

# The History and Culture of Buyobo

(including the impact of the Women's  
Microfinance Initiative Loan Program)

compiled and edited by

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### **About John Finch**

John Finch ([john\\_finch@verizon.net](mailto:john_finch@verizon.net)) is an anthropologist whose research interests include economic development, globalization, education, and migration. He has a Ph.D. from the City University of New York, and has done fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, the United States, and South Korea. He has published widely in academic journals and is currently working on a book manuscript about the importance of English language education for South Koreans. He is a lecturer in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at George Washington University

## **Background**

Buyobo is an administrative sub-county (gombolola) in Eastern Uganda near the Kenyan border on the slopes of Mount Elgon. Its inhabitants support themselves mostly by mixed farming. The main crops are bananas, maize, beans and cassava. They also raise cattle, goats, chickens and turkeys, along with a smaller number of sheep. In addition to basic subsistence farming, residents of Buyobo also grow coffee as a cash crop and engage in a variety of commercial activities connected with the nearby town of Mbale.

This manuscript is based on a series of fourteen interviews with sub-county residents conducted between 5 June and 17 June 2011. These interviews have been transcribed and edited in order to produce this short oral history. Apart from the headings, I have indicated any content that I have added by using a different font. The source for each passage is indicated by the initials in parentheses at the end of the passage.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The people whom I interviewed and their initials are as follows: Ambrose Masolo (AM), Allen Namarome (AN), Beth Womboza (BW), Gubi Alfred Wazemba (GAW), Gutaka Nelson (GN), Gudo Wilson Mazune (GWM), John Mashate (JM), Jackline Pheobe Namonye (JPN), Jesca Woniala (JW), Namonye Alex Choudry (NAC), Nambafu Jenipher (NJ), Nandudu Zebia (NZ), Olive Wolimbwa (OW), Rev. Canon Theophilus Kikoso (TK), Mzee Sekaniya Wajambuka (SW), Yekosan Woniala (YW), Wesamoyo Akazia (WA), Wolayo

## **I. Origins**

We are called Bamasaba, the children of Masaba. The man called Masaba who is our ancestor came from Ethiopia. We are all descended from him. He came into Uganda and settled on top of Mt. Elgon, and that is why we call that mountain Masaba. He married a woman, and produced three sons. Mwambu, then Muboya and then Wanyare. The people in the south, bordering Kenya, are called Babuya, the descendents of Mubuya. Mwambu is ancestor of the Bamasaba in the north. And then Wanyare, is ancestor of the central Bamasaba, around Mbale. In addition to the three sons, Masaba also had a daughter called Nambi, who went and married in Buganda.

Now Mwambu, who stayed here, gave birth to Muyobo, Walasi, Hugu and Masifwa. Muyobo founded Buyobo. Walasi founded Buwalasi over towards Mbale. Hugu founded Buhugu, the lower part of this area. Masifwa founded Bumasiywa which is towards Mt. Elgon.

We all speak Lumasaba. Lumasaba is a general language in Masaba-land, but there are different dialects.

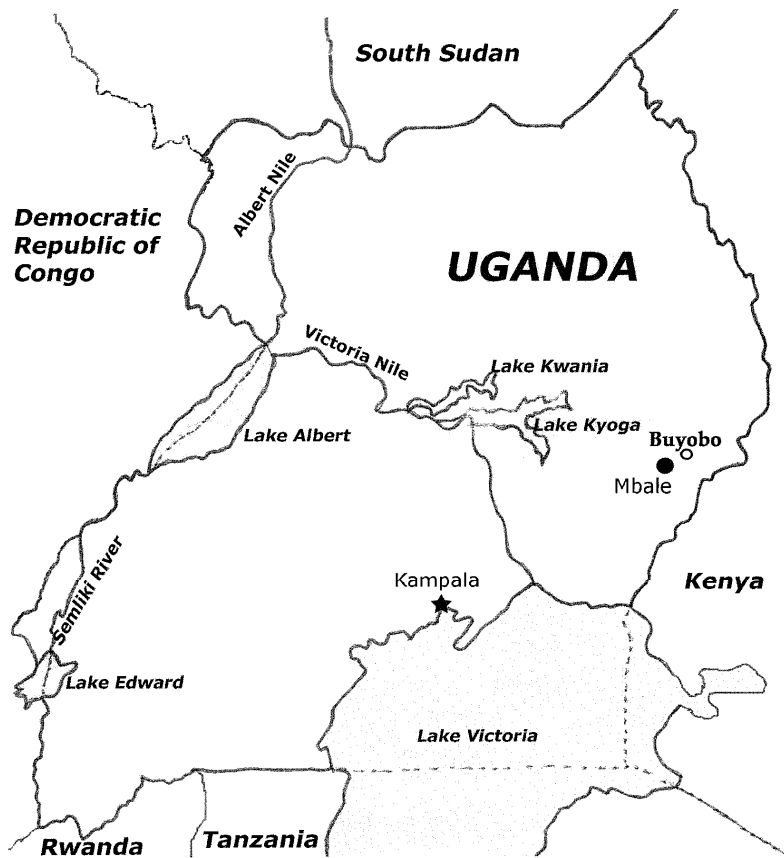
People nicknamed us Bagisu. This name did not come from within us, but it came from the place where our

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Kelenuka (WK), Wambedde Wodyemira Richard (WWR), & Wamboza Zadok (WZ).

forefathers came from. In the language of the Sebei, they call a bull “gisu.” In those years, those people used to keep bulls, and they used to have meeting places where they would take these bulls for fighting. Whoever had a very hard-working and very strong bull would win the fight. So those people of Sebei, named these people “Bagisu” because they fight like their bulls.

When Masaba started with his children, the original name was Bamasaba, not Bagisu. The other one was given by those people, because we are very rough, very fierce people like a bull. But according to Bagisu themselves, our founder is Masaba, and so we should be called Bamasaba.(TK WA GAW & WZ)



The Location of Buyobo in Uganda



## **II. Customs and Traditions**

### **Circumcision**

The most important tradition is the circumcision. We are, I think, at the top of the circumcision custom. It is the Bagisu here who have circumcision, and the Bamba, right across the country, in the western mountain ranges. It skips some people here and then it stretches down to Kenya, Bukusu and other nearby tribes, and covers the Kikuyu, the Kamba, and stretches down to South Africa. We have a center, the Masaba cultural figurehead, we call him Mumuyenga, and every two years, every even year, we have the circumcision. They are at Mutoto, a place just outside Mbale. That is supposed to be the center, where the first man was circumcised. And it has been going on for centuries.

As far as we remember, our grandfathers have been circumcising. It could probably have started from Israel. Because Masauba was said to have been a Jew. He could have been the high priest at the time of Zedekiah, when Nebuchadnezzar broke the Jewish state. And he traveled southwards, so that is how we get the name Masaba. And circumcision, probably, that could have been the beginning of it. (JM)

When a boy reached between the age of eighteen and twenty-two, he was circumcised and initiated into manhood. We have our local surgeons. They cut the foreskin, carefully. And I do not know whether it was God-given or what, because you find that these local surgeons know even the veins. They can identify that this is a vein, so they make the knife not to touch the vein. So I think it was God-given, I cannot talk much about it, because I do not know how they know.

The boy has got to keep quiet. He cannot make noise, because he wants to be initiated into manhood. Normally, they do not fear. They must stand the knife. For medicine, they used to get local herbs. In Lugisu, this herb was called imuku. It is a flowering plant. They would dry it, and burn it into ash, and use it to heal the wound of circumcision.

(WWR)

These are reasons why circumcision is very important, and why the community encourages that men should be circumcised: One, that as this foreskin, because it covers something which is inside, and that something which is inside, if somebody does not maintain good hygiene, becomes smelly. Then two, when that foreskin is there, it encourages the development of germs, and ends up causing other sicknesses. Then, another thing, circumcision also

creates unity for the community. Because we know that every even year, we, Bagisu, are going to converge for something we are sharing. Then it also shows maturity, because when somebody is circumcised, there is a way he is guided to fit in with the community. When you are circumcised, there is a way they can guide you and say you cannot misbehave like a child, and you become mature.(WZ)

### **Marriage**

When a boy was old enough to marry, it was the parents, especially the father, who identified the girl and then went to talk to the parents of that girl. “Yes, I have a son. We are interested in your daughter. Please, could you allow us to go ahead.”

If the parents of the daughter accepted, then the son would also go there and meet the girl, and her parents. Then, after talking to the boy, if the girl accepted, “Okay, I like him, I think it is okay. I accept,” the families would make arrangements for dowry [brideprice]. They would pay dowry: Three cows and three goats, and some small things, like a hoe, a panga, some salt, some sugar, meat, bread, things to please the parents.(WA)

Then the girl and some of her fellow girls, village-mates, escorted her to the boy’s home. They kept doing work there for some time, but the girl who was going to get

married did not eat certain types of food. On the final day, when the ceremony was arranged, they slaughtered a goat. She began eating together with the boy and they became married.(WK)

The tradition here was to pay five cows; recently it came down to three cows, because people did not have many cows around. So now it is the local government law in Bumasaaba that we pay three cows and three goats. That is traditional dowry or brideprice for a bride. It has even been enacted into the national laws, the laws of Uganda, that if you marry a Mugisu girl, you pay three cows and three goats. (WWR)

Children of today prefer choosing their partners themselves. They meet at school, talk to each other, and agree. Then the girl introduces the boy to her parents and the boy also introduces the girl to his parents. If they accept, they consent, and then they make arrangements for marriage and these gifts and so forth. That's the latest method of marrying. (WA)

The dowry is still there, but it is changing a bit. Women are arguing that this system should be abolished, this system of dowry. They want to call it a gift, not dowry. Because by paying dowry, it implies you are buying that girl. So they prefer gifts, so you do not have so much control, or

power over her, because it is a gift. If it is a dowry, you have more control over that woman. It looks as if you bought her, so you have extreme control. This is the thing women are arguing against. In parliament they are debating it. Women want it to be abolished. They do not want to be seen as bought by men. They prefer gifts.(WA)

Some men say, “Ah, I paid my cows, now you do this. Don’t you know that I spent my money on you?” But to educated families, it is not something which is so important. But these other rural men say, “Ah. You go and dig. Don’t you know that I paid my cows.” People say that, especially these men that are drunkards. After boozing, they can be blowhards.(OW)

[Since families no longer arrange marriages for their children, the introduction has become an important ceremony.] The boy and his relatives come to the girl’s family. The girl’s family prepares, and they sit and wait for their son-in-law. The girl introduces the boy to the parents, “This is somebody who is going to marry me.” They pay dowry, and decide that on the date for the wedding. Introduction is expensive. Wedding is expensive. When they see that it will be so expensive, sometimes after introduction people say, “let us go home.” Still they would be

married. But the wedding, is more official because you are going to sign a certificate.(OW)

### **Division of Labor between Men and Women**

[Men and women traditionally performed separate tasks]:

The women would do the housework, the cooking and all that. In the gardens, the men only slashed, so the women and the children were the ones to dig. Other roles, like building houses were for men, so was looking for the grass to thatch the houses. The women would also look for food in the gardens, like, for example cutting the bananas. Now it has changed, so sometimes the women also do what the men used to do. (WK)

[While men generally considered the division of labor to be fair]:

Well, the approach of my generation, and even in my father's time, was that we shared the labor, in as far as possible, equally. It is just her hoe on her shoulder and mine on my shoulder and we go to dig. (JM)

[Women often had a different perspective]:

They both dig? No, some of them sit. In the morning here, I think you see, boys around the shops there, seated. They're idle. But women, every morning, whether you are working or not, still you are going to the garden, doing

something, then back. Then going to these other jobs. It is like a command, every morning, you have to. But men, especially these ones who have businesses, can take two or three months without going to the garden. (OW)

### **Traditional Religion**

The traditional religion has disappeared in Buyobo, replaced by Christianity and Islam. People still talk about it, but there are no longer any followers.

Whenever there was a calamity, or a drought, or something bad, we would get a ram offering, slaughter him, and if there was a drought you would have rain. If it was a sickness, people would be healed, like the old times of Abraham.(JM)

People believed there were gods, especially the ancestors, those who died long ago. They believed that they had powers to do things. They would build a small hut in the back of their compound. And if they slaughtered a goat, they would cut a piece of meat, prepare it, roast it and put it there, hoping that this god, or ancestor would come to feast. If they slaughtered a cow, they would get a piece, roast it, put it there, and say, "We are feasting. We have slaughtered a cow. We are feasting. Please don't get annoyed. Here is your share."

I saw this being done in the neighborhood. Some of my neighbors were doing that, but in our home, in our family, we did not. We are Christians.

When a child was born, the child was named after one of the relatives. If your father was dead and you had a son, you would name the baby after your father. To confirm the name, after a period of about a year, or up to two years, you would prepare a ceremony. You would prepare millet and ripe bananas, and if it was a son, you would slaughter a he-goat, and call together people from both the side of the mother and the side of the father. They came together and ate and confirmed the name of that son.

And if it was a daughter, you would buy meat, cow's meat, and then some hens. And do the same. Ripe bananas and millet and you call people from both sides, the side of the mother and the side of the father. They ate together and confirmed that name. Today this ceremony is disappearing. But naming, we still name children after our ancestors. (WA)

### **Political Organization**

Among the Bagisu, the clans were not united. The only leaders were clan-leaders called "mguga." Leadership was not inherited, but each clan chose a senior man to be its leader and to organize his people. (YW)



When there were problems, that leader called the clan to come together to solve their problems. When they were going to fight, that leader had to ask other clans for assistance. The leader is there to educate the clan. Clan leaders are still very important, even the government recognizes it. (GN)

I am the leader of my clan. So when I see that people are trying to misbehave, or a family is disorganized, I have to go there and assist them. My work is to see that in my clan, that the children go to school, that they have enough food, that they behave well, and that they know the policies of the government.

The Bagisu did not have a king, because kings are too expensive. We do not feel happy giving something to a person who does not do anything. He has to at least play a part. A clan leader has a home, he has a farm, he has food, so when he wants to invite people, he is the one to entertain his people, rather than the community entertaining the leader.

It is more or less like in America, if you want to become a leader, at least be a well-off man. It is the same here with Bagisu. If you are to be a leader you have to be a person who can welcome the community; who can entertain them.

When you call them together, you have to know that you have got enough to feed the community. (GN)

### **III. Kakungulu and the Expansion of Government and Christianity (early 1900s)**

When the Europeans came, the British took over Uganda as a colony. They used indirect rule. The first people in Uganda to be in touch with the Europeans were the Baganda.<sup>2</sup> And they were used by the British to help them extend their colony. The Muganda leader who came here in the name of the British and started dividing the area for administrative purposes was Semei Kakungulu. He discovered that people were scattered in different places: Buyobo, Buwalasi, Buhugu, Bumasiwa. So those became sub-counties [gombolola]. Places settled by the sons of Masaba became counties. So Budadiri became a county and Moboya also became a county. In this Budadiri area, now the sons of Mwambu had settled in different places, so it was divided up into sub-counties. A different sub-county for each of the sons of Mwambu.

When Kakungulu arrived here, people were afraid of him. They thought he was coming to take over their land. So there was fighting between this Muganda and his forces and some of the Bagisu. Some of the Bagisu ran away towards

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<sup>2</sup> The Baganda and the Bamasaba (Bagisu) both speak Bantu languages. Bantu languages have a system of noun classes distinguished by their prefixes. An individual member of the Baganda tribe is a Muganda. Buganda is the territory of the Baganda people, and their language is Luganda.

Mt. Elgon. They fled from Kakungulu because he was a foreign invader in their land. He proclaimed, "I'm bringing peace. I want us to have peace." And those who understood his message remained. "Mulembe" means peace in the Luganda language. And it became our greeting, in our language today. It started with that Muganda. When he arrived, these Bagisu were fighting him, thinking that he was coming to take away our land. But he was saying, "Mulembe, mulembe, mulembe," so we took that to be our greeting.

Kakungulu and some of the people who had realized that he was not a bad man established their palace at a place called Bukieti. This became the county headquarters, and they also set up the church, side-by-side with the administration. Some of the ones who ran away, came back when they heard that there was peace. But others remained there, and up until now we have some of our clan members remaining over there. For example, this is Bulambuli, we have Bulambuli here and we also have Bulambuli on the other side. There is a new district there that is named Bulambuli. Those are the people who ran from here escaping Kakungulu and went, settling on the mountains, and they are still called Bulambuli.

After the headquarters were established, and they had divided the region into sub-counties, then in each sub-county, they also established churches. In Buyobo, then Buwalasi, then Buhugu, and Bumasiywa. So each sub-county had a sub-county chief and a church. And that is the expansion of both administration and the church. They were running together. That was in 1926.

Now Kakungulu started choosing some men from well-understanding families, and taking them to train them for leadership, both in the government and in the church. Some of them were trained to be administrative leaders, and some were trained to be church leaders. At first, they had come with people from Buganda who were doing the administrative work, but they pinpointed those they could train from within these areas, and they took over. So later on, those ones who were taken for training, were brought back, and people from within this place, were now the chiefs and the church leaders. (GAW)

#### **IV. The Protectorate (1900s to 1962)**

The first European missionary here was Father Lyding, a Catholic from Holland. Father Lyding constructed two churches. There is one up here called Bugunzu, then another one across on this hill at Bugalabi. Both are good churches. Then he went up to Budadiri, where he founded another big church for the Catholics. Father Lyding was followed by Bishop McGattan of the Anglican Church. Bishop McGattan did not build any churches this way. He settled in central Mbale, where the cathedral church was constructed. They moved around preaching the Gospel, rather than building churches.(YW)

The missionaries started by teaching us to read the scriptures. Then they taught us to learn how to write, and by the early thirties people were literate. By that time, they had a skeleton of helpers. People were able to help the missionaries, and they were also able to help the government. (JM)

In 1940, the Anglicans started Buyobo Primary School next to the church that was already there. At first it offered classes from primary one to primary four, and classes were held under the trees. It was going very well in the 1940s, but up until the 1950s there were still very few children who went on to secondary school. (JM)

In 1962, the local MP [Member of Parliament], who came from Buyobo, organized the construction of classrooms for the new Buyobo Primary School. They built classrooms for P1 to P6 and then junior one. That was through the efforts of the MP. Those buildings are still there. Schools also started opening in other places within the sub-county: Buminsa School; then Bugunzu School, affiliated on the Catholic Church, Buteza School, affiliated with the Anglican church; and Bulambuli School was started as Buyobo Muslim, affiliated with the mosque. (GAW)

The Muslims had a problem because there were two factions: Those who came from North, and those who came from South. So when they were here, everyone was disagreeing. Each was working on his own, and there was no unity. They acted like enemies, and it caused them to lag in education.

Two or three years after independence, the parliament said that all the church schools should be under the government. Be it Muslim, Anglican, or Roman Catholic all schools must be run by the government. That changed everything, and they also reassigned teachers so the schools would be non-denominational. (TK)

There was a famine here in about 1910, when my father was a young man. People had to uproot banana

suckers and made their roots into powder to eat. The famine was called navalinda. There was also another famine later on. That was called navalero. Then they were so short of meat that they soaked dry hides until they are soft, and they cooked them to eat. (JM)

The missionaries introduced coffee and cotton as cash crops. We had nothing special to sell and get money before that. Indians were brought to Uganda to build the railway and they stayed on to become traders. Up until independence most trading was done by the Indians. We brought our coffee to sell to them. (GN)

The road through Buyobo was built early during the Colonial period. At first, it was not well-built like this one now. It was just like a wide path. My grandfather used to tell me about this road. People used to come and work on the road, voluntarily. Because there was a tax, and if you could not pay the tax, you could come and work on the road. Some people ran away because they could not pay the tax. The tax was only sixty shillings, but if you could not pay, you had to run away. (YW)

During those years the economy was very low, because the only thing that we used to produce was coffee, and the price was very low. One could not even afford to put up a building. We used to live in grass-thatched houses.



Gradually things began to change. In 1953, coffee was selling at one shilling and fifty cents per pound. That was when people started building houses.

I remember the first car around our place here. It was a very big lorry which cost only thirty thousand shillings. That means that by that time, the economy had just started coming in slowly like that, only because of coffee. Prices turned down in 1954, when Brazil produced a lot of coffee. A pound of coffee was then about one shilling and twenty cents.

This is when a European called Cooper who was the agricultural officer, came and sensitized the coffee producers to the importance of forming and registering their groups. He said that after registering, you can sell your coffee for a higher price. So people started forming and registering their groups. They called them cooperative societies. Then the price came up to one shilling and seventy cents. When people were getting higher prices, some of them started putting up buildings with iron roofs. So things developed like that. And in 1956, they formed the Bugisu Cooperative Union to help market their coffee. (YW)

Power lines came through Buyobo in 1956, but at first people were afraid of electricity, because there were signs saying, "Danger, Hatari." People said, "No, we are not going

to use the electricity in our houses, because it is dangerous.” Only recently have people started requesting electricity. (YW)

There was one old man near our place here, who has since passed away. When the white man came with the cable and wanted to install electricity, the man said, “No, no, no. We shall not accept it. This electricity is coming to destroy our bananas, so we do not want it. We shall lack food because of electricity.” (JPM)

Even here, my grandfather, my own grandfather refused. He said, “No. Do not install electricity in your houses. Your house will be burned. You can see that there is danger there. Written here, “Danger, hatari.” “ So we have gone many years without using electricity. It is only just recently become widely used.

Few Bagisu joined the army during the Protectorate. They said, “We grow coffee, we have a lot of money, why should we go to army,” so they neglected to join the army. The people, such as the Teso, who live further north, are warriors so the army attracted them. And on top of that, we, on this side, are a little bit short. Those people are taller than us. The system required that to enter any armed forces, you must be at least six feet five inches. So our people could not join the army. (YW)

## **V. Independence (1962)**

I remember when we achieved independence. I was there, 1962, ninth October. People celebrated. They were very happy to get independence. After independence, the government which brought independence started to look into the foreign people, for example, the District Commissioners, the agricultural officers, the veterinary officers who were Europeans. They said, "let us start training our own manpower." They started replacing agricultural officers, slowly by slowly. After they trained one up to a degree in agriculture, they said to the European, "My friend, could you leave the place," and when he left, then they put in a black man. They went on like that until they had filled every the position with an African.

I was with a European called Keene, and one called Smyth. They were in agriculture. Prior to our independence, Smyth said, "No, I'm not going to work under an African." He went. And then Keene, he also went in 1964. (WY)

## **VI. The Regime of Idi Amin (1971-1979)**

At the time of independence there were two strong parties, UPC, Uganda People's Congress, and DP, Democratic Party. At first, DP was popular within Buyobo, but after UPC won, in the 1962 election, then the majority of people changed to support UPC. We still think highly of UPC in Buyobo.

I started with the UPC government as a youth leader. I was a youth mobilizer. We got training, and after training I became a youth leader. The UPC government wanted to help the youth, to unite them. They got financial support from America, and they constructed community centers in each sub-county. I worked in community development, and we built some centers, like this one, the building up next to the bank in Buyobo. That is the community center. We constructed buildings in each sub-county where the youth could come: sort of a recreation place where they could gather together.

The government wanted to bring the youth together to train them so they could serve their own country. They trained them in the community building. Every evening, maybe every afternoon, they would come together. They taught them that they had to work to help their areas: Voluntary work to help, maybe making roads, maybe

hospitals or dispensaries, constructing buildings for the orphans and widows. That was the target for the government, to bring the youth together and then teach them that they have to help other people. That was during the UPC government, before Amin came in. That is what I was doing.

In Buyobo, in my department there was a group that was recognized for cultural entertainment. We were recommended by the President, and during Amin's regime, our group went to represent Uganda in Malawi. We performed music, dance and drumming. We have drumming during our circumcision ceremonies. There is drumming, while they move around with the candidates to be circumcised.

We were under the National Uganda Youth Organization (NUYO) when we participating in this cultural entertainment group. Now, when Amin came in, he realized that these strategies had been made by Obote, the former leader, and he refused to go along with them because they had been started by the former president. The people who were deep in these organizations were hunted by Amin, and some were killed. Some escaped and went into exile. They also hunted for me, but I left all government activity and

came back home. I stayed as an ordinary farmer and also joined the church, as a lay leader.

When Amin came in he destroyed most of the things that had been started by UPC. In each community center, they had put a TV set, and a radio, and machines that can make the blocks for constructing buildings, and so when Amin's government came in, it destroyed all these things. The TVs were taken back, and these machines were destroyed. They did not want this strategy to continue. So they ended most of the developments that the former government had started. They had planned to have a recreation hall in every parish. But during Amin's regime, there was no further development. The community roads that had been started also were blocked. The cooperative societies that had started, that were now doing very well, were stopped. It was a very big loss to the people, and during Amin's regime there was a shortage of many things. (GAW)

John Mashate recounted his experiences as a member of Uganda's post-independence elite: In 1959, when I joined Barclays Bank, independence was coming here, and those who were bright did the institute of bankers' degrees. At that time the politicians were agitating to see more black faces in the bank. They said, "We want

more Africans. You're promoted." So they accelerated our training. That is how I was able to come up so fast.

I left Barclays Bank in 1967. When the Uganda government decided to make the Uganda Credit and Savings Bank a fully fledged commercial bank, they did not have personnel to manage that system: with the checks and letters of credit and that complicated commercial banking, so they advertised for people in other commercial banks to come and join and take up this. And so I jumped from the bank.

I joined the Uganda Commercial Bank, and at the time Amin overthrew the government, I was regional manager, Lira Branch. (President Obote's place, north of here.) I joined in 1967, and by 1972, I was pretty senior. Now when Amin took over the government, he really did disrupt a lot of families and a lot of jobs. Many people went into exile, for their safety, those people who were educated, or who were enemies of the government. Well, I do not think we were truly enemies, but the guys who came into power did not know anything about literacy. They were the type of fellows who were not anybody in the society. When they were wielding power, they harassed us, so I had to abandon my job, after nine years of service. I stayed here for a year after he took over, and then when things became nasty, I had to

go into exile. I spent seven years in exile in Kenya. When I came back, I found that many things had changed. Those who were my juniors had gone up high: “Mzee,<sup>3</sup> you trained me, where can I put you now?” I could see their problem.

We had a very rough time. Amin advocated that the Africans should take charge of their commerce, and he apportioned the type of trade for the foreigners. The Europeans and Americans were encouraged to manage industries. He mapped out some streets and said some of these should be for the retailers. It was not very popular with the business community, but I believe it was well intentioned, in that the government wanted the Africans to also have a bit of a share in the commerce. Obote wanted to do it piecemeal so that it did not disrupt the system. If the Africans could get used to retail trade, graduate to wholesale, and then venture into industries; it would have had a good system to hand over the change and the development. But Amin got excited, you know. Right in the middle of it he said, “Everyone pack up and go.” That created a big chaos. (JM)

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<sup>3</sup> Mzee is a respectful way to address an elder (from Swahili).



Amin's government was bad and it made the Indians suffer a lot.<sup>4</sup> When he expelled them, he gave them only a few days so they suffered. But on the other hand, he forced us to join business. He forced Africans to join trading, he forced Africans to go into the town. Those are the two things for which I would thank him: He forced the Africans to join business, and he forced we Ugandans to go into the town. The town should not be only for Europeans or Indians, you should be there. You should learn from the foreigners. (GN)

A lot of industries closed down, because people who took them over did not have the knowledge to run them. Very few of them really recovered. There was also this harassment of the civil service. His regime came in, and they did not like those people in high places. They thought they were having it too nice. A lot of people were killed, and a lot more people went into exile, and therefore caused a vacuum in the civil service. That is how, I would say, this place was affected, all the population everywhere. You had good professionals running, even doctors and teachers running away. So the commodities were run out, general services declined and there was poverty actually. It was tough. (JM)

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<sup>4</sup> In August 1972, the 55,000 members of Uganda's Indian community were ordered to leave the country within 90 days by President Idi Amin.

There was no way to market coffee here, so people carried it on their heads from here to Kenya. I did not go myself, but I gave coffee to others to take for me. You could not even buy salt. There was no salt, no sugar, paraffin, or soap. It was very hard. So people would go to Kenya, walk, take some four days to a week, buy some of these items, then come back. That was during Amin's regime, and how we have suffered during that time. (GAW)

When Amin came in, he wanted everyone to become Islamic. And if you were not a Muslim, you could not buy anything from the shop. Things like soap, salt, or sugar were only available to the Muslims. In 1978, when I saw things were becoming harder, I changed and became a Muslim. So I was able to get sugar, salt and soap. If you were not a Muslim, you could not get these things. That is why I became a Muslim, and when Amin left, I changed back.(NZ)

Amin appointed Muslims as chiefs, so that they could convert people to Islam. There was a man called Yunisu who was a chief here. He resigned peaceably, after Amin was gone, and he is still living here. (GWM)

Many people were killed by Amin's regime. They come and abduct someone. Tomorrow, you hear that they have just dropped him somewhere. The dead body is there. They

killed Nandala, a secretary general in Mbale, and Wayisi, the president of the Bugisu Coffee Union, and a supporter of Obote's government. Those army boys chased down these people. These people believed in UPC, so they were to be killed. Every one. (GWM)

They killed many people here. They killed Wangoda, the owner of that house next to the bank. He was a businessman, he had a car, and he had a shop. Amin's people did not like those people who had things, or were rich. They just came and killed you because you have money. (AN)

[The poverty and violence of Idi Amin's time made a vivid impression on people who were children at the time.]

**Allen recalled:** I was still young, but I used to see people passing. They passed near our place. I was born in Manafwa District, and people used to pass our home carrying the coffee they were taking to Kenya. When they were coming back, the soldiers used to chase them, and they used to take away those things that they brought from Kenya. So people suffered. I was young, but I can remember.

**Jackline said:** We used to use one plate. There were three of us, and they put the food on one plate. People had

some little money, but there was nothing to buy in the shops. That was Amin's regime.

**Alex remembered:** When I was growing up, I heard gunshots: my first time to hear a gunshot. They killed some people at that trading center down there. That place was a forest of Eucalyptus trees, and they killed some people during Amin's regime in that area. For them, you just kill every opponent.

## **VII. The Government of Yoweri Museveni (1986-present)**

After Amin had been toppled, life started coming back to the country. When the first government was formed after the fall of Amin, Dani Nabudere, who was the first professor from Bugisu and who lives in Buyobo, became the Minister of Justice. And when Obote came back, and they were organizing the 1980 elections, the Democratic Party, wanted Nabudere, to stand as the flag bearer of DP. But when he came back to Buyobo to consult, people here said, “We do not want that. We do not want you to go deep into politics.”

During the 1980 elections, Museveni was the flag bearer of UPM, the Uganda People’s Movement, but his campaign failed and he went to the bush to fight against the government. Obote won and became president for the second time. The military toppled Obote in 1985, in January 1986 Museveni had the chance to come in, and take over the government. (GAW)

Generally, Museveni is good, and he is a strong leader. He has managed the Army. Those people, Obote, Amin, and Tito Okello<sup>5</sup> could not. They were just in the hands of

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<sup>5</sup> Tito Okello led the coup d'état that ousted president Milton Obote in 1985. He served as President of Uganda for six months until January 1986, when Yoweri Museveni took control.

the army. So we like Museveni because he has kept the army in check. People used to fear when an army man comes here, because he can just slap you and kill you and go. But now, when an army man comes, he greets humbly and leaves you in peace. Museveni has done a lot. His type of administration is good. He has helped in the peace sector. And because of the peace he has brought in, people are now developing.

Museveni brought in the system of Resistance Committees. It was RC at first, then after five years and he changed it to LC, Local Councils. For the Local Councils, he counted every village. You are to mobilize yourselves in a group of nine on the council. (AM)

Villages make a local council, elect their own members, then they converge on the parish, they also elect the Parish Council, up to the sub-county, and up to the district, like that. So that was a change which came in here during Museveni's regime. People appreciate it, because it brings administration back home. Because the leaders are elected from within, down to the grassroots, Museveni's administration has helped solve some of the problems within communities. You can discuss issues such as domestic violence. (JPN)

## **VIII. Village Organizations**

### **The AIDS Support Organization**

In 1994, after AIDS had started, I coordinated with the TASSO [The AIDS Support Organization] group in Mbale. They started a branch called the Bulambuli AIDS initiative and I became a counselor in that. We helped widows and orphans and counseled others about the stigma of HIV, and how they should do the prevention measures. (GAW)

### **Buyobo Buteza Community Development Association**

The idea of having an association started in 1993 with my late brother George. He was then working at Kampala, and we thought about what we could do in memory of our late father. We thought of two things: starting a health center for women; and starting a maize mill. We had those two things, and when my brother came this way we discussed them. He also discussed it with our sister Edith who is now in America. They decided that we should look for a way of starting a dispensary for treating women and small children.

In 1994, my brother heard that there were some funds that the American Embassy was giving out to those who are developing something for the community. He wrote to request funds to start the health center, but he was not

successful. Still we kept on with that idea of starting a health center.

At the beginning of the 2000s, our sister, who had by then gone to America, was worshipping in a church, called the Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. She had friends there who were interested in women's health. One was called Joy Panagides, another one Bonnie Holcomb. So in 2003, these people came this way and did some research. It took about three months to do the research about women and children. Then they found out that a clinic was needed in Buyobo.

Our friends from Bradley Hills suggested we could start a Village Health Team (VHT) to go and educate children about health, so a village health team was formed with assistance provided by our friends in the church. The members of the team go in the villages and teach about sanitation and what not. It is still very active.

At the same time we were also asking our friends to assist us with the maize mill. Maize is one of the chief foods here. There was a man, a gentleman called John Shepherd, who worked for the World Bank, and he encouraged us to start a maize mill around here. So these friends of ours managed to get a diesel engine for us, and they also gave us some assistance to put up that building which is behind



there. Then our friends saw that diesel would be too expensive, so they went to their friends, collected some more assistance, and bought a transformer for us. We also managed to get the machine itself. They bought us a motor and there are also many things that the association itself bought. We appreciate what our friends have done for our community here, but for us it all started with our own voluntary work. We just do things to assist the community.

About the same time, we formed the widows association, inside our association here. We had a big group of women who had lost their husbands. They saw that if they were together and there is a problem, it could be solved easier. If a widow had a child at school these people could collect things for her and assist their friend. So we wanted to encourage them like that.

My sister's daughter, June Kyakobye, sent her friend, Robyn Nietert, from America to see our widows here. When she came, she found that ladies in Africa here, they are not the same with people in your area at all. The environment does not allow our women to do a certain part in their homes.

They found that our women here depend too much on men. The children are in the hands of men. They came and they taught us that women should also take part. They

should at least know how to take part in their families. The husband takes part, and the wife also takes part. They encouraged us and encouraged more women to join the widows association.

We still have our idea for a health center. We joined with our friend who had started a health center up there near the school, but later on he let us down. He handed over the building to the government. At this stage it is not enough for the community. But even if the government runs it up there, we want to fulfill our vision. We want to have a clinic for women. We want to see that women are well treated. And these small children are dying because the treatment is not good for us here in the community. So because my sister is a nurse, I want to work together with her and build one, even if it is small, like this building, so we can assist the women. With the government, the medicine sometimes is not enough. You find that dispensaries are without drugs. So even if it is there, I want to fulfill that idea of having a health center here for children and for women.

The maize mill is working. Except, one problem that I have seen with it is that we do not make a profit; because when you put in ten kilograms, the power starts working, and the calculation starts. By the time you finish, what you get

from the person who has got ten kilograms is not as high as the cost of the power.

So there is a problem getting a profit when you are helping the community. You do not get any, unless, if you have money, and you buy your own maize. With about a hundred kilograms, a full lorry, then you take it either to the schools, or sell to the shops. There you can get some profit.(GN)

### **Bulambuli Widows Association**

We started Bulambuli Widows in 2006 with a group of twenty widows. We met every week. Every Saturday we contributed to one widow to support her family. BBCDA said to us, since you are already organized, you can join our association, so we are under BBCDA. They obtained a grant for us from the Bradley Hills Church in America, and we bought sewing machines, fabric and some furniture to start a trading project. Then we started sewing uniforms for local school children.

The aim of forming the group was to reduce poverty. As a widow, you work single-handedly, you are the mother, you are the father, everything is on you. I was the chairperson. I said, "Ladies now, if we continue crying, or talking, this and this, how are we going to support the

families? Let us come together and raise some little money to support our families.”

So we pushed on like that. Out of the fabric we had some little profit. And at Christmas we gave each family a kilogram of rice, and a kilogram of meat, out of our profit. We continued like that through 2007, when June and Robyn came up with the idea of microfinance. So we negotiated how much interest, how much this is, until we agreed. In 2008, Robyn, June, Montana Stevenson, and Victoria Stevenson, came, and started training women, a group of twenty women. Many of them were from the widows group, but because some widows shied away, and Robyn wanted a cluster of twenty, [the blue group] we added in other women who were not widows to make the twenty.

We were given those loans, and they performed well. When they finished well, another group, the red group, joined. In fact we went on like that, until now we are six hundred. Everyone was requesting to join the program, so we needed to off load some groups. Now, the pioneers, the blue and the red groups, are already off loaded. They are the ones whom we call independent borrowers [now transitioned to customers of Post Bank Uganda].

The name has remained Bulambuli Widows because microfinance came through Bulambuli Widows. In fact,

some people have asked, “You mean all these women who get loans here are widows? What happened in Buyobo to get so many widows in the same place?” But it is because of the twenty widows, the pioneers.

Now, because of lack of space, the sewing machines are not being used. Some are here, and two are in my place. The fabric and the uniforms are in my place, so we hope that when our new building is finished, we can take back our machines, bring all the fabric to one place and then continue. We still have some money in the account of Bulambuli Widows. (OW)

**John:** Did the Bulambuli widows know each other from church or just from the locality?

**Olive:** From the locality, because some of them were Christians, some were Muslims.

### **Women’s Microfinance Initiative**

The impact that WMI has had in the area is deep, big. Firstly, children, now never sleep without food, never sleep without getting a cup of tea, which was common before. Women were just waiting for their husbands to go out, work, buy sugar, buy salt, so that they could bring it home. And if the husband came back without sugar, that meant that the whole household would not have tea that evening. But now that these women have been given small loans, they go out,

trade, and they come back with what they need. That is instead of going to the neighbor and begging for sugar. WMI has cleansed it. It never happens anymore. Going out begging for a match box, it is not there. Most women are now able to buy sugar, to buy salt, to buy match boxes, and clothing for themselves and their children. Secondly, they are now able to educate their children. They are also contributing. The father brings, the mother also brings, and they send the child to school, which was a rare case in the community. Finally, we are hearing that women are buying small plots of land, out of WMI money, which is really very good. That is the big impact that we are having with WMI. (JPN)

Up until now, in some areas, everything in the home belonged to the husband. A woman did not possess any money. It all belonged to the husband. And the husband bought whatever was bought for the home. Women just depended on their husbands: No soap, no sugar, no rice, no what, they just wait for the father. “Will you wait for your father. He is about to come. Wait for your father.” So they went without tea when the husband was not around.

It is not the case any more, whether the husband is there or not there, because the woman is doing a business. She can go to the shop and buy something for the family.

The only women who had some money were these ones with jobs. At the end of the month, they got a salary. But for these other rural woman, all money belonged to the man.

The community has welcomed the program. It has made a very big impact, women now own businesses, they own money, and they also have bargaining power. They are now respected in the community. Because when you have money, people respect you, but when you do not have money, you do not know how you will be treated. So women are proud, very proud of this program. So there is a very big impact. Women are now well-dressed. They are supporting their families. Children no longer sit at home because of lack of school fees. Now the woman contributes and the husband contributes, and they support their children to go to school.

With WMI before you are given a loan, you must undergo two or three days of training. Our borrowers know, “a customer is my boss, so I have to respect whoever it is, whether a child, whether an old woman, whether mad, a customer is my boss.”

We also train borrowers about how to do bookkeeping: because when you spend this money blindly, you cannot know whether you are making a profit or not. You end up

finishing the money without knowing where the money is going. But when you record, you find out, “I had fifty thousand, I have used seventy, I am going to get problems.” And you stop.

**John:** When you were doing the sewing for the Bulambuli Widows Association, did you do bookkeeping?

**Olive:** Before? No, anything to do with bookkeeping was useless to us. But Robyn came herself with these others and they trained us: “You people you have to write.” We learned, “Okay, so it is important.” We started practicing it and now have seen that it is very, very important.

This program has also enabled women to save. When we are teaching them during the training, we tell them, “you must save.” That money is going to assist you in an emergency. It is going to assist you to pay fees, cover sickness and whatever. Also at the end of the program, the end of the loan, you will have something. You can use these savings to buy, maybe a cow, or something for the family. If you do not save, you do not qualify to get a loan. So one is forced to save as they repay their loan. There was a lady in Buteza last time who had 250,000 [\$100 US] in her savings



account. But at least borrowers had about a hundred thousand, or eighty thousand. Not zero.

What helps our borrowers to pay well are the incentives. First of all there are the solidarity groups. In a group of twenty, we want you to be in sets of five. That means that for twenty members, you have four groups.

And when a member is absent: You say, "Where is Olive today?"

"Ah, ah, Olive is sick." "No, her child is sick." "Maybe she lost somebody."

That one can deliver the news, and "But how do we assist her?"

Maybe, "Let us contribute for her." Maybe the money is delayed on the way.

So that brings members together. They love one another and they cooperate. They solve that and you find that each time the recovery rate has been a hundred percent.

In a cluster of twenty, you find they make their own arrangements, and say, "Whenever you come to pay a loan, bring an extra one thousand shillings to give to one person." So while they are paying loans, they are collecting the one thousand shillings. And when a member has less than she owes, maybe by ten or twenty thousand, they use this

money which they brought to top off for her. If they see that they have all paid well, they can go back with that money and use it at home.

WMI is also succeeding because our members are given an appreciation gift. After the first loan the best five savers are given a lamp. And when we come to transition, every member who is joining the transition program is given a clothes iron. Every member is given a tote bag, and we give them calculators. And for the group leaders, when you are joining the transition, we give you a kettle as an appreciation for organizing the group.

Each cluster of twenty elects a chairperson. Those big people sit on their table and wait for, "Who has not come?" Each group organizes themselves, they make their own collections. So we appreciate the chairperson by giving her a kettle. That is not done by any financial institution in Uganda. It is not there. They only get money from you, but you are not given anything back. The money which we use for buying for them gifts is out of the interest--ten percent interest.

We say, "Thank-you for paying the loan. Thank you for being with us. You also get this." So WMI is succeeding because of that.

No microfinance can even give you a jerrycan, instead they milk from you, but now this program has come in the community, and on top of giving loans, they constructed a school building for us. That building cost thirty-five million [\$14,400 US], not including the paint. Now the girls [the U.S. interns] are putting on the paint. The labor and whatever, if you are to value it, would also cost a million plus. Our women also contributed five thousand each. The contribution from the women is what we are going to use to put the roughcast on the outside.

Now that women are taking on loans, some of them are working together with their husbands, they solve their problems without going to their neighbors, so husbands appreciate the WMI program.

I always give the example of Joyce in Buweri. Joyce, at first was afraid to take a loan of a hundred thousand [\$40 US]. “How will I pay back? All that money. How am I to get a profit?”

But when she got the money, she worked hard. She paid it all back, and said, “This time give me three hundred thousand.”

And with the three hundred, “What, I paid well and finished?” Up to five hundred. Now up to one million.

With the three hundred, she bought pigs, and, as you know, pigs deliver so many piglets. She had profit from the pigs, and paid the loan well, so she started buying chicks also. She told me she found herself having thirty hens in her home, and the pigs, and the business is moving on well.

She sold some of the piglets, and bought a motorcycle. Right now the motorcycle is bringing in some money. I understand, twelve thousand per day. And she is now dealing in second-hand clothes, and the poultry and whatever is at home being looked after by her husband.

This is somebody who started from a hundred thousand.

**John:** One thing, I wonder about, is that walking along the road, I see that people who have fancy houses are people whose business or whatever their source of income was, came from far away. I wonder if a local business can be successful enough to build that kind of house.

**Olive:** It can. And we have one. There is a woman in red group. She is Prisca Mafabi. In January, we were here and she gave a testimony. That woman also started with three hundred thousand. She has a grocery at Sonoli, and her husband runs a produce shop, selling beans, maize and

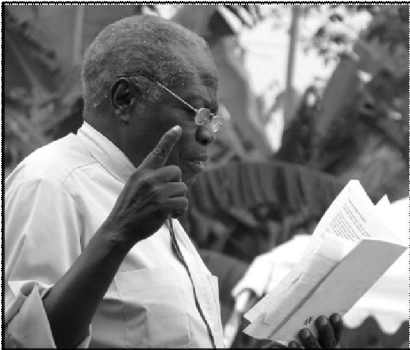
coffee. I understand they had a competition. Every evening, the husband is supposed to save three thousand. And when the wife comes also, "Where is yours? Mine is here." Every day.

At the end of the year, they had one point two million. When they looked in their business, there was some money in the business. They bought a motorcycle also. The business is continuing, and they started constructing a permanent house near Sonoli. It is not yet plastered. It has two rooms, and a sitting room. It is a small house, but permanent, and it is from this program.

## People of Buyobo



Olive Wolimbwa, Local Director of  
Women's Microfinance Initiative  
(Photo by: *Robyn Nietert*)

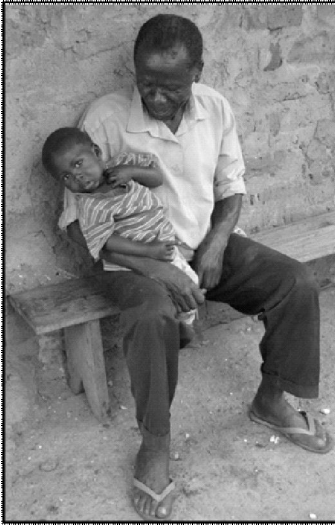


Reverend Theophilus Kikoso  
(Photo by: *Robyn Nietert*)



Jenipher Nambafu  
(Photo by: *Ainsley Morris*)

All photos courtesy of Women's Microfinance Initiative (WMI)



Nelson Gutaka with his grandson.  
(Photo by: *Montana Stevenson*)



Jackline Namonye  
(Photo by: *John Finch*)



Allen Namarome and  
Ambrose Masolo.  
(Photo by: *Colleen Rossier*)



Akazia Wesamoyo.  
(Photo by: *Robyn Nietert*)

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