

African Rituals in the Context of Pandemics: Case Study of IMBALU among the Bagisu in Eastern Uganda.

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Abstract: This article examines the adaptabilities and conceptualizations in the Bagisu understanding and practice of imbalu in the context of pandemics. Traditionally, Imbalu among the Bamasaba is an initiation ritual involving circumcision. It is an elaborate and complex social mechanism by which the Bagisu initiate and replenish the African society with desired membership. However, in the context of pandemics especially following the onslaught of HIV/AIDS and Covid-19, there have been significant changes in the ritual practice. The pandemics in Africa are part of the negative effects of globalization. The approaches in combating the pandemics have caused social changes which affect cardinal cultural practices that are supposed to enhance the philosophical functions of imbalu. There are adaptive measures, which have redefined the Bagisu conceptualization of imbalu, manhood and masculinities. The article addresses the following questions: How has the imbalu adopted itself to the contemporary global pandemics, and how do these global challenges influence the Bagisu constructs of a man (masculinity)?

1. INTRODUCTION

This article unveils the degree of influence of contemporary pandemics on *Imbalu* ritual as a rite of passage. The *imbalu* like other socio-cultural practices, as a matter of necessity has been modified in order to cope-up with preventive approaches in the fight against pandemics like HIV/AIDS and Covid-19. This is part of the continued tapestry of how globalization is affecting life in many African societies; and transforming the philosophical and ideological thought patterns like masculinity constructs. Of critical value in this article is the reality that the socio-cultural changes in *imbalu* are not due to the importation and imposition of foreign cultural practices and ideologies, but the mutation impact caused by globalization, in which the Bagisu people have reinvented the cherished cultural practice in a bid to cope-up with the contemporary challenges. This copying up is not just in practice, but also thought patterns and conceptualizations of what it means to be a man.

What is *Imbalu*?

To begin with, there are two key concepts used in this article: circumcision is the act of cutting the foreskin of the male organ, while *Imbalu* is the ritual, which also involves circumcision. In deploying these terms, we have used imbalu in a much more detailed sense, while circumcision is used in respect to the actual cutting.

Imbalu, etymologically, denotes a sharp chopping object akin to a knife or panga as conveyed in Lumasaba dialects (Nandala, 2002; Makwa, 2010; Khamalwa, 2018). The chopping tool, is used for chopping trees, clearing farmland, hunting and also a defense weapon. *Imbalu*, in the sense of circumcision shares the etymological derivation with a sharp knife. *Imbalu* ritual involves the act of being circumcised using a sharp knife. This is the apex of the ritual. Traditionally, the *imbalu* circumcision is carried out in a nonmedical sense where candidates are not sedated. It is a very painful encounter between the human flesh and a sharp knife. The pain is equated to fire burns, and in fact in the ritual music and dances, words like *imbalu-mulilo* (imbalu is fire) are common. The ability to withstand the pain during the operation is what qualifies and defines proof for bravery and ability to withstand life challenges. It is a proof of manhood. In some cases, some candidates opt to proof their bravery by adding things like red pepper, salt and water—as a demonstration to society that they can withstand any amount of pain. The circumcised male organ is eventually called *imbalu*, after going through the ritual. Ideally, it conveys the idea of “the cut one,” “sharp one,” “one which has faced the aggression of the knife.”

Makunya, who is a cultural leader of one of the Bagisu clans asserted that, the reference to the male organ as *imbalu* is a polite, descent and dignified way of referring to the male sexual organ that has encountered the sharp knife (August, 8th 2020). During the circumcision act, the senior male members especially fathers are quick to supervise and inspect the cutting of the foreskin to ensure that the surgeon has given an approved traditional *imbalu* expected of a cultural man. It is literally referred to as '*Imbalu ingene*', meaning a real *Imbalu* or a real cut. As Wotsuna Khamalwa (2018) would emphasize, *Imbalu* is pain and willing-full pain. It is self-choice, but a choice made in order to attain a belonging and status in society. The *Imbalu* ritual mark therefore becomes an identifier, not only of bravery but also tribe. Not to be initiated through *imbalu* is to carry the mark of reproach and shame in society.

2. OTHER FUNCTIONS AND ASPECTS OF IMBALU

Apart from the cultural ceremony, and heroic act, the ritual has a number of cultural roles that are highly revered in the ethnic group. **The *imbalu*** as the circumcised organ, in essence exists for a purpose. The purpose is recreation through acts of sexual reproduction. In the Bagisu thinking, *imbalu* is used for reproduction. During the elaborate rituals, the initiates are taught about the values of family, sexuality and human reproduction. A real man should marry, have sex and have children. Having children is not limited to marriage contexts only. The real man can produce children from any woman as long as she is not a blood family relative or wife to some one else. The aggressively circumcised *imbalu* is to use its prowess in the context of sexuality and reproduction. It is important to note that many African societies value the role of sex in family and marriage stability. In societies like Buganda, the rituals of visiting the bush are meant to train a woman to give sexual satisfaction for stable homes and marriages. But unlike the Baganda where rituals are largely to prepare women, among the Bagisu the rituals are carried out to prepare the men. There are no corresponding rituals which are done in the context of *imbalu* on women. This is probably because, traditionally, women are perceived and expected to be passive actors in sex, and the stability of a home is attained by the sexual prowess of the circumcised penis.

Imbalu makes men among Bagisu people complete. An uncircumcised man is incomplete and incompetent of doing anything in the Bagisu mindsets. As a sign of completeness, it is a mark of authority and power, signifying the highest level of moral and ethical expectations. In this regard, a circumcised man would swear by his circumcised status as proof of truth and seriousness of the matter.

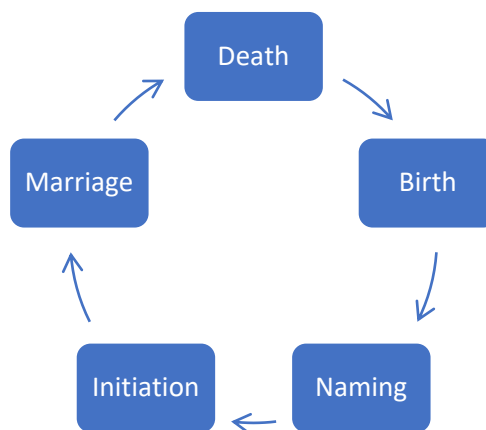
To reiterate, the *imbalu* involves a series of ritual activities, which can not be exhausted in this paper. In the traditional sense, the rituals are communal, often involving the whole clan. In these days, with the institutionalization of *Umukuka* as the cultural head, the rituals are programmed in the way that each lineage initiates on different days. These lineages are mythologically traced and linked to some founding fathers like: Mubuya, Wanale, Lutsekhe, Mututa, Mugisu, Mungokho, etc. the names of these founding fathers are associated with different names that constituted various counties and sub-counties which are home to Bagisu people. This therefore makes *imbalu* a multisite event within a given region. This multi-sited occurrence enhances the social and communal participation of the people across clans and borders within the land. For example, it is a common practice for the people of Bududa to cross to Bubulo to witness how the *imbalu* is taking place. Actual circumcision takes place in an open outer space called Luya or Lusha depending on the dialect. This is the local name for a courtyard or compound. Whereas this courtyard can belong to any house or homestead, traditionally it had to be a home compound for a respectable elderly person who has had sons himself. She courtyards are ceremonially marked and associated with *imbalu*. On the ceremonially gazetted courtyard, initiates from different families within the clan can be circumcised. The open courtyard, and presence of candidates from various homes serve to enhance the social and communal nature of *imbalu*. In which the initiates would identify themselves as members of the same brood or age set locally called *Bamakochi*. Traditionally, this social body is further strengthened by the mixing of blood, where candidates at the same site are circumcised using the same knife. Various people gather to witness, eventually testify and even cast their judgement in accordance to how a particular initiate withstood the pain. The philosophy of behind this openness is that candidates display their reproach and shame publicly and losing it publicly as all people witness. It is also a way of proofing bravery in the full view of the clansmen and women. According to Mushikori - Umukuka 11 (2018), said that "Imbalu is an exam, those who pass it well are highly celebrated, respected and prestigious, while those who fail are an embarrassment and a shame to their families and clans. The initiated transit from the mother's garment of boyhood into the father's garment of

manhood". It is the process by which boys graduate to manhood. It is the litmus test for manhood, bravery, and proof of courage.

Another social aspect of *imbalu* involve pre-circumcision and post-circumcision details. Pre-circumcision details can be protracted and long over a period of time. The preparatory communal rituals begin all the way from the introductory dance of *Isonja*, inauguration at Mutoto, brewing, smearing, visitations to maternal uncles and sacred sites. The post circumcision rituals, include ceremonial cleansing, hatching and lastly induction into grades of men at the *Inemba* dance. The importance of these protocols is to enhance social ties between the initiates of a particular year. Coupled with ceremonial cutting involving the same knife, the initiates' bond is strongly formed. Among the Bagisu, to be a man is not to be a lone but to belong to a certain brood of people called *Bamakochi*. To claim manhood among the Bagisu people, one had to identify with his *Bamakochi*. *Bamakochi* are believed to constitute a significant spiritual authority over each other. They hold the ability to bless or curse an errant member of their age-set.

3. IMBALU IN THE CONTEXT OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RITUAL LIFE.

It is very important to emphasize the importance of rituals in African cosmology. In African life is theological and philosophical. Every stage of human existence is not just by chance, but purposeful and interlinked in a cyclic relationship with other stages. Following the works of John Mbiti, life is continuous, and its cyclic nature makes it difficult to determine its beginning or end. This is what makes life divine. The interlinkages in the ring of life are enhanced by appropriate rituals. Rituals are prevalent in all the five meta life stages in the African thought patterns:



Initiation rituals like *imbalu* constitute an important stage in the lifecycle, as it constitutes not only an entry point to other stages, but initiates people to participate in various capacities in other fundamental rites of passage like marriage, death, birth, naming etc (Ndeke and Masya 2017). Against this background, it is worth noting that, the Bagisu people also ritually circumcise dead people. This happens in the context where an initiation candidate dies before the time for circumcision, or after death it is discovered that the dead had dodged *imbalu*. It is abominable, in the Bagisu thoughts for a man to be buried without being circumcised as it would constitute a disequilibrium in the journey of life. The victim may be refused to be welcomed by the ancestral spirits, and may therefore affect the rebirth. Therefore, as part of the burial rituals of the Bagisu people, a corpse of the diseased male person is ritually examined to authenticate that the dead was circumcised during his life-time, and if found uncircumcised, the appropriate circumcision rituals are carried out.

4. PANDEMICS AND THEIR EFFECT ON IMBALU RITUALS

Pandemics like HIV/AIDS and Covid-19 have had devastating impact on the African modes of life. Various studies made have testified how these pandemics and related diseases have impact on the ritual life of Africans South of the Sahara. To begin with, pandemics present a paradox that the ritual life the people, which is characteristic of their cultural history and essence, is the cofactor in the spread of the diseases (Sovran 2013, Airhihenbuwa, Ford, and Iwelunmor 2014, Huremović 2019, Ngwainmbi and Manda 2023), and that their persistence undermines scientific efforts to manage the pandemics (Jaja, Anyanwu, and Iwu Jaja 2020, Khosa-Nkatini and White 2021). Several scholarships have demonstrated how HIV/AIDS destabilized ritual life of Africans (Ayikukwei et al. 2008, Dilger 2006, Sackey 2001).

The same is with Covid-19 (Omonisi 2020, Botes et al. 2024), and how it subjected Africans to unfamiliar living codenamed new normal (Dlamini-Myeni 2022).

The core argument in this paper is that HIV/AIDs and Covid-19 affected the *imbalu* ritual practices, which resulted into the copying strategies and reconceptualization of what it means to be a man. To begin with, HIV/AIDs affected the ritual life in the way that, initiates could no longer be circumcised by one knife. This was to avoid the mixing of blood, which initially would cement social ties akin to the ritual of blood brotherhood. This transformation was premised on the reality that HIV/AIDS is transferred through blood transfusions. The initiate may be infected with the HIV/AIDS from an infected peer when the same knife is used. The symbolic idea and imaginations of sameness as based on the same knife in defining the relationship with Bamakochi become challenged. Every initiate has to be circumcised by a different knife. This means that the traditional surgeon has to have a bag of knives, enough for the day of circumcision, and also carry sanitizing measures to ensure that the knives are disinfected for use. The guild of Bamakochi is very important in defining masculinity among the Bagisu. A real man must have a guild of peers who are socially bonded to him in a complex relationship. The Bamakochi constitutes that guild in the case of Bagisu, and they are the priority guests at every function. A man's status in society is valued on the basis of how he relates with his Bamakochi. With the absence of the common knife, the ritual blood bond between the initiates is removed, leaving the concept of Bamakochi to mere mental imagination than blood bond.

Furthermore, it is HIV/AIDs has called for responsible sexual if. It is no longer safe for men to live a careless sexual life in an attempt to exploit and reinforce their manhood. HIV/AIDs, which is transmitted through sexual contact and conduct with infected people has killed so many circumcised men. Therefore, the idea that *imbalu* (penis) is meant for sexual exploits has had to be rethought in the context of HIV/AIDS. Coupled with other global challenges especially money economy and climate changes which have resulted into poverty and scarcity of food; it is no longer manly enough to have so many wives and children as a way of proving manhood.

Perhaps Covid-19 was the most devastating blow to the *imbalu* rituals. The preventive approaches to the spread of Covid-19 destabilized the social aspects in the *imbalu* rituals. As noted earlier, *imbalu* is a social and communal ritual. It is a community affair, which draws various actors who include clan leaders, morale boosters, singers, dancers, relatives and other spectators. Covid-19 with its social distancing motif destabilized the communality of the ritual. Initiates of the year 2020 were the most affected following the country wide lockdown. The Covid-19 national task force and Ministry of Health prescribed the copying up mechanisms in order control the Covid-19 spread. Public gatherings were outlawed and events were securitized. The *imbalu* ritual events of drawing people together were stopped. So many *imbalu* candidates either postponed the initiation or chose alternative means of circumcision without detailed appropriation of *imbalu* rituals. The deviant attempts by the Bagisu people to practice *imbalu* rituals against government directives resulted into skirmishes with the security organs. For instance, against the government position that outlawed public gatherings, a group of *imbalu* ritual diehards wanted to hold an inaugural ceremony at Mutoto ceremonial ground in Mbale defiantly. This resulted into clashes with the Uganda police, who sprayed the ground with teargas and rattling of live bullets (Newvision Aug 12, 2020, Masongole and Kitunzi 2020). The ceremonial ritual ground was profaned with teargas instead of the ritual smock of sacrificial meat to the gods and ancestral spirits of the land. There were other similar scuffles, as residents of Bududa district, for instance clashed with police in defiance to the SOP orders that stopped public gatherings (<https://www.independent.co.ug/police-deploys-in-bududa-ahead-of-imbalu-cultural-ceremony/>; <https://ugandaradionetwork.net/story/ldus-deployed-in-bududa-to-enforce-covid-19-directives-?districtId=506>). The spiritual and cultural agony unleashed by Covid-19 on the *imbalu* culture was appalling. The Bagisu were told to adapt a *scientific circumcision*, which was not in consonance with the cultural norms. Scientific circumcision required that the circumcision candidate either goes to the hospital for a medical operation, or avoids the grounds and take circumcision from a controlled place. This to some Bagisu was not *imbalu* because, although it involves the act of circumcision, the candidate is not initiated according to the demeanor of the Bagisu people. The spiritual aspects involved in the transition to manhood were not involved, which signified a distorting impact in the cultural and spiritual life of the Bagisu. According to James Kangala, one of the opinion leaders among the Bagisu, the traditional *imbalu* dictates that boys must go through vigorous trainings before they face the knife. This grooms them to become brave men capable of facing the world at all costs" (Wambede 2020). However, given the developments, as Isaac Nazeba laments "our ancestors must be

wailing when they see what is happening to our *imbalu*. Our sacred ritual has been diluted. It is now turning into a practice of mere cutting of the foreskin of the penis. This is a total disgrace” (Wambede 2020). Relating the *imbalu* to ancestral connection is not accidental. Real men, in the traditional understanding join the legion of ancestors when they die. It is only initiated men who are welcomed by the ancestors according to the Bagisu people. This is the philosophy which informs the circumcision of bodies of dead men, as mentioned earlier.

By and large, the cultural institution did neither postponed the activity nor gave clear guidelines on the progression of the *imbalu* rituals in 2020. Apart from not participating in the arrangements for the aborted inauguration ceremony at Mutoto cultural center, the cultural institution did not give clear regulatory guidelines in the *Imbalu* in resonance with the government directives. This ambivalence may have been a technical move on the side of the cultural institution. Caught in a catch 22 situation, the cultural institution leadership either risked offending the central government or risk the wrath of their cultural subjects. Individual candidates and families were left at large to take on personal and family decisions to circumcise privately and calmly or join the defiant groups. The ambivalence demonstrated by the cultural leadership, it can be argued, is a precursor to the ambiguities surrounding the construct of manhood in the global setting more so amidst prevailing circumstances of pandemics. Some initiates interviewed, lamented for having missed the opportunity to show themselves to the world. They said that they were ready to go the way of their ancestors to manhood but the standard operation laws stopped them. The way of their ancestors meant participating in all the rituals which ranged from pre-circumcision preparations to post-circumcision preparations. A common song sung during the *imbalu* rituals is that: *shetta omwana affine Baba-we* (circumcise a child to be like his father) may not denote the biological father but ancestry. It is in this spirit that as part of the rituals, initiates are led in a ritualistic procession of visiting graveyards of departed male ancestors. Visiting these graves serve to embolden the initiate but also to firm solidarity with the living dead—who were men that faced *imbalu*. They were the men in society, whom the initiates are being prepared to replace. An initiate has to resemble his ancestors. In the works of Ngugi Wa Thiongo, a female character called Muthoni disobeyed his father’s newly attained Christian doctrines that portrayed the Kikuyu cultural practice of circumcision as evil. She got circumcised in a ritual ceremony, which eventually caused her life. On her sick bed she said: “Waiyaki, tell Nyambura I see Jesus and I am woman, beautiful in the tribe.” In the olden days, Kikuyu girls would be initiated into womanhood through initiation ritual which involved circumcision. Muthoni, who had been forbidden from circumcising by her father, disobeyed her father’s orders that were preventing her to become a woman. In her assertion, while dying, Muthoni was proud that she is joining her ancestors as a woman, and her tribe, which apparently included the living dead honors her as beautiful.

In this regard, scientific or medical circumcision is nothing less than just surgery and not manhood in the traditional sense of the Bagisu people. An initiate who stood firm in the face of *imbalu* was celebrated and gifted for bringing *honour* to the family. He is gifted with land and cattle, in preparation for family life. He is a family hero, and the pride of his father and the crown of his clan. In this respect a son who would pop-up when circumcised in the non-familiar ways and places like hospitals in the case of medicalized circumcision was disowned by his family. He was also not allotted ancestral properties (especially land), and was never entrusted with family responsibilities. He is an embarrassment to his ancestors and fathers in the clan. The ancestral spirits would at liberty disown such a child, because he remains foreign and not introduced to them through appropriate *imbalu* initiation rituals. In society, such a son is not a man but a coward, womanly and weak because they have not demonstrated bravery; and a great humiliation to his father’s blood bonded guild of Bamakochi.

The pandemics, generally speaking altered the traditional status of initiates as men. They caused a spiritual disconnection from the traditions of their ancestors, and may have caused a spiritual disequilibrium. In specific terms, HIV/AIDS with regard to separation of knives to control the transfusion of blood between initiates loosened that blood knit relationship between the Bamakochi. It translated the conceptualization of masculinity from a common identity to an individual experience. It is no longer a common experience felt through the same knife. The concept of Bamakochi therefore changed expression from this experience to just a theoretic concept. It is no-wonder, the Bamakochi today may not exercise much authority over the errand members of their age-set.

Similarly, COVID-19 distorted the Bagisu conceptualization of manhood in several ways. According to the ministry of Healthy protocols, annex 5 (MOH 2020) and other international guidelines (Finegan

et al. 2020, ICRC 2020), Covid-19 death guidelines prevented the Bagisu from inspecting the dead body to ascertain that the dead was circumcised in order to carry out the appropriate rituals. In the event that it was discovered that the dead was uncircumcised, appropriate rituals to circumcise the dead body would be carried out. In this state, it is possible that those who died without being circumcised were buried as boys, and not as men. Furthermore, the protocols prevented gatherings and communal participation in the *imbale* rituals. These protocols were reinforced by the government measures of securitizing society and dispersing errant members who wanted to break the presidential directives.

In view of these restrictions, some respondents who were asked about the Bagisu masculinity were to opine on whether people who were circumcised during Covid-19 are short of Bagisu masculinity conceptualization. Some informants seemed to suggest that the choice of circumcision was occasioned by the health circumstances, which people didn't choose. While they were ready to face the ritual, covid-19 hit them. It was not any form of cowardice. In such a way, they are men, especially for those who never took the medical circumcision, but bore the pain of the bare knife by the local surgeon, under customized customary conditions. Specifically, Umukuka, the cultural head of the Bagisu informed this study that "Prevailing circumstances have dictated beyond culture and there's nothing we can do or change; we cannot argue or estimate the weight of a natural calamity. In times of crisis, customary laws have to be subject to national laws especially when it concerns people's welfare (December, 20th 2020). Cornelius Wekunya, one of the renown anthropologists and celebrated writer on Bagisu people in an interview wondered whether the ethnic initiator of the *Imbalu* ritual, who is said to be ancestor Masaba, ever underwent all these detailed rituals that occupy individuals and families the entire year or several months of the year. To Wekunya, "as long as the initiate is to prove bravery, no matter the audience, and in absence of detailed ritual protocols, he qualifies to be a man. The Covid-19 is a serious disease which easily exterminate the whole community. People have to be very careful."

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS.

In view of the above, the conceptualization of *imbalu* and infact manhood is now a fluidic matter. While there is a section of Bamasaba that think that the absence of detailed rituals reduces *imbalu* to mere cutting, and robs the ritual of its ancestral underpinnings, there are some who reason differently. To the latter group, bravery does not mean facing death irrationally, when it can be avoided. To this group, the concept of manhood is to be alive. One needs to be alive in order to be a man. "A dead person is not a man, and cannot support society" adds Wekunya. In order to be relevant today one has to be alive and supportive to others. In line with this category of the Bagisu, we personally think that heroic connotations associated ritual aspects of *imbalu* are not only displayed through a public show of bravery to the pain, because in the context of modernity the narrative of heroism has changed from the pre-colonial paradigms. Heroism is to protect life of oneself and others. In this way, it can be argued that pandemic prevention protocols in the context of *imbalu* have transformed a brave and fearless man to a careful man. A real man in these days is one who prevents the spread of pandemics like HIV/AIDS and Covid-19. The kind of protection needed in homes, clans and tribes has transformed from the warrior fighting statures to contemporary laws and security organs. *Imbalu* as a means of initiating and recruiting brave warrior like elites to defend their land, families and clans may no longer serve the purpose. This is not to suggest its abolition but to suggest that globalization has brought many opportunities and challenges which serve as focal lenses through which culture can be viewed. In the same way, globalization presents new epistemological frameworks within which the Bagisu people can reevaluate what it means to be a man.

It is pleasing to note, as we conclude this paper that *imbalu* today is listed as tourist feat in Bugisu by the Uganda tourism board. *Imbalu* has been recently recognized as a separate tour product by Uganda tourism board. Tourists visiting mount Elgon national park fluke a chance to experience the unforgettable unique Bamasaba culture. Many people time this season to travel to the region not to miss on the mysterious ceremony and bring in income for the cultural institution. This has added to the different rituals and strengthened on the performances to rightly sell it as a tourist attraction. J, Musila said that great plans are underway to improve on the running of the cultural institution. He said that the cultural board has an acquisition of 20 acres of land and has a huge plan to build a magnificent cultural dome for the cultural institution. This will enable the smooth organization of the cultural house, promote order and take tourism and the related cultural activities to another level. Additionally, the Ugandan government, is in promotion of cultural institutions as a way of governing the nation. Lots of monies are released by the government to facilitate the cultural activities of the cultural institutions. President Museveni in his speech at the inauguration of *Imbalu* in the year 2022, emphasized government support

for cultural institutions through establishment of museums and upgrading of cultural sites to attract foreign revenue. Hon Martin Mugara Bahinduka revealed a plan for a Zoo in Mbale city which will cover 60 acres of land with an investment of 22billion shillings. In the 2024 3rd August launch, Hon John Mulimba state Minister for foreign affairs who represented president Museveni said that *Imbalu* is a timeless tradition that will continue to unite Bamasaba for generations to come. The president supported the cultural house financially and argued Cultural leaders to eliminate outdated cultural practices, to foster economic growth through science. This all strengthens the cultural house to maintain and boost its cultural activities to meet the current need and demand. In view of these, we opine that, the ritual details which subject initiates to danger like sharing of the knives, and mammoth grounds should be avoided in the face of danger. Pandemics and other related viral diseases are a reality in the globalized society. The viruses are spread in different ways depending on their nature. Although HIV/AIDS and Covid-19 seem to be managed through vaccinations and relevant protocols, other virus are emerging like Ebola, Marburg, without discounting ever continuing variants of Covid-19 are increasing.

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