mulyammere. Balyammere is a terminology coined and used at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in a metaphoric sense to denote all living humans who depend on nature-grown food as a source of livelihood. Within this Chapter and throughout my entire thesis, all the Balyammere consented that I refer to them by the pseudonyms they availed me but with the exemption of the names within the object-ritual and spiritual performances in Chapter Four because the names therein reflect the anticipated healing derived from the objects of interaction. Besides, the object-ritual and spiritual performances deal with sensitive personal issues such as reproduction and the inability to bear children as elaborated in Chapter Four

spiritual space of Mubende Hill. The larger context of Buganda's cultural history, as well as the political integration of Buganda into Uganda and the fallout that transpired, forms the basis for my analysis.

### 3.1. Locating Spiritual Space of Mubende Hill



Figure 3.1: The Nakayima tree which I refer to as the Omweyimirize tree in this study. Photograph by Paul Walusimbi and Basam Mukwaya (2020). This image shows the gigantic Omweyimirize tree with the *Balyammere* situated within the tree partitions formed by the tree buttresses, layered with a carpet of spear grass.

Located on Mubende Hill, the Spiritual space of Mubende Hill is the home to the renowned Nakayima Tree<sup>74</sup> which is referred to as the Omweyimirize tree in this research. The Omweyimirize tree (Figure 3.1) as elaborated on later in the Omweyimirize tree section, is said to have supernatural powers for healing, fertility, wealth, and good health. The tree

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<sup>74</sup> I identify the Nakayima tree as the Omweyimirize tree in this study, which in my mother tongue translates to a symbol of fair judgment. This name honors the tree's role in representing the spirit of Nakayima, as channeled by the spirit medium (Catherine Nabukeera). Furthermore, the Balyammere also call it the "Nakayima tree", acknowledging its welcoming nature to visitors from within Uganda and abroad. The tree is known by various names such as Nyakahima, Nyakahuma, or Nyabingi, which honor both the spirit and the medium, varying by the medium's location. (see section 3.3, titled 'Omweyimirize Tree' for details).

which is considered an important ritual object of African spirituality gets its name from a spiritual princess Nakayima, who allegedly disappeared into it. The Nakayima tree is located three and a half hour's drive along the Kampala-Fort Portal Road in Uganda. Oral history confirms there are differing narratives, with Ballarin et al. (2013:34) claiming that the Nakayima tree has existed for more than four hundred years and Batte (2012), a Ugandan newspaper editor for the *Daily Monitor*, quoted Kajura who noted that “in 1989, white researchers<sup>75</sup> came here and took samples of the tree for testing. They told us that this tree is estimated to be about six hundred fifty years old.” However, according to oral tradition based on some interviews conducted at Mubende Hill's spiritual space from October 1 to November 30, 2020, and then from December 27, 2020 to January 7, 2021, Local Council 1 Chairman Fred Sebatta (2020) confirmed that the tree has been there since 1932. Some *Balyammere* believe the tree has existed for five hundred years (Ibra 2020), and Kadidi (2020) believes it has existed for six hundred years. Harriet (2021) believes it has existed for one thousand years, and others (Tasha 2020, Shaliwa 2020 and Dudu 2020) believe it has existed since the beginning of creation<sup>76</sup> and it became well-known when it was planted in memory of the former Chwezi King Ndahura who ruled from the 15th until the 16th century (Sentongo 2020 and Don 2020).

Ballarin et al (2013:7) revealed that geographically, the tree based on the hilltop is in Central Uganda, an area imagined as the core of the Chwezi empire; further elaborating that the local council chairman of the hill's summit confirmed that the Bachwezi were believed to possess a supernatural power and sight that enabled them to view their entire empire, including Uganda, Kenya, a part of Tanzania, and Rwanda, from the hilltop. Nonetheless, the capital soon lost its centrality. According to Lanning (1966:153), the sacred status of Mubende Hill dates to pre-Bachwezi times when it was settled by the 'sorceress' Kamawengye, who hailed from the vicinity of present-day Mbarara. The magician had two sons, who established themselves as important local rulers, and their capital on Mubende Hill was widely known at

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<sup>75</sup> However, Batte, the Ugandan Daily newspaper editor and Kajura whom he quoted do not mention the white men's names and how many they were.

<sup>76</sup> According to interviews conducted at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, some *Balyammere* believe that the Nakayima tree which is termed as Omweyimirize tree in this research is believed to have existed since the beginning of creation as per the Christian bible when God created heaven and earth.

that time (Lanning 1966:153). As a result, it rapidly became one of the largest settlements in the region. Lanning (1966:153) further notes that the site was taken over by the Bachwezi ruler Ndahura, who resided there for several years, before abdicating in favor of his son Wamala to retire to his birthplace near Fort Portal town.

The specifics of these oral histories and traditions are however subjected to some debate, but their broad sweep is corroborated by archaeological excavations that suggested that an important settlement existed on the crest of Mubende Hill around the time Ndahura was king as noted by (Posnansky (1961:191), Lanning (1966:153), Schmidt (1990:256), Robertshaw (1994:106), Robertshaw, et al, (1997:74). According to Lanning (1966:153), Mubende refers to a substantial expanse covering nine miles, elevating approximately 700 feet from the surrounding terrain to an average height of 5,000 feet. It is positioned midway between Kampala and Fort Portal. The district is named after the hill, and the administrative headquarters are found on the easternmost summit of the range. The spiritual space of Mubende Hill, a countryside spiritual space is considered by the ritual specialists and the *Balyammere* as the “center of the universe” (*Awaka w’ensi*). The Hill later became a focal point of the Bachwezi and the residence of their last and greatest king Ndahura also called Ndaula. However, Smallpox broke out and the Bachwezi influence over the Hima pastoralists collapsed and this led to the rise of the Bito dynasty (Lanning1966; Ballarin et al 2013:22). With the abandonment of Kisozi as the ruling center, the hill came to be known as Mubende, meaning ‘there is another one’. Not another person or ruler but a complete change in the ruling power (Lanning 1966:154).

In that regard, much as the spiritual space of Mubende Hill is open to tourists and other visitors, the ritual specialists and *Balyammere* are very much aware of the behaviors of every individual who steps onto the spiritual premises. So, the individuals such as ritual specialists, *Balyammere* and Basazamazima shortened as Basazima (elaborated on in the introduction) take a lot of precautions. They screen unwanted visitors<sup>77</sup> through a spiritual form of dream

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<sup>77</sup> In 2020 during a face-to-face conversation, Moses Sentongo (Tour Guide), described unwanted visitors as “enemies” to Maama Nakayima's palace. He explained that these individuals often appear to cause “havoc” since the spirit medium (*Mukongozi*)’s seat is contested (Figures 3.6 and 3.7). Sentongo further illustrated this by recounting an incident where a fence made of thatch, intended to demarcate the site’s boundaries was destroyed one morning, leaving the grass scattered. I corroborated this event, having commenced participation in Mubende Hill’s ritual and spiritual performances (Nalukenge, 2020).

analysis guided by the divine, Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's" spirit as venerated by the spirit medium (*omukongozi*). On arrival at the spiritual space, a visitor is asked a couple of interview questions such as, 'Have you come to tour or pray? Did Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima call you? If yes, have you come to pray and go, or you have come to pray and stay'? After answering those questions, the tour guide directs the potential visitor/s to the rightful tree partition where they are introduced to the process of ritual performance in the case of a prayer session and a guided tour around the tree in the case of a tourist (elaborated in Chapter Four section 4.2).

### **3.2. History of Spiritual Space of Mubende Hill**

A lot of mystery surrounds the history of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Various scholars in African history who specialize in Ganda history, ritual, and spiritual practices such as Hoising, Lanning, and Cohen have given various accounts of the history of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill which is currently referred to as the Nakayima Tree Tourist Site. According to tradition, the hill has always been spoken of as the headquarters of the Bachwezi (Briggs and Roberts 2007:100; Ballarin et al 2013:18) who, are considered to have entered southern and western Uganda in the 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ballarin et al 2013:19). Lanning offers an interesting entry point to the anthropological and archaeological analysis and understanding of the pre and post-colonial histories of spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

In May 1953, I found sherds and animal bones in a road cutting at the District Headquarters. Excavations carried out in the area have shown an enormous number of potsherds. The sherds are concentrated over an area of about 12 acres. This area includes a place known to have been a center of worship of the spirit of smallpox (Lanning 1953:181).

Lanning (1966:153) and Ballarin et al. (2013:22), who excavated Mubende in the 1950s and twentieth centuries, respectively, found that oral traditions predate the supposed arrival of the Bachwezi as mentioned earlier in this section. However, it is also important to note that the aforementioned versions are intertwined with pre-colonial state formations involving the Chwezi dynasty (Posnansky 1961:187; Robertshaw 1994:106; Lanning 1966:154;

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Robertshaw 2010:259). The Chwezi dynasty preceded most of the pre-colonial Great Lakes feudal states such as the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom and the Buganda monarch (Posnansky 1961:187; Lanning 1966:153; Robertshaw 1994:107; Robertshaw 2010:256). The spiritual space of Mubende Hill, therefore, stands at the intersection between the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom and Buganda.

Sebatta (2020) and Omutaputa (2020) claimed in an interview that this complexity is behind the Buganda, and Bunyoro kingdom scramble for the Nakayima Tree Tourist Site. The Nakayima traditionally was not only a caretaker of the tree, but she was also regularly possessed by the spirit of Ndahura (the former Chwezi King, her husband, and the god of smallpox). Due to her supernatural powers and ability to possess the spirit of Ndahura, she too could cure smallpox, and other fatal diseases, and help infertile women bear children. The Nakayima received regular tributes in the form of annual fruit harvests from both above polities, in addition to overseeing ritual and spiritual ceremonies that involved the health, fertility, and general well-being of the *Balyammere* and other living creatures. If the oral history is to be believed, for centuries, the Nakayima lineage was and still is an acknowledged spiritual figure to both the rulers and the ordinary Baganda and Banyoro (Ballarin et al 2013: 34). Regardless, the lineage has encountered some pitfalls.

Lanning (1966:157), Briggs and Roberts (2007:101), and Ballarin et al (2013:27) confirmed that the first intimation was in 1888 when the religious conflict that rocked Buganda forced the incumbent Nakayima, Nyanjara, to flee from Mubende. When she returned a year later, all but one of the seven huts traditionally inhabited by the Nakayima were razed, while the graves of her predecessors had been desecrated, and her sacred drums had vanished. This attack had no immediate impact on the Nakayima's influence in Bunyoro, then relatively unexposed to exotic religions indeed, King Kabalega made a special visit to Mubende to pay Nyanjara tribute in 1899. In this thesis, I first and foremost set out not to dispute but to temporarily distance myself from earlier published research regarding the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. I was more interested in engaging the original indigenous interpreters at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill to acquire deeper historical and cultural narratives surrounding the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Johnson and Sackett (in Kawulich 2005:6)

clarify that most research information collected by researchers such as anthropologists does not represent what happens in a culture being observed<sup>78</sup>.

For instance, when one wants to know more about the daily life experiences of the *Balyammere*, it is better to go to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill and interact directly or indirectly with the *Balyammere* rather than learn about them via media and activist narratives. This is clarified by the researcher's field research experience through participant observations in the methodology section. In that regard, the researcher acquires firsthand information that is likely to enrich his/her findings more than the media and activist narratives about the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Oftentimes the media alters the information which at the same time changes the meaning of this information to best sort its needs. So, I made trips to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill where I stayed for two months and two weeks. As earlier mentioned in the methodology section, I made friends with some of the caretaker groups and lawful ritual specialists at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Some of these caretakers and specialists at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill inform the next historical account of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

However, the information contained in much of the interviews from the spiritual space of Mubende Hill ritual specialists, *Balyammere*, and Basazima is more than just interviews. According to these participants, their answers to the research questions are actual revelations in the form of dreams and other spiritual messages from Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima. The interview process was therefore a tedious one requiring more time and patience with some interviewees. Most of the interviewees requested extra time to gain a perfect spiritual connection with the spiritual realm before answering certain questions. However, a more dependable historical account by the tour guide identified as Ssentongo (2020) indicated that there was an old woman who lived at the site around 500 years ago. Ssentongo (2020) asserted that it is that old woman who discovered and started ritual and spiritual practices at

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<sup>78</sup> As a researcher, I acknowledge the complexity of this position as both an insider and outsider. I identify as a member of the Baganda ethnic group, which is closely associated with the Nakayima narrative, providing a certain leverage to challenge stereotypes or colonised thinking about the space (xxxii). However, I also recognise my outsider status due to not being part of the immediate religious community or the indigenous Mubende Hill spiritual space (xxxiii). This dual positioning allows me to engage with indigenous ways of knowledge production while maintaining a critical perspective on traditional anthropological practices (xxviii).

the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. He goes on to explain that the old woman called Nakayima was entrusted with the above duties at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill by the Nakayima spirit (Ssentongo 2020). He, however, notes that the spiritual space of Mubende Hill was not originally known as Nakayima since people did not know the name of the spirit at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. He reveals that Nakayima was endowed with unique physical and spiritual characteristics, enabling her to exist as both a natural and divine being. She could therefore appear and disappear with ease. This peculiar nature bestowed upon her the special pseudonym, Omusange, in plural *Emisange*. The word *Emisange* is derived from the local Ganda dialect and meaning. It is used in the context of an act of finding the subject in reference. The word was, therefore, coined in a descriptive manner and context within which the physical and invisible spirit of Nakayima could appear and disappear with ease. This concept of *Emisange* is not a new phenomenon in Buganda and East Africa. The *Emisange* are believed to be major components of the African indigenous spiritual conception of life and existential realism.

For instance, one of the *Balyammere* at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill identified as Ibra (2020) gives a more philosophical account in his interview when he explained that, in the beginning, the world was not for *Balyammere*, or mortal humans, it was for souls. He affirms that across the “entire universe”, the spiritual space of Mubende Hill was the chosen abode for the *Emisange*. Ibra (2020) highlights the distinction between *Emisange* and ancestral spirits, emphasising that humans create physical shrines for their ancestors; while *Emisange* are mobile spirits with limited connection to human conditions. Their dwelling places are in trees of the forest; thus, the connection to the spirits that reside at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. In all these accounts, the *Emisange* are described as timeless watchers who have existed at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill for more than five hundred years. Ibra’s (2020) observation is further augmented by Musawo's (2021) interview who coined a slightly different pseudonym, *Musangwa* in the singular and *Emisangwa* in the plural. She elaborates that the spirits are locally called *Misangwa* because they are believed to be ‘bonafide’ spirits at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Musawo (2021) confirms the view that it is the *Emisangwa* who planted the tree.

In agreement with the above observation, Saava Mugerwa (2021) and Grace Mukisa Kayongo (2021) of Buganda Cultural Routes, specialists on traditional Ganda beliefs and practices in a face-to-face interview explained that the *Emisange* are believed to be both physical and unseen spirits that roam the earth. *Emisange* can morph into an animal, bird, reptile, insect, and other living and nonliving objects with ease. Their main places of abode are natural habitats such as rivers, lakes, hills, mountains, forests, and water grooves. In support of the above observation, Ssentongo (2020), proposes that the *Emisange* possess the divine right and the freedom to interact with anyone they desire. In exercising their unrestricted choice, they opt to become the spirit medium for Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima. They found the original Nakayima to be a good ritual and spiritual conductor and began instructing her on what to do at the tree (Ssentongo 2020) gaining and perfecting the skills of ritual worship and spiritual propitiation. Having regular, unique experiences and direct interaction with the unseen energy that enlivens all living beings within this distinct spiritual realm, she, out of compassion and responsibility towards suffering humans, disclosed the spiritual healing capabilities and the secrets of this unique place to the Bacwezi and the wider community of the *Balyammere* (Ssentongo 2020). Ssentongo (2020) further elaborated that, Nakayima was part of the Bachwezi. Ssentongo (2020) and Don (2020) corroborate previous assertions that the spiritual space of Mubende Hill was initiated by the Bachwezi, known for cultivating millet, sorghum, and simsim [sesame seeds]. To this day these crops continue to serve as both grains and ritual objects in the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, as indicated by this study.

However, interviews with Basazima (2020), Omutaputa (2020) Ssentongo (2020), and Mulema (2021 and 2022), purport that the spiritual space of Mubende Hill has existed since the time of creation. This narrative exhibits a distinct resemblance to the creation story. Genesis 1:2 describes the Earth as being without form, void, and in darkness upon the face of the deep. The Basazima (2020) explicitly align with this biblical account by stating that the early world was circular and formless Basazima. The same understanding of the universe's nature was prevalent among the Greeks and Romans; confirming this, Lucretius Carus T (2008:1) asserted in the introduction of his book *On the Nature of the Universe* (2008) that "All nature, as it is in itself, consists of two things: there are bodies and there is void in which these bodies are and through which they move." The Basazima (2020) assert that the origin of all living organisms, including the first race of mankind, traces back to the spiritual space of

Mubende Hill from whence populations started spreading out to inhabit various regions worldwide, encompassing Europe, the USA, Australia, Asia, and different parts of the African continent.

The Basazima (2020) further revealed that their forefathers were the first race of created humans who presided over the ritual and spiritual affairs at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. There was a prosperous and peaceful space under the first female priestess Nakayima (Basazima 2020). However, the news of this stability wherever it reached brought forth negative forces which were determined to besiege and weaken the formerly peaceful world of the Mubende Priestess, Nakayima (Basazima 2020). The primary motive behind this premeditated assault was the unique ability of the Nakayima priestess to perceive and interpret messages, as well as discern the schemes and intentions of her adversaries without their awareness (Basazima 2020). The Basazima (2020) asserted that Nakayima had the power to travel to distant planets such as Mars, Jupiter, Pluto, and other strange lands on her investigative missions and excursions. Nakayima could utilise her divine transporting power, allowing her to be present at enemy gatherings without any prior invitation. This presence could manifest both physically, when someone embodied her spirit, and spiritually, through dreams (Basazima 2020). It is this extraordinary power that was a threat to the outside world since Nakayima used it as a powerful weapon; a notion aligned somewhat anachronistically with the idea of disorganising the plans of the colonial masters.

In a bid to control and tame Nakayima's extraordinary power, stranger forces who heard about Nakayima's extraordinary power infiltrated the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's confederacy. Briggs and Roberts (2007:101) and Tumusiime (2012:36) contend that the coming of colonising forces led to the forceful eviction of the then-incarnation of Nakayima from her throne, hence belittling her power. It is therefore worth noting that the spiritual space of Mubende Hill is located a stone's throw away from the state lodge. The state lodge is part of the chain of presidential suites which were built in the 1940s as part of the colonial government's welfare facilities. Up to date, such lodges are common in most colonial administrative towns of Uganda. Briggs and Roberts (2007:101) further affirm that as early as 1902, the political autonomy that had characterised the once feared and revered spiritual community led by the Nakayima was curtailed when Mubende Hill was placed under the

indirect colonial rule of a Muganda Saza chief appointed by the British administration at Kakumiro. The then incumbent of the title Nakayima, Nyanjara retired to Bugogo, where she died in 1907, the first Nakayima not to be interred in the traditional cemetery near the sacred tree, though eventually she was buried in isolation at the base of Mubende Hill. Her fantastic regalia, confiscated by the authorities now forms one of the most impressive displays in the national museum in Kampala together with three large pots housed in the store (Briggs and Roberts 2001:101).

### 3.3. Omweyimirize Tree

The spiritual Nakayima tree is referred to as the Omweyimirize tree in this study. The name of the Omweyimirize tree is derived from the external significance of the title Nakayima, associated with the former Bachwezi priestess<sup>79</sup>, whom I refer to as Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima. This special title is a result of her advocacy for fair judgment, a role which is locally referred to as *Okweyimirira*. Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima is therefore well understood as a ritual and spiritual intercessor to millions of living souls spread across the “entire universe” (Ssentongo 2021; Omutaputa 2022; Ibra 2020). Therefore, the Omweyimirize tree is part and parcel of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, the superior priestess and intercessor at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. In this study, the Omweyimirize tree takes on an intrinsic meaning as the tree is endowed with the power to protect, heal, and bless (Ibra 2020; Basazima 2020). This is due to the widely held historical (Lanning 1966:154; Ballarin et al 2013:14) and oral traditional (Basazima 2020; Dudu 2020, Don 2020; Kalisa 2021, Musawo) beliefs that the spirit of Nakayima resides within the tree. It is also believed that the former priestess Nakayima, Nyanjara (of the colonial era 1907), is said to have vanished therein. This incident is elaborated later on in this section. Therefore, for the *Balyammere*, the spirit of Nakayima is more alive than dead, as demonstrated by their reverence for the tree.

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<sup>79</sup> During the reign of the Bachwezi of Bunyoro Kitara empire, founded by King Ndahura, the King had a wife (priestess). The real name of Ndahura’s wife is, however, not known because, in the ancient days, women were referred to by titles such as Nakayima or Nalongo other than their real names as depicted by the various tree partition spirits; names at the Omweyimirize tree (Ssentongo 2022). Also, see Lanning (1966:154).

The Omweyimirize tree, the central ritual object of investigation in my thesis<sup>80</sup>, is a peculiar ritual magnet in Buganda and some African countries bordering Uganda such as Rwanda and Tanzania. This fact is often revealed in this thesis by the interviews I conducted with the *Balyammere* in 2020. A clear signpost located at the bottom of the hill along the Kampala Fort Portal highway directs visitors to the UNESCO-protected site (Ballarin et al 2013:16). A Buganda kingdom emblem (Figure 3.2) is placed adjacent to the Omweyimirize tree symbolising the mutual relationship and ritual importance of the tree to the age-old kingdom of Buganda. The giant Omweyimirize tree stands beside an ever-green background of trees, thickets, and meadows atop the Mubende hill. The tree's enormous size is a result of its protracted life span (elaborated on in section 3.1 of this chapter with regards to varying oral history and oral tradition views relating to indigenous knowledge) and its species, *Pterygota mildbraedii* (scientific name) as attested by Esezah Kyomugish Kakudidi (2004:115), Cecilia Pennacini (2009:347), Dominic Musinguzi (2020) and Mary Namaganda<sup>81</sup> (2023). The tree has naturally formed gigantic buttresses forming ninety-nine partitions termed *Ebisenge* [rooms] (Pennacini 2009: 343; Ballarin et al 2013:30; Kadidi 2020; Sebatta 2020; Ssentongo 2020; Omutaputa 2020; Kinyomo 2021; Kalisa 2021).

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<sup>80</sup> The Omweyimirize tree is the central focus of this study because it serves as the pivotal point for all object-ritual and spiritual practices. Embedded within the Balyammere's cultural and spiritual existence, it functions as a channel for spiritual restoration and well-being. Associated with ritualistic items such as clay vessels, containers, and gourds, these elements are essential to the ceremonial activities surrounding the tree (xiii). Its importance is underscored by its role in the Bachwezi people's belief system, forging a connection with forebears and facilitating the attainment of spiritual well-being (70). Representing more than spiritual and ceremonial acts, the Omweyimirize tree embodies the enduring cultural heritage of the Bachwezi, transmitted across generations (70). The Narratives of Olwaazi, Okuzza Obugya, Ggumbas, Nakitto, and Musa illustrate its role as a central figure in these performances strengthening its status as a pivotal entity in these practices, emphasizing its significance as a spiritual and cultural symbol (72).

<sup>81</sup> Namaganda Mary is the Principal Assistant Herbarium Curator at the Department of Plant Science, Microbiology & Biotechnology, Makerere University. She informed me that the Nakayima tree's scientific name is *Pterygota mildbraedii* (2023).



Figure 3.2: Buganda kingdom emblem<sup>82</sup>. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image shows the gigantic Omweyimirize tree with some *Balyammere* within the tree partition of Nakayima, which also acts as a sitting room and reception formed by the buttresses layered with spear grass carpet.

According to Kadidi's (2020) interview at the spiritual space, the universality of this tree is reflected in the metaphor of the ninety-nine tree partitions. The ninety-nine number is a metaphoric symbol for the ninety-nine hills representative of the Chwezi dynasty which ruled over the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom presently from Mubende hill. Presently, the ninety-nine hills of Mubende, as disclosed by Kato (2001) and shared in interviews with Omutaputa (2020), Ssentongo (2020), and Sebatta (2020), are focused around the Omweyimiriz tree, with Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima reigning over them all. In the object-ritual and spiritual tradition associated with the Omweyimirize tree, it is a consistent belief that where there is a female spirit, there is also a corresponding male spirit. The "mother of the universe", Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima (spirit), is symbolically represented by the number nine. Similarly, the "father of the universe", referred to as taata Ndaula, is also symbolised by the number nine (Kalisa 2021; Musawo 2021). Kalisa (2021) and Musawo (2021) further assert that this symbolic pairing results in figure ninety-nine in the context of

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<sup>82</sup> It is important to note that placing the Buganda kingdom emblem at the spiritual space does not interfere with the sacred space and its associated practices but rather affirms the kingdom's reign (see page 68) over the Mudende Hill.

this cosmology at Omweyimirize tree (Sebatta 2020; Kadidi 2020). More still, in the Omweyimirize tree ritual<sup>83</sup> and spiritual tradition, all humanity is reconfigured into two parts, the upper part [spiritual realm], and the lower portions [the realm of the *Balyammere*] (Ssentongo 2020; Omutaputa 2020). Of these two parts, the upper part is deemed more important and symbolised by Figure ninety-nine for its Godly nature (Ssentongo 2020; Omutaputa 2020). Musawo (2021) and Mulema (2022) offer a different perspective by affirming that the number ninety-nine can also signify the totality of the seven *malayika* (angels), which appear in the form of a rainbow. They further clarify that the seven *malayika* include Ndaula – symbolised by green; Musoke – symbolised by yellow; Kiwanuka – symbolised by red; Mukasa – symbolised by blue; Muwanga – symbolised by violet; Musisi – symbolised by white; and Kibuuka – symbolised by black (Musawo 2021; Mulema 2022).

In this study, the Omweyimirize tree is viewed in the light of the above cosmology as an umbilical cord that joins Buganda to Bunyoro Kitara and the spiritual space. It is at the Omweyimirize tree that all the *Balyammere* can experience the powerful force that is transmitted to the original ninety-nine hills of the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's area of jurisdiction. It is in the ninety-nine hills that the highest spiritual deity is called upon to bring her spirits onto the earth. In a nutshell, every tree partition at the Omweyimirize tree is conceptualised as a hill. Out of the ninety-nine tree partitions, eighteen partitions<sup>84</sup> are crucial for the ritual and spiritual propitiation of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima as revealed through the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium. All the tree partitions of the Omweyimirize tree are carefully lined with a neat carpet of spear grass (*esubi*) that spreads out to the entire compound of the Nakayima spiritual space. The grass is carefully selected and maintained by different groups of attendants which include the *Balyammere* and Basazamazima. As learned during my participant observation period as I interacted in the object-ritual and spiritual performances, an assortment of various ritual and spiritual objects such as clay pots (small and big) (*nsumbi* and *nsuwa*), clay bowls (*ebibya*), and a calabash

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<sup>83</sup> Omweyimirize tree ritual is undertaken by most *Balyammere* who visit the spiritual space on account of prayer were depending on whichever intended healing, the *Balyammere*/*Mulyammere* rotates around the tree in a clockwise direction which I term as *Okulamaga* [pilgrimage] as emphasised later in section 3.4. of this Chapter. Besides, some of the figures are depicted within the object-ritual and spiritual stories of Olwaazi and Ggumbas in Chapter Four.

<sup>84</sup> The eighteen partitions belong to the spirits of "Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima", taata Ndaula, Nandaula, Abalongo, Nabuzaana, Bassalongo, Bannalongo, Bachwezi, Lubowa, Nabinene, Bamweyana, Nakayaga, Abasese comprising (Musoke, Kiwanuka, Ssewamala), Mukasa, Kitinda and Wanema respectively.

(*olwendo*) are carefully placed onto the thick grass carpet in the partitions of taata Ndaula, Bassalongo and Bannalongo specifically for different ritual and spiritual performances as seen in the subsequent chapter. Through further participation in the object-ritual and spiritual practices and from oral stories, I learned that a lot of care and rules are observed around the Omweyimirize tree premises. Tasha (2020), Dudu (2020) and Nabukeera (2020) noted that there are varied restrictions which include; Firstly, they prohibit *Balyammere* from engaging in sexual acts. Secondly, they specify dietary limitations, forbidding the consumption of pork<sup>85</sup>, grasshoppers, fish, and chicken by women. Additionally, there are specific behavioral expectations for women not to sit near the male spirit's fireplaces during their menstrual periods. Lastly, the *Balyammere* must maintain the cleanliness of the spiritual space as a whole.

Despite being supported and defined by the ninety-nine partitions, the Omweyimirize tree has other unique features. The tree has got an outgrowth above the partition of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, which is metaphorised and conceptualised as a cow's head (Figure 3.3) by

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<sup>85</sup> During formal interactions at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, some *Balyammere* (Omutaputa 2020; Kalisa 2021; Musawo 2021 and Kinyomo 2021) confirmed that pork consumption is prohibited because Taata Ndaula is Muslim. They continued by noting that grasshoppers are forbidden because they are also termed as children, eating fish would mean consuming the water spirits known as Abasese (Musoke, Kiwanuka, Ssewamala). The prohibition of women from eating chicken dates back to ancient times when women were not allowed to eat chicken and only men did.



Figure 3.3: Omweyimirize tree cow head projection. Photograph on the left by Paul Walusimbi and Basam Mukwaya (2020). Photographs on the upper and lower right Harrison Watsala (2018). The image on the left depicts the exact location of the cow head on the Oweyimirize tree whereas the two images on the upper and lower right depict a close-up of the cow head. The image at the upper right shows a side view whereas the lower right one shows the front of the cow head both with a tongue-like projection at the front of the head with a protruding branch at the top of the head mimicking a horn.

the *Balyammere* as well as the ritual specialists. The 'cow head' exhibits small horn-like protruding branches and an embossed human-like figure in a seated position. This figure marks the location where the former "Mukongozi," also recognized as the spiritual medium Nyanjara, is believed to have vanished into the universe (Nabukeera 2020; Ssentongo 2020; Sebatta 2020; Omutaputa 2020; Basazima 2020). The notion of a 'cow's head' is directly connected to the cow [nte] clan which is also Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's and taata Ndahura's clan (Basazima 2020; Ssentongo 2020). Inside the 'cow head' is a permanent beehive which is believed to be an ages-old biophysical habitat, notes Ssentongo (2020) and Omutaputa 2022. They further clarify that the bees are believed to be guardians of peace which also serve a role as spiritual 'soldiers' (Ssentongo 2020 and Omutaputa 2022).

Through the object-ritual and spiritual practices, I comprehend that the bees also provide security to the *Balyammere* who come to deliver their petitions and communicate their daily life challenges and most stressing issues to Omweyimirize mama Nakayima through the Mukongozi [spirit medium]. The continuous and undisturbed presence of bees at the spiritual

space of Mubende Hill further points to Indigenous African ritual and spiritual conception and sensitivity towards all living souls including insects, crawling mammals, birds, animals, and humans as one part of the entire ecosystem (Mbiti 1975:22; Mbiti 1990:50; Lugira 2009:91). Apart from these unique features, the tree as I observed and got clarity from Ssentongo (2020) has got other protruding features thought to resemble and embody breasts (Figure 3.4). The breasts are believed to be a feminine feature and symbol of motherhood and life. Many people in Uganda still believe that Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima exists at the Omweyimirize tree, across the ninety-nine Mubende hills<sup>86</sup> and the world over. Therefore, time and again, large crowds throng to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill to offer sacrifices and petitions for their needs, as noted by (Pennancini 2009:342; Ballarin et al. 2013:32 and Nalukenge 2020) to interact in the object-ritual and spiritual practices.



Figure 3.4: The image displays the Omweyimirize tree breast projections, located towards the center of the picture. Two V-shaped features protrude downwards, aligning with the demarcation border of the partitions of the Abasese spirits. The Bamweyana's spirit partition is on the right, Kiwanuka's spirit partition is on the left, and a side view portion of the Omweyimirize tree cow projection cow's head projection is visible at the extreme left top corner.

### **3.4. Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima as a Symbol of Spiritual and Ritual Performance**

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<sup>86</sup> Mubende Hill is made up of ninety-nine hills dedicated to various spirits and the Omweyimirize Tree rests at the top and at the center of the ninety-nine hills occupying the 99<sup>th</sup> position, hence relating its positionality to the center of the universe as clarified by the (Basazima 2020; Omutaputa 2022; Nabukeera 2020; Ssentongo 2021).

In this section, I analyse the role of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima as a symbol of spiritual and ritual performance. I analyse Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima in the context of Ndaula's widow, who became an advocate for fair judgment for her subjects during Kitaka's reign and hence gained the title 'Nakayima', (Eroku 2019; Ssentongo 2020; Don 2020; Sebatta 2020; and Dudu 2020). Based on the principles of Baganda and Banyoro spirituality and ritual performance, my analysis serves as a foundation to grasp the importance of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, whom I recognize in her role as a paramount Ganda spirit medium, believed for her nurturing and protective nature. During my practical field visits to the Omweyimirize tree, I witnessed how a lot of people flocked to the space and testified to having achieved great things in their lives due to the blessings received by invoking and praying to the spirit of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima through the Mukongozi at the Omweyimirize tree. All the *Balyammere* acknowledged that the spiritual space of Mubende Hill is a global center where people from inside and outside of Uganda come to pray for their every need, and they obtain it. The *Balyammere* who intend to present their petitions to the healer and spirit medium, Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima are guided by the Mukongozi through the process of ritual and spiritual performance around the tree partitions. The *Balyammere* and Basazamazima further revealed that the spiritual space of Mubende Hill is a very fascinating stopover because of the supernatural powers of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima. It is these supernatural powers that many seek in the process of ritual and spiritual performance at the Omweyimirize tree.

Amanze (2011:4) and La Placa et al (2013:116) explain that generally, it has been difficult to understand African spirituality and the concept of well-being. According to Mtuze (1999:5) and Masango (2006:934), the literature regarding African indigenous spirituality has been written about in problematic ways either marginalising, demonising, or subjugating the subject. The introduction of Western Christian spirituality, along with its associated education and health systems, into Africa did not aim for collaboration. Instead, these external forms of knowledge embodied and transmitted Western culture and understanding to Africans (Louis 2007:131; Khupe 2014:10). They intended to eradicate any traces of indigenous spiritual practices within the African context. Consequently, the practice of African Indigenous spirituality went subterranean and was conducted clandestinely (Mbiti 1980:818). Despite being hidden, it retained its transformative capacity to adapt and redefine itself while interacting with historical and contextual factors to contribute to overall well-being.

The above scenario also resonates with the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima and related ritual and spiritual activities that have been alienated by the Global North Christian ideologies<sup>87</sup>. It is important to note that the coming of Christian missionaries and the corresponding Missionary education in Uganda discouraged the people from traditional religious practices (Nakazibwe2005:28) such as worship and pilgrimage to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill (Eroku 2019:1 and Nanyombi 2023). Mbiti (1980:817) contends that a crucial aspect of African conceptualisation and the practice of well-being lies in the comprehension of African spirituality; it is this foregrounding of African spirituality that is applied in this study. Spirituality is about connection, relationship, and the collective (Coates et al 2006; Mavundla et al 2009; Boucher and Chisale 2012; Ohajunwa 2019). The above explanation is therefore important in this study because it is crucial in situating the concept of spirituality within the performances at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. It is important to note that just like indigenous African spiritual systems discussed above, the spiritual space of Mubende Hill has gone under similar circumstances that were dictated by the coming of Christian spirituality. Eroku (2019:1) writes that as Uganda receded into colonialism, Nakayima was then relegated and marginalised as a wicked goddess, and her power and identity were lost. However, at one point, Nakayima wielded a lot of power and influence in the societies where she lived but lost it due to colonialism, Christianity, and African patriarchy. Such limited importance and use of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spiritual prowess was until recently drawn into scholarship and research in spirit mediumship and ritual healing.

Hoelsing (2012:94) observes that research executed by scholars such as Tantala (1989), Roseman (1991), Janzen (1992), Friedson (1996), Schoenbrun (1998), Feierman (1999), Thram (1999 and 2002) and Kodesh (2010) within the fields of humanities and social

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<sup>87</sup> The alienation of Western ideologies has influenced the oral traditions of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, leading to a form of syncretism. The spiritual space accommodates people from various religious backgrounds, including those influenced by Global North ideologies, which has led to a blending of practices and beliefs. This is evident in the diversity of the Balyammere, who come from different religious, social, and political backgrounds, and yet participate in the spiritual and ritual performances at Mubende Hill (59 and 77). The oral traditions reflect a syncretic approach by incorporating elements from different belief systems while maintaining indigenous practices. For instance, the prohibition of pork consumption due to Taata Ndaula's Muslim background and the restriction on eating certain animals like grasshoppers and fish due to their spiritual significance demonstrate how different cultural and religious beliefs have been integrated into the practices at Mubende Hill (71). Additionally, the taboos and restrictions observed at the spiritual space, such as respecting the spear grass carpet and prohibiting certain activities, depict the preservation of indigenous practices despite external influences (28). This syncretism allows the spiritual space to remain inclusive and non-discriminative, accommodating a wide range of participants while maintaining its core spiritual and cultural values (87).

sciences about spirit mediumship and ritual healing is mostly ethnographic<sup>88</sup>. Renee Louise Tantala (1989:260) refers to these as studies of “classical religion” in East Africa, while Steven Feierman (1999), Neil Kodesh (2010) and David Schoenbrun (1998) write on “public healing,” and John Janzen (1992:) and Steven Friedson (1996) prefer the proto-Bantu cognate “*ngoma*.” These terms offer alternatives to negatively tinged formations like “cults of affliction” or “drums of affliction” (Hoelsing 2012:95). Consequently, this thesis focused on employing the title Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima to demystify the fact that, within the indigenous Baganda and Banyoro schools of thought, spiritual and ritual performances are intertwined with the life and well-being of all *Balyammere* as common occurrences.

Aligned with the aforementioned observation, Richard A. Ogunleye (2014:149) elucidated that within traditional African settings, ritualistic expressions manifest as recurring events that mark the various stages of life from birth to death. Ceremonial activities and offerings are conducted to appease specific deities during particular circumstances (Ogunleye 2014:149). Ogunleye (2014:149) further expounds that in diverse regions of Africa, such as the central plateau of Mali inhabited by the Dogon people, it is customary to engage in rituals when an individual falls ill. Additionally, according to Ray's work, "African Religions: Symbol, Ritual, and Community" (2000:47), a man may perform a ritual sacrifice for his ailing mother, brother, or son, even if they reside separately; it is believed that the ritual can still have efficacy regardless of their physical proximity. Hence, rituals transcend mere symbolic actions, possessing a hieratic nature wherein personal roles and identities play a crucial role.

Furthermore, burrowing from Eliade's (1959:45) demonstration, ritual is shaped by archetypes, representing the primal gestures and dramas from the dawn of time that must be enacted and relived by participants. In the realm of ritual, individuals willingly submit their corporeal existence, assuming well-defined roles governed by intricate rules. For instance,

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<sup>88</sup> It is important to note that whereas this study is also ethnographic like most humanities and social science studies such as (Tantala 1989; Roseman 1991; Janzen 1992; Friedson 1996; Schoenbrun 1998; Feierman 1999; Thram 1999, 2002; Kodesh 2010) concerning spirit mediumship and ritual healing, this study differs by focusing on the performance of ritual objects at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, emphasising local oral narratives and indigenous knowledge, and contrasting the significance of ritual objects between Mubende Hill and the Uganda museum

visitors to the Mubende Hill must undergo a unique form of orientation,<sup>89</sup> and rotate around the Omweyimirize tree<sup>90</sup>. It is believed that anyone who approaches the Omweyimirize tree becomes a pilgrim obligated to partake in all requisite ritual performances befitting such a designation.

Eliade (1959:169) supports the earlier observation by emphasising that ritual holds a significant role in the religious expression of traditional African belief systems. Its functions encompass the expiation of sins, expressions of gratitude for blessings, and the acquisition of permission or authorization for engagement in communal activities such as farming and fishing. Eliade further notes that in certain African communities, rituals follow a regular cycle of repetition (Eliade 1959:31). An illustrative instance is the Osun Osogbo festival in Nigeria, an annual event situated along the Oshun River outside Osogbo in Osun State, typically taking place in August each year (Eliade 1959:123). This cycle includes rituals associated with herding, hunting, agricultural practices, human life, and craftsmanship (e.g., smiting in the construction of new homes), all intricately connected to community leadership roles (Eliade 1959:126). Moreover, there are specific rituals designed to address crises or calamities affecting local affairs, such as those conducted at the Omweyimirize tree, involving unique functions related to ceremonial singing held during both the early morning and late-night hours.

According to interviews from ritual specialists at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill (Nabukeera 2020; Ssentongo 2020), ritual singing takes place during the early morning and late-night hours because that is the time when the angels return to mix and interact with earthly creatures. In addition to ritual singing, there is another ritual performative act that requires all present *Balyammere* to wake up and pray at an individual level (Nabukeera 2020; Ssentongo 2020). This happens between midnight and 3:00 am. It is believed that at these

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<sup>89</sup> This involves asking of specific questions by the Tour Guide in relation to the purpose of the visit of a *Mulyammere/Balyammere* (63-64)

<sup>90</sup> Rotation around the Omweyimirize tree [pilgrimage] is performed in a clock-wise movement depicting the transient aspect of ritual and spiritual practices as opposed to the anti-clockwise static state. This act further involves prayer in a kneeling gesture while placing coffee beans within each tree partition (see 79 for more details). The *Balyammere*'s object-ritual stories involve offerings of *ebigali* and *amakula* brought before the attainment of healing and after the healing occurs respectively. The practices are dreamt and actualised through objects such as calabashes, clay pots, bowls, milk containers, coffee beans, ghee, Bachwezi cup gestured through prayer, smearing, sipping, specific partitions, sawing, singing, dancing, drumming, clapping and are time specific (see the *Balyammere*'s stories of objects in Chapter Four for a broader discussion).

times, the angels come to ensure that the “children” are well-fed (Nabukeera 2020; Ssentongo 2020). At the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, all living creatures including humans, animals, birds, and insects are referred to as “children” (Nabukeera 2020; Ssentongo 2020).

Regarding the ritual procedures observed at the sacred site of Mubende Hill, Ogunleye (2014:149) highlighted a noteworthy example of healing rituals that often involve the gathering of herbs and leaves. Typically, leaves are collected during morning and afternoon hours, but in urgent situations, they may be plucked at night (Ogunleye 2014:150). It is intriguing to mention that some Yoruba people in Nigeria and other African regions believe that leaves "sleep" at night, and, therefore, inactive leaves are considered ineffective. To remedy this, it is deemed necessary to awaken the dormant leaves when they are required (Ogunleye 2014:150).

The awakening process involves chewing seven seeds of alligator pepper. After chewing, the individual spits on their palm and uses it to gather sand from the ground, which is then sprinkled onto the leaves. Following this, an incantation is recited. In the context of Mubende Hill's spiritual space, it has been elucidated that the rituals performed at the tree follow a repetitive pattern. This explains why the *Balyammere*, a practitioner, circumambulates the tree in a clockwise manner rather than counterclockwise, a practice referred to as "Okulamaga," loosely translated as pilgrimage. The clockwise motion symbolises forward movement, contrasting with the anticlockwise motion associated with backwardness. Additionally, clockwise directions are linked to 'good luck,' while anticlockwise signifies 'bad luck.'

Ogunleye (2014) further observed that in returning to our general discussion concerning healing, from an African perspective, diseases and their causes are housed in three categories: First are physical ailments, thus illnesses that fall within the range of the physical plane of reality and understanding such as a headache or a fever, and the like. Second are the mystical ailments that according to Babalola (2014:150), belong to the corridor of spirituality. And the third category is what Lambo (1998:149) called astral influences such as the influence of cosmic agents such as the sun, and the moon. It is this concern for the knowledge of

connections between the physical and the spiritual that leads people to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. At the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, all who seek this hidden knowledge can meet Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima who uses her extraordinary ability to reveal the hidden secrets of human relations and existence. In this way, Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima acts as a powerful symbol of relief from all categories of ailments beyond the physical. Ogunleye (2014:148) reinforces the legitimacy of Indigenous African healing practices by noting that Western-trained doctors, typically recognise only physical ailments. In contrast, other categories of illness are perceived as treatable solely through ritualistic means (Ogunleye 2014:150). Thus, people seek efficacious solutions to their health problems at the feet of herbalists and traditional healers who provide them with medicines and rituals for prevention, protection, and cure. Ritual, therefore, signifies a re-enactment of a primordial existence that revitalises the structure of a community.

Therefore, the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima does not segregate concerning the health of the *Balyammere* and all living creatures, prevents, protects, and cures all sorts of illnesses, visible and invisible. The Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's creature creator role and consciousness about spiritual wellness and ritual healing for all created souls regardless is what is witnessed in the above classification. According to Basazima (2020), Don (2020) and Sentongo (2020), life is incomplete without daily revelation from Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima; this fervor would suggest that Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima is not only regarded as a spirit medium through which the Nakayima spirit is venerated but as a superior Ganda deity.

It follows then that the spiritual space of Mubende Hill is considered the home and main catchment area of guardian angels and spirits conceptualised under Omweyimirize Mamma Nakayima. This special place located in Uganda's oldest ritual and spiritual propitiating region of Buganda is perceived by followers as the epicenter and home of the “entire universe” (Basazima 2020; Sentongo 2020). This special place of pilgrimage – *Ewaka Wensi W’ommweyimirize* Maama Nakayima – is a point of focus in this thesis. The perceived presence of the superior Ganda deity, Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima in the form of the spirit medium is believed to be the guardian spiritual deity of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima is furthermore believed to be the godhead and Mother

figure of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill alongside Taata Ndaula. The spiritual space of Mubende Hill can be compared to a ‘watchtower’ from where she performs her duties as watcher and overseer of the steady progress and normal functioning of all aspects of life among the Ganda people. Summarily, “Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima” is a watcher and keeper of the physical spiritual, and ritual wellness of all created beings.

### **3.5. *Balyammere* as Living Human Recipients of Spiritual and Ritual Performance.**

In this section, I discuss my first trip to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill as elaborated in the methodology section in the introduction. I visited the Mubende Hill Sacred Space and embarked on fieldwork from October 1 until November 30, 2020, and subsequently from December 27 until January 7, 2021. Throughout this time, I engaged in personal observation and participation so that I become more familiar with the spiritual space of Mubende Hill premises, and practices, and so that I gained individuals' trust in a meaningful and respectful way (Bernard 2012:327), also intended, to acquire potential interviewee participants. This task which to any academician looked like any other practical fieldwork survey turned out to be more sensitive and riskier than I had earlier imagined.

The spiritual space of Mubende Hill, a countryside sacred space is considered by custodians of ritual to be the “center of the universe” [*Awaka w'ensi*]. In that regard, much as the spiritual space of Mubende Hill is open to tourists and other visitors, the custodians are very much aware of the negative publicity by local and international journalists and other strangers who pretend to be tourists. In this regard, the custodians such as *Balyammere* and Basazima take a lot of precautions. They screen unwanted visitors through a spiritual form of dream analysis guided by the divine, Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima. Despite my conscious effort to avoid standing out as someone not deeply engaged in the spiritual healing activities at the site, I humbled myself and forged connections with the daily crowds, making more friends in the process. During the three months at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, I made daily critical observations and recorded all activities related to ritual performance. After realising that I had accumulated enough trust I started writing down some of the critical observations about the *Balyammere*. I could now clearly describe my special encounter and interactions with other native guardians at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. These are collectively

identified under a collective nomenclature as ‘The *Balyammere*’. The terminology was coined and is used at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in a metaphoric sense to denote all living humans who depend on nature-grown food as a source of livelihood. ‘The *Balyammere*’ is therefore an acceptable and highly respected social classification of all living humans no matter their social position or rank in society.

Against that background, all the mortal humans including ritual specialists, the fact that they depend on nature-grown food are referred to as *Balyammere*. However, alongside this generalised definition, the terminology is contextualised and utilised at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill as a more hybrid pseudonym which defines all visitors to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill who seeks truth and justice in front of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima. Eventually, all *Balyammere* become active members and custodians of ritual at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. They become the overseers and guardians of ritual and the code of conduct pertaining to the spiritual space of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima. All *Balyammere* oversee the day-to-day operations at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill alongside the more specialised ritual specialists. In this process, the *Balyammere* cannot be taken for granted as passive seekers of ritual and spiritual healing at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. They are active agents and guardians of strict processes of spiritual conduction spiritual space of Mubende Hill. For example, during my first encounter with the “*Balyammere*”, I was described as a stranger who needed a lot of prior training and orientation before undertaking my research in a spiritual and ritual place such as the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Their actions were resentful and distrustful of my intentions and presence at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. I had to work hard to win their trust and confidence. I made friends with some of them and adopted their code of conduct at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. This acculturation plus the ritual and spiritual immersion became my admission ticket to the ranks of The *Balyammere*. However, to familiarise myself and gain individual trust in a more meaningful and respectful way and to achieve the goals of my study, I engaged in participatory research. Participatory research and critical observation enabled me to become more familiar with the most intricate details of the consecrate premises and ritual practices (Bernard 2012:327). These research tools plus my active participation enabled me to acquire potential interviewee participants.

During the first month, I established a daily schedule. I strictly observed the code of conduct which included not wearing shoes or sandals and engaging in any sexual activity around the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Maintaining cleanliness was also taught to any new visitors. Some of the visitors at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill brought food items such as plantain, animals, and birds which were meant for ritual and spiritual thanksgiving. These food items were later given to *the Balyammere* as food. The “*Balyammere*” were also responsible for collecting the several bundles of grass which were arranged neatly around the entire spiritual space of Mubende Hill compound to the inside parts of each of the partitions of the Omweeyimirize tree. Under strict guidance, I actively participated in arranging and laying the grass around the Nakayima tree partitions and the compound; as well as doing daily chores like peeling, preparing, and serving food to the rest of the visitors at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. It is these activities plus their experiences as senior curators and custodians of spiritual and ritual performance at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill that qualify *Balyammere* as living human recipients of ritual and spiritual performance.

Each day at Mubende Hill, I would arrive around 7:00 am, greeting the *Balyammere* who were either in small groups or attending to their individual tasks. I joined them in their daily activities, such as cleaning the grounds, washing ritual objects, and tending to utensils and vessels used in spiritual practices. These duties were an important way for me to engage with the custodians while remaining observant of the rituals and performances carried out by both the *Balyammere* and the spiritual specialists. Whenever I had a moment to rest, I would sit quietly on my mat and jot down notes about what I had witnessed.

Despite my efforts to remain respectful and engaged, an encounter with a woman named Lydia in 2020 left me shaken. She questioned my constant note-taking, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown when schools were closed, implying that writing had no place in such a sacred environment. Her challenge, which drew the attention of those around us, forced me to reassess my approach. I explained to her, calmly and with humility, that my intentions were purely academic, aimed at preserving the spiritual heritage of the space. From that point forward, I decided to limit my note-taking in the presence of the *Balyammere*, recognizing the delicate balance between my research and the community’s expectations. This experience prompted a deeper reflection on the ethics of my role as an observer, leading me to critically

evaluate how I documented and represented the *Balyammere* and the spiritual practices at Mubende Hill.

As I continued to participate in the daily routines at the sacred site, it became clear that, despite sharing ethnic and clan ties with some of the *Balyammere*, I was still perceived as an outsider. Gaining their trust was a slow process that required perseverance and an increased level of engagement in their spiritual and ritual practices. During the second month of my stay in 2020, I made an effort to immerse myself more fully in their performances of thanksgiving. This involved eating with them, partaking in songs, dances, and drumming, and praying around the sacred tree. I also contributed by laying fresh spear grass carpets in the partitions of the tree and purchasing food items like milk, bread, and plantains for the community.

Participating in daily activities in the spiritual space of Mubende Hill premises did not make me assume an insider's position. Despite belonging to the same ethnic group and clan as some *Balyammere*, I remained an outsider. Obtaining trust amongst the *Balyammere*'s was undoubtedly difficult, but I persisted, participated more in the performances, and established alternative methods of observation. Throughout the second month of my stay in 2020, I had to participate in alternative ways of gaining trust amongst both *Balyammere* and specialists. As such I increased my participation in the ritual performances of thanksgiving by eating food and fruits, singing, dancing, drumming, praying around the tree, sowing seeds around the tree (*Okusiga*), laying a new carpet of spear grass within the tree partitions and the various fireplaces, and purchasing food items such as milk, bread, sugar, and plantain for the individuals at the consecrate. After participating in the ritual activities, I believed I had earned the trust of the *Balyammere* and ritual specialists, but this was not the case. I discovered that I had acquired the trust of at least some *Balyammere*, though not all because people's trusting abilities vary. As a result, locating prospective participants was not as simple as I had imagined.

### **3.6. Political Shifts and the Spiritual Space Of Mubende Hill Uganda**

The political shifts around the spiritual space of Mubende Hill can not be discussed and exhausted without a discussion of Uganda's colonial history, Buganda's expansionist projects, and the post-independence political shifts. Ballarin et al (2013:22) noted that located on the southern border of the Bunyoro kingdom, the Mubende area has for a long time been affected by Ganda expansion. Conquered by Buganda at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it became a Saza (county) in 1893 maintaining, nevertheless a Nyoro identity (Green 2008:475). With the British conquest, Bunyoro territory was reduced approximately to half of what it was with the annexation to Buganda of the so-called "lost counties" (Buyaga, Bugangaizi, Buruli, Bugerere, and Buwekula. This annexation was a reward for the support granted by the Kabaka to the colonial project and as a punishment for Kabalega's fierce resistance. This entire area was incorporated into Mubende District and put under the authority of Ganda chiefs (Green 2008:475).

The Buganda agreement (1900) secured land titles in the district to Ganda landlords, resulting in a long-standing controversy that is not over yet. The question of the "lost counties" has now and again resurfaced with complex narratives in Buganda's political history. The results of this quest for the "lost counties" have brought devastating consequences to Buganda and Uganda in general. The most significant backlash was the 1966 crisis in Uganda which turned around Uganda's history following the attack on the Kabaka's place "Lubiri" (Green 2008:475). These politics are expounded more under the sub-section of "Political Shifts around the Spiritual Space of Mubende Hill".

Ballarin et al further explained that during the years of chaos following independence, ritual activities on the hill seem to have faded, only to regain full vitality recently. For the last two decades, the site has been once again, the destination of pilgrimages of many people who come to perform rites under the tree (Ballarin et al 2013:21). The practice has undergone significant changes, particularly concerning the spiritual entities involved. Nyakahima, once a title for a woman possessed by the spirit of Ndahura, transformed into a spirit of greater importance, surpassing other Bachwezi spirits revered under the tree (Ballarin et al 2013:22). At the beginning of my research, I intended to interview the late spirit medium Restetuta Nalubega (Figure 3.5), but she passed away in May 2020 before I began fieldwork. Her granddaughter Catherine Nabukeera (Figure 3.6) succeeded her subsequently, raising

significant questions about whether the position of the spirit medium could or should be inherited.



Figure 3. 5: Restetuta Nalubega, the late Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium (Omukongozi). Photograph by Kirumira Rose Namubiru (2019). This image shows the late spirit medium seated in the partition of Nakayima which acts as the sitting room and reception with ritual objects such as a basket with coffee beans, barkcloth and Bachwezi cups (*ebyanzi*). The spirit medium is depicted smoking a pipe, adorning a *gomesi* with a jacket and a *kikooyi* on her lamps.



Figure 3.6: Catherine Nabukeera, the current Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium (Omukongozi). Photograph by Claire Nalukenge (2020). This image shows the current spirit medium (Catherine Nabukeera) seated in the partition of

Nakayima which acts as the sitting room and reception with ritual objects such as a fruit basket, sticks, smoking pipe, Bachwezi cups, baskets, and a lamp. The spirit medium is depicted seated on a hand-woven mat, holding a basket, covering her upper body with a white cotton cloth and her lower body with a *kikooyi* [cotton cloth].

During my entire visit to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, from the months of October to November 2020, I was only able to conduct fourteen interviews with the two specialists (Nabukeera and Sentongo) and The *Balyammere*, of which only twelve were meaningful. Surprisingly, I easily acquired four meaningful interviews during my second trip from December 27, 2020, to January 07, 2021, from some *Balyammere* with whom I had interacted during my first trip. Notably, both *Balyammere* and ritual specialists contend that the Nakayima's seat and the spiritual space of Mubende Hill have undergone a series of political shifts that had diverse effects on the local, national, and international image of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. In trying to understand the political shifts around the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, it is important to shift our analysis to the histories and gender debate to elucidate the position of Buganda in Uganda and the role of female princesses and priestesses in the political affairs of the land.

The active involvement of women in the day-to-day management of social, political, and economic affairs in society has consistently been met with gendered undertones. To comprehend this complexity, recent scholarship on gender and women's participation in the civic space in Buganda is revisited. Tumusiime (2012:34) cites Hanson (2002) noting that, the Buganda kingdom, a traditional kingdom in Uganda, held prominence in the mid-nineteenth century. According to Tumusiime, "Princess Nassolo also made her mark on Buganda's history when she led her brothers in a rebellion against King Kagulu's brutality around the seventeenth century". Notable women, such as Princess Nakku, Queen Nannono, and Princess Nassolo, played significant roles in the kingdom's history, with Nassolo even choosing a successor to King Kagulu and restoring leadership sanity in Buganda (35).

Historical records indicate the active involvement of two females, the queen's mother (Nnamasole) and the king's sister (Lubuga), in the administration of the Buganda kingdom by the mid-nineteenth century (Tumusiime 2012:37). These women wielded influence through their lineage positions, as mentioned by Gray (1934:67). Hanson (2002:221) highlighted that the queen mother participated in a gendered political power system, acting as a check against

excesses and safeguarding the nation. However, their influence was curtailed in 1900 by the Buganda Agreement, which marginalised and silenced them socially, economically, and politically (Tumisiime 2012:37).

Hanson (2002:228) further argued that with European colonialism, the king became a mere figurehead, controlled by coalitions of chiefs with military power. Consequently, under a weakened king, the queen's mother lost her preeminent role in politics. The situation in southwestern Uganda, encompassing present-day Kabale, Kanungu, Kisoro, and Rukungiri districts, is explored by Rutanga (1991:320) who analyses how Nyabingi, a female leader, used her power to emancipate society by forming a cult and claiming divine authority. Nyabingi led female soldiers (*Abagirwa*) in a political movement against colonial agents from 1909 to 1914 (Rutanga 1991:320). However, in the 1930s, the traditional role of Nyabingi was supplanted by new Western religions, weakening her influence (Rutanga 1991:6). While in the Bunyoro kingdom in western Uganda from 1225 to 1500 AD, the title, Nakayima, was associated with a goddess of defence, guarding Mubende, a sacred hill dedicated to Ndahura, the first Muchwezi ruler (Rutanga 1991:51). Pilgrimages to Nakayima for consultations on politics, sickness, and wealth were common among the Banyoro (Rutanga 1991:51). However, the advent of colonialism and Christianity undermined Nakayima's myths, diminishing her political influence to a relic in the Uganda Museum as a historical relic (Tumusiime 2012:35).

The above analysis is therefore an important beginning point to the understanding of political shifts at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. The analysis is based on a gendered perspective within which we can contextualise the spiritual space of Mubende Hill as a space of political shifts that target the vulnerability brought about by the feminine orientation of the deity Nakayima. In agreement with Tumusiime's (2012) observation, Eroku (2019:1) wrote that at one point, Nakayima wielded a lot of power and influence in the societies where she lived but lost it due to colonialism, Christianity, and African patriarchy. Eroku's (2019:2) explanation regarding the effects of colonialism and Christianity on African ritual and religious practices such as those at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill was further advanced by Amanze (2011:3) when she elaborates that as we receded into colonialism, she was then relegated and marginalised as a wicked goddess and her power and identity were lost. Yet, this was not the

case before colonialism as testified to by the historical information that ascribes the deified figure of Nakayima as a guardian of the sacred Mubende Hill site.



Figure 3.7: Mary Katusabe, who also claims to be the rightful Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium [Omukongozi] from the side of the Basazamazima [Advocates for fair justice]. Photograph by Paul Walusimbi and Basam Mukwaya (2020). This image shows the alleged spirit medium adorned in a blue and white *gomesi* [a traditional Ugandan dress worn by women, particularly among the Baganda people] with a white sash, also sporting a blue Covid 19 face mask below her chin, with some other women in the background.

Nagadya (2017) further clarified that before she was named Nakayima, the spirit medium associated with divinity was known as Ndaula's wife. Nagaddya (2017) further emphasises that Ndaula reigned over Kisozi and was a darling to the people owing to his good governance; hence, upon his disappearance (he never died but rather vanished hence the Bachwezi term "demigod"), his subjects planted a tree seed as a souvenir to remember him. The reign of Kitaka, who succeeded Ndaula, was characterised by hostilities, depopulation, death, and migration, which prompted the people to rename the place 'Mubende', meaning, 'big, bad complete change' (Nagaddya 2017). This name change, however, did not induce a change in Kitaka's reign, as had been expected, rather it forced the people to approach

Ndaula's widow, who became an advocate for fair judgment of the subjects during Kitaka's reign and hence gained the title 'Nakayima' (Nagaddya 2017). Owing to her new role in society, the subjects brought the tithe of their harvests meant for the king to Nakayima (Nagaddya 2017). Kitaka, feeling jealous, harbored a desire to harm Nakayima (Nagaddya 2017). It is believed that to escape Kitaka's threat, Nakayima concealed herself and vanished into the memorial tree planted to commemorate Ndaula's reign (Nagaddya 2017). Further impacting the inscription of the tree as a place of prayer was a reported incident about a subject, who was supposed to be killed the day following the disappearance of Nakayima (Nagaddya 2017). This person is said to have prayed to Nakayima for intercession and thereby survived execution (Nagaddya 2017). Nagaddya (2017) explains that it was believed that Nakayima intervened on his behalf. After the disappearance of Ndaula's widow, many years elapsed without the existence of a Nakayima, and this prompted the people to solicit Nakayima's divine intervention (Nagaddya 2017). The people requested Nakayima to send a representative and their request was answered in the form of Nyanjara, an individual from among the Banyoro ethnic group to become a Basazima [spiritual custodian] recommended by the Nakayima spirit (Nagaddya 2017). It is believed that Nyanjara's reported powers of disappearing and reappearing lay in *enkwanzi* [beads] and it was during her reign that colonialism came to Uganda (Nagaddya 2017).

Nagaddya (2017) further claims that King (Omukama) Kabalega of Bunyoro and King (Kabaka) Mwangi of Buganda first worshipped Nakayima and were able to put up strong resistance against the colonialists. Besides, Ssenyonga (2017) clarified that the current Kabaka of Buganda, Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II's visit to the Nakayima tree during his twenty-fourth coronation ceremony reaffirmed the Buganda government's control over the management of the Nakayima cultural site. Pennacini (2013:33) concurs with Nagaddya (2017) by noting that, among the Nakayima exhibits at the Uganda museum was a spear donated to Nakayima by Omukama Kabalega of Bunyoro to the priestess. It is also argued that Nyanjara was captured twice and managed to escape but lost most of her regalia to the Europeans who destroyed them (Nagaddya 2017). She (Nyanjara) later left and settled in Bugogo in Fort Portal, in present-day Toro, where she later died (Nagaddya 2017). Nakyanzi Maria then started her reign as Nakayima (Nagaddya 2017). Later Restetuta Nalubega, who was about 78 years old, reigned as Nakayima and was succeeded by her granddaughter Catherine Nabukeera who is the current Nakayima spirit medium [since May 2020] and yet

Mary Katusabe (Figure 3.7) from the Basazima [short form for the title Basazamazima] also claims to be the rightful Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium. According to interviews acquired from the spiritual space (Ssentongo 2020; Ibra 2020; Musawo 2021; Kalisa 2021), there is an affirmation that the position of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's spirit medium is not inherited. They further asserted that anyone from whichever part of the country within and outside Uganda, from whichever tribe or religion can take on this position if there is a legitimate calling.

According to this research, the above accord on the matter of succession amongst spirit mediums misses one aspect regarding the death of the former Nakayima, Restetuta Nalubega who died during the period of COVID-19. In examining the historical and cultural transformations within Uganda, particularly at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, the Uganda National Cultural Policy (2006) serves as a crucial framework. This policy provides insights into the socio-political shifts that have occurred due to colonial influences, which have significantly impacted traditional structures and cultural practices. The Uganda National Cultural Policy (2006) outlines how pre-colonial Ugandan communities were tightly-knit, with social, political, and economic structures centered around family, clan, and traditional leadership. Cultural practices dictated daily life for all members of society (Uganda National Cultural Policy 2006:sec 1.0). However, colonial rule and foreign influences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries disrupted these traditional systems, leading to the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and health practices [like those at the Mubende Hill] (Uganda National Cultural Policy 2006:sec 1.0). Despite these challenges, many communities [the Mubende Hill inclusive] continued to value and preserve their cultural heritage (Uganda National Cultural Policy 2006:sec 1.0).

This study emphasises the enduring role of women in Buganda's indigenous practices, particularly through the Nakayima spirit medium at Mubende Hill, which serves as a living testament to the resilience of cultural traditions despite colonial disruptions. While the policy does not aim to resolve specific conflicts, such as the ongoing dispute between the Nakayima spirit medium claimants (Figures 3.6 and 3.7),<sup>91</sup> it offers a lens through which to understand

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<sup>91</sup> It is important to note that the efforts to resolve the conflict between the two Nakayima spirit medium claimants are long underway and would require intervention from the Buganda authorities. During formal interviews from Ssentongo (2020),

the broader implications of colonial rule on indigenous knowledge systems and cultural heritage. The spiritual space of Mubende Hill functions as an active space where ritual objects and performances are deeply connected to cultural, social and spiritual identity and beliefs. It is a place where women, through roles like the Nakayima spirit medium, actively engage in spiritual and ritual practices that reinforce their societal roles and cultural heritage. This engagement underscores the belief that any woman can achieve spiritual status, reflecting the site's significance in preserving and perpetuating indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices.

### 3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a growing interest and belief in the ritual and spiritual performances at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. This is evident in the number of people (*Balyammere*) who flock to the spiritual space for various reasons concerning health, fertility, and general well-being. This is substantiated by my fieldwork research involving observation and active participation in various ritual and spiritual practices, including the general prayer ritual of circling the Omweyimirize tree and thanksgiving rituals dedicated to healing. This thesis bears witness to my observations that, although African ritual and spiritual systems like Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima may be perceived as primitive or outdated religious systems, those who attest to ritual healing at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill serve as evidence of the enduring nature of African ritual and spiritual performative methods of knowledge production. While my research is delimited to observation and cannot provide a broad scope of multidisciplinary views on the subject, it can be said that there is merit to the claim that the *Balyammere* are relieved, protected, and cured of physical, mental, and spiritual unwellness. This thesis, therefore, advocates and argues for the recognition of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima and the spiritual space of Mubende Hill as a center of ritual and spiritual healing; and for the inclusion of the spiritual space of Mubende Hill within art history studies relating to indigenous African ritual and spiritual systems, owing to a need to revitalise indigenous knowledge relating to the ritual and spiritual healing practices at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. This chapter further provides ground for the following

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Ibra (2020), Musawo (2021), and Kalisa (2021), it was affirmed that the *Omukongozi* position is not inherited (see p.89) because any female figure is eligible to take on the position provided the spirit of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima intervenes. These politics of the *Omukongozi* ownership are discussed further in Section 3.8 of this study.

chapter concerning the analysis of ritual objects in relation to the ritual and spiritual performances through the narratives of the *Balyammere* at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

## Chapter Four

### Object Stories in Relation to Ritual and Spiritual Performance at the Spiritual Space of Mubende Hill

In this chapter, I share eight personal experiences with ritual objects and their performances at the Spiritual space of Mubende Hill in Uganda through the stories of the *Balyammere* with whom I interacted. The discussions that allowed for the gathering of these individual narratives occurred during my fieldwork study carried out between October 1 and November 30, 2020 (first trip) and from December 27 2020 until January 7, 2021 (second trip). These stories were not from the formal interviewees which I acquired from the *Balyammere* during fieldwork. Most are stories I acquired from the less formal conversations that fostered trust, supplemented by participant observation methods (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:205 and Coffey 2018:67). Notably, the accounts of *Balyammere* stood out, which I encountered during my immersive experiences and learning from their ritual and spiritual performances at the Omweyimirize tree. Out of respect for the sensitivity of personal issues related to conception/childbirth incapacities among the *Balyammere* due to various reasons detailed in the various subsections, formal interview conversations would be inappropriate. Therefore, I chose to narrate the stories of the *Balyammere* using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Through the narration of *Balyammere*'s stories of objects, I analyse the meaning of these objects within ritual and spiritual performances at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. I re-contextualize *Balyammere*'s stories of object-ritual and spiritual performances in the following four sections: Knowledge Production and Meaning of Objects; of *Amakula* and Knowledge Production: The meanings of *Ebigali* as Initiators of *Amakula*; Rejuvenating Knowledge; Politics of Conception, Childbirth, Trauma, Healing and Knowledge Production – each relating to the main spirit partitions of the Omweyimirize tree: Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, Taata Ndahura, Banalongo, and Bassalongo respectively. This chapter focused on the four spirit partitions because these divisions relate to objects. The Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's partition initiates all the other partitions and objects before ritual and spiritual performances. Taata Ndahura, Bannalongo, and Bassalongo's partitions house objects therein. This chapter therefore provides a more in-depth analysis of how and why ritual objects are employed in performance through the stories of the *Balyammere* and demonstrates that objects need not be detached from their intended practices because they acquire meaning through performance.

#### 4.1. Knowledge Production and Meaning of Objects

There are ongoing conversations regarding how objects are used, or how they are stored in terms of whether they lose meaning because they are not attached to their performative actions and spaces as in the case of the Smithsonian and British museums. As such these debates have called for the return of cultural objects from Western museums back to their original locations in Africa (Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub 2012:74; Smith 2013:21; Mbembe 2018:4 Mbembe 2019; Stevenson 2019:230-231). Rather than focusing on objects that have been placed in museums all over the world, specifically the Uganda Museum, this chapter subverts this conversation about objects already lost to meaning and considers objects that are still at the location at which they are used for their intended purpose. This chapter focuses on the spiritual space of Mubende Hill (see chapter three for in-depth description) as a living site where people engage with ritual objects to perform ritual and spiritual practices daily. The objects such as clay pots, bowls, milk cups, calabashes, coffee beans, ghee, and milk become efficacious when used to perform ritual and spiritual practices of smearing, sipping, drinking, kneeling, and praying.

This chapter seeks to analyse the value of objects in terms of meaning or knowledge production within ritual and spiritual performances at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. Meaning is generated from the various ninety-nine tree partitions dedicated to different spirits at the Omweyimirize tree as elaborated in chapter three. Although there are ninety-nine spirit partitions<sup>92</sup> only four partitions house objects relating to the space between the Omweyimirize tree root's buttresses. These spaces have specific purposes, and in this way relate to particular objects for related ritual and spiritual performances. More specifically, the partitions of Ndahura, Bassalongo, and Bannalongo have found objects therein, the fourth partition of Nakayima has objects initiated into ritual and spiritual performances. In the remaining ninety-nine notional partitions, there is no connection with objects; the activities primarily involve engaging in prayers within these partitions. Analyzing the meaning within all ninety-nine spirit-tree partitions is a complex task, requiring an extensive and intensive duration, given the distinct meaning and variation associated with each partition. Besides,

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<sup>92</sup> The ninety-nine partitions reflect the ninety-nine hills that encompass and surround Mubende Hill, dedicated to various spirits. The Omweyimize tree rests at the top and at the center of the ninety-nine hills, occupying the 99th position, hence relating its positionality to the center of the universe as clarified by Basazima (2020); Omutaputa (2022); Nabukeera (2020) and Ssentongo (2021).

meaning, knowledge, and information are very fluid phenomena (Mudimbe 1988:202; Hountondji 1996:41-42; de Sousa Santos 2018:viii-ix). There is not just one homogenous type of meaning or one homogeneous type of knowledge. Creation of meaning requires that language used to make a description is important for it relies on the dos and don'ts of the provided object so that a message is well sent to the intended audience (Balaba 2013:24-25). As such and due to the need for focused scope and discussion in this study, this chapter is limited to a discussion of the four physical partitions—Ndahura, Bassalongo, Banalongo, and Nakayima. The first three partitions were chosen because they house ritual objects whereas the fourth partition has ritual objects introduced before the ritual and spiritual performance. By delving into the personal experiences shared by the *Balyammere*, this study narrates and analyses the significance of ritual objects in the context of ritual and spiritual performances at Mubende Hill. This chapter also considered the mine and some contemporary artists' stories of how objects function in different performances.

Luganda

English

*Oze kulambula oba kusaba?*

*Have you come to tour or to pray?*<sup>93</sup>

The above question asked frequently at Mubende Hill upon greeting arrivals, suggests that people engage with the spiritual space for either touring or praying. This means that Mubende Hill is both a tourist and a sacred space. As mentioned above, meanings are never static but fluid. The meaning of space as both a tourist destination and a sacred space can vary and be multifaceted, depending on the specific context and perspectives involved. (Mbaya and Chetty 2012:574-575; Ngozi 2016:1; Ngobese 2018:81). This intersection often requires negotiation and balancing of different interests and perspectives. This space may be managed to cater to tourists' needs while also respecting its sacredness and the rituals associated with it. This chapter considers the prayer aspect of the question because the *Balyammere* specifically visit the spiritual space for prayer purposes where they interact with the objects

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<sup>93</sup> This was the same question I was asked by the tour guide (Moses Ssentongo) in 2018 during my preliminary research and also on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, during my first official field research trip at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

during ritual performances within the partitions of Ndahura, Bassalongo, Banalongo, and Nakayima tree spirits.

The above question also suggests that the tour guide is the first point of contact for an individual who visits the spiritual space of Mubende Hill for whichever purpose whether it's for tourism or prayer. In a face-to-face Interview at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill with the tour guide Moses Ssentongo (2020), he mentioned that when a tourist visits the Nakayima Tree, he takes him/her around the space while narrating the historical background of the space, tree, and symbolisms of the partitions and objects. In case the visit regards prayer, he instead directs the *Mulyammere* to the first partition (Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's partition) of the tree which is the seat for Catherine Nabukeera who hosts the spirit of Nakayima in her body (Spirit medium).

During my participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:205; Coffey 2018:67), in an on-site interview with Tasha (2020), it was explained that before a *Mulyammere*, accesses the spiritual space of Mubende Hill specifically for object-ritual and spiritual purposes, even before they encounter both the tour-guide and the spirit-medium, they first acquire a dream. The dream is a calling that leads them to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill (Tasha 2020). Upon arriving at the spiritual space, the 'pilgrim' pays an entry fee of shillings 3000 (Uganda Currency) to the tour guide whose office is right outside the spiritual space (Tasha 2020). In Tasha's (2020) reckoning, the money is a mere token whereas the dream is the 'ticket' for *Balyammere/Mulyammere* to enter the spiritual space of Mubende Hill for object-ritual and spiritual performances. Some scholars affirm that within African tradition, dreams are considered a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms (Roscoe 1911:18 and Mndende 2002:30). Dreams are often seen as a means of communication with divine entities, ancestors, or the subconscious mind (Mbiti 1975:62 and Hirst 2005:3). Within the Ugandan context, specifically Buganda, no person ever let a dream pass unnoticed, without drawing from it the lesson it was intended to convey as expressed through the object-ritual stories of Musa, Nakitto, Okuzza Obugya, Olwaazi and Ggumbas in Chapter Four and Roscoe (1911:18).

In the proceeding sub-sections, I narrate the 'dream stories' of the *Balyammere* regarding object-ritual and spiritual performances based on the four partitions of Ndahura, Bassalongo, Nnalongo, and Nakayima that relate to objects. In this study, I use the term narration in two

ways; firstly, as a form of oral history to generate meaning/knowledge; and secondly, as a form of oral tradition to recount the dream stories of object-ritual and spiritual performances of the *Balyammere*. In some cases, the chapter also includes personal stories and conversations with some contemporary artists, not specifically analysing their artworks, but drawing from their perspectives of situations regarding objects that are not directly related to the spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

#### **4.2. Of *Amakula* and Knowledge Production: The Meanings of *Ebigali* as Initiators of *Amakula***

This subsection focuses on the partition of the Omweyimirize tree that relates to objects specifically initiated into ritual and spiritual performances, within the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's partition. According to some interviews conducted by some *Balyammere* at the spiritual space and via WhatsApp respectively, this partition acts as the reception or sitting room (Don 2020; Omutaputa 2022). They affirm that it acquires the context of a reception because it is where the *ebigali* (gifts brought before a *Mulyammere* receives any kind of healing for an intended ritual), are displayed; then it becomes a sitting room where *amakula* (gifts brought after a *Mulyammere* has healed from an ailment during a ritual and spiritual performance) are displayed. This sub-section delves into the *amakula* context, as the later elaboration on *Mulyammere*, Musa's story highlights its ritualisation as a form of gratitude in a thanksgiving performance dedicated to the spirit of Nakayima. The following subsection, (Rejuvenating knowledge: Politics of conception and knowledge production, childbirth, trauma, and healing) falls within the *ebigali* [objects initiated into the *amakula* in honor and appreciation of the healing and blessing bestowed unto a *Mulyammere*] context because the *Balyammere* are seeking guidance and healing.

Something important to note is that some objects such as coffee beans, ghee, milk, Bachwezi cups, and seeds (millet, simsim [sesame seeds], and sorghum) are used in both contexts of *ebigali* and *amakula*. Joan Kekimuri (2018:284), a contemporary Ugandan visual artist, provides a similar view regarding *amakula* by stating that upon the curing of an ailment, offerings are given to the gods in gratitude for the treatment. "*Amakula go tuleta*" was premised on the tokens given back by the subject at hand: animals symbolised by the horns; art forms like shields, basketry (*ebigali*), cowrie shells that symbolise the monetary values;

barkcloth and spears engaged to communicate the aspect of giving back to the gods, a sacred giving of gratitude (Kekimuri 2018:284). The 'giving' aspect of the basket is specifically aligned with the term '*ebigali*' in Kekimuri's (2018:284) account. Within the Christian religion, the *amakula* is also exhibited during the thanksgiving ceremony (Mbiti 1990: 62; Lugira 2009:74; Aga 2010:4).

As an introductory partition of the Omweyimirize tree, this spiritual space also acts as an initiation site for the rest of the ninety-eight partitions because of the clockwise order of the partitions. This can suggest that the ninety-eight partitions gain meaning upon instigation from the Nakayima spirit partition, this sitting room partition welcomes them into the realm of ritual and spiritual performances. The concept of a sitting room at the spiritual space resonates with most of the architectural set-ups of some African contexts (Ekhaese, Evbuoma, Adeboye and Adejuwon 2016:3491; Williams 2013:103). Within Uganda and more so in Buganda, a sitting room is a space where cultural Objects are displayed as embellishments but most importantly as cultural exhibits of the great importance the Baganda attribute to their identity. In light of this, clan members commission the production of objects through which they express allegiance to their clans and place such objects in their sitting rooms to identify with them as markers of their identity (Nalukenge 2018:xii). However, this research does not view the objects as embellishments because the meaning of these objects is embedded within their respective ritual and spiritual performances. The performances make the objects function as living objects within a living space as in the case of object stories of Musa, Okuzza Obugya, Olwaazi, Ggumbas, and Nakitto in the following subsections of this chapter.

In Luganda, the expression "Weyanjure namanyago, aga bazadde ne ekika kyovamu" translates to "Introduce yourself with your name, your parent's names, and the clan you are from" in English. This phrase underscores the importance of personal and familial identity within a cultural and social framework. It emphasises one's family background and social identity, helps trace one's familial connections and ancestral heritage, signifies a connection to a particular community or group, and provides others with a deeper understanding of one's background and cultural context by sharing this information. In the Baganda tribe from which I reside, we are organised and identified through clans of totems known as *Emizziro* (Roscoe

1911:7; Kizza 2010:72; Nalukenge 2018:1). As seen in chapter three of this study, both the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima and taata Ndahura belong to the *Nte* (cow) clan. An important thing to note here is that the structural order of the Omweyimirize tree recognises the importance of women, especially Nakayima. This is because of the positionality of the Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima as the first partition of all the ninety-nine partitions, initiating the ninety-eight partitions into the ritual and spiritual performances. I analyse the meanings of the *Abigail* objects (Holy Bible, coffee beans ghee, money, kyanzi, cold milk) as initiators of the *amakula* performance of objects (hot milk, bread, clay bowl, bread, performance) through Musa's story:

Musa (2020) in the company of his four siblings brought a Holy bible, nine twenty-five litre jerry cans of milk, nine packs of ghee, nine packs of coffee beans, and nine big loaves of bread, in a white super custom car. Upon payment of an entry fee, Musa drove and packed the super custom [type of car] near Maama Nakayima's partition for the initiation ceremony, they removed all the *ebigali* and displayed them within Nakayima's partition. The Mukongozi blessed them while raising the Holy Bible saying "Bweza bwa Nakayima" (Musa 2020). She then instructed Musa to collect *ekyanzi* (Bachwezi cup) in which he poured some milk, then served the gods by pouring it on the ground three times (Musa 2020). He sipped three times, and then gave the cup to his three siblings to do the same (Musa 2020). The four *Balyammere* each with a pack of ghee were then instructed to unpack the ghee and smear it onto their bare body parts (Musa 2020). In a clockwise direction, the spirit medium guided the four *Balyammere*, in prayers around the tree with three coffee beans given to each for placing in each partition (Musa 2020). Afterward, they offered Nsimbi (money) into the baskets (*ekibbo*) of Maama Nakayima and Maama Nabuzaana (Musa 2020). Mukongozi instructed Musa to pour milk into the vessel again, take some milk into his mouth, and slowly dribble it all over the outside and inside of his car emitting misty droplets of milk from his mouth for the car's purification ritual (Musa 2020).

In Musa's (2020) story, the Holy Bible represents the sacred text and serves as a symbol of faith, spirituality, and connection between humans, spirits, and God. It is used to invoke blessings and express devotion to the divine spirit of Maama Nakayima through the saying "Bweza bwa Nakayima" (glory to the spirit of Maama Nakayima). At the same time, the bible invokes blessings to the five *Balyammere* for their initiated return to the Omweyimirize tree to glorify the spirit of Maama Nakayima that works through the Mukongozi. In essence, the Bible is encompassed with sacred text which the *Balyammere* use to glorify both God and the spirit of Nakayima. This is similar to the Christian way in which Christians glorify God

through the Bible. Christians also use a similar phrase of “glory to God as well as being obedient to the ten commandments and praising God through songs” (Karani 2023:28-29).



Figure 4.1: Coffee beans. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image reveals nine bundles of coffee beans wrapped in dried banana fibers placed onto a brown bark cloth. Eight bundles are tightly closed, and one pack is open containing twenty-six coffee beans. The nine coffee bundles are the bundles that *Balyammere* use to engage in initiation prayers around the Omweyimirize tree.

Coffee beans (Figure 4.1) act as bonding objects between Musa, his siblings, and the spirits within the various partitions. This bonding act is what this study refers to as *okutta omukago* between the *Balyammere* and the spirits (Ssentongo 2020). Similarly, Kekimuri (2018:165) clarifies that, in Buganda Culture, coffee beans (*Entabaluganda*) are used in rituals to determine the occurrence of deadly and non-deadly sickness among the Baganda. It is also used as a symbol for mutual and ‘blood-bonded’ relationships (*Omukago*) created among people or a group of people (Kekimuri 2018:165). The packs of ghee used for smearing onto the bare body parts of Musa (2020) and his siblings are considered protection against harm that might affect their bodies and skin. The soft and smooth nature of the ghee, is believed to soften/quicken situations or things (Musawo 2021; Hurwitt 2023:2). In addition to the usual eating or cooking functions, butter or ghee from domestic animals is used in various regions of Africa for religious purposes, such as anointing the newlywed wife, kids, corpses for burial, and so forth (Mbiti 1990:132; Lugira 2009:16). It is common in Africa to use Ghee as

a substance for purposes of anointment and purification during cultural ceremonies (Mbiti 1990:132). Among the Akamba community, Ghee is used in ritual for example when they mark a newly found wife-to-be (Mulandi 2002:6). In Rwanda, the use of and donation of ghee during ritual stands for a reflection of a social value and dignity received from peers and or society members (Masabo, Ndikubwimana and Uwamahoro 2023:8.17).

The money offered into the baskets from Musa (2020) and his siblings herein represents a form of gratitude and giving back to the spirits. It represents material abundance, prosperity, and reciprocity. The act of offering money acknowledges the assistance received and demonstrates a willingness to share one's blessings. The money hence resonates with Musa's request for finances, reflecting his desire for wealth and prosperity.



Figure 4.2: The *Kyanzi/Byanzi* (the Bachwezi cups). Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image depicts the official Bachwezi cups (ebyanzi) sculpted from wood. The Bachwezi cups are black in color and are encrypted with diamond shapes and lines on the bottom of the cup. The cups are displayed on a utensils rack at the Spiritual Space with one cup placed upwards whilst the rest of the cups are laid down on their sides.

However, the *kyanzi* (Figure 4.2) as reflected in Musa's dream was an assurance that he needed to go back to the spiritual space to give thanks for the car blessing because the *kyanzi* symbolises the official Bachwezi cup. The milk vessel that Musa (2020) sees in his dream is a communication medium between Musa and his return to the spiritual realm of Mubende. This is similar to what Roscoe (1911:18) and Mndende (2002:30) refer to as helping to create a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms. A notion echoed in this reflection on biblical teaching related to dreams; "You will be able to identify the areas of the human world where God is active based on a dream of God's future. Because the Spirit of God is at work whenever and wherever people are cooperating to fulfill God's promises, regardless of how ineffectively, perplexedly, or sinfully they do so" (Buttrick 2002:40). The foundation of African worship is based on spirits, who are perceived as essential components of humans, or as spiritual entities who exist in a distant world yet communicate with humans through dreams (Waweru 2007:177). A notion echoed in the Bible, which attests to God's Spirit appearing in dreams (Waweru 2007:177). In African traditional society, the Holy Bible is used to enrich the understanding of the world through meaningful and situated interpretations of the content provided by the Bible (Mbiti 1990:190; Lugira 2009:8-10).



Figure 4.3: Cold milk sipping. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image depicts the researcher wrapped in a white *kikooyi* (cotton fabric) around her waist up to the feet and another *kikooyi* wrapped over her head wearing a blue and white jacket kneeling on the mat placed on the spear grass and sipping on cold milk from *ekyanzi* within Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima's partition for the initiation of prayer. One *Mulyammere* is seated on the mat on the right wearing a dark green dress with white straps, with a green sweater around her waist, and holding a brown bag. The acting Nakayima spirit medium (Catherine Nabukeera) is seated beside the *Mulyammere*. The medium is wrapped with a brown, red, and orange *kikooyi* and her yellow sweater is wrapped with a *kikooyi* with varying shades of green. Another *Mulyammere* is seen in the background kneeling with hands raised to the walls of the partition in a striped *kikooyi* of brown and red.

Various societies employ different vessels as containers of milk such as *Borana* (from Kenyans), *Damaja* (Somalia), *Elepit* (Turkana community), *Ekukuri* (Masai community), and *Samburu* container. Because the *Kyanzi* (Figure 4.2) is sculpted from wood that is obtained from trees, the cold milk that is sipped (Figure 4.3) by Musa (2020) and his siblings and then poured into the ground for the spirits to feed on, symbolises purity, nourishment and fertility, reflective of the growth of the trees from which the *Kyanzi* is created (Mbiti 1990:132; Lugira 2009:68). The *kyanzi* (Figure 4.2) used for holding cold milk for the purification process

takes on the meaning of a sacred container acting as a conduit between the spiritual and physical realms.



Figure 4.4: Cold milk ‘galloping and gashing’. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image shows a male *Mulyammere* dressed in an army green kanzu holding *ekyanzi* and ‘gashing’ [spraying cold milk from his mouth] towards other *Balyammere* surrounding him for the purification process.

Musa’s (2020) act of pouring cold milk into the vessel and his mouth for anointing the car was a similar act of ritual purification, protection, and anointing of the vehicle. The performance of ‘galloping and gashing’ (Figure 4.4) of the cold milk all over the car signifies the spreading and dispersing of the ‘sacred essence’ believed to carry the spiritual energy and blessings of the milk, permeating the car both externally and internally (Musa 2020). This act serves to fortify the car and create a spiritual shield around it, cleansing and protecting it from harm and ensuring safe journeys (Musa 2020). It is noted that among the Nama people in Namibia, milk is used in the ritual for girls' first menstrual period, forcing the girl to abide by a complex set of taboos (Mutale 2017:15). Furthermore, within a Namibian context, as a ceremonial process, milk must be tasted by the chief or other authorised individuals before it is consumed, thus vetting and blessing the milk, ensuring its safety for human use by ensuring it is free from any physical or ceremonial harm (Mbiti 1990:132; Lugira 2009:16).



Figure 4. 5: Singing, clapping, dancing, and drumming. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image shows a group of *Balyammere* singing, clapping dancing, and drumming within the partition of the spirit of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima. The Buganda kingdom emblem is seen at the left far corner with some *Balyammere* sitting on the peddle stone and one is seen standing beside it gazing at the *Balyammere* in performance.

Hot milk represents a nourishing and purifying element in the *amakula* context. Furthermore, milk is recontextualised within the *amakula* performance of thanksgiving as it symbolises gratitude and shared blessings. It is offered in separate clay bowls to the spirits of Nakayima and Ndahura in a very hot state because the spirits are fed on the vapor emitted by the hot milk. After the spirits are fed, the *Balyammere*, including Musa (2020), the receiver of the car blessing, are fed too by the Nabuzaana (the *Mulyammere* in charge of cooking food at the spiritual space). The clay bowls, on the other hand, are used as containers of hot milk for the spirits, and serve as vessels for offering and distributing the milk; also signifying a material connecting between the natural and spiritual realms. The sharing of bread between Musa (2020), his siblings, and all the *Balyammere* within the partition of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima represents sustenance, fulfillment, and the sharing of blessings. The *amakula* performance is meaningfully climaxed through acts of singing, clapping, dancing, and drumming (Figure 4.5) representing a joyful celebration and expression of gratitude towards the spirits and the blessings received (Mbiti 1990:61; Lugira 2009:84; Emeke 2011:9). The performance serves as a communal act of worship, strengthening the bond between the *Balyammere* and the spirits at the spiritual space of Mubende; the act of communal worship in Africa's context serves to help community members not violate the spiritual bond and relations with ancestral spirits (Emeke 2011:12).

### 4.3. Rejuvenating Knowledge

In this subsection, I am focusing on the partition of the spirit of Ndahura (the second partition of the Omweyimirize tree, following the Nakayima partition) that deals with skin healing. This specific story is about a little girl named Okuzza Obugya (2020) who had Chickenpox. I used the name Okuzza Obugya which is a Luganda saying that in this study means ‘life restoring’. This name suggests that when Okuzza Obugya takes part in the object-ritual and spiritual performance within Ndahura’s partition, her skin would be rejuvenated and in the same way her life restored.



Figure 4.6: ‘Warted’ calabash. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). In this image, one can see a ‘warted’ (rough textured) calabash placed amongst various smooth textured calabashes at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. This specific calabash is symbolic of Ndahura the god of smallpox.

On 27 December 2020 whilst at the Omweyimirize tree, when Okuzza Obugya’s father had finished narrating his daughter’s dream to the Nabukeera, she recommended he go to Ndahura’s partition with his daughter so that her skin could be rejuvenated from chickenpox. For skin rejuvenation purposes, the following recommendations are suggested for *Balyammere/Mulyammere* to follow. They are advised to apply either ghee obtained from the surface of a warted calabash (Figure 4.6) or ashes derived from burning charcoal stored in a charcoal stove (Figure 4.7) onto their skin (Obugya 2020). Specifically, Okuzza Obugya (2020) and her father were required to perform the latter of smearing her with charcoal ashes

mixed with a paste of water. Okuzza Obugya's (2020) father would smear her with ashes every morning for two weeks so that her skin would be rejuvenated.



Figure 4.7: Taata Ndahura's partition at the Nakayima Tree. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). In this image, one can see a partition of a tree (Taata Ndahura's spirit) with a carpet of dry spear grass onto which three charcoal stoves and a wooden shield are placed.

The performance of burning charcoal into ashes represents a transformative process similar to the cycle of life and death, symbolised by the change from a solid (charcoal) into a powdery residue (ashes) (Obugya 2020). The burning of charcoal could represent Okuzza Obugya's (2020) shedding off the dead chicken pox skin; while the the smearing of the body with the ash (also a product of the 'death' of wood) signifies renewed and rejuvenated skin emerging from underneath the damaged and dead skin (Obugya 2020). The charcoal stove acquires its meaning through the performance of burning charcoal and smearing ashes onto a living subject. This ash ritual also resonates with the globally celebrated Catholic, Ash Wednesday ceremony in which Christians partake at the start of the Lent period. Similarly, during Ash Wednesday, palm leaves from the previous year are burnt to generate an ash substance that is smeared on the foreheads of Christian believers as an initiation into the period of lent.

In South Africa, for instance, the act of smearing resembles the painting of the bride's face and sometimes the whole body with yellowish or greyish colored clay "*isinuka*" or "*ingceke*" to cleanse her during the Xhosa wedding ceremony (Mpako et al 2011:236). In

countries like Uganda, during the circumcision ceremony where the foreskin of a boy's penis is cut for his manhood initiation (Mbiti 1975:92; Lugira 2009:69; Makwa, Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Solomon 2012:73) a white paste made from powdered yeast and water is smeared all over the boy's body as a Bagisu ritual (Makwa et al 2012:78). They (Makwa et al:78) further note that the yeast facilitates the maturing process of the boy, thereby preparing the initiate for maturity. It is also thought that the smearing of yeast on the circumcised penis fastens the healing process (Kandhwal, Behl, Kumar and Arora 2021:1). This 'anointing' process is similar to the transformative process within Okuzza Obugya's (2020) story mentioned above which represents a renewed and rejuvenated skin. In this study, the rejuvenation of the skin in some way relates to the rejuvenation of knowledge-making or meaning-making (Kabiito 2010:16-17; Cushman 2016:235; Acord 2010:461). Knowledge is continuously produced (Brown and Duguid 1998:90; Tsoukas 2009:1); it is not static but dynamic undergoing a perpetual process of reproduction.

#### **4.4. Politics of Conception and Knowledge Production**

This section examines the stories of how children are conceived and also how knowledge is conceived through two of *Balyammere's* stories that reflect on issues of fertility within the partition of Bannalongo (Figure 4.8) at the Omweyimirize tree. The two *Balyammere* had different stories, one is faced with not having enough vaginal fluid, and the other one is unable to bear children. For this specific section, where I am writing from a place of respect, and understanding, and not trying to reproduce trauma, I avoid using words like 'infertile', 'sterile', and 'barren', as they have negative paternalistically-inscribed associations.



Figure 4.8: Bannalongo's partition. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image depicts the partition of Bannalongo represented with large clay pots (*nsuwa*) exhibited on dry grass. The first clay pot in the foreground and the one in the middle ground are not covered while the clay pot in the left background is covered with a clay pot and calabash on top of it. This is the partition where *Balyammere's* fertility issues are mediated.

Knowledge is not produced in one way. It is produced in multiple ways (Gaventa, Cornwall, Reason, and Bradbury 2006:Reason and Bradbury 2005:197). You can produce knowledge through experience, learning, academia and different kinds of things (de Sousa Santos 2014:208; Rathwell and Armitage 2016:10; Tordini 2018:17). Within the context of Uganda, knowledge is produced in so many ways through rituals, performances, through art and so forth (Nandala and Yiga 2017:225; Uganda National Cultural Policy 2006:sec 11). This subsection deals with the production of knowledge relating to child-bearing. Within the context of Uganda and Africa alike, some people feel the need to reproduce children, which somehow makes them feel fulfilled (Roscoe 1911:25; Kizza 2010:156; Namujju et al, 2018:1). This subsection is dedicated to the stories of Olwaazi (2020) and Ggumbas (2020) who wanted to be able to birth a child(ren). The name 'Olwaazi' is a Luganda name that means 'rock'. I used Olwaazi to symbolise the situation of having no water, which resonates with the appearance of a rock. The name 'Ggumba' is a Kiganda name that means 'bone'. The metaphorical meaning of the name Ggumba is akin to a bone without marrow, highlighting the idea that just as a bone needs marrow to function properly, an individual with this name suggesting a lack, may face difficulties in getting pregnant. The metaphor emphasises the association between the absence of bone marrow and challenges related to fertility. So, for this study, I refer to Ggumba 1 (wife), Ggumba 2 (husband) and Ggumbas (couple):

It has been four months now of running away from men and yet I am now 38 years old! “Please, Mother Nakayima, assist me since I cannot solve this issue on my own. I have had three broken marriages and closed the chapter regarding men because I fear being intimate with them. The vaginal fluid causes me to experience excruciating pain whenever I engage sexually. Mother Nakayima I am requesting your assistance because I know you can perform miracles. The way you helped my friend who did not have vaginal fluid when she came here to pray and drank water from a clay pot, Mother, I also request your assistance so that I can stop being afraid of men so that the men will instead yearn for me, and so that I, too, get pleasure from intimacy”, lamented Olwaazi<sup>94</sup> (2020).

My dear, we remain strong, but you reach a point when you feel enough is enough and you cannot hold on any longer. My husband and I have crossed hills, and mountains, and I feel overwhelmed. The challenge we are facing regards my husband because he finally opened up to me and informed me that he is infertile. The good thing I love about him is that he is a humble and well-mannered man who has always been there for me. We have tried so many possibilities, like pills, but there is no hope yet. We have visited some expensive hospitals through sourced funds which has made us appear so vulnerable, Ggumba1 (2021).

Olwaazi (2020) longed for a child, moved from marriage to marriage, and at 38 years old is still yearning for a child due to problems with ‘vaginal fluids’. On the other hand, the Ggumbas (2021) have tried all possible routes that lead to reproduction, like fertility pills; also ending up in financial difficulties due to these efforts. As such Olwaazi (2020) and the Ggumbas (2021) felt that the only option left to them was to visit the Omweyimirize tree on account of ‘dream-callings’. For them to be able to cure and prevent the reproduction challenges with which they faced, they needed to perform the object-ritual performances specifically within the partition of Bannalongo (Figure 4.8), as guided by the Nakayima spirit medium Catherine Nabukeera.

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<sup>94</sup> The use of the metaphor (Olwaazi) could be seen as the way some people in Ugandan society construct stigma around the lack of vaginal fluids, potentially mocking women facing such issues. However, the intention in this thesis is to remain within the Baganda cultural context of naming and not necessarily to perpetuate stigma (110). The metaphor is used to emphasise the societal pressures and stigmas concerning reproduction, as experienced by individuals like Olwaazi and Ggumbas, who face physical limitations and social pressures (112).



Figure 4.9: *Ekibya* (Calabash). Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). The image shows a brown calabash with a curved handle and a round base featuring a hole, placed atop terracotta barkcloth outside the tour guide's area near the Omweyimirize tree. It is used for drawing water by both men and female from the clay pot and used for drinking by male *Balyammere*.

The spirit medium instructed Olwaazi (2020) to go to Bannalongo's partition of the Omweyimirize tree, pick up *olwendo* (calabash) (Figure 4.9) in her right hand and an *ebibya* (clay bowl) (Figure 4.10) in her left hand, draw water from the *nsuwa* [large clay pot] (Figure 4.11) into the *ebibya* using the *olwendo* until the *ebibya* was full, and then drink the water following a 'three-gallop pattern' involving the spraying of liquids from the mouth for nine days. Then, the Ggumbas (2021) were also instructed to visit the same partition, but, instead, Ggumba 2 (2021) was told to first drink water from the *olwendo* making sure he 'gallops' the water from his mouth nine times before finishing it. When he finished, he was instructed to draw water from the pot, pour it into a clay bowl, and offer it to Ggumba 1 who also gallops the water nine times (Ggumba 2 2021). The couple followed the same procedure every

morning and evening for eighteen days. Both Olwaazi (2020) and the Ggumbas (2021) were supposed to spend their nights within this partition for their intended durations.



Figure 4.10: *Ekibya* (clay bowl). Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image shows a brown clay bowl on terracotta barkcloth, photographed outside the tour guide's space near the Omweyimirize tree. This bowl is what the women use to drink water at the Omweyimirize tree.

The African societies for example; the Banyarwanda and Barundi have provided evidence for the involvement of god in conception. In their native tongue, they practice a ritual and custom called “Amazzi y'imana”, which translates to "God's Water" (Lugira 2009:66). It is also noted that when conception takes place; pregnancy, birth, naming, and childhood are all considered to be the early stages of the life cycle. It is, however, noted that pregnancy is the first step in the birth rituals. However, in some African religions, conception is a joint effort by the future parents, their God, and any associated with gods (Lugira 2009:66).

The stories of conception or of how we become who we are are very different and go beyond how we are conceived (Akinyemi 2003:2; Turyomumazima 2013:1). The concept of reproduction in various contexts is complex and very sensitive (Benn 2004:12; Cense, de Neef, and Visscher 2018:9-11; Mukoro 2017:2-3). Biologically, educated people know that for a child to be born, a woman's ovaries must meet with the sperm of a man (Bertram,

Neubaum and Wolfner 1996:1; Dunson, Weinberg, and Wilcox 2001:133). While people become parents in very different ways which in itself is a very meaningful way, you do not always produce offspring by just carrying them in your belly. You can produce offspring in other ways such as surrogacy and adoption (Boivin et al 2001:1; Martha and Field 1988:68). However, contrary to adoption, surrogacy allows one to raise a child independently of pregnancy and childbirth without sacrificing the benefits of biological connection (Lev 2006:73; Casparsson, 2014:19 Aznar and Martínez Peris 2019:59). World over, it is believed that surrogacy is motivated by the desire to produce genetic offsprings despite difficulties with reproduction (Fayemi and Chimakonam 2022:77; Rotabi 2014:1).



Figure 4.11: *Nsuiwa* (Clay pot). Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image shows a grayish clay pot with a curve placed on top of a terracotta barkcloth taken outside the tour guide's space outside the Omweyimirize tree. It is used for storing in water at the tree.

In the context of Uganda and specifically within the society in which I live, people become parents in so many different ways, even if they have not conceived the children themselves. Adoption is an option in Uganda, although it is a less traditional option. Adoption happens in many different ways and for different purposes (Bergey 2015:26; Leinaweaver, 2018:3; Wilkinson 2011:40-46). For example, I was born of the late Christine Mulemba and Charles Kato, (may their souls rest in Eternal Peace). When my parents passed away at the age of three in 1990, I was welcomed and entrusted to the family of my aunt, who has nurtured me to date. My adoption is a kind of adoption that is based within the scope of a family relationship. Roscoe (1911:81) affirms that adoption in Uganda has generally followed the clan system, meaning that when the parents of a child pass, he/she is placed with relatives as the new caretakers. However, adoption can also occur when the adopted person has no relationship with the person or family adopting them, like in the case of Angel Busingye, a long-time friend (elaborated on in the introduction) who was adopted by a family with whom she had no relationship whatsoever.

Besides this people can also become parents through artificial insemination (Lopez 2011:907-908; Naziri and Feld-Elzon 2012:692-702). Artificial insemination, as practiced in Nigeria and most Sub-Saharan countries, involves the use of donor semen to achieve pregnancy in a woman whose husband is severely oligospermia or azoospermic (Ugwu et al 2014:201 and Igbolekwu et al 2023:1). So, Olwaazi (2020), and the Ggumbas (2021) have other more socially and medically based options for becoming parents. In addition, some women get donor eggs with their partner's semen. As it happens with most people, the first way they think of having a baby is through conception, which is the first thing most people will try before they think of other kinds of methods, or before they find out that they are unable to proceed with conception for whatever reason.

In certain situations, individuals may find themselves in contexts where societal judgment can be harsh when considering modern or adoptive methods of becoming parents. This criticism often stems from societal expectations and attitudes, as noted by Roscoe (1911:48). In the cultural context of Buganda, for instance, societal norms historically considered a woman ready for marriage at the age of twelve (Roscoe 1911:79; van Reisen 2017:13). In this regard, I am constantly reminded by my relatives during family meetings that I am 'not

getting any younger’, comparing me with my siblings who have given birth. I am asked, “Are you in a relationship”? If the answer is no, then that is looked at as a very big problem. On the other hand, if I am in a relationship, then the next question is “When are you introducing him to us? When are you giving us a child like your sister Sarah/Juliet/Diana/Miriam? Thus, regardless of the reasons individuals may have for not having a child at the commonly deemed suitable age, as well as the methods they may employ to conceive, or adopt, societal expectations and stigmas impact deeply on these intimate and sensitive matters. Olwaazi (2020) and the Ggumbas (2021) were undoubtedly at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in response to physical limitations and difficulties; but also in response to social pressures and stigmas concerning reproduction. Ssentongo explains: “Olwendo kubanga lwelusena amazzi mu *nsuwa*, abasajja lwebakozesa okunyweeramu naye bo abakyaala banyweera mu kibya ate nga basenesa olwendo. Kino nekitegeeza nti olwendo n’ekibya bitegeeza ebitundu bye kyaama ku musajja ne ku mukyaala”. (Translation: A calabash is used to draw water from a pot, this is what the men drink from, whereas women drink from a clay bowl and draw water with a lwendo (Ssentongo 2020). The meaning of this is that a calabash and clay bowl represent the reproductive organs of a man and woman respectively. (Ssentongo 2020). Ssentongo’s (2020) explanation of the ritual suggests that the calabash and clay bowl operate in a mode of symbolic visual resemblance to the male and female organs of reproduction. That is to say that the phallic calabash is associated with masculinity and male fertility due to its resemblance to the male organ. Its use by Ggumba 1 (2021) to draw water from the clay pot and drink from it reflects men’s active involvement in the process of obtaining spiritual nourishment and healing. The act of drinking water from the calabash can be understood to signify a sense of power and agency, as well as the potential for procreation.

On the other hand, the clay bowl in its vessel form is associated with the female reproductive organ. Olwaazi (2020) and Ggumba1’s (2021) use of the calabash to draw water from the clay pot and pour it into the clay bowl aligns with women’s nurturing and receptive roles. Pouring the water into the bowl before drinking can represent the act of containing and receiving spiritual nourishment, also reflecting on the sexual act, and the ability to conceive. In this way, the spiritual space narrative engages with traditional beliefs and practices, intertwining spirituality, with object-based material culture and symbolism, intending to affect reproductive health through this bridging of the spiritual and the actual (Mndende 2002:30).

Claire Nalukenge's master's dissertation (2017) provides a similar reading following the actions of Ggumba 2 (2021) asserting that Kalindaluzzi, a male individual from the Ngeye clan draws water from the Kanywabalangira (the Kabaka's lake) using a calabash (olwendo) with a small round hole and straight handle, and stores it in a pot (Nalukenge 2017:31). Nalukenge discusses similar objects as those used by Ggumba 2 (2021) though from the perspective of royal narratives and figures. In a related context, the calabash holds significant ritual value in Kikuyu rituals, serving as a vessel for honey beer during community processions. This study notes that the symbolic use of objects specifically the calabash to facilitate spiritual practices creates a connection between the Mubende Hill rituals of Olwaazi and Ggumbas and the Kenyan Kikuyu ritual. It should be noted that the connection between the Ganda rituals of Olwaazi and Ggumbas and the Kenyan Kikuyu ritual lies in the importance of using symbolic objects to facilitate spiritual practices. The use of calabashes in both the Ganda and Kikuyu rituals illustrates how the same object can hold different meanings and serve various purposes depending on the cultural and ritual contexts. Therefore, the calabash serves as a versatile object whose meaning is shaped by the specific cultural and ritual practices in which it is employed, illustrating the notion of "the same object, different meanings and context" (Mbembe 2001:2; Ogbechie 2005:63; Mbiti 2015:143).



Figure 4.12: Mortar and Pestle, Lilian Nabulime, (2002) 57 x 50 x 150 cm. wood Photographer unknown (Njabala 2022)

Contemporary Ugandan artist Lilian Nabulime's sculpture titled "*Mortar and Pestle*," (Figure 4.12) explores the themes of sexuality and safe sexual intercourse depicted in a sophisticated display. The mortar and pestle as traditional utensils used for pounding groundnuts carry symbolic connotations relating to sexual intercourse, with the mortar representing the vagina and the pestle symbolizing the penis (Njabala 2022). Contemporary Ugandan artist Rose Kirumira's sculpture titled *Akakyala* (Figure 4.13) examines the traditional game of Omweso and its cultural significance in relation to childbirth, gender norms, and power dynamics (2019). The sculpture and the narratives surrounding it shed light on the complex beliefs and taboos associated with women's participation in the game and the potential consequences attributed to such actions within the Ganda community (Kirumira 2019:52). The artwork raises the matter of gendered power dynamics, and the reproductive and child-rearing role of women as mothers in traditional societies.



Figure 4.13: Kirumira Rose Namubiru, 2019. *Akakyala: Reconfiguring the Omweso Board Game: Performing Narratives of Buganda Material Culture* (2016). Mixed media. 155 cm x 120 cm x 120 cm. Photograph by Kirumira Rose Namubiru. (*African Arts* 52:52).

While different objects are employed within the object stories of Olwaazi (2020), the Ggumbas (2021), Nabulime (2002) and Kirumira (2019) they all exhibit aspects of sexual connotation operating in different contexts. The artworks *Mortar and Pestle* and *Akakyala* resonate with the object-ritual stories of Olwaazi and Ggumba, unpacking societal norms and the complex themes of sexuality and gender roles. Employing symbolism and metaphor, the artworks echo the ritualistic use of symbolic objects in addressing reproductive health and healing (see Section 4.4). Both the artists' work and the object-rituals reinforce a shared objective in promoting knowledge and understanding regarding objects and their meanings (Kabiito 2010:16-17; Cushman 2016:235; Acord 2010:461). However, the mediums used therein differ in the sense that the artists express through visual art, while the rituals engage through physical and spiritual performances of ritual objects. Most importantly, Nabulime and Kirumira's artworks relate to Olwaazi and Ggumba's rituals by emphasising the pivotal role of symbolism in tackling societal complexities and the healing capacity of cultural practices through visual representation and performative enactment. The sexual connotations in both the artworks and the rituals are associated with healing, as they address reproductive health and societal perspectives surrounding sexuality. The narratives of Olwaazi, Ggumbas,

Nabulime and Kirumira hence become places of healing in some way through the production of various meanings and knowledge.

In this context, the narratives of contemporary artists Nabulime and Kirumira resonate with the ways in which local histories are constructed through context by engaging with cultural and societal norms, taboos, and themes of sexuality and gender roles (Kyeyune 2003:134). Their artworks utilise symbolism and metaphorical representations to convey messages, which contribute to the production of various meanings and knowledge, thus becoming places of healing (Nabulime 2014:115). In so doing, the artworks decontextualise object-ritual performances by reimagining similar objects in contemporary contexts to generate meanings. This contrasts with the problematically flattened meanings often assigned to such objects when they are removed from their original contexts and placed in settings like museums. Therefore, the study emphasises the need for new art histories that are decolonial and foreground African artists and researchers, allowing for reclamation of authentic significance and cultural importance (Simbao 2017; Simbao et al 2017).

#### **4.5. Childbirth, Trauma, Healing, and Knowledge Production**

This subsection focused specifically on Bassalongo, the sixth partition of the Omweyimirize tree (Figure 4.14). This partition deals with childbirth issues relating to a child's gender, twins, triplets, childcare, and healing. My analysis is grounded in a *Mulyammere's* narrative, which examines the role of objects in childbirth rituals. This is supplemented by accounts from individuals with direct or familial childbirth experiences in creating knowledge through childbirth, process and related matters of healing.



Figure 4.14: Bassalongo's partition. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image shows the sixth partition of Bassalongo at the Omweyimirize tree exhibiting various small pots of different colours.

The partition of Bassalongo mediates the birth of a child according to sex, number, and even in special cases such as twins, triplets, and everything that deals with childbirth. This means that a *Mulyammere* can visit the spiritual space of Mubende Hill seeking the birth of a boy child in which case you drink water from a small clay pot with a rough texture; or a girl child that would require the drinking of water from a small clay pot with a smooth texture; or twins, which would call for the drinking of water from a small clay pot with two mouth openings – or in the case of triplets where you drink water from a small clay pot with three mouth openings. This specific subsection focused on the first option of seeking a boy child through the long-necked textured small clay pot (Figure 4.15) which I refer to as *omulenzi* simply meaning “boy”.



Figure 4. 15: Mulenzi. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image shows a brown long-necked clay pot called Mulenzi with a rough texture placed on spear grass that meditates the birth of a boy child.

Taking the partition's title (Bassalongo) as the point of departure, (although the partition itself does not specifically discriminate regarding the sex of the child one can bear because the *Balyammere* seek children of both sexes within this partition), the name is rather discriminatory as it favors the male child over a girl. In Buganda, the tribe to which I belong, it is not uncommon to hear relatives refer to fathers of twins as Bassalongo/Basalongo or Ssalongo/Ssalongo, meaning a father of twins; and the mothers as Bannalongo/Basalongo or Nnalongo/Nalongo as a singular mother. Similarly, Roscoe (1911:65), Kagwa (1934:105), and (Kizza 2010:141) assert that the father of the twins was called Salongo and his mother Nalongo. So, this research analyses the partition of 'Bassalongo' for its intended purpose of influencing childbirths through object-ritual and spiritual performance elaborated on in this subsection.

In most African societies, certain rituals are performed before, during, and after childbirth (Mbiti 1975:83; Lugira 2009:64). This is because children are considered gifts from God (Chukwu 2015:4; Chukwu and Ume 2020:195). Moreover, the delivery of a boy child is often

accompanied by even more blessings. As earlier mentioned in the first subsection, societies in Buganda (Roscoe 1911:71, Kizza 2010:72), as throughout Africa, are typically (but not exclusively) organised along patriarchal lines (Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 2015). The boy child is often seen as more valuable to the family by this patriarchal gender social construct. Gender and feminist studies of the present day dispute the concept that this status automatically confers social, political, and economic advantages on male offspring over female offspring (Tumusiime 2012:33; Wood 2019:2). Although this system has been challenged by some feminist and gender scholars and professionals, it continues to influence the behaviors and societal attitudes of Ugandans (Tumusiime 2012:VIII) and other societies. In this regard, the *Balyammere* continue to seek Bassalongo's intervention and blessings for personal reasons and gender societal constructs that prioritise male offspring.

Although I am not certain of the number of women who have sought boy-child births within the partition of Bassalongo and the spiritual space at large, one can estimate that many are attempting to conceive a son. This is influenced by the fact that in Uganda, inheritance practices are patrilineal, and previously, a widow was not allowed to inherit the matrimonial home either through customary or statutory law. The first-born boy child of the deceased inherits the matrimonial home (Roscoe 1911:270; Whitehead and Tsikata 2003:74; Asimwe 2019:139). Madanda (cited in Snyder 2002:81) reckoned that this is because "daughters are expected to leave their parental homes and settle with their spouses when married, and the family would lose the property," which exposes a bias in land inheritance. Compounding the problem, married women who did not share their husband's clan were not eligible to inherit property from him. "In essence, women belong nowhere," Madanda (cited in Snyder 2002:81) says, "and that, in turn, hampers productivity".

However, this land inheritance bias is slowly changing because, from my perspective, when my mother passed away, I inherited her land. Another scenario happened after the death of Uganda's prime minister Apolo Nsubambi, who chose his daughter Rhoda Kasujja to be his heir. But, this was considered unusual in the Buganda kingdom and for the Fumbe clan to which he belonged. The same act raised a lot of dust as it became a public debate among the Baganda since it was perceived as contrary to the "Ganda culture" and being done by a prominent person's family at the level of the prime minister of Uganda and a Muganda by

tribe. An official from the Buganda kingdom asserted that embracing modernity should not compromise tradition. Nonetheless, the appointment of an heiress was seen as improper, prompting an inquiry to verify if the late politician had a male heir. This incident was reported as "Clash of cultures; Which Way for Buganda" in the Daily Monitor in 2019. In affirmation, a study conducted by the Department of Yale University and Makerere University stated that women do inherit the land, both from their fathers and their husbands, although it is more common for men to inherit the land (Doss et al 2011:5).

I have been at Motther Nakayima's for four months and two days, and I am still hopeful that my prayers will be heard. I am both content and discontent with my marriage. I have been married for five years and count my blessings daily with my lovely daughter. On the other hand, I am sad because I have always wanted to bear a son. Birthing a boy for me would alleviate the grief I continue to feel after the death of my father when I was only a week old. For me, birthing a boy would be a rekindled and treasured memory of my late father, of whom I barely had any physical memories apart from photographic memories (Nakitto 2020).

Nakitto's (2020) story portrays complex emotions and a hope that her prayers at Maama Nakayima's will bring her the fulfillment she seeks. The story expresses a mixture of contentment and discontentment with her marriage. She appreciates and counts her blessings, particularly her daughters, but at the same time, feels a sense of sadness and longing, the reason for her strong desire to have a son (Nakitto 2020). Nakitto believes that having a son would alleviate the grief she has carried since the death of her father when she was only three days old. Nakitto's (2020) desire for a son is deeply tied to her longing for a connection with her late father. She has few physical memories of her father, with photographs serving as the primary medium through which she engages with his memory. Nakitto believes that the birth of a son would symbolise a rekindling of her father's memory. Besides, she trusts that this action would forge a valued connection to her ancestral roots.

On the other hand, Nakitto's (2020) story also portrays the trauma faced when an individual loses a parent (s) at such a young age, which profoundly affects their lives. It can lead to a sense of loss, longing, and a search for connections and meaning in both their personal and lost parent histories. Nakitto's (2020) need to make up for her father's absence and establish a concrete connection to their past motivates her desire to have a son. I can relate to Nakitto's

story because as earlier mentioned in the section on “politics of conception and knowledge production”, my parents passed away when I was only three years old. This loss still haunts me to this day when I sometimes look at my nieces and nephews with their parents and the voice inside me says “I wish mine too were still here”. I am grateful and blessed with a new family, father and mother for they have nurtured, cared for, loved, and shown me affection.

The loss of a child by a mother is at times linked with trauma which affects the mother’s social life reflected by feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Adewuya Ologun and Ibigbami 2006:286). Indeed, trauma as a result of birth and any related complications might be due to compressions at the time when the mother is to give birth but it is critical to note that birth type is not related to the number of times birth trauma occurs among mothers (Osinaike, Akinseye, Akiyode, Anyaebunam and Kushimo 2017:169). The rupture of the uterus can also occur due to the trauma experienced by the mother at the time of giving birth (Aminu, Unkels, Mdegela, Utz, Adaji and Van Den Broek 2014:148).

To fulfill my dream of birthing a boy, the mukongozi [spiritual healer] instructed me to pour the seeds of obulo [millet], entungo [simsim/seasame] and muwemba [sorghum] into a kibo [basket] and kusiga [sow] around the tree in a clockwise direction while uttering these words: “Obulo bukuloosenga omwana mulubuto, etungo zitungirire ebyakugana okuzaala omulenzi, ate omuwemba gukuwembeje kulwo luzaalo”. When kusiga [sowing] was done, the mukongozi guided me to Bassalongo's partition and instructed me to kneel and pray while touching mulenzi [the vessel associated with a male offspring], drink water from it (mulenzi) and sleep within the premises of this partition until my departure (Nakitto 2020).

The African traditional society is known for using seeds to create and strengthen community and family ties with the view that social cohesion and unity are promoted within society and thus seeds are not merely for food but for cultural ceremonies that lead to the purification of persons (van Niekerk and Wynberg 2017:1; Odongo 2023:1). Nakitto’s (2020) supposed iteration intended for the Kusiga process as instructed by the Mukongozi is translated as “millet to help you dream that there is a child in your stomach, simsim to mend whatever prevented you from birthing a boy and sorghum to nurture your birth”. Each seed carries its significance and purpose within the ritual. Millet is associated with dreaming and manifestation suggesting that by consuming millet, one may visualise or dream about having

a child in the womb. This may be seen as a form of manifestation or setting intentions to conceive a boy. The reference to *simsim* can be understood as a symbolic act of healing or overcoming any physical or emotional barriers that may hinder the desired birth. Sorghum represents the sustenance and nourishment needed to support both the baby's and mother's well-being during the postpartum period. However, the utteration could also suggest that the seeds are/were used in spiritual intervention for a situation[s] where child conception is/was failing. The seeds could have worked mysteriously, or possibly there is scientific nutritional value in the seeds that could boost hormonal balances/stability in a woman's body, as regards reproductive health and the maintenance of pregnancy. This study reflects the *Balyammere's* cultural beliefs and practices surrounding childbirth and gender preferences. It signifies the *Balyammere's* belief in the power of rituals, spiritual performances, and the role of specific seeds in spiritually influencing and/or supporting possibly through nutrition the desired outcomes in childbirth.

Childbirth requires physical, mental, and psychological preparation because it comes with both joys and complexities (Karlström, Nystedt and Hildingsson 2015:4; Moran, Bradshaw, Tuohy and Noonan 2021:4). Moreso, during some delivery processes, either the mother or the child can pass away or both in some incidences. Then the after-birth complications also sink in as Nakitto (2020) lamented: “Njagala okuzaala omwaana omulenzi naye gwe nasooka teyandeka kyekimu, yanjuza Nnabaana. [I want to conceive a baby boy but my first child did not leave me the same, it ruptured my uterus].<sup>95</sup> In an interview with Edward Balaba (2020), a Ugandan visual artist at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Art, informed me that he lost his child in 2020 due to the carelessness of the nurse. The child got a complication at birth with the umbilical cord wrapped twice around its neck (Balaba 2020). The baby was born with only a heartbeat and no cry because of the trauma, additionally, the mother's vagina was ruptured (Balaba 2020). It only survived three years because it could not breastfeed and swallowing was challenging (Balaba 2023). Immy Mali (2023) a Ugandan visual artist, experienced a different kind of trauma before and after childbirth. In a phone call interview with her, she told me that during her first trimester, she hated the smell of “young

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<sup>95</sup> Nakitto as she waited patiently for her departure time was at the same time worried about the delivery process due to her past child delivery experience.

men” and whenever she saw them from afar, she would dash back into the house or wherever she was. She also found some colors, like green irritating, her water broke slowly in episodes, and when she reached labour, she was afraid to push because she was confronted with the fear of rupturing (Mali 2023). At some point right after she delivered, she hated the feel of clothes as if “animal instincts” had sunk in (Mali 2023).

However, not all women experience these symptoms and traumas during childbirth. For instance, two of my cousins with whom I stay did not experience these kinds of traumas, their sufferings were more of a psychological nature. For example, one was able to deliver her two babies naturally and was discharged from the hospital the following day with each birth. She encountered no complications apart from a “sagging tummy” as one always calls it. The other one had a Caesarean section (C-Section) where an incision is created into the abdomen and uterus, and after the child is delivered from this cavity, it is stitched to heal. The healing process also differs for all the individuals involved. Reflecting on these various oral narratives regarding child birthing knowledge of symptoms, traumas, and the healing process, it can be said that regardless of situational context healing is gradual, it is not a one-day thing (Gonzalez, Costa, Andrade, and Medrado 2016:617). That is why Nakitto (2020) was specifically instructed to pray from Bassalongo’s partition until her departure time. Though Nakitto's ritual and spiritual performances of kneeling, praying and drinking water are similar to the stories of Okuzza Obugya (2020), Olwaazi (2020 and the Ggumbas’ (2021), Nakitto’s healing process and objects took a different turn.

Revolving around child gender, Nakitto’s healing towards her dream of birthing a boy was mediated through the object of Muleenzi (Figure 4.15). Muleenzi’s long neck, brown color and rough attributes are the *Balyammere*’s constructed attributes for one who wishes to birth a boy child. These attributes differ from those of a clay pot intended for girl-child births (Figure 4.16). The girl child clay pot is short-necked, light grayish, and has a smooth texture. This differentiation of attributes for objects meant for mediating the gender of a child resonates with the ongoing ideologies regarding stereotypical behavior (Lee, Fredenburg, Belcher and Cleveland 1999:162; Saucier, McCreary and Saxberg 2002:1). However this particular section does not resolve gender stereotypes but rather seeks to examine the role of Muleenzi towards Nakitto’s (2020) desire for birthing a boy as a form of healing. And for

Nakitto (2020), to birth to a boy, she had to drink water from the ritual object (vessel) called Muleenzi as observed earlier in this chapter within the partition of Bassalongo.



Figure 4.16: Girl child small clay pot. Photograph by Moses Ssentongo (2020). This image shows a light greyish short-necked clay pot that mediates the birth of a girl child placed on spear grass.

Meaning in relation to these objects is generated in various ways, and there is little comprehensive literature regarding how people have engaged with a ritual object like Mulenzi for childbirth and healing, although there are other scholars and contemporary artists who offer insight. In this subsection, I do not analyse the works of contemporary visual artists but rather base my observations about the function and operation of these ritual objects on their childbirth experiences as a form of knowledge creation. In Kenya among the Kalenjin, the substance of Bosarok (ash-like powder) is used to transform the foetus' gender from female to male (Riang'a, Broerse and Nangulu 2017:8). In describing her own journey, Immy Mali (2023) explains:

It all started with a decision of wanting to give birth. The best lesson I got after birth was that every single woman is different, and the sooner someone accepts that we are not the same, the better.

For Mali, the above text is an object for coping with trauma in relation to childbirth, healing and knowledge production. Mali's (2023) reflection on difference can also suggest recognising and accepting the unique qualities, characteristics, and experiences of each woman. It suggests that comparing oneself to others or expecting others to be the same can lead to dissatisfaction or misunderstandings. Instead, by acknowledging and appreciating individual differences, one can foster a more inclusive and understanding perspective. However, for Balaba (2020), the availability of funds and maintaining the visual aesthetics of the late son's grave were his healing objects, noting that he would also constantly clear his son's grave ensuring that it was in good shape and looked "visually appealing". People heal through objects in various ways and for different reasons as ways of producing knowledge.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the significance of ritual and spiritual objects lies in their contextualized usage within specific cultural performances. The chapter highlighted that objects such as coffee beans, milk, Bachwezi cups, charcoal stoves, ash, calabash, clay pots and bowls are not mere objects but are actively employed and integrated into rituals, ceremonies, and performances. The objects hold symbolic value and are imbued with meaning through their participation in the performances of *amakula*, skin rejuvenation, fertility and childbirth. This chapter further suggests that the meaning of ritual and spiritual objects is not fixed or predetermined, but is

constructed and reinforced through their engagement in ritual and performance and personal motivation. As the *Balyammere* perform rituals and use these objects, they bring them to life and create a shared understanding of their significance within their cultural framework. The objects become vessels through which cultural meanings, beliefs, and values are expressed, communicated, and experienced. In essence, the chapter stresses the dynamic relationship between objects, rituals and spiritual performances at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill. It challenges the notion that objects are static entities detached from their intended practices, highlighting instead that their meaning and significance emerge through active engagement and participation in ritual and spiritual performances.

## Conclusion

### Insights from the Spiritual Space of Mubende Hill and Implications for the Future

This PhD in art history thesis is a scholarly exploration of the spiritual realm of Mubende Hill in Uganda, unraveling the complex relationships between ritual objects, their contexts, and the transformative power they wield. The central focus of the thesis aimed to challenge colonial legacies in art history and museum studies, particularly in the representation and understanding of ritual objects, by emphasising their dynamic agency within spiritual performances at Mubende Hill. This research juxtaposed how objects are understood in the sacred space of Mubende Hill and the museum environment; calling into question the purpose and consequences of putting objects in a museum and the ways people make meaning with ritual objects in both situations. In so doing, I examine how select contemporary Ugandan artists and a group of art history students (2019) from the Makerere Art School in Uganda interacted with similar objects and the Mubende Hill sacred space and how their artworks generate new narratives and art histories that respect and encouraged local knowledge production. This research further examines the interrelation of ritual objects, rituals, and spiritual performances asserting the inherent relationship. The role of ritual objects in restoring balance and well-being in spiritual contexts, from global to local, and at Mubende Hill specifically is explored. In so doing the historical and cultural meanings of the Mubende Hill sacred site in Uganda are explored to challenge and decolonise the Western views that dominate the existing literature on this site and its history. This was achieved by placing the focus of the study on local oral narratives, offering a different perspective that respects and acknowledges indigenous knowledge and the spirituality of the Mubende sacred space. In essence, the study focused on the performance of ritual objects at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, where I collected and analysed the *Balyammere's* stories their own narratives and their embedded knowledge about the role and histories of this space and the meaning of object-ritual-performances. This is achieved through the discussion of images obtained during my fieldwork.

Drawing upon the secondary and primary information gathered from this research, several key findings were illuminated. In chapter one, the significance of ritual objects was

contrasted between Mubende Hill and museums, showcasing the distortion and loss of meaning linked to the context of the objects within the museum settings. Archaeologist Eric C Lanning's 1953 transfer of vessels from Mubende Hill to the Uganda Museum is a case in point. These vessels, once integral to spiritual performances, are now often viewed merely as aesthetic objects in the Uganda museum. Chapter four delves into this issue, highlighting the significance of ritual objects in Bannalongo's partition. This is the sixth division of the Omweyimirize tree (Figure 14), associated with childbirth, its challenges, child gender, twins or multiples, and healing practices. Similar pots to those that play a role within the Bannalongo partition are currently stored in the museum store without any context to their purpose or interaction from the museum visitors. Meanwhile, the works of select contemporary Ugandan artists and those of the 2019 art history students from the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts (chapter one) indirectly and directly inspired by Mubende Hill's ritual objects, stand as vivid critiques of the colonial disassembly of narrative, affirming the situated knowledge and 'spiritual memory' that these objects are imbued with. In support of this work, I have reviewed multidisciplinary theoretical and methodological perspectives ranging through art history, anthropology, museology, performance studies and postcolonial studies, to frame this analysis and discussion of how ritual objects and performances are inherently related and interpreted both in the museum and the spiritual spaces, such as Mubede Hill.

Chapter two provides a critical framework for understanding ritual objects and spiritual performances, considering their contexts and reciprocal influences. This is achieved by drawing on a multidisciplinary approach that integrates art historical (Thompson 1983; Blier 1995; Ogbechie 2005; Mbiti 2015), anthropological (Apaadurai 1986; Forster 2012), museological Mbembe (2018; Rassool 2006; Abiti 2021) and performance perspectives (Simbao 2008 and 2006; Drewal 1991) in relation to ritual objects and performances. Through analysis of particular object ritual and spiritual contexts, I contend that these objects and performances are not merely expressions of religious beliefs and practices, but also modes of cultural resistance and identity formation in response to colonial and postcolonial challenges. Chapter two aims to enhance the current and indigenous understanding of the complex and dynamic interactions between objects, performances and spirituality in African art history.

Chapter three explores the historical and cultural importance of Mubende Hill, challenging Western bias by incorporating local oral histories. Numerous scholarly works have raised doubts about the existence of the Bachwezi (Schmidt 1990; Sutton 1993; Robertshaw 1994; Wrigley 2002; Schmidt 2006), the group of people credited with establishing the sacred domain of Mubende Hill, the subject of this inquiry. And yet my primary data carried out during participant observation asserts that the Bachwezi existed in the past, and still do. Furthermore, I discovered that the Bachwezi have a ruling king known as Mulema who is also called *taata* (father), and possess royal regalia, a flag and a national anthem. These findings contest the questioned existence of the Bachwezi. Finally, chapter four delved into the role of ritual objects in the spiritual practices at Mubende Hill, emphasising the importance of connecting these objects to their original contexts for a holistic understanding. Through the *Balyammere*'s stories of object-ritual and spiritual performances, this research confirms that the ritual objects and substances such as the bachwezi cup, coffee beans, milk, ghee, ebyanzi to mention but a few are very important components of the ritual and spiritual performances at the Mubende Hill spiritual space. That is to say that when ceremonial items are utilised in object-rituals and spiritual practices, they form an integral part of a systematic and repetitive framework. This implies that the objects and the rituals function interdependently, as the absence of either results in an incomplete object-ritual and spiritual performance in a way interrupting the intentions and healing intended for the object-ritual and spiritual performance.

This research thesis aligns with existing scholarship by challenging the conventional separation of ritual objects from their contexts, echoing the sentiments of scholars such as Thompson (1983); Blier (1995); Ogbechie (2005); Lugira (2009); Okwaro (2013); Mokgobi (2014); Olupona (2014) and Mbiti (2015) who advocate for a more nuanced understanding of objects within and in reference to their cultural frameworks. This research builds upon this foundation by providing a situated exploration of the spiritual space at Mubende Hill, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the dynamic nature of ritual objects; while aligning with and extending existing discussions in the field of art history, in which the study lies. Borrowing from the work of Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (2005) whose work has contributed much to an understanding of a decolonised exploration of African identity and spirituality in relation to African visual culture and material objects provides a foundation for this study's exploration of objects as historical agents in the study of African art history. I

employ the term 'historical agents' to emphasise the participatory approach of collecting oral histories and cultural narratives within this thesis. I focus on the significance and functions of ritual objects, object-rituals, and spiritual performances associated with the Omweyimirize tree on Mubende Hill. Ogbechie (2005) argues that objects are not passive or inert; instead, they are active, dynamic entities that can transform their symbolic nature based on changing discourses and practices. Extending this, I studied ritual objects in relation to their performative contexts of ritual and spiritual practices, thereby enriching our understanding of the dynamic roles and meaningful impact of these objects.

This research also benefits from contributions by renowned scholars such as Suzanne Preston Blier, David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1995) and Robert Farris Thompson (1983). Preston Blier (1995) has emphasised the symbolic function of ritual objects and their critical role in shaping cultural narratives. By exploring the spiritual performances at the Omweyimirize tree, this analysis builds upon their arguments, illustrating how ritual objects can instigate not only personal transformation but also foster broader communal healing. Further, my research responds to John Mbiti's (2015) assertion about the mystical life ascribed to objects in African cultures, related to the symbolism behind ancestor objects, in this case, the symbolism (in relation to faith) of the various object-ritual and spiritual performances at the Omweyimirize tree. This concentrated emphasis on the interplay of ritual objects and spiritual performance resonates with Arjun Appadurai's (1986) concept of the discerning function of ritual objects, highlighting their evolving role within a healing context. In this study, I have developed a multidimensional framework for understanding objects, rituals, and spiritual performances, engaging with essential insights from art history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, material culture studies, and performance studies. Thereby contributing significantly to ongoing scholarly dialogues, situated at the intersection of multiple disciplines and within the field of art history. In my analysis of selected Ugandan contemporary artists and the work of students from the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts (2019), I explore indigenous and decolonised ways of engaging with traditional material culture and thereby resist the Western frameworks usually adopted by Ugandan museums.

A qualitative research methodology was employed in carrying out this research, emphasising subjective insights and contextual understanding gained through first-hand observation and fieldwork; focusing on people's interactions with ritual objects and their representation by selected contemporary Ugandan artists, a cohort of art students (2019), and interaction with the Uganda museum. This approach included the usage of structured and semi-structured interviews, observations, and participation. An array of sources such as newspapers, journals, websites, books, and video clips, alongside interviews, were used to triangulate data. Furthermore, by immersing myself in the contexts (the spiritual space of Mubende Hill, Uganda museum and the Makerere art school, through participant observation I established meaningful and respectful relationships with research subjects, enabling an understanding that was less likely with strictly extrinsic research methods. The multi-source data collection approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the topic, combining firsthand accounts, historical sources, and contemporaneous interpretations. My active participation in daily activities and rituals at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill facilitated a deeper understanding of the context by fostering trust with the subjects and gaining insights into the *Balyammere* and ritual specialists' practices.

Initially, I feared sacred worship practices like those at the Nakayima tree, influenced by some of my High school peers<sup>96</sup> who viewed them as demonic. Besides, as an orphan, my only experience with worship was through the Anglican Church, where we sang praises and worship every Sunday morning. This fear persisted until I got a reason to engage in the object-ritual and spiritual practices at the Nakayima tree. I was distressed about participating in these practices and considered hiring a research assistant. However, I realised that to write my thesis effectively, I needed to immerse myself fully in the fieldwork. This realisation drove me to overcome my fear and engage directly.

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<sup>96</sup> During my high school years at Maryhill High School in Mbarara District, Western Uganda, we frequently engaged in group discussions about school life and broader life experiences. During these interactions, my peers occasionally shared their perspectives on sacred spaces of worship, such as the Nakayima tree, which some viewed as “evil” and “satanic.” For further information on this perspective, refer to Nakazibwe Venny’s thesis, “Bark-cloth of the Baganda People of Southern Uganda: A Record of Continuity and Change from the Late Eighteenth Century to the Early Twenty-First Century” (2005:232). However, other peers expressed the view that beliefs vary among individuals and that all beliefs deserve respect.

During my first week of field research (October 3, 2020), I was offered hot milk tea by the Nabuzaana<sup>97</sup>. Although I thanked her, I feared drinking it because I was not yet accustomed to the practices. When I noticed a fly in the tea, I informed Nabuzaana, who reassured me that it was harmless. Nabuzaana assured me by saying “Tofayo oyo naye mwana nga gwe, osobola omujjamu nonywa kyaayi (Do not worry, that one is also a child<sup>98</sup> like you, you can remove it and you drink your tea). Despite her reassurance, I couldn't bring myself to drink it and politely declined. She then instructed me to pour the tea into a clay bowl for some other children [dogs], which I did. Despite my initial fear, through sustained active participation in the sacred practices, including daily chores and rituals around the Omweyimirize tree (see Methodological Framing and theory around the methodology section), I experienced personal healing. Immersing myself in these spiritual practices nurtured a sense of connection and inner peace, significantly contributing to my well-being and alleviating my fear of the tree and its associated rituals. As an active research participant, I observed, experienced, and learned the healing effects of these rituals firsthand (see details in the object-ritual stories in Chapter Four). This involvement provided valuable perspectives on how the *Balyammere* and ritual specialists facilitate healing, both for themselves and others, including myself.

I encountered challenges in navigating my identity as both an 'outsider' and 'insider.' Despite sharing the socio-linguistic background of the Baganda and being a citizen of Uganda where the research was conducted, I maintained an outsider's perspective due to not being part of the *Balyammere* and community of ritual specialists. Gaining the trust of some research subjects proved challenging initially, impacting the identification of potential participants. The boundary of respectfulness was occasionally crossed, as evidenced by Lydia (2020), who perceived my constant note-taking as disrespectful, prompting adjustments to the observation strategy. Through perseverance and flexibility, I devised alternative observation methods and discovered more nuanced approaches to actively participate and interact with the subjects. I drew from Kawulich's (2005) method of “written photographs” where I would describe my observations upon leaving the site. Managing the ‘fairness’ of accounts coming from high-

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<sup>97</sup> Nabuzaana is the Mulyammere chief cook at the spiritual space of Mubende Hill.

<sup>98</sup> During formal interactions, Balyammere such as Sentongo (2020), Sekyanzi (2020), and Nabuzaana (202) clarified that all beings whether human, animal, insect, harmful or harmless, wild or domestic are regarded as children in the eyes of Omweyimirize Maama Nakayima, provided they reproduce. This perspective is cherished by all the Balyammere at the Omweyimirize tree.

ranking individuals like King Mulema (current Bachwezi King) who could at times skew accounts to favor their bias, was challenging. Furthermore, access to key individuals such as King Mulema and ritual specialists was limited because of their busy schedules. As a counterpoint to the potential influence of figures like King Mulema, I take care to include diverse sources and perspectives from various *Balyammere* and ritual specialists to balance out potential biases. These methods highlight the dynamic nature of qualitative research, where unexpected circumstances require quick methodological modifications to ensure the continuation and quality of the research. This heterogeneous approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the spiritual practices at Mubende Hill, capturing the essence of ritual objects within their performative contexts.

This thesis has far-reaching implications for the discipline of art history. Traditionally, art history and museum practices have often examined objects primarily for their aesthetic and historical values, with inadequate attention to their original cultural and spiritual contexts. This thesis calls for a shift in this approach, suggesting that understanding cultural objects requires a holistic view that encompasses their roles in ritual and spiritual performances rather than objectification. The thesis further positions ritual objects not as passive relics but as active agents in their cultural and spiritual settings. It shows that the ritual objects associated with the spiritual space of Mubende Hill have roles and "lives" that extend beyond mere aesthetic appreciation and anecdotal context; when observed and considered within their performative contexts. This implication calls for art historians to recognise and appreciate the 'biographies' of objects and their interconnections with the societies that created and used them. By focusing on the spiritual space of Mubende Hill in Uganda, the thesis underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity. It demonstrates that objects cannot be completely understood or appreciated when removed from their cultural spaces, which was the frequent practice of colonial antiquarians. This approach continues to varying degrees within contemporary Western museums, although this practice is being challenged and negotiated with a trend towards 'object biographies,' which emphasise the cultural and historical contexts of objects. This implication argues for more awareness and respect of art histories and traditions beyond the West, and for diverse non-eurocentric perspectives to be included in the discourse of art history.

Considering the way that material culture objects are mostly framed by museums in Uganda, I submit that this research contributes meaningfully to knowledge creation and opens up room for more Ugandan scholars, curators and museum staff to embrace ritual practices, performance and spirituality and their impact on our work. Additionally, exploring the impact of digital technologies on the representation of ritual objects in virtual spaces presents an important avenue for future studies, particularly because such technology has not been embraced in the Ugandan context as much as is visible in many Western contexts. Integrating participatory and situated research and local knowledge with digital representations and virtual reconstructions, diverging from Western museum practices, has the potential to influence local perceptions and engagement with ritual objects profoundly. In our increasingly digital age, it is crucial to ask how these technologies can effectively convey the context and performative significance of these objects. This is particularly relevant as the intersection of art history and digital humanities becomes more commonplace.

Given this study's critique of conventional museum practices that often decontextualise ritual objects, further research can delve into alternative museum practices that acknowledge the dynamic agency of cultural objects. Questions that can guide this would be: How can museums better incorporate the performative contexts of ritual objects within their exhibits or exhibitions? How might interactive galleries, or immersive multimedia presentations, for instance, be used to better present the lived realities of these objects? This study points to the colonial bias present in conventional museum approaches to ritual-object representation and presentation. Future research could extend this by examining the effects of ongoing decolonisation efforts in reshaping our understanding and interpretation of ritual objects within museums and art history in general. There is still a significant amount of research to be conducted on colonial collections of Ugandan material culture objects in both local and international museums, and this thesis argues for the importance of Ugandan scholars engaging in this research undertaking. Furthermore, the way material culture is venerated at sacred ritual sites versus the quotidian way museums treat objects (both physically and philosophically), raises important questions about the repatriation of objects that were taken from Uganda during colonialism.

Writing about the contemporary artist Eria Nsubuga and his engagement with the missionary/anthropologist John Roscoe, Ruth Simbao (2024:np) argues that forms of classifying, collecting and gifting can be forms of theft. This resonates in my mind with the incident where Uganda's Prime Minister of the Buganda kingdom, Apollo Kwagga, was involved in 'gifting' sacred objects to European museums. These so-called 'gifts' were frequently the outcomes of various co-option strategies. Furthermore, the repatriation of objects is culturally, logistically and legally complex. When some of the sacred Kibuuka relics were returned from the Cambridge Museum of Archeology and Anthropology in 1961 and ended up in the Uganda National Museum, the controversy did not end. As Simbao (2024:np) notes:

Even though these objects were repatriated, they remain embroiled in contention. Many Baganda people believe that human remains should be respectfully re-buried rather than displayed in a museum so that people can honor their ancestors and perform appropriate rituals. In 2007, a group of Baganda unsuccessfully stormed the national museum, 'intending to seize the relics' (Thomas 2016:341). However, the outdated law pertaining to antiques in Uganda, states that once objects 'are deemed to be owned by the Museum...[they] can never be removed from display' (Nyiracyiza 2009: 8-9).

This story of the repatriated Kibuuka relics and Baganda people storming the Uganda museum to 'release' the relics from behind glass, challenges scholars, museum professionals, and everyday people to engage with various forms of activism and public policy-making. What are the practical implications of decolonising museum spaces and of deepening our comprehension of the potent and contextual interpretative processes of ritual objects in various cultures? The exploration of Mubende Hill's spiritual space, the critique of museum practices, and the emphasis on local narratives collectively weave a thesis here that transcends the boundaries of traditional art historical inquiry. In essence, this thesis has not only contributed significantly to the understanding of ritual objects, but it also lays the foundation for a more inclusive and culturally aware approach to the study of material objects in specific and locally embedded African contexts.

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