

**BACHWEZI BASHOMI IN WESTERN UGANDA: ORIGINS, BELIEFS  
AND PRACTICES**

**BY**

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## **DECLARATION**

I, Joy Tinkamanyire, hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work and has not been submitted to any University for academic award. All the quotations, sources of information and assistance have been acknowledged herein.

I declare this to the best of my knowledge.

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**APPROVAL**

This dissertation that has been carried out and prepared under our guidance and supervision is wholly Joy’s original academic work. It is now ready to be submitted for examination.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate my work to my dear husband Kuruga Johnson and my lovely children who endured my absence during the course of study

To my dear Mum Gertrude Lwamafa who inspired my progress with great support and encouragement always

To all my respondents who unreservedly gave me their all.

To all those who strive to bring knowledge into perspective

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## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

<b>Bachwezi Bashomi</b>	Believers in both Bachwezi an African Traditional Religious sect and other foreign religions especially Christianity
<b>Bachwezi</b>	Mystical people that ruled the interlacustrine region
<b>Bashomi</b>	the enlightened people, a name for religious people especially Christians in this study it will be used to mean Christians.
<b>Ekanisa Yobusingye</b>	Church of peace
<b>Ekigabiro</b>	Natural shrine like caves and man-made sacred place for prayers by members of Bachwezi Bashomi
<b>Eyojwa</b>	Royal grass used on the floor of a shrine
<b>Itambiro</b>	A place where prayers are conducted like a church some are constructed in a modern way
<b>Muchwezi</b>	Diviner
<b>Nyabingi</b>	Local name for the Deity

<b>Nyaruju</b>	The house where the important things of the deceased like parents are kept and where prayers and feeding of Bachwezi take place
<b>Obusingye</b>	A form of salutation used by the Bachwezi Bashomi followers meaning peace wishing others peace which their religion stress.
<b>Okwotsya Ebikoto</b>	A ritual performed around the fire place where members move round spitting in fire believing to burn the misfortunes
<b>Omuhasiro</b>	A ritual performed by the leader by pressing the white trail made of a white tail of an animal with beads on the handle on the believer's head to bless and to heal and it is ended by believers drinking herbs.
<b>Omuji</b>	Formal preparatory training classes to be a Christian.
<b>Orumanyo Rwabachwezi</b>	The Holy Bible
<b>Ruhanga</b>	God
<b>Emandwa</b>	Name of a deity in Runyankole
<b>White robes</b>	Clothes worn by Bachwezi Bashomi to symbolize purity of the holy Angels who are the Bachwezi

## ABSTRACT

The study explored the origins, beliefs and practices of the Bachwezi Bashomi religious movement in Western Uganda. It also examined the theological contributions of Bachwezi Bashomi in the study of religions in Africa. The phenomenon of Bachwezi Bashomi has since the introduction of foreign religions in Africa presented a theological challenge as the study of African traditional religions came into perspective. This theological challenge is exhibited in the double lives of Bachwezi Bashomi practitioners - they fully embrace and practice Christianity while having very strong belief in their ancestral spirits of the Bachwezi (mystical people who are believed to have lived in the interlacustrine region, and eventually morphed into ancestral spirits) as angels or messengers sent by the supreme God. In this sense, Bachwezi Bashomi are truly Christian and truly African traditionalists. Its adjectival name as Bachwezi Bashomi (literally means Bachwezi who are Christians, who read or enlightened) is a theological problem. Does Bachwezi Bashomi represent theological transactions between African ancestral religious ideas with the foreign religions, especially missionary Christianity, which was associated with the art of literacy? To understand this problem, the study examined their origins, beliefs and practices by targeting both practitioners. This study was based on the following objectives: To explain the meaning of Bachwezi Bashomi; To trace the origins of Bachwezi Bashomi; To explain the beliefs and practices of Bachwezi Bashomi; To examine the theological contributions of Bachwezi Bashomi. The study is qualitative in outlook employing descriptive and analytical approaches. The methods used for data collection are semi structured interviews and observation photography and document analysis. The study established the following key findings: The name as Bachwezi Bashomi denotes the idea of an African religious system which has been Christianized; Bachwezi Bashomi is a blend of African traditional spirituality with other foreign religious ideas especially Christianity; The African spiritual realities like ancestors are central and given prominence as angels or messengers of God; Bachwezi Bashomi stands for the ongoing quest for Africans to express their spirituality and culture in the face of the changing world, by blending modernity with their cultures. Through the encounter with the participants, the researcher recommends that: Bachwezi Bashomi deserve respect, mutual understanding for harmonious co-existence; other religions like Christianity should recognize Bachwezi Bashomi in its right without bias or prejudice; The Bachwezi Bashomi continued growth needs more scholarly work for it holds the Africanism that we cannot deny.

## CHAPTER ONE

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Introduction

This chapter contains the background to the study, statement of the problem, general and specific objectives of the study, research questions, scope and justifications of the study.

#### 1.1 Background

Bachwezi Bashomi is one of the hybrid African religions. Bachwezi Bashomi is made up of two words: *Bachwezi* (mystical people or ancestral spirits) and *Bashomi*, which literary means enlightened, studied, or people with the art of literacy. The sect is profoundly associated with regions of Western Uganda, regions of Rwanda and Western Congo. The study took a selection of Kiruhura and Mbarara districts as a case study, to examine the theological underpinnings of Bachwezi Bashomi mapping the origins, core beliefs and practices; and its relationship with contemporary Christianity. Despite its long-time existence, this sect has received limited scholarly attention especially from African points of view.

It is interesting to note that missionary Christianity in Africa was introduced with a racist attitude, which undermined African traditional spiritualities and religious sensitivities. In many cases, missionaries preached against African ways of life. African religious systems, which made sense to Africans were condemned to be pagan, satanic and hell bound. Africans were encouraged to drop their modes of life and belief systems and embrace the way of the European missionaries. Many Africans found European Christianity shallow and dry, void

of the performative and experiential aspects which were rich in African spiritualities. Moreover, some Africans used the literacy skills attained during the process of becoming Christians to read and interpret the Bible in ways it made sense to them. At the same time, Africans read and conceptualized Jesus, the Christian hero in their own terms. Jesus Christ in the gospels was read in relation to the African worldviews and spirituality as a character who identifies with the belief systems that are familiar to the Africans. A number of religious movements emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which combined aspects of missionary Christianity and African traditional spirituality, both as a resistance discourse and hybridization of faiths against the colonial missionary impositions. For instance, in 1921 Kimbangu, a Baptist mission catechist, founded a new Christian movement (Jesus Christ's Church on earth by his special Envoy Simon Kimbangu) based miraculous healings and biblical teaching in the Belgian Congo (Heuser 2018, Mokoko Gampiot 2017, Gampiot and Coquet-Mokoko 2017, Poston 2011). Similar religions were also founded for example the Nazareth Baptist Church in South Africa by Shembe in 1910 (Tishken 2015, Tishken 2002, Brown 1996, Echtler 2020); Aladura movement in Nigeria in 1918 (Ray 1993, Johnson 2011, Adogame 2004, Dada 2014) which centered African spirituality in the heart of the new Christian faith and doctrines.

Christianity on the African landmass went through transformations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Together with the bible translations into African languages, the process of Africanization of the faith took a twist as pressure shifted from cultural colonialism to political and socio-economic marginalization of Africans. In Colonial Kenya, for instance, Dini Ya Msambwa was founded by Elijah Masinde, a catechist in the Friends Mission Church in Western Kenya.

Among other things, Masinde, whose religious movement grew exponentially to include other parts of Kenya and Uganda, demanded that the White settlers who had subjected Africans to landless status and slavery should go back to Europe. Positioning himself as the new Moses, Elijah interpreted the Bible texts from the African socio-cultural and geographical contexts, which portrayed White settlers as evil and beastly people (*kamanani*) (Wabyanga 2014, MacArthur 2020, De Wolf 1983).

The inception of Bachwezi Bashomi as a religious movement is traced to the 1960s as part of the revitalization of indigenous religious beliefs and practices (Ndyabahika 1997). Antecedent to this inception, there had been an African religious movement called *Nyabingi*, which gained prominence in the 1910s, at the time European colonialism took shape among the *Bakiga* and *Banyankole*. *Nyabingi* took a military outlook, led by a female leader called Muhumuza, as the *Bakiga* and *Banyankole* confronted the European colonialists in a number of battles like *Ikumba* (1915), *Nyakishenyi* (1917) and Kabale (1918 to 1920) in which many colonialists and their agents were killed by the *Nyabingi* rebels, until the movement was crushed militarily by the British in 1920. Muhumuza was detained in Kampala by the colonial government until her death in 1944 (Ndyabahika 1997).

Following the defeat of their military warfare, the *Nyabingi* changed form and approach in expressing their religious beliefs and practices. Muhumuza's spirit was deified and venerated by the *Bakiga* and *Banyankole* (Ndyabahika 1997). As a religious movement, *Nyabingi's* most formidable conflict was with the *Balokole* revivalists especially in the 1950s. The *Balokole* revivalists took a

deliberate destruction of the sacrificial articles of *Nyabingi* followers (Ndyabahika 1997) with the intention of demonstrating the superiority of the power of Christianity over African traditional religions. The *Balokole* who configured themselves as forces of light burnt down the shrines and other religious articles of the *Nyabingi* priests and followers without any restraint. Some *Bakiga* and *Banyankole* anticipated divine repercussion against the *Balokole* from the *Nyabingi* spirits but in vain. The *Balokole* remained at large—which sent a message to many Africans that their traditional religious mindset and beliefs are futile, and Christianity, premised on the personhood of Jesus Christ, is more superior.

I find that the Bachwezi Bashomi as a religious movement in Uganda stems from the above backgrounds: The background of African beliefs about the Bachwezi, the legendary demi-gods venerated as the ancestral spirits, with powers to influence human fate. It can be argued that the Bachwezi represented an African identity and roots of the people of East African region. The military and ideological wars waged against *Nyabingi* by the British and the *Balokolo* movements (with great success), made many Africans rethink their religious traditions and beliefs in light of the power (military and spiritual) of Christianity. Bachwezi Bashomi comes up as a hybrid religious movement that believes in the Bachwezi ancestors and the Christianity (Jesus Christ). They are Bachwezi who are also Christians. As already noted, Christianity was associated with learning through *Omuji* and formal education. To be a Christian was to be enlightened in matters of literacy and numeracy and other aspects of colonial missionary civilization. Bachwezi-Bashomi, as a Christian movement (Ndyabahika 1997), therefore ends up as a clear manifestation of African quest

to indigenize Christianity, and Africanize Jesus as the great ancestor (Beyers and Mphahlele 2009, Palmer 2008, Wanamaker 1997, Mokhoathi 2018, Luka 2019) in African Christological worldview.

There are personalities who act as priests and diviners among the Bachwezi Bashomi. They claim to have inherited these mystical powers and can communicate to obtain blessings and favors with the Bachwezi ancestral spirits, who now intertwine with Jesus Christ to perform miracles in hostile situations and to provide fertility, health and general well-being of families and communities. As a blend of local ancestral beliefs and Christian teachings, Bachwezi Bashomi would stand as an African version of Christianity, which has more power than the conventional missionary Christianity which is shallow. As Edward Baingana-Muntu, puts it *“Given that Christianity has not addressed all the questions and the quest for answers in search for healing to natives, any religious movement that comes in the name of addressing such issues will get a great followership. Bachwezi Bashomi thrives on this premise.”* (Baingana-Muntu 1990).

The Bachwezi Bashomi as popularly known in native Western Uganda dialects derives its name from a combination of two words - “Bachwezi” and “Bashomi”. According to Turyomumazima 2005, Bachwezi refers to the mystical people who existed during the legendary dynasty said to have occupied the central and western Uganda, parts of Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. This area is referred to as the interlacustrine region (the land of great lakes) (Turyomumazima 2005). Bashomi on the other hand is a local name for Christians or the enlightened. Many of the adherents of

this sect are Christians (Bashomi) hence the name Bachwezi Bashomi. Bachwezi Bashomi in its present state shows an awkward amalgamation of native religious beliefs and practices and Christianity (Baingana-Muntu 1990).

Before becoming ancestors, the Bachwezi are believed to have been real human beings but with supernatural powers. Their origin is not clear and a matter of guess work, which even associate the group with stray Europeans like the Portuguese and Romans sailors (Ndyabahika 1997). Oral traditions nevertheless affirm that there once lived a group of people in the great lakes' region called Bachwezi inhabiting a vast land of modern Western Uganda, Eastern Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania and Burundi. This group is believed to have disappeared mysteriously but left a religious legacy which constituted African traditional religion. Ndyabahika, (1997) acknowledges that some of the religious beliefs, like *emandwa* were introduced into South-Western Uganda by the Bachwezi as a means of praising, worshipping and thanking the Supreme Being. He continues to suggest that when the Bachwezi suddenly disappeared (they are believed to have either drowned into Lake *Rwitanzigye* (Lake Edward) or Lake *Wamala*) from interlacustrine region, they left behind them their priests (diviners) who could communicate with them and obtain their blessings and favour. By the arrival of European colonialism in East Africa, the interlacustrine kingdoms of Ankole, Bunyoro, Tooro, Buganda and Karagwe in western Tanzania venerated the Bachwezi. These veneration continue to exist in various forms, and at certain points informed African resistances like the *Nyabingi* rebellion against British colonialism in Kigezi subregion.

The Bachwezi Bashomi, as it is known today, is widespread in western Uganda and plays on deeply rooted fears and anxieties of the populace and purports to offer viable solutions stemming from traditional wisdom. Bachwezi Bashomi relies much on traditional society religious beliefs like the belief in a Superior being, belief in spirits that is to say family or ancestor spirits and Chwezi divinities. It uses various names for the mediums; religious artifacts and the sacred space for example the stool, the milk pot, the *eyojwa* grass, bark cloth, the bead cord and some contemporary artifacts like the bible, the rosary, prayer books and the seat of the protector. It uses well-known Christian religious thoughts, articles, books and imagery at the same time. The use of various religious articles and holy books makes it harder to detect and remove or separate it from Christianity.

The process of becoming a *muchwezi* (diviner) medium is an interesting one. This involves the manifestation of the call and diagnosis, initiation and installation just like it is the same process in the Christian world. The *muchwezi* diviner has healing powers, carries religious functions and maintains discipline observed by both mediums and clients. It is against this background that the researcher sets out to establish the origins, beliefs and practices of the Bachwezi Bashomi religious movement in Western Uganda.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

The phenomenon of Bachwezi Bashomi presents a theological problem in the study of African traditional religions. Owing to the fact that the religion is associated with Bachwezi (mystical people who are believed to have lived in the interlacustrine region, and eventually morphed into ancestral spirits), its

adjectival name as Bachwezi Bashomi (literally meaning Bachwezi who read) presents a theological problem. Does Bachwezi Bashomi represent theological transactions between African ancestral religious ideas with the foreign religions especially missionary Christianity, which was associated with the art of literacy? In understanding this problem, the study shall examine the origins, beliefs and practices of Bachwezi Bashomi.

### **1.3 General objective**

To explain the phenomenon of Bachwezi Bashomi religious movement in Western Uganda.

#### **1.3.1 Specific objectives**

The specific objectives of this study were:

- i) To explain the meaning of Bachwezi Bashomi
- ii) To trace the origins of Bachwezi Bashomi
- iii) To explain the beliefs and practices of Bachwezi Bashomi
- iv) To examine the theological contributions of Bachwezi Bashomi

### **1.4 Research questions**

- i) What does Bachwezi Bashomi mean?
- ii) Where did the Bachwezi Bashomi come from?
- iii) What are the beliefs and practices of Bachwezi Bashomi?
- iv) What are the theological contributions of Bachwezi Bashomi in the contemporary society?

## **1.5 Research Scope**

**Geographical Scope:** This study covered **Kiruhura** and **Mbarara** districts in Western Uganda. These areas were chosen because they have a significant concentration of Bachwezi Bashomi followers among other districts in the Ankole-Kigezi regions.

**Content scope:** The content of this study was limited to the origin, beliefs and practices of Bachwezi Bashomi. The study tried to examine the nomenclature of Bachwezi Bashomi, its origin, beliefs and practices and examine the theological currencies in the contemporary study of religion in Africa.

## **1.6 Justification**

This study on Bachwezi Bashomi is significant in a number of ways. First of all, it preserves Indigenous religious knowledge, beliefs and values, which are already being forgotten due to western religions and belief systems. On the wings of globalization raids Western ideologies, philosophies and religions such as Christianity and Islam, which have swept throughout Africa. This has created a risk of traditional belief systems being marginalized or forgotten.

Studying and documenting Bachwezi Bashomi is not only to document and preserve the religious heritage of East Africa, but to encourage further discoveries through research of related areas of interest. Bachwezi Bashomi represents a classic example of a unique blend of traditional beliefs and contemporary religions like Christianity, adding to the already existing African initiated religions as Kimbanguism and Dini Ya Musambwa.

The current study demonstrates the adaptability and hybridity of religions, using the particular materials from the cultural heritage of the people of Western Uganda. The adaptability and hybridity emphasize the need for dialogue and understanding between the African spirituality and foreign religions, especially Christianity, and between the adherents of these belief systems with the hope of bridging the theological divides that have existed between foreign and indigenous beliefs. By examining how individuals navigate between these two traditions, it is hoped that believers of both faiths can identify points of convergence and divergence which fosters interfaith dialogue, mutual respect and harmonious coexistence.

Furthermore, understanding the Bachwezi Bashomi within the cultural fabric of Western Uganda and the neighboring regions enhances cultural and historical constructiveness, which is essential in the decolonization mechanisms. The study serves to highlight historical and cultural interconnectedness between the African communities in Uganda, Rwanda, Congo, Kenya and Tanzania, which can be a good basis for political integration.

### **1.7 Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by Emile Durkheim's theory of religion - Functionalism Theory. According to Edwards 2024, functionalists view religion as a fundamental institution that plays a crucial role in maintaining social order and cohesion.

Functionalists contend that religion serves several functions in society. Religion, in fact, depends on society for its existence, value, and significance, and vice versa (Durkheim, E 2018). From this perspective, religion serves several purposes, like providing answers to spiritual mysteries, offering

emotional comfort, and creating a place for social interaction and social control. In providing answers, religion defines the spiritual world and spiritual forces, including divine beings. In this perspective, Bachwezi Bashomi, from the local perspective of its adherents, provides answers to fundamental questions like, “How was the world created?” “Why do we suffer?” “Is there a plan for our lives?” and “Is there an afterlife?” as conceptualized in the traditional cosmology of the people of Ankole and Kigezi. Importantly, the answers to the above questions in one way or another provide emotional comfort especially as the people contend with questions of life and death. Religious rituals bring order, reassurance, and organization through shared familiar symbols and patterns of behaviour.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter contains works of other scholars or related fields to the subject under study. It has to be pointed out that scholarly works on Bachwezi Bashomi are very scanty, and therefore it is necessary to tap into other similar religious movements in explaining the co-relations in terms of the theological underpinnings of Bachwezi Bashomi.

### **2.2 Review of Related Literature**

#### **2.2.1 Meaning and Origin of Bachwezi Bashomi**

The Bachwezi Bashomi as popularly known in native Western Uganda dialects derives its name from a combination of two words - “Bachwezi” and “Bashomi”. According to Turyomumazima 2005, Bachwezi refers to the mystical people who existed during the legendary dynasty said to have occupied the central and western Uganda, parts of Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. This area is referred to as the interlacustrine region (the land of great lakes) (Turyomumazima 2005). Bashomi on the other hand is a local name for Christians or the enlightened. Many of the adherents of this sect are Christians (Bashomi) hence the name Bachwezi Bashomi. Bachwezi Bashomi in its present state shows an awkward amalgamation of native religious beliefs and practices and Christianity (Baingana-Muntu 1990).

Another interesting study on the subject is the works of Turyomumazima B (2005) who examines Bachwezi Bashomi from the frameworks of the church and healing among the Ankole people of Mbarara. He stresses that Bachwezi

Bashomi offers a grounded responses to the problem of disease where by both spiritual and physical healing is emphasized for example in their overnight prayers *Bachwezi* spirits re invited at the same time steaming with herbs, taking herbal remedies, spitting in fire to burn their misfortunes, which the Christian church should emulate. His study argues that because of the holistic view of life among the Banyankole people, they are often attracted to traditional healing practices, which *Bachwezi* Bashomi advocates for. He advocates for an integration approach of healing, arguing that the concept of Jesus, as the divine healer should be central in African Christology.

In view of the above, the dominant narrative about *Bachwezi* Bashomi is “divine healing and power of foretelling” (Ndyabahika (1997). This healing is found in many African traditional religions like *Nyabingi* in Kigezi (Murindwa-Rutanga (2011) Dini ya Musambwa Wabyanga (2014). The researcher views this as a driving force behind followership in *Bachwezi* Bashomi.

Baingana-Muntu (1990) examined the religious movement in view of its beliefs and practices. He underscored that the religious movement uses Christian religious thoughts and artifacts and traditional artifacts associated with the *Bachwezi* spirituality of the Banyankole people. To Baingana-Muntu, *Bachwezi* Bashomi are a traditional religious idea within the Christian church, and their presence constituted a challenge to the Christian Church (Baingana-Muntu 1990).

The above views indicate a common theme that *Bachwezi* Bashomi is a challenge to the instituted churches (Baingana-Muntu 1990) and Ndyabahika (1997). The theology of *Bachwezi* Bashomi which is a blend of Christian and

African traditional ideas are judgmentally seen as syncretic. Nevertheless, in all the above scholarly works, the writers implore the mainstream church to examine itself in relation to the local needs of society, especially the problem of disease and healing.

It is the researcher's belief that the current study examines Bachwezi Bashomi in its own right as one of the religions in contemporary society without prejudice because the movement demonstrates the quest for Africans to assert their spirituality and independence, which centers their own religious heritage in the context of foreign religious ideas.

With the Africanization of foreign religions like Christianity, Bachwezi Bashomi finds a niche in the pigmentation of Christianity with the local religious colors that reflect their background. This practice is not only unique to Bachwezi Bashomi. There are other cases where Africans, in view of the bangs of Afro-religious identity in the face of superiority of Christianity, developed a blend of religious ideologies which constitute what is called New Religious Movements. From the above assertions, it is very clear that the quest for religious independence and the preservation of African culture is undying and it has been gaining momentum at every stage of human development.

Among other aspects, the Bachwezi are remembered for being great rulers. Chwezi kings like Ndahura and Wamara were believed to be responsible for the founding of interlacustrine kingdoms like Bunyoro, Ankole, Toro and Buganda. Their empire is believed to have stretched widely to include regions of modern Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Congo and Zambia (<https://www.hatshepsut.co/chwezi-empire/>). The Bachwezi were also semi-

gods who possessed supernatural powers and performed miracles. They were wandering pastoralists, tall and light-skinned people; great sportsmen. The Bachwezi are believed to have disappeared to the underworld after a series of misfortunes hit their empire. Their disappearance, however, is perceived in the many traditions as an ascendance to glory (entering the spiritual world), where they continue to play an important role in the lives of the people according to African traditional religious thoughts. The Bachwezi are still venerated in many parts of East Africa like *Ankole*, *Bunyoro*, *Tooro*, *Buganda*, *Rwanda* and *Karagwe* (Ndyabahika, 1997). These veneration continue to exist in various forms and by different people whom the researcher met.

James Ndyabahika, 1997, informs that some of the religious beliefs like *emandwa* were introduced into South-Western Uganda by the Bachwezi as a means of praising, worshipping and thanking the Supreme Being. He continues to suggest that when the Bachwezi suddenly disappeared they left behind them their priests (diviners) who could communicate with them and obtain their blessings and favour. The priesthood to Bachwezi is not attained through training or inheritance. The Bachwezi spirits choose a person through whom they want to manifest their will.

The Bachwezi, can therefore be said to transcended from being humans to spirits (upon disappearing) becoming a sect and religious tradition which characterize the contemporary African traditional religious heritage. Bachwezi, to many people in Western Uganda are therefore the ancestral spirits. They are humans who continue to exist after death, and maintain communion with the living people who are still on earth. They are therefore venerated and worshipped as

deities or part of the pantheon in a divine order according to African cosmological worldview (Onongha 2022, Thabede 2008, Mazama 2002, Wiredu 2013), which constitute a significant influence in African traditional religion (Olupona 2014). Ancestors play a very big role in African religiosity as guardians of morals (Mekoa 2019), offering advice and bestowing good fortunes to people (Chiorazzi 2015); nexus between the earth and the spiritual realm (Kofi 1972); healing and prosperity and serve as guardian angels (Oluwapelumi 2023, Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada 2022).

### **2.3 Beliefs and Practices of Bachwezi Bashomi**

African traditional belief in ancestors as the living dead informs their religious worldview. These spiritual forces can be malevolent or benevolent depending on how the living relate with them. In the event that the living forgets or neglects their ancestors or behave contrary to social morals, catastrophes in form of misfortunes and threats to the flow of life become apparent, either against the whole society or an individual culprit (Edwards et al. 2009, Phiri 2005, van Duijl, Kleijn, and de Jong 2014). This idea is so often acted in many Afro-cinematic movies especially Nigeria's Nollywood movies. For example, in the movie titled "the Evil King" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZNaG7jJRrc>) the immoral activities of a ruler plunged the whole kingdom into the wrath of ancestral spirit(s). Veneration and worship to the ancestors generate a spiritual equilibrium that makes the spiritual forces benevolent. Acts of worship and veneration, according to the African worldview are reciprocated to by the benefits which Ancestral spirits are known to yield like good harvests,

fertility and child production, longevity of life and general welfare of society (Isidienu and Onyekelu 2021).

The Bachwezi are ancestral spirits. They are believed to be powerful. They bestow favour upon people who seek for solutions to problems of life, and blessings associated with welfare and fertility. They are believed to reside in nature—trees, rocks, water bodies and space, and manifest in different forms like wildfire, winds and storms, snakes, insects and other creatures. There is a belief that though the Bachwezi disappeared, they will return with fresh ideas and rule over the interlacustrine region again (Ndyabahika 1997, 126).

### **Kimbanguism (Democratic Republic of the Congo)**

According to Mokoko Gampiot, Aurélien (2014) Kimbanguism is a new religious movement professed by the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by his special envoy Simon Kimbangu, and was founded by Simon Kimbangu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1921. Kimbangu, who was a Baptist mission catechist, inaugurated a mass movement through his supposed miraculous healings and biblical teaching in April 1921. Suspicious about the movement, Belgian authorities exiled Simon Kimbangu to Lubumbashi and imprisoned him until his death in 1951. Many years after Kimbangu's death, the Kimbanguists maintain their rituals and processes guided by their belief in the power of their revolutionary founder Papa Simon Kimbangu. Their ceremonies reveal an African expression of Christianity, rooted in African tradition and embodied in cultural and ritual patterns, with a strong use of music and performance. Furthermore, Kimbanguism is primarily rooted in an Africanized interpretation of the Bible which plays a role in helping to structure their

identity. The church deliberately abstains from politics and embraces a puritan ethic, rejecting the use of violence, polygamy, magic and witchcraft, alcohol, tobacco, and dancing. Extensive social services in agriculture, healing, education, youth work, and cooperatives make it a modernizing agency for a membership estimated at six million followers. Many other smaller, more loosely organized groups in Central Africa also regard Kimbangu as God's special prophet.

Gampiot (2011) places the rise of spiritual movements to resistance to the colonial order in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as the theological bases of Black restoration and Black identity offered by such movements for example the Kimbanguist Church. The researcher finds Kimbanguism very close to Bachwezi Bashome specially on cultural aspects for example upholding African identity and Africanising foreign religious beliefs. This creates curiosity in how such a process of decolonizing religion is being done.

### **Dini ya Musambwa (Religion of the Ancestor)**

According to Wafula Mukanda et al (2019), Dini ya Musambwa is a religious movement which arose in western Kenya and Uganda, accused Christianity of being a 'white man's religion', and proposed a return to veneration of ancestors. The founder was Elijah Masinde (1910-87) who was educated in a mission school and gained distinction playing for the national football team. He separated from the mission staff after disagreeing with the church on key theological issues, which seemed to marginalize African identities. Masinde embarked on a career both as an independent preacher and as an agitator against

colonialism. His position was that the white people had brought some good things but that it was time for them to go.

The practice of this new religion centered on pilgrimages to Mount Elgon which was equated with Mount Zion (*'Sayoni'* in local speech). Here traditional sacrifices were offered. Masinde, however, was selective in his use of traditional religion. While rejecting Christianity (as the white man's religion) he maintained that the ancestral tradition in several respects resembled Christian practice and teaching. For instance, there was less emphasis on praying to ancestors and more to Were the High God. His close followers, in the early stages, saw his call as parallel to that of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed; for some of them, he was a messianic figure.

The researcher finds all the above examples illustrating similar religious and cultural sensitivities to the Bachwezi Bashomi. There seems to be a transcending religious thought that cuts across regions and cultures in Africa in the formation of New Religious Movements (NRMs), which calls for a close examination. In this study, it is hoped that the researcher facts will be constituted hence contributing to the foundation of studies on the cross-cutting features of the NRMs, especially the feature of identity and cultural relativism.

### **2.3 Theological Contributions**

It is true that Bachwezi Bashomi is a hybrid blend of religious ideas from African traditional beliefs and Christianity. The religious movement is a good example of African quest to Africanize Christianity (Droogers 1977, Kaplan 1986, Middleton 2005) and the Bible, as well as tracing African roots in the

heart of the Bible and salvation history (Adamo 2001, Moy 2006, Spruill et al. 2020, Bugg Jr 2023, Nkhoma 2022).

Research has established that most world religions of today are a product of hybridity, which constitute the theological worldviews. Judaism was a product of various religious ideas copied from Egypt, Canaan and Mesopotamia (Davies 2016, Clay 2007, Zawadowska 2022, Goldenberg 2007), While Christianity itself is a blend of Judaism and Greek and Roman beliefs (Luckert 1991, Johnson 2009, Green 2010). Other religions like Islam (Melchior 2012) and Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1997) are not an exception. This therefore illustrates that copying of ideas from other religious traditions has been a common practice in all religious movements, and in that regard, Bachwezi Bashomi is part of the world's examples.

Bachwezi Bashomi's contribution to the contemporary theme of ecological theology cannot be underestimated (Reid-Bowen 2016, O'Meara 2012). The religious movement looks at nature as inhabited by the Bachwezi spirits. Accordingly, natural features like trees and forests, rocks, snakes and water bodies are aboard the Bachwezi. It is an established religious belief in human civilizations that nature is the embodiment of creative spirits (Reid-Bowen 2016, O'Meara 2012), and home to many other deities. For example, *Lubale* spirits are believed to inhabit Lake Victoria among the Baganda (Kenny 1977). Some of the natural features are believed to have been established by deities themselves. For example, the Nakayima tree in Mubende is believed to have been planted by one of the Bachwezi deities called *Nakayima* (Wagaba et al.

2021). This consciousness has led to what is popularly called nature worship, which venerates the natural environment as divine.

Perhaps, one of the leading scholars on Bachwezi Bashomi is Ndyabahika (1997). In his doctoral studies at university of Cape town, Ndyabahika examined the attitudes of the Anglican Church on Bachwezi Bashomi. He demonstrated that the Bachwezi Bashomi, presented a more organic and contextually grounded religious ideas, which challenged the Anglican church which was void of African spiritual consciousness. He pointed out that Bachwezi Bashomi members also belong to mainstream Anglican church, which presents a form of syncretism, where the members are worshiping two conflicting religious ideologies: where being in church is prestigious and fashionable, and being *Muchwezi* is a heritage. Ndyabahika (1997) refers to this as an unbroken covenant with the primal religion. He further demonstrates how Bachwezi Bashomi gave a pastoral challenge to the Anglican church especially in regards to Bible interpretation, miracle performance especially in dealing with the problem of disease and healing.

Mulindwa-Rutanga (2011) agrees with Ndyabahika (1997) as he explains why many people in Africa, especially the interlacustrine region lived a dual or multiple religious life. He explains that people worshipped African gods in secrecy and so on, and were Christians or Muslims openly. He further explains that they found having different religions neither contradictory nor conflictual but rather empowering, and at times enabling their maneuverability, concealment and benefits. Thus, converting into Christianity became handy for many of them.

Whereas Mulindwa-Rutanga (2011) is concerned with the Nyabingi Movement among the Bakiga in Kigezi, the same situation is seen among the Bachwezi Bashomi in Ankole. People take on European or Arabic cultural names to show their new affiliation with the Western religions and in their search for 'modernity' but keep rooted in their culture and heritage.

This according to Mulindwa-Rutanga (2011) shows the resilience and persistence of old beliefs, gods and religions in the face of concerted demonisation by the colonial authorities and their agents. It also demonstrates a crisis of identity which was created by colonialism and its ideological arms - Christianity and Muhammedanism.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter describes the strategies and techniques that were used in carrying out this study. The study focused on Bachwezi Bashomi in western Uganda examining their origins, beliefs, practices and theological transactions and significance. The chapter explains the study design, the population, the sampling techniques and the tools for collecting and analyzing data.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The study applied a qualitative research design employing descriptive and analytical analysis in outlook. The research describes the Bachwezi Bashomi and analyses significant concepts and theological contributions to the field of religious studies. According to Manning (1992), qualitative research provides a deeper understanding of the meaning and perspectives that respondents interviewed and observed made of their experiences from their standpoint. Robert P Luciano (1999), further supports the use of Qualitative research methods as valuable in providing rich descriptions of complex phenomena; tracking unique or unexpected events; illuminating the experience and interpretation of events by actors with widely differing stakes and roles; giving voice to those whose views are rarely heard. Basing on this argument, the Bachwezi Bashomi practitioners were able to give their inner views and beliefs.

### **3.2 Data collection Methods**

Data was collected by use of semi structured interviews, semi structured observations, photography and document analysis methods. The researcher

conducted interviews with some leaders of the religious movement. The semi structured interview method was chosen because it allows the researcher to collect open-ended data, to explore participant thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular topic and to delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions, probes and comments (Arbor Ann et al, 2019). Semi structured observation proves what is said in relation to what is on ground as observed by the researcher.

### **3.3 Sampling Procedure**

Selection of the interviewees took a Purposive sampling method was used in which a selection of thirty (30) religious leaders practioners were met to inform the study. The study employed purposive sampling as advanced by Kassiani, N (2022), that purposive sampling can be used to extract meaningful and in-depth information from a selected group of participants, providing qualitative insights that are often unattainable through more generalized sampling methods. This enabled the researcher to select participants who were most relevant to the study, especially Bachwezi Bashomi practitioners.

The findings were presented thematically in the form of narratives and descriptions. The researcher was also allowed access to worship centers, sacred places and people's homes to observe the practices and life of the Bachwezi Bashomi. The researcher was given permission to take photos of some sacred objects which are presented in this study.

### **3.4 Area of study**

This case study was limited to examining the origins, beliefs and practices of Bachwezi Bashomi in Mbarara and Kiruhura districts in Western Uganda due to the high concentration of Bachwezi Bashomi adherents.

### **3.5 Research Instruments**

In this study, Data was collected by use of the Interview schedule. This was because this method helped to get contextual and authentic information in a participative and interactive atmosphere.

The researcher carefully designed the research instruments that are both the interview guide and observation guide, to enable her in the collection of relevant data so as to be able to answer the research questions.

#### **3.5.1 Interview Guide**

The researcher designed an interview guide aimed at getting one-on-one information from respondents. This method was chosen because it gives interviewees space and time to explain their answers and accounts.

#### **3.5.2 Observation Guide**

The researcher designed an observation guide aimed at watching and examining the phenomena in the most natural setting independently. The researcher observed what was happening in those settings and documented all observable facts, especially artifacts and items related to the practices of Bachwezi Bashomi. This method as advanced by Maggi Savin-Baden and Claire Howell Major (2023) were particularly useful for understanding how or why something

occurs within a natural setting. This was effective to avoid self-reported information (what people say) which may be different from actual information (what people really do).

### **3.6 Research Procedure**

The researcher sought official permission from selected respondents that participated in this study and got their informed consent which was granted. The researcher explained to the expected participants the intentions of this study, built a rapport and objectively sought their informed consent to participate in the study. This was done to ensure that the participants not only get assured of confidentiality but also own this study and cater for any other ethical issues.

### **3.7 Data analysis procedure**

Data was analysed qualitatively and presented thematically. Descriptive and interpretive analysis was used to interpret and discuss data so as to come up with explanations of the phenomena under investigation from which generalization was drawn. This form of analysis was chosen because it attached meaning to the data collected through interpretation and explanation, which led to deeper understanding of the problem under investigation.

### **3.8 Ethical and Validity Issues**

The researcher treated participants' views with utmost total confidentiality, as promised. The participants' views were used only for purposes of this study. Some participants however, preferred having their names mentioned, asserting that they would prefer to be known as the bonified members of the Bachwezi Bashomi Religious movement.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE MEANING AND ORIGIN OF BACHWEZI

### BASHOMI

The Bachwezi Bashomi as popularly known in native Western Uganda dialects derives its name from a combination of two words - “*Bachwezi*” and “*Bashomi*.” The *Bachwezi*, refers to the mystical people who existed during the legendary dynasty said to have occupied the central and western Uganda, parts of Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi (Turyomumazima, 2005). This area is referred to as the interlacustrine region (the land of great lakes). Information about the *Bachwezi* has remained mystical since their presumed existence and life was not documented. Their history has been preserved and transmitted through oral tradition. Traditional stories and legends have it that the name *Bachwezi* is connected to *Okuchwera*, the word used in *Runyankore-Rukiga* to mean spitting. It is believed that the mystical people had the super power in their saliva. They could spit to bless, to curse or to reprimand and it comes to reality because of that habitual act they were named *Bachwezi*. The *Ekigabiro Maama Mugore* in Kiruhura is believed to be the result of the curse from the legendary *Muchwezi Mugasha* on the ordinary people from the wedding introduction with their bride and turned into stones on failing to adhere to his warning through spitting. To date Bachwezi Bashomi leaders do the same to heal, bless and curse on revelation by *Bachwezi* spirits (Rubanyonyora 2023).

Among other aspects, the *Bachwezi* are remembered for being great rulers. *Chwezi* kings like *Ndahura* and *Wamara* were believed to be responsible for the founding of interlacustrine kingdoms like *Bunyoro*, *Ankole*, *Toro* and *Buganda*.

Their empire is believed to have stretched widely to include regions of modern Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Congo and Zambia (<https://www.hatshepsut.co/chwezi-empire/>). The *Bachwezi* were also semi-gods who possessed supernatural powers and performed miracles. and they were wandering pastoralists, tall and light-skinned people; great sportsmen. The *Bachwezi* are believed to have disappeared to the underworld after a series of misfortunes hit their empire. Their disappearance, however is perceived in the many traditions as ascendance to glory (entering the spiritual world), where they continue to play an important role in the lives of the people according to African traditional religious thoughts. The *Bachwezi* are still venerated in many parts of East Africa like *Ankole, Bunyoro, Tooro, Buganda, Rwanda and Karagwe* (Ndyabahika, 1997). These venerations continue to exist in various forms and by different people whom the researcher met.



The rock above is *Karegyeya* Rock commonly known as *Eibare rya Karegyeya* by locals in Ntungamo. It is believed to be the point where the first *Bachwezi*

transformed or transfigured into spiritual reality and went into underworld never to return to the world of men physically. The *Karegyeya* rock in Ntugamo is believed by Bachwezi Bashomi to form the entrance to this underworld and that *Bachwezi* still reside down there which make them pay pilgrimages for spiritual power (Tugume 2023)

Ndyabahika, (1997), informs that some of the religious beliefs like *emandwa* were introduced into South-Western Uganda by the *Bacwezi* as a means of praising, worshipping and thanking the Supreme Being. He continues to suggest that when the *Bachwezi* suddenly disappeared they left behind them their priests (diviners) who could communicate with them and obtain their blessings and favour. The priesthood to *Bachwezi* is not attained through training it is inherited. The *Bachwezi* spirits choose a person through whom they want to manifest their will.

The *Bachwezi*, it can therefore be said transcended from being humans to spirits (upon disappearing) becoming a sect and religious tradition which characterize the contemporary African traditional religious heritage. *Bachwezi*, to many people in Western Uganda are therefore the ancestral spirits. They are humans who continue to exist after death, and maintain communion with the living people who are still on earth. They are therefore venerated and worshipped as deities or part of the pantheon in a divine order according to the African cosmological worldview (Onongha 2022, Thabede 2008, Mazama 2002, Wiredu 2013), which constitutes a significant influence in African traditional religion (Olupona 2014). Ancestors play a very big role in African religiosity as guardians of morals (Mekoa 2019), offering advice and bestowing good

fortunes to people (Chiorazzi 2015); nexus between the earth and the spiritual realm (Kofi 1972); healing and prosperity and serve as guardian angels (Oluwapelumi 2023, Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada 2022).

African traditional belief in ancestors as the living dead informs their religious worldview. These spiritual forces can be malevolent or benevolent depending on how the living relate with them. In the event that the living forgets or neglect their ancestors or behave contrary to social morals, catastrophes in form of misfortunes and threats to the flow of life become apparent, either against the whole society or an individual culprit (Edwards et al. 2009, Phiri 2005, van Duijl, Kleijn, and de Jong 2014). This idea is so often acted in many Afro-cinematic movies especially Nigeria's Nollywood movies. For example, in the movie titled "the Evil King" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZNaG7jJRrc>) the immoral activities of a ruler plunged the whole kingdom into the wrath of ancestral spirit(s). Veneration and worship to the ancestors generates a spiritual equilibrium, that makes the spiritual forces benevolent. Acts of worship and veneration, according to the African worldview are reciprocated to by the benefits which Ancestral spirits are known to yield like good harvests, fertility and child production, longevity of life and general welfare of society (Isidienu and Onyekelu 2021).

The Bachwezi spirits, are ancestral spirits. They are believed to be powerful. They bestow favour upon people who seek for solutions to problems of life, and blessings associated with welfare and fertility. They are believed to reside in nature—trees, rocks, water bodies and space, and manifest in different forms like wildfire, winds and storms, snakes, insects and other creatures. There is a

belief that though the Bachwezi disappeared, they will return with fresh ideas and rule over the interlacustrine region again (Ndyabahika 1997, 126).

### **Bachwezi Bashomi**

The word Bashomi, as earlier hinted carries a lot of meaning in relation to the missionary Christian activities in Africa. The prefix *ba* is plural form commonly associated with many Bantu languages. It is commonly used to refer to people or human related groupings. *Shomi*, probably derived from the word *Shoma* (meaning to read or study), is an adjectival noun suggesting the people who can read or who are reading, or who possess the ability to read or people who regularly attend church services. Literacy and reading in African can be largely traced from the missionary activities. When European missionaries introduced Christianity in Uganda, including Western Uganda, the gospel preached was accompanied with literacy skills. To become a full Christian was a process, which involved learning how to recite the creed, sacraments, reading Christian materials and the bible among others. In this case, Christian converts went through a series of trainings at the mission centers before they were eventually baptized and confirmed.

It is also known that wherever missionaries established themselves, schools were also constructed besides the church. These eventually become church founded schools, within which the doctrines of missionary Christianity were imparted to the African learners. To gain admission in these schools, one had to be a member of the religious group of the school founding body. The CMS schools for instance admitted only Anglican converts, so was also the Roman Catholic founded schools. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Christianity and

Colonialism transformed many African communities. Some Africans had become Christians, and then to become a Christian was part of civilization, while not becoming a Christian was associated with backwardness and barbarism. To be Christian also meant that one had read or possess knowledge of the Christian doctrines like Sacraments and the creed. In other cases, it meant ability to attain literacy skills and a level of formal education which were paramount in the rapidly changing society.

It is interesting to note that missionary Christianity in Africa was introduced with a racist attitude, which undermined African traditional spiritualities and religious sensitivities. In many cases, missionaries preached against African ways of life. African religious systems, which made sense to Africans were condemned to be pagan, satanic and hell bound. Africans were encouraged to drop their modes of life and believe systems and embrace the way of the European missionaries. Many Africans found the European Christianity shallow and dry, void of the performative and experiential aspects which were rich in African spiritualities. Moreover, some Africans using the literacy skills attained during the process of becoming Christians to read and interpret the Bible in ways it made sense to them. At the same time, Africans read and conceptualized Jesus, the Christian hero in their own terms. Jesus Christ in the gospels was read in relation to the African worldviews and spirituality as a character who identifies with the belief systems that are familiar to the Africans. A number of religious movements emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which combined aspects of missionary Christianity and African traditional spirituality, both as a resistance discourse and hybridization of faiths against the colonial missionary impositions. For instance, in 1921 Kimbangu, a Baptist mission catechist,

founded a new Christian movement (Jesus Christ's Church on earth by his special Envoy Simon Kimbangu) based miraculous healings and biblical teaching in the Belgium Congo (Heuser 2018, Mokoko Gampiot 2017, Gampiot and Coquet-Mokoko 2017, Poston 2011). Similar religions were also founded for example the Nazareth Baptist Church in South Africa by Shembe in 1910 (Tishken 2015, Tishken 2002, Brown 1996, Echtler 2020); Aladura movement in Nigeria in 1918 (Ray 1993, Johnson 2011, Adogame 2004, Dada 2014) which centered African spirituality in the heart of the new Christian faith and doctrines.

Christianity on the African landmass went through transformations throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Together with the bible translations into African languages, the process of Africanization of the faith took a twist as pressure shifted from cultural colonialism to political and socio-economic marginalization of Africans. In Colonial Kenya, for instance, Dini Ya Msambwa was founded by Elijah Masinde, a catechist in the Friends Mission Church in Western Kenya. Among other things, Masinde, whose religious movement grew exponentially to include other parts of Kenya and Uganda, demanded that the White settler who had subjected Africans to landless status and slavery should go back to Europe. Positioning himself as the new Moses, Elijah interpreted the Bible texts from the African socio-cultural and geographical contexts, which portrayed White settlers as evil and beastly people (*kamanani*) (Wabyanga 2014, MacArthur 2020, De Wolf 1983).

The inception of Bachwezi Bashomi as a religious movement is traced to the 1960s as part of the revitalization of indigenous religious beliefs and practices (Ndyabahika 1997). Antecedent to this inception, there had been an African

religious movement called *Nyabingi*, which gained prominence in 1910s, at the time European colonialism taken shape among the *Bakiga* and *Banyankole*. *Nyabingi* took a military outlook, led by a female leader called Muhumuza, as the *Bakiga* and *Banyankole* confronted the European colonialists in a number of battles like *Ikumba* (1915), *Nyakishenyi* (1917) and *Kabale* (1918 to 1920) in which many colonialists and their agents were killed by the *Nyabingi* rebels, until the movement was crushed militarily by the British in 1920. Muhumuza was detained in Kampala by the colonial government until her death in 1944 (Ndyabahika 1997).

Following the defeat of their military warfare, the *Nyabingi* changed form and approach in expressing their religious beliefs and practices. Muhumuza's spirit was deified and venerate by the *Bakiga* and *Banyankole* (Ndyabahika 1997). As a religious movement, *Nyabingi's* most formidable conflict was with the *Balokole* revivalists especially in the 1950s. The *Balokole* revivalists took a deliberate destruction of the sacrificial articles of *Nyabingi* followers (Ndyabahika 1997) with the intention of demonstrating the superiority of the power of Christianity over African traditional religions. The *Balokole* who configured themselves as forces of light burnt down the shrines and other religious articles of the *Nyabingi* priests and followers without any restrain. Some *Bakiga* and *Banyankole* anticipated divine repercussion against the *Balokole* from the *Nyabingi* spirits but in vain. The *Balokole* remained at large—which sent a message to many Africans that their traditional religious mindset and beliefs are futile, and Christianity, premised on the personhood of Jesus Christ is more superior.

I argue in this chapter that the Bachwezi Bashomi as a religious movement in Uganda stems from the above backgrounds: The background of African beliefs about the Bachwezi, the legendary demi-gods venerated as the ancestral spirits, with powers to influence human fate. The Bachwezi, it can be argued represented an African identity and roots of the people of East African regions. The military and ideological wars waged against *Nyabingi* by the British and the *Balokolo* movements (with great success), made many Africans to rethink their religious traditions and beliefs in light of the power (military and spiritual) of Christianity. Bachwezi Bashomi comes up as a hybrid religious movement that beliefs in the Bachwezi ancestors and the Christianity (Jesus Christ). They are Bachwezi who are also Christians. As already noted, Christianity was associated with learning through *Omuji* and formal education. To be a Christian was to be enlightened in matters of literacy and numeracy and other aspects of colonial missionary civilization. Bachwezi-Bashomi, as a Christian movement (Ndyabahika 1997), therefore ends up as a clear manifestation of African quest to indigenize Christianity, and Africanize Jesus as the great ancestor (Beyers and Mphahlele 2009, Palmer 2008, Wanamaker 1997, Mokhoathi 2018, Luka 2019) in African Christological worldview.

There are personalities who act as priests and diviners among the Bachwezi Bashomi. They claim to have inherited these mystical powers and can communicate to obtain blessings and favors with the Bachwezi ancestral spirits, who now intertwines with Jesus Christ to perform miracles in hostile situations and to provide fertility, health and general well-being of families and communities. As a blend of local ancestral beliefs and Christian teachings, Bachwezi Bashomi would stand as an African version of Christianity, which has

power than the conventional missionary Christianity which is shallow. As Edward Baingana-Muntu, puts it “*Given that Christianity has not addressed all the questions and the quest for answers in search for healing to natives, any religious movement that comes in the name of addressing such issues will get a great followership. Bachwezi Bashomi thrives on this premise.*” (Baingana-Muntu 1990).

## **CHAPTER FIVE: BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF BACHWEZI**

### **BASHOMI**

In this chapter, the research describes the core beliefs and practices of Bachwezi Bashomi. The chapter is informed by other scholarly works on the religious movement and similar religious movements; and the testimonies and observations made by the researcher during the course of study.

#### **5.1 Beliefs**

It is never easy to escape temptations of describing the beliefs and practices of Bachwezi Bashomi using the paradigms employed in describing African traditional religions (ATR). There is now a scholarly consensus that the contemporary African Traditional Religion is practiced alongside other religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism (Ndemanu 2018, Mokhoathi 2021, Reddie 2018). This binary religious life allows crisscrossing of religious ideas between the ATR and Christianity, for example, which allows hybrid religious ideas and worldviews. Bachwezi Bashomi, as demonstrated in the previous chapter is a classic example of a hybrid religious ideology formed from the intersectionality of Christianity and African traditional religion. Other religions of similar nature are Kimbanguism, Dini-ya-Musambwa and Aladura, to mention but a few, as discussed in the previous chapter. In this regard, the beliefs and practices of Bachwezi-Bashomi are better understood from the perspectives of its hybridity, as partly Christian and partly African. Some of the respondents contacted in this study prefer identifying themselves as bi-denominational, that is belong to two different denominations (Mpairwe 2024). Some followers of Bachwezi Bashomi prefer fellowshipping in instituted

Christian churches, and at the same time maintain communion with the Bachwezi Bashomi establishments like *Nyarunju* in their homes and other traditional worship centers called *Ebigabiro*.

In the picture, there are articles of worship which range from the local African traditional items and items associated with foreign religions like Christianity and even Islam. These include: The Bible, prayer book, rosary, and the Quran. African traditional items include: the musical instruments, candles, herbs, calabash, milk guard etc., all arranged on a table.

Each of these items carry strong significance in the religious life of the Bachwezi Bashomi. For instance, the drum is not only a musical instrument but also a symbol of royalty (Nkwi 2018, Jones 1957, Kafumbe 2011) associated with the legendary Bachwezi kings as well as a symbol of unity. The drum and other instruments communicated a nonverbal but symbolic language in many African communities. Drums represent the soul and spirit of the community as a ceremonial, ritualistic and communicative tool (Ugobude 2020, Oosthuizen 2016); and an embodiment of the community emotions (Izu 2019), and its sound is the rhythm and voice of the gods and ancestors (Omojola 2010). In the works of Chinua Achebe, drums are “like a pulsation” of the village’s heart, “[filling] the village with excitement” (Achebe 1994, 44).

Similarly, a calabashes and gourds carry a strong significance in African traditional religious thoughts. Apart from being a containers and vessels, the calabashes and gourds can be used as musical instruments during divination practices (Holdsworth 2014, Turner 1975). A calabash represents totality of the universe. It represents heaven and earth. It’s small opening on the top is

perceived as the vent through which the divine reaches out to the bottom (earth) (Rice 2016). It is a symbol of a magic womb commonly associated with African Goddesses and ancestral mothers (Kumari et al. 2014, Coleman and Fatunmbi 2023). In the words of Will Coleman and Awo Fa'lokun Fatunmbi with reference to the Ife people of West Africa:

“Everything is inside of the calabash.” This is one of my favorite ways of describing the cosmo-genesis (time), cosmo-geography (space), cosmo-psycho-physiology (spiritual, mental and physical cohesion) and cosmo-sociology (social and political interactions) of the Ifa worldview or perspective. It is not dualistic or dichotomous. Instead, everything is contained with a unified perspective of which the calabash (sphere) is an appropriate representation. It is a multidimensional, all-inclusive sphere that contains and sustains a multi-tiered universe, macrocosmically and microcosmically.” (Coleman and Fatunmbi 2023, 17)

The milk gourd, is used primarily to store milk and probably other valuables like medicines as seen among other nomadic communities (Nyambura 2022). Among the Bachwezi Bashomi, it is part of the utensils used for communal sharing of milk between the Bachwezi spirits and the living humans. In every shrine and worship places, believers have gourds filled with milk, which is believed to be fed by Bachwezi spirits. Milk and cattle rearing have been described in many anthropological writings as the cultural and religious heritage of the *Banyankore* people, especially the *Bahima* (Steinhart and Claessen 1978, Twasiima 2021). The long-horned cattle in particular is the cherished feature, whose origin is believed to be the Bachwezi. The Bachwezi were believed to be cattle keepers and they kept long horned cattle. Like in other pastoral

communities like the *Masaai* of Kenya and Tanzania and *Khoe* of South Africa, Milk from cows is cherished as an ancestral and religious heritage among the Bachwezi Bashomi (Århem 1989). The *Khoikhoi* to date use milk in invocations of ancestral blessings from their great ancestors namely *Tsüigoab* and *Heitsi-eibib* (Lombard and Parsons 2006).

It is in the same spiritual sense that the Bachwezi Bashomi use milk as an entry point to the mystical communion with the ancestral spirits. One of the respondents informed the study that unlike other traditional practices which use alcohol, the Bachwezi Bashomi use milk. Upon approaching the alter or *ekigabiro*, the believer takes some milk and then spills it from his/her mouth while uttering some words. The act is significantly symbolic in the sense that while the worshiper is on one hand appreciating the Bachwezi for provisions, the believer on the other hand is also feeding the Bachwezi with or from his/her mouth.

### **5.1.1 Belief in God and Trinity**

The Bachwezi Bashomi believe in the existence of God the creator called *Ruhanga*. This *Ruhanga* exist in a trinity as *Ruhanga Rugaba* (God the giver), *Ruhanga Kazooba* (God the sustainer) and *Ruhanga Nyamuhanga* (God the creator). Whereas from time immemorial, the concept of God as creator has been part of the African traditional belief systems, the concept of the trinity clearly seems to be the result of the encounter with Christianity (Manganyi and Buitendag 2013, Kombo 2009, Bitrus 2017, Vonkeman 1973). In the works of Chelwa Sakupapa, the development of trinity within the African religious environment stems from the translatability of the pre-Christian African concepts

of God and subsequent outcome of African Christological reflection (Sakupapa 2019). In this regard, it is not astonishing to reveal that other contemporary religions like Kimbanguism that was founded on Christological beliefs of Jesus as the Messiah and deliverer (messianic) constructed the idea of the trinity in terms of spiritual messianic movement. In fact, Simon Kimbangu was believed to be the personification of the Holy Spirit, promised to the believers in John 14:15-17 (Droogers 1980, Mokoko Gampiot 2017).

### **5.1.2 Belief in Jesus Christ**

The Bachwezi Bashomi believe in Jesus as their high prophet. That Jesus' prophetic mission was foretold by other prophets like Isaiah. He is a higher prophet who could not only foretell but also perform miracles like healing, rise the dead and exert control over nature like walking on water. That Jesus possessed the higher spirit from God, so much that all other spirits would obey his commands (Rubanyonyora 2024).

### **5.1.3 Belief in the Bible**

To Bachwezi Bashomi, the Bible is the word of God, which was written under the inspiration of Bachwezi. According to some leaders like Johnmark Rubanyonyora, God used the literary art of the Jews to write the Bible. If the Africans like Prophet Kakara Kashagama (who was an African prophet inspired by Bachwezi) were able to write, they could have written their own Bible (Rubanyonyora 2024). Rubanyonyora and others like Benon Mpairwe (Mpairwe 2024) believe that the Bible is their essential reference book, that the sect call "*orumanyo rwabachwezi.*"

#### 5.1.4 Belief in Ancestral Spirits

The Bachwezi ancestral spirits are central in the religious beliefs of Bachwezi Bashomi. There is a belief that these spirits are the angels and can possess an individual member of the community to reveal the divine message. The Bachwezi spirits are believed to be inhabited within nature like in rocks, waters and trees. As such some rocks and big trees are sacred places where pilgrimages, worship and veneration take place. These sacred places are also known as *Ebigabiro* (singular *Ekgabiro*), *Nyaruju*, *itambiro* or *omuriinzi* and *Omutooma* Trees. Such sacred places include *Bigo-byamugyenyi* in Sembabule, *Maama Mugore* in Kiruhura, *Itaaba* in Mbarara, *Karegyeya* in Ntungamo, *Bugona* in Rubaare, Ntungamo, *Nyakahondogoro* in Ibanda, Lake *Nyabihoko* in Ntungamo and *Nyakahima tree* in Mubende. In all these sacred places, women are not allowed to visit when not pure for example during menstruation period (Namara 2023). Some of the sacred sites have been renovated, while others have remained in their natural form as illustrated in the figure 1 below:



**Figure 1: Ekgabiro in Mbarara**



***Figure 2:Ekigabiro in Kiruhura***

Figure 1 and Figure 2 are Ebigabiro which are improved or renovated. They are both sacred places found in Mbarara and Kiruhura respectively.



***Figure 3 :Maama Mugore in Kiruhura***



***Figure 4: Karegyeya Rock Ekigabiro***

**Figure 3** and **4** are *Ebigabiro* which are natural rocks. They are both sacred places found in Western Uganda.

These holy places operate alongside formal churches, constructed in Christian style. The most illustrious examples are *Ekanisa y'Obusingye* (Church of Peace) in Kiruhura, *Omukiyenje* in Mbarara and Peace Divine Temple at Garuga in Entebbe which is known as the Command Centre/ Headquarters of Bachwezi Bashomi.



***Figure 5: Ekanisa y’Obusingye in Kiruhura***

The Church of peace, as indicated in the picture above is constructed in the architectural design of contemporary Christian church with mark of a cross. The cross is a symbol of Christianity (Benson 2013, Mustafina and Borbassova 2020). Furthermore, at *Omukageeti*, Kiruhura district the church has a primary school where children are offered formal education together with the rudiments of Bachwezi-Bashomi doctrines, the reality that is similar to early missionary churches and the education institutions in Africa.

Like many religions that fall in this category, information about Bachwezi-Bashomi is based on oral traditions especially through stories, myths and tales about the legendary Bachwezi. These myths and stories have been passed for generations, and the elderly people of the group are the custodians of this knowledge. Elders therefore take a prime space in the religious movement as they are viewed as knowledgeable and authoritative. Besides the oral tradition, the Bachwezi Bashomi, drive their theology from Bible and Quran. They believe in the Bible and the Quran as inspired books. The Bible and Quran are

commonly associated with Christianity, Judaism and Islam, but according to the church leadership, these are divine books from Ruhanga/God, with universal messages which speaks to Bachwezi-Bashomi. In the church the researcher visited, prayer services are organized in a Christian style where relevant Bible verses are read. The Bible message is then interpreted by the leader in relation to the Bachwezi-Bashomi beliefs, apparently to strengthen the faithful ones in their belief.

The church walls inside, it was observed, was decorated with various mystical creatures. There were winged angelic features with black African faces and features, pictures of cows, spears and sticks, drums etc, which apparently inform the mystical reality in the belief systems of Bachwezi-Bashomi.



*Figure 6: Male person with wings*



*Figure 7: Female person with wings and a horn*



**Figure 8: Youthful angelic male covering/comforting a youthful woman**

## **5.2 Practices and Ethical Life**

Despite the perceived unity of Bachwezi-Bashomi in terms of theology, there seems to be divergent views on the days of worship. There are some who believe

in praying on Sundays while others worship on Saturdays. In the church visited, the establishment holds that they worship on Sunday because it is a sun-day. The sun is associated with *Ruhanga Kazooba*, who is responsible for sustenance. That the sun sustains life both for humans and animals. The Saturday group believe in the sabbath doctrine, and worship in the seventh-day Adventist manner.

In all the assemblies, followers sit on mats, down on the church floor. It is only the leaders who sits on a chair. The sitting arrangement is organized in the way that men sit separately from women. Men sit in front, while women sit behind. The believers don't enter church with shoes. Shoes are left outside, reminiscent of what happens with Muslims.



A

B

***Figure 9: A and B Believers in the Church with shoes left outside and Inside the Church; believers seated on mats***

It was also observed that Bachwezi Bashomi's sitting mats are made of decorated palm leaves. In some other places of worship like shrines, followers sit on a grass called *eyojwa*. This grass portrays royalty. Chairman asserts that

nothing can be equated or substituted for this grass. He further reveals that special hides and skins are also used. They are mainly used in people's homes especially of affluent economic status. The Bachwezi Bashomi kneel or sit stretching their legs or sometimes stand head-bowed during prayers. They sometimes bend putting hands on the chests as a sign of respect to God and deities.



**Figure 10: Eyojwa grass in Ekigabiro**

The praise and worship in the churches take form of songs and traditional music instruments. Songs sung praise *Ruhanga* and *Bachwezi* in the traditional Runyankore-Rukiga dialects and lyrics. People sing and dance in the traditional style which involve jumping and clapping of hands and systematic movement of the hands and body. Some of the songs and lyrics call for peace (*obusingye*), power (*amaani*) and implore all humanity to respond to the call of Bachwezi. For examples the Song called “*Kora aha ngoma igambe*”, (sound the drum) the call becomes clear when the singers implore people of Congo, Rwenzori and

Buganda to embrace the Bachwezi. In another worship song called “*abatamba-ndwara*,” (those who heal) referring to the Bachwezi as angels, from both Anglican and Pentecostalism, singers emphasize that the Bachwezi are the angels (*katugambe Abachwezi Bamalaika abarikwera abatamba-ndwara*). “*Ija ija iwe muhumuza*” (come come comforter) from Roman catholic church inviting God to comfort the believers

Besides Churches (*Amatambiro*), there are *Nyaruju* and *Orugyegye*. These are shrines which are found in people’s individual homes. *Nyaruju* is a small house with religious articles like spears, walking stick, milk guards, stools, animal hides and skins, plant seeds.



*A*



*B*

*Figure 11: A and B Nyaruju (shrines) constructed in modern structures*



*Figure 12: Inside the Nyaraju, covered with white is the seat of the diviner.*



*Figure 13: Where milk gourds are assembled is the Ruyegye where the Bachwezi are fed.*

The life style of Bachwezi-Bashomi is ample subject to the economic status of an individual. They are not secretive, and easy to go people. They participate in

daily social-economic activities of the contemporary society like farming, trade, transportation and joys and sorrows of life. Of importance to emphasis is that its membership constitutes upper class citizens who are highly education, economically empowered and political elites. The lifestyles expected of upper-class citizenry therefore manifest as some of the members own lavish cars, permanent houses and even their shrines (*nyaruju*) are made of cement, bricks and iron sheets, and even electricity facilities, unlike other shrines which are made of dry grass and straws. During religious ceremonies, members and their leaders dress on white robes signifying the purity and holiness of God and *bachwezi* referred to as the holy angels They greet each other with *obusingye* as a form of salutation, which means peace, *Amaani* which means the power of Bachwezi which is more said during service.

Bachwezi-Bashomi claim to be the movement of all African people. Their vision is to establish worship places (*ebigabiro*) throughout Africa. They claim that Traditional African religious customs- which are characteristic of the entire continent are part of the Bachwezi heritage. All indigenous African Religions are part of the Bachwezi customs (called *Obuchwezi*), with the headquarters located in Ankole regions of Western Uganda in East Africa.

One of the core beliefs of Bachwezi Bashomi is that the Bachwezi spirits are ones responsible for leadership sustenance and general peace in the country and world at large. It is therefore a duty of Bachwezi Bashomi to pray for peace. According the respondents, all leaders especially from this region are sensitized and foretold about what transpires in their leadership and the country in general. One respondent showed the researcher a place in Kiruhura District called

“Parliament” to which many leaders must visit for prayer. This place called “parliament” is a special place found within a natural shrine (ekigabiro) of Maama Mugore, in Mugore-Kenshunga, Rwakitura, Kiruhura District as seen in figure 14 below.

To this place, politicians visit to make consultations with the Bachwezi spirits and get blessings to succeed in politics



***Figure 14: Is a place called parliament in the middle of Mugore Shrine/Ekigabiro.***

Bachwezi practice marriage and family. They practice heterosexual relationships with the goal of producing children who will constitute continuity of the Bachwezi-Bashomi movement encouraging monogamous type of marriage due the interference of Christian teachings and their call for peace which Bachwezi Bashomi advocate for. Marriages from the choice of marriage suiters to actual family life is highly informed by the religious beliefs. Parents play a center stage in the choice of the right marriage partner for their children. Sometime, the Bachwezi divinities would identify the potential suiter. For

example, “Chairman” claims that he got a revelation of the girl at lake *Nyabihoko* when he met a man he had never met physically in the middle of the lake. It is this stranger who described the girl he would meet later that day and how he would eventually marry her despite any possible difficulties.

They practice divination and healing. Followers combine modern pharmaceutical treatments with natural herbal practices to treat diseases. The major focus on wellness about Bachwezi Bashomi is preventing harm and diseases from people (Mpairwe 2023). This seems to be the essence their call for peace (*obusingye*). *Obusingye* cuts across interpersonal relationship to include good relationship with the spiritual reality, and physical and psychological contentment. Nature in this case is harnessed to human health and wellness. The Bachwezi are believed to heal and maintain human health balance through nature like plants and waters. This is what informs the practices and beliefs in the power of some trees like *Nakayima* tree in Mubende and others like *Omurinzi Omugorora* in figure 17 and *omutooma* in figure 15 below.



***Figure 15: Omutooma (bark cloth) sacred tree at Itaaba believed to be as old as Omuchwezi Wamara from where he crafted Bagyendanwa the sacred royal drum***

Other plants like coffee trees are also believed to possess divination powers. Coffee seeds are believed to enhance the spiritual equilibrium with the spiritual realities.



*Figure 16:Some of the seeds in the sitting room of a member, which include Coffee, Oburunga red in colour and other seeds used for protection, healing and bringing peace (Obusingye)*



*Figure 17:Coffee tree in the middle surrounded by stones and Omugorora in the fence Shrine used in creating better relationship*

Fire seems to play an essential role in the Bachwezi Bashomi beliefs and practices both spiritual and physical fire is used by Bachwezi Bashomi as seen

in picture 18 and it was even seen in most of the sacred places that the researcher visited Mugisha explains that Bachwezi Bashomi believes in the power of fire which serves many functions like lighting at night, warmth, for food, storytelling and so forth (Mugisha 2023). He further emphasizes the healing power of this fire during one of the rituals known as *Okwotsya ebikoto* (this is where fire is made and members move around while spitting in it) for body cleansing and pronouncing blessings (Mugisha 2023). Many other respondents like Mumbere agreed that fire has healing powers and it is used to steam themselves with herbs at night (Mumbere 2023). Some use this fire to smoke in accordance with Bachwezi Bashomi rituals as revealed by the Bachwezi. It was further explained that during “*okwotsya ebikoto*”, members each, puts a piece of firewood as a sign of burning their problems for example curses, diseases, misfortunes and in so doing they are purified and cleansed (Mpairwe 2023, Mugisha 2023, Mumbere 2023). According to respondents’ revelations, overnights are part and partial of BB ceremonies. An overnight start by lighting fire, praise and worship and teachings. Early in the morning, members drink herbs as they start the Muhasiro (blessing) ritual before retreating to their homes (Mumbere 2023, Mpairwe 2023).



*Figure 18: Fire being made at Itaaba when it approached 5:00pm with the spears around the fire place as directed by the spirits.*

Respondents mentioned that there are several special ceremonies carried out by Bachwezi Bashomi. The ceremony of Omuhasiriro (nights of Blessings) stands out (Tugume 2023). According to one respondent, some hold such ceremonies on every 4th of the month whereas others hold the same as revealed by the angels / holy spirits (Bachwezi). During this ritual, the leader prays for the believers. On each believer seeking healing or deliverance, the leader places Ikinga (a white tail of an animal with a handle made of beads on the table), while uttering words.



*Figure 19: Ikinga (The white trail)*

Whenever Bachwezi Bashomi carry out overnights, followers are given specially prepared herbs and concoctions at the itambiro (shrine) and Omuringa (iron bangle or bracelet worn on the wrist) is put on every member by the leader. This bangle is for physical and spiritual healing as well as protection. “Chairman” says that to him, he uses his bangle or bracelet to purify water for healing. Respondents further revealed that Bachwezi Bashomi celebrate religious days according to other religions they were individually converted to, for example Friday if majority are Muslims, Sunday when they are Christians and so forth.



***Figure 20: A bangle (omuringa) worn by one of the believers***

Prophecy is a common characteristic feature of Bachwezi Bashomi assemblies. Prophecy is done by Abarangi (mediums) and it is in born (Oweishemwe 2023). One of the enduring prophecies perceived through oral tradition is that of Kakara ka Kashagama Kamangu's prophecy about the disappearance of the mystical Bachwezi and the transition into the present Bachwezi realm. This was during the reign of *Ruhinda rwa Njunaki* the first human king after Bachwezi (Prince Tugume 2023), which forms part of the mythical aspects of the religious movement. Some of the Abarangi who are prophets in Bachwezi Bashomi include *Omurangi Barigye* and *Omurangi Mulema*, who also serves as the overall leader of the Bachwezi Bashomi.

Like any other religion, Bachwezi Bashomi have some taboos, which given their ethical life. For instance, in food regulations, Bachwezi Bashomi don't eat fish of all kinds, because fish causes poverty. They also don't eat pork and

ducks, basing on the biblical accounts in Leviticus 11, which condemns these creatures are unholy. They don't eat blood, or drink milk from a cow that is on heat (Obusito). Women in their monthly periods are forbidden from approaching ebigabiro, because they are regarded as unclean before the Bachwezi spirits (Tugume 2023). They discourage killing of snakes. To them snakes are spiritual, and like any other spirits they are only dangerous when threatened. Snake act as messengers of Bachwezi, and their potency stems as far back as the Bible. They are guardians of nature like water bodies, forests in Africa. That the whites misled Africans to think that snakes are evil, yet for them they have preserved them as symbols in most of international organizations like UN, WHO and pharmaceutical industries (Mpairwe 2024).

## CHAPTER SIX: THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

From the start, *Bacwezi-Bashomi* leaders (*Abarangi*) and their adherents began as devoted Christians, who would go to church, but remained ardent believers in Bachwezi spirits. Being Christian and going to church was a prestigious feat (Ndyabahika 1997). The prestige associated with Christianity was apparently the Church's association with modern life and civilization, and the perceived strength of Jesus Christ over ancestral spirits as discussed above. The desire by the leadership to keep both tradition and adopt as well as adapt the new normal, resulted into the formation of Bachwezi-Bashomi as a religious movement which mirrors both new and old religious orders. It is a hybrid religious movement.

As already mentioned, Missionary Christianity was associated with a series of preparatory trainings known as *Omuji*, as well as formal education. After these *omuji* trainings, the trainees would be baptized or confirmed as Christians. The new Christian status was associated with several prestigious social benefits as new names, access to missionary schools for formal education, medical treatment, leadership positions and envisaged salvation. Christianity had created a new social order, which was most preferred to the old order. Within the new order, African antecedents like African traditional beliefs and religious practices were seen as savage, pagan and hell-bound, deplete of sense and meaning (Sepota 1998, Moyo and Gonye 2022, Nobles 2014, Bascom 1953).

Earlier studies on Bachwezi Bashomi (and similar) religions had a tendency of examining the subject in ways that are sympathetic to missionary Christianity. For instance, a study carried Ndyabahika, who was a church minister in the

Anglican Church categorically labels the movement as a pseudo-religious group which is challenging the Anglican church, constituted by “Christians who hardly take their faith and baptismal calling seriously”, people who have failed to “grasp seriously the biblical teachings”, and lack “down-to-earth philosophical” orientation (Ndyabahika 1997). Similar views are shared in the works of Bonaventure Turyamumazima (Turyomumazima 2005) and Derek Peterson (Peterson 2012).

This chapter seeks to examine the theological ideas of the movement in its right. It is true that Bachwezi Bashomi is a hybrid blend of religious ideas from African traditional beliefs and Christianity. The religious movement is a good example of African quest to Africanize Christianity (Droogers 1977, Kaplan 1986, Middleton 2005) and the Bible, as well as tracing African roots in the heart of the Bible and salvation history (Adamo 2001, Moy 2006, Spruill et al. 2020, Bugg Jr 2023, Nkhoma 2022). It has been discovered that most world religions of today are a product of hybridity, which constitute the theological worldviews. Judaism was a product of various religious ideas copied from Egypt, Canaan and Mesopotamia (Davies 2016, Clay 2007, Zawadowska 2022, Goldenberg 2007), While Christianity itself is a blend of Judaism and Greek and Roman beliefs (Luckert 1991, Johnson 2009, Green 2010). Other religions like Islam (Melchior 2012) and Zoroastrianism (Boyce 1997) are not an exception. This therefore illustrates that copying of ideas from other religious traditions has been a common practice in all religious movements, and in that regard, Bachwezi Bashomi is part of the world examples.

Bachwezi-Bashomi is part of anti-colonial resistance against cultural and ideological impositions of British colonialists. Unlike the earlier resistances which involved religion and military resistance like the Nyabingi (Western Uganda) and Dini Ya Musambwa (Western Kenya), the Bachwezi Bashomi comes in effect in the 1960s, as a resistance discourse which aimed at recognizing and restoring African religious and spiritual consciousness. It is was a way of asserting an African self for recognition in the context of spiritual consciousness about the reality of spiritual ancestors. Instead of navigating dual religious lanes, the Africans in this part of Uganda chose a more inclusive approach in dealing with the spiritual realities. The Bachwezi spirits who remained active in African consciousness were venerated in light of biblical ideas which recognize ancestors like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the twelve tribes of Israel, and further given angelic status—in the order of heavenly angels like Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. It is in view of this same mindset of African consciousness that Africans and African theologians have given Jesus Christ a high status as the chief ancestors in a way of making sense of Jesus Christ in African Christology (Luka 2019, Akper 2007, Lies 2004, De Jongh 2008).

The concept of Bachwezi ancestral spirituality needs further elaboration. As stated earlier, Bachwezi are believed to have been a group of demi-gods people who lived in East African regions of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and Congo. They were great rulers, cattle keeper, magicians, sportsmen, and miracle performers. They were believed to have not died, but just disappeared underground. The Bachwezi-Bashomi are mainly constituted by Banyankore-Bakiga people who live in the corridors of Ankole-Kigezi regions. They claim ancestry from the Bachwezi, whose spirits they venerate. IT can therefore be

argued that the Bachwezi spiritual veneration has been part of the cultural and religious heritage of the regions of Ankole and Kigezi, which even precedes the invention of Christianity. In the contexts of contemporary challenges associated with socio-economic pressures, humanity has always idealized the past the point of time in the distant past when things were presumed good, and has either developed myths to explain the contemporary problems, or religious ideas in which he/she will assume psychological reoccupation of the nostalgic past. For instance, many Christians who read the Bible accounts of Eden as a place of bliss feel nostalgic about Eden, the lost paradise, and assume that through Jesus, they will be in paradise again (Healy 2009).

Bachwezi Bashomi emphasis on healing and deliverance. The essence of any religion lies in its mystical power to touch people's areas of need. Miracle healings, especially in contexts with no affordable and accessible medical care become the only hope for human well-being. Bachwezi Bashomi emerged at the time missionary Christianity had become institutionalized and void of miracles and wonders, despite the fact that the Christian Bible preaches of miracles associated with Jesus and the disciples. The promises of miracles and deliverances prayer rituals by the religious movement became attractive to the population. It has to be noted that majority of Africans, especially Africans of the time conceptualized every problem in spiritual terms. Problems like diseases, poverty, famine and natural calamities occur because of spiritual disequilibrium, especially when ancestral spirits are not happy or ignored. In the contexts of Ankole and Kigezi, such problems would occur because either the Bachwezi spirits are not venerated or their help against other malevolent voices has not been sought. In the healing rituals like okwotsya ebikoto and

omuhasiriro, deliverance prayers occur when believers spit in the fire while calling on the Bachwezi spirits for deliverance.

The aspect of fire is a significant theological element in many religions. Besides the functional purpose of keeping Bachwezi-Bashomi worshipers warm at night, fire signifies presence of the spirit in many world religions like Christianity (Pieris 1996, Haluza-Delay 2000). In Exodus 3, God appeared to Moses in form of fire; in 1 Kings 18, fire fell from Heaven and consumed the sacrifices at Mt. Carmel; while Matthew 3: 11 speaks of the spirit as the tongues of fire. Like in many other African traditional beliefs and stories (Schoffeleers 1971, Sluyter and Duvall 2016, Masoga 2020) Bachwezi spirits manifestations can take forms of strange and sporadic fires on hill tops, valleys and bushes especially in the evening and night hours. As already noted, fire is a common feature at every worship center or site associated with Bachwezi Bashomi. In some places it is kept constantly burning, while in others it is lit every evening through the night to symbolize the protective presence of the spirits over the people there. The custodians of the holy fires are the priests (*Abalangi*). In other studies, fire, besides communication with and honor to the ancestors, is considered a potent symbol of purification and transformation. Fire is used in rituals and ceremonies to cleanse spiritual spaces and burn problems (UEF 2023). In this light, it is not strange that the healing and deliverance rituals among Bachwezi-Bashomi, involve fire. This is apparently why the rituals are commonly called *okwotsya ebikoto*, to literally mean burning misfortunes. It symbolizes a ritual of purification by fire from all perceived human challenges and problems.

Bachwezi-Bashomi is generally one of the classic examples of religious relativism. Religious Relativism argues that “at least one, and probably more than one, world religion is correct and that the correctness of a religion is relative to the world-view of its community of adherents” (Quinn 1995). The theological reality of Bachwezi-Bashomi is relatively correct to the believers, and grants the desired experiential satisfaction. It is a religion founded on the local spiritual infrastructure of the belief in the potency and presence of Bachwezi spirits. From the look of things, one can rightly argue that Christianity was conceptualized from the frameworks of the local spiritual knowledge which created a revelation of relevancy between the local spiritual knowledge with Christian spirituality and the desire to create a hybrid religious ideology called Bachwezi Bashomi, which could mean the Bachwezi who are Christians. It can be further stressed that, the Bachwezi Bashomi is the desire by Africans to Africanize Christianity and the Bible in order to make it culturally and spiritually relevant to the African realities. It is in this case that mystical characters of the Bible and Christianity like the Angels are given African identities as Bachwezi, to create a spiritual reality that is relative to Africans. Of great value is the decolonization aspects of the religious movement, which sanctify and canonize African ancestors as saints.

Bachwezi Bashomi casts a very important contribution to the contemporary theme of ecological theology. The religious movement looks at nature as inhabited by the Bachwezi spirits. Accordingly, natural features like trees and forests, rocks, snakes and waterbodies are the aboard of the Bachwezi. It is an established religious belief in human civilizations that nature is the embodiment of creative spirits (Reid-Bowen 2016, O'Meara 2012), and home to many other

deities. For example, *Lubale* spirits are believed to inhabit Lake Victoria among the Baganda (Kenny 1977). Some of the natural features are believed to have been established by deities themselves. For example, the *Nakayima* tree in Mubende believed to have been planted by one of the Bachwezi deities called *Nakayima* (Wagaba et al. 2021). This consciousness has led to what is popularly called nature worship, which venerates the natural environment as divine. In view of the contemporary climate crises associated with deforestation and pollution, many environmentalists and theologians have championed a theology that restores nature, as indeed destruction of nature causes self-harm to humanity. It suits to add the African proverbs that “if you through a stone at God, it will land on your own head.” Destruction of nature there for causes self-harm. The Bachwezi Bashomi theology that treats nature as divine can thus be a key theological framework for restoring the natural environment.

*Ekigabiro* is one of the common religious concepts among the Bachwezi Bashomi. The term *Ekigabiro* literally mean a place of communal eating. It is related to words like *Okugaba* (to give or be given). It conveys the idea of a communal eating place in a family setting. In traditional African homestead, food was served by mothers in a communal eating place either in a sitting room or compound on the banana leaves or large wooden trays. It is from that common pool that every family member would draw food. *Ekigabiro* enhanced social cohesion among family members. It asserted the authority of the mother as the provider and the father as the principal. It became a place of nourishment and nurturing. Used in the context of Bachwezi Bashomi, the concept had a deep connotation with deep theological ideas. Whereas it enlists ideas of communal life, sustenance and nourishment, the concept provokes questions of

the agency of the sustenance and nourishment, assuming that the beneficiaries are the worshippers. Perceived in the trinitarian conceptions of Bachwezi Bashomi in which *Ruhanga* (God) is *Ruhanga Rugaba* (God the provider), *Ruhanga Kazoba* (God the sustainer) and *Ruhanga Nyamuhanga* (God the creator), the *Ekigabiro* becomes the place of contact with the *Ruhanga* for provisions and sustenance. The idea may also stem from the African traditional belief in the ancestors as the providers and sustainers of life. The ancestors, if ignored or forgotten would lead to disasters like drought or barrenness. They would withhold the sustenance to the flow of life and cause misery. *Ekigabiro* among the Bachwezi Bashomi becomes a place of contact with the Bachwezi spirits, from which worshippers pray for provisions to their areas of need. Approaching *Ekigabiro* calls for appropriate prayers and protocols. The followers begin by feeding the Bachwezi spirits with milk (which partly indicates the reciprocal dual meaning of *ekigabiro*), while uttering incantations and enchantments before they offer their prayers. Women in menstrual cycles are not allowed to approach *ekigabiro*.

*Ekigabiro*, as demonstrated above is a place with spiritual values to the Bachwezi Bashomi. These places may be natural features like impressive rocks of *Mama Mugore* in Kiruhura and *Karegyeya* rock in Ntungamo or constructed shrines (pictures 3 and 4 above), or man-made like in shrines at a historical site (pictures 1 and 2 above), or under a sacred tree (see picture 11). *Ekigabiro* has a sense of an altar. In Christianity and throughout the Bible the Altar and the Tents were built in places for great significance, the place of sacrifice and a power point to draw spiritual and supernatural strength (Genesis 8:20-21 NIV).

The same to Bachwezi Bashomi who frequently visit *Ebigabiro* for the same cause.

As hinted earlier, there is a theological correspondence between the Biblical idea of transfiguration with the *Bachwezi*'s transformation of the first *Muchwezi* to transcend into the spiritual realm. In the Old Testament, prophets like Elijah disappeared into heaven. In the New Testament, Jesus transfigured at the Mountain, and his later ascension to heaven happened in full view of his disciples as he was consumed into the invisible body (Mark 9: 2; Luke 24: 51 NIV). Among the Bachwezi Bashomi, the first *bachwezi* Nyamiyonga Isaza, Wamara and others transformed into spirits and vanished into the underworld at the entrance of *Karegyeya* rock on a hill which Bachwezi Bashomi venerate.

It has been mentioned that the Bachwezi, etymologically related to the word *Okuchwera*, which means to spit saliva. Spitting is believed and done by Bachwezi Bashomi when emphasizing something such as healing, blessing and cursing. Saliva has a significant meaning with deeper connotations in the African Religious setting for it has the power to change things (Nguyen 2006, Nabofa 1996, Mangany 2013, Dogbey 2018). This relates with Jesus' act of healing the blind man Jesus spat on the ground and mixed his saliva with dust which he used to heal the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:23 NIV).

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.**

### **7.1 Summary**

The study established the following key findings: The name as Bachwezi

Bashomi denotes the idea of an African religious system which has been Christianized; Bachwezi Bashomi is a blend of African traditional spirituality with other foreign religious ideas especially Christianity; The African spiritual realities like ancestors are central and given prominence as angels or messengers of God; Bachwezi Bashomi stands for the ongoing quest for Africans to express their spirituality and culture in the face of the changing world, by blending modernity with their cultures.

### **7.2 Conclusion**

Bachwezi Bashomi is an African traditional religious movement characterized of foreign religious ideologies that led to its crimped growth despite its long time existence, It is a silent religious rebellion against foreign religions that is gaining ground with the increasing number of followers who are boldly coming out with a voice venerating African spirituality than before witnessed by increasing number of their institutions with permanent structures like schools and churches with leaders of high levels of Education and the use of social media.

It was noticed that most of the homes in Kiruhura and Mbarara Districts hold Bachwezi Bashomi religious movement dearly as a natural heritage therefore its members are people like you and me not mystical people who deserve

respect, mutual understanding and harmonious co- existence which this study calls for.

### **7.3 Recommendation**

Through the encounter with the participants, the researcher recommends: Bachwezi Bashomi deserve respect, mutual understanding for harmonious existence; other religions like Christianity to recognize Bachwezi Bashomi in its right without bias or prejudice; The researcher further advocates for the continued growth and need for more scholarly work of Bachwezi Bashomi religious movement, for it is a heritage which holds Africanism which we cannot deny.

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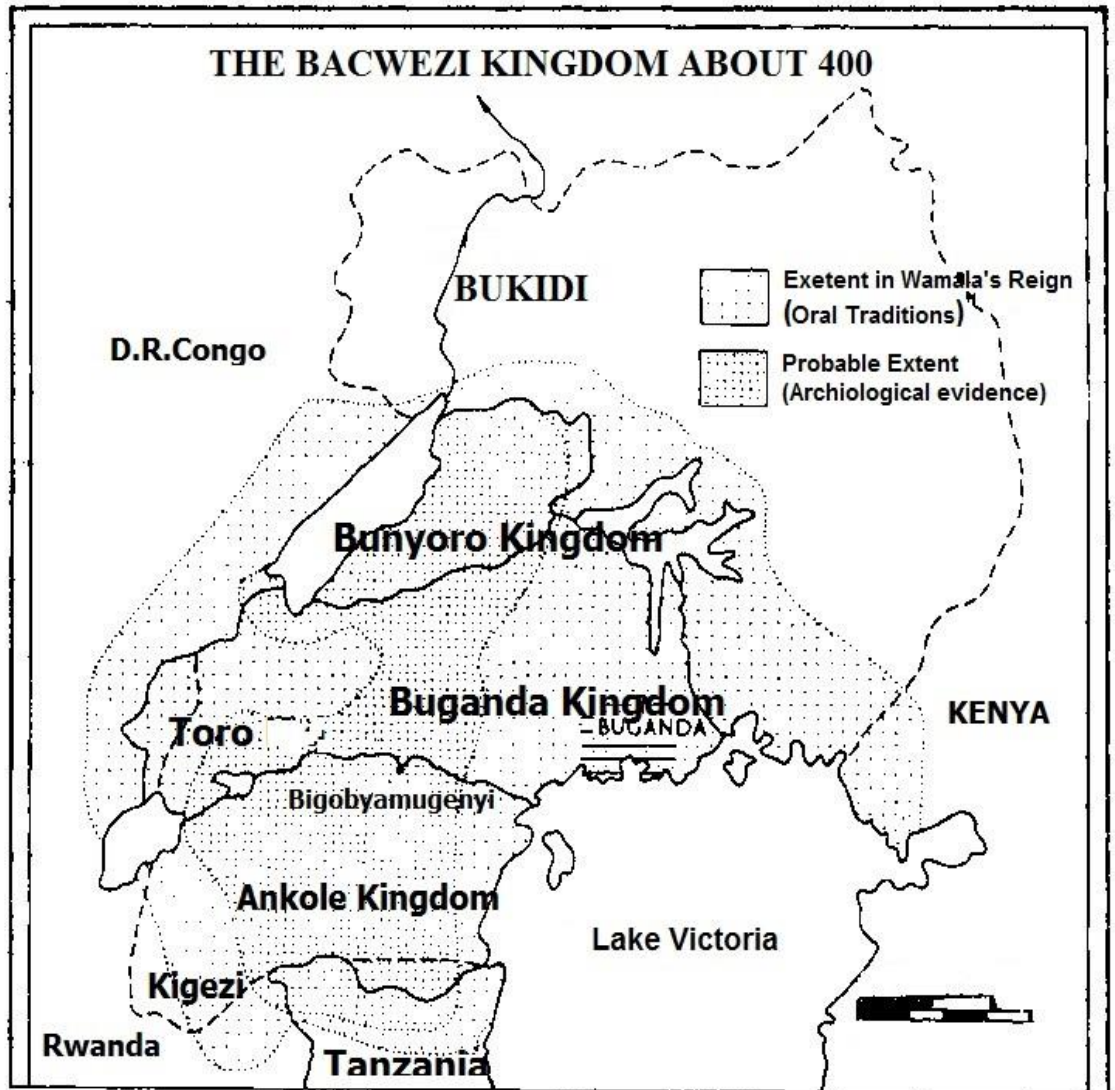
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## **APPENDICIES**

### **APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTION**

- What does Bachwezi Bashomi mean?
- Where did Bachwezi Bashomi come from?
- What do you believe in?
- Do you have special days and places of worship?
- How does one become a member of Bachwezi Bashomi?
- Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Are Bachwezi Bashomi Christians?
- Are there taboos in Bachwezi Bashomi
- What kind of fire is used by bachwezi bashomi?

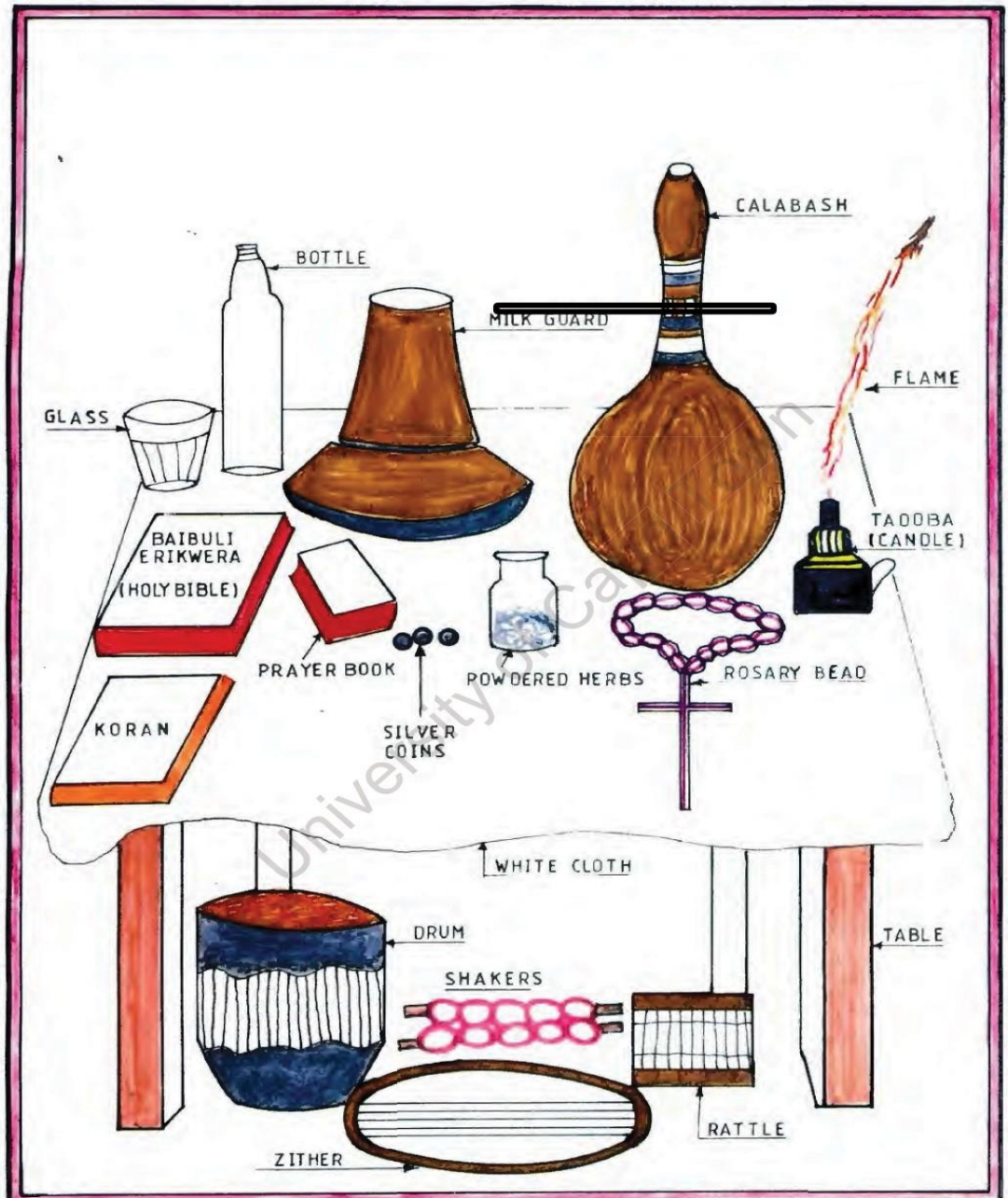
APPENDIX II: MAP OF ANCIENT CHWEZI EMPIRE



Adopted from <https://thinkafrica.net/bunyoro-kitara/>

### APPENDIX III: THE RELIGIOUS ARTICLES OF BACWEZI

#### BASHOMI



Picture adopted from Ndyabahika (1997) by the Researcher