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Yakani Spirit in the Making of Spirituality and Social Order among the Lugbara of Uganda

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This was a historical study of the Yakani spirit among the Lugbara people of West Nile in Northwestern Uganda. The Yakani Spirit and cult continues to take a central position in the history and identity of the Lugbara of Uganda. Despite modernisation and Christianity, Yakani continues to thrive among the Lugbara people. The Yakani spirit played, and continues to play a critical role in the making of the Lugbara social order through the colonial period to the present. The objectives of the study included to: a) Trace the origin of Yakani spirit among the Lugbara; b) Explore the Lugbara perception on the concept of Yakani Spirit among the Lugbara people of North-Western Uganda, c) investigate the Yakani cult practice among the Lugbara and d) examine the extent to which Yakani spirit practice constituted a revolution during the colonial period. The key finding indicated that Yakani was a tool for fighting colonial rule, a transitional justice mechanism, and a means of healing the land. Yakani spirit and cult constituted a revolution and provided a cultural worldview of the Lugbara cosmological understanding of good and evil and the interconnectedness between the spiritual and physical worlds.

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INTRODUCTION

The Yakani Spirit has been a key aspect of the Lugbara history and identity in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period. Ritskes, (2011) noted that, spirituality is the collective “connection with self, connection to one’s community, connection to history, and connection to a higher power or larger framework. It is through this connectivity that spiritual power is constructed and spiritual resistance is empowered and without it, spirituality falls prey of individualism and relativism (Ritskes, 2011, p. 15). Yakani has been seen in both positive and negative light. The Lugbara regarded it as a weapon used in the anti-colonial struggle and a tool for maintaining indigenous law and order in the society. From the colonial and Christian missionary perspective, it was considered a cult, devilish and criminalised. Hence, it was “not a subject spontaneously brought up in conversation with Europeans”. One colonial administrator, J. H. Driberg, who wrote an account of Yakani in 1931, played a key role in the suppression of the cult among the Lugbara (Middleton, 1963, p. 80). This paper approaches the Yakani spirit from the broader historical context of colonialism in Uganda, and spirituality and identity among the Lugbara in the post-colonial era. The main argument is that the Yakani spirit played a critical role in the making of the Lugbara from the time of foreign invasion to the present. However, it was a complex historical phenomenon with an intricate impact on the colonial and post-colonial Lugbara society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design to explore the Lugbara people's values, beliefs, perceptions, and experiences concerning the Yakani Spirit and its role in sustaining indigenous social order (Kumar, 2018). Specifically, a historical and ethno-historical research approach was adopted to collect, verify, analyze, and synthesize data from archival sources, oral traditions, and eyewitness accounts

about the Yakani Spirit from 1914 to 2024 (Krech, 1991, p. 349). The retrospective historical research method helped contextualize the emergence of social disorder and the Yakani Spirit’s function as a restorative mechanism among the Lugbara during this time frame. This method emphasized the reference period to trace the historical progression of the Yakani Spirit's role through pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras (Kumar, 2018).

The research recognized the historian's task as engaging in a social process, involving individuals and historical methods to reconstruct the past (Carr, 1990, p. 55). Key historical sources included archival records, written documents, oral traditions, and oral histories. These sources allowed the researcher to engage with individuals and families directly involved with or witnesses to Yakani Spirit practices. Oral tradition, or *adi nzeza* in Lugbara, was especially critical in understanding the pre-colonial and colonial eras and was transmitted verbally across generations (Vansina, 1985, p. 1; Atkinson, 2010, pp. 23–25).

However, the study acknowledged limitations inherent in oral traditions. Atkinson (2010, p. 27) cautioned that oral history does not directly present the past but rather the remnants that persist into the present. Among the Lugbara, history is preserved in memory and recounted by elders, typically during funerals, marriage ceremonies, or conflict resolution events, often by a designated clan orator with notable storytelling ability (Field interviews: Amaga, 2014; Ondoma, 2014). Oral tradition served as a crucial source for understanding indigenous Lugbara law and social norms, bearing what Vansina (2006, p. 8) described as “a kernel of historical truth.”

Despite its value, the method faced challenges, including memory lapses among elderly participants and conflicting narratives influenced by clan loyalties or personal agendas. To address these limitations, the study implemented triangulation strategies—cross-verifying oral accounts with

written sources and comparing testimonies across different participants, focus groups, and documents to ensure validity, reliability, and authenticity.

Purposive sampling was employed to select knowledgeable participants, including clan elders, leaders of the Lugbara cultural institution (Kari Lugbara), and elderly men and women familiar with colonial-era Yakani Spirit practices. Intellectuals, civil servants (both active and retired), politicians, women, youth, former convicts, and crime victims were also included due to their potential insights. Participants were identified through snowball sampling and networking. As this was a qualitative historical study, a non-statistical sampling method was used. Saturation was achieved at 67 participants when no new significant information emerged. This comprehensive methodology allowed for an in-depth understanding of the Yakani Spirit as a traditional mechanism for maintaining social order among the Lugbara across different historical periods.

In adherence to ethical standards, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they fully understood the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any stage. Cultural sensitivity was a central consideration; the researcher made deliberate efforts to respect the beliefs and practices of the Lugbara people, avoiding any actions that could cause harm or offense. Community engagement was maintained throughout the research process, with findings shared and community input sought in the interpretation of results. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were safeguarded through the anonymization of data and secure data storage. Finally, data were systematically grouped, coded, and analyzed in alignment with the research objectives and emerging themes: a). The concept Yakani Spirit among the Lugbara, b). the origin of the Yakani cult, c). role of the Yakani spirit in restoring order in Lugbara-land and beyond, d). the O'dupi Rebellion and its effect on the Lugbara and

e) the continuity of the Yakani cult in the contemporary Lugbara land.

Background to the Lugbara People

Who are the Lugbara?

The Lugbara are a Sudanic-speaking people of north-western Uganda and the north-eastern Congo. They are classified as members of the Moru-Ma'di sub-group of the Eastern Sudanic group (Agatha, 2016, p. 1; Middleton, 1963, p. 80; Shiroya, 1981, p. 125). The Lugbara Sudanic speakers belong to the Chari-Nile languages, who Greenberg classified as members of the Moru-Ma'di sub group of Eastern Central Sudanic group (Greenberg, 1981, pp. 292–308; Agatha, 2016, p. 1). Joseph H. Greenberg uses genetic classification to derive the source of language in the absence of direct, written or historical record which is still relevant to African linguistic classification (Greenberg, 1996, p. 526). They are ethnically related to the Ma'di of Moyo and Adjumani districts; the Keliko and Logo people in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Avukaya, Moru, Lulu'ba and the Bari in South Sudan (Crazzolara, 1960, p. vi; Sutton, 1968a, pp. 70–97; Sutton, 1981, pp. 569–589; Shiroya, 1984; Atkinson, 2010, p. 62; Agatha, 2016, p. 1). The Lugbara live between 200 30' N. 300 30' E. and 300 30' N. 310 30' E (Latitude 2.5°N and 3.5°N and Longitude 30.9°E and 31.5°E). The territory extends from the bank of the Nile, about 50 miles north of Lake Albert, inland and westwards across the political boundary into the Democratic Republic of Congo (Prothero, 1920, p. 3 & Crazzolara, 1960, p. v). They occupy the high plateau of the Nile-Congo Divide drained by major rivers Osu, Acha, Oru and Enyau, Ayii in Ayivu, Maracha and Terego, and rivers Kendra and Kochi in Aringa. The divide rises from about 4000 feet above sea level in the north, where Uganda, Congo and Sudan border meet, to over 6000 feet in the south. The mountains rise to a height of 7000 feet. The ranges extend eastward to the escarpment which divides the highland region of the watershed from the lowlands

of the Nile Valley, less than 2500 feet above sea level. The lowlands are occupied by the Ma'di. To the north, the escarpment ceases and the Lugbara occupy the low-lying Aringa plains that extend to the South Sudan border and to the south lies Alur land (Bright, 1910, p. 230, Middleton, 1965, p. 2).

The plateau is marked by three mountains: Mounts Liru to the north, Wati (Eti/Iti) in the central part and Luku to the south. Wilhelm Junker a Russo-German explorer and the first European to visit the West Nile in 1877, named the mountains after Romolo Gessi, General Charles Gordon and Sir Samuel Baker. Liru as Jebel Gessi, Wati his Jebel Gordon and Luku as Jebel Baker (Posnett, 1951, p. 171). Romolo Gessi was an Italian, who worked closely with General Charles Gordon under the authority of the Egyptian government, which was under British influence at the time. Romolo Gessi (1831–1881) played a key role in suppressing slave trade in the Sudan and for his expeditions in the Equatoria region of Africa. Romolo Gessi was sometimes referred to as Gessi Pasha after receiving the Ottoman title of Pasha for his service (Posnett, 1951). Sir Samuel White Baker (1821–1893) was a British explorer, officer, naturalist, and abolitionist renowned for his contributions to African exploration and his role in suppressing the slave trade in the Nile Basin (Julian Monroe Fisher, 2014).

The origin of the Lugbara is traced to Bari land in the modern-day Rejaf-Juba region in South Sudan. Between 1000 and 1500 AD, the Moru-Ma'di group displaced by the Lotuko and Bari invasions finally settled in the present-day Lugbara territory (Agatha, 2016, p. 1, & Shiroya, 1972). The ancestors of the Lugbara people might have arrived in their present homeland from 1600 AD to 1650 AD (Agatha, 2016, p. 1, Middleton, 1999; Shiroya, 1972, p. 23). Oral tradition among Ma'di of Moyo and Adjumani the first Moru-Ma'di arrivals in the present-day West Nile territory refer to the Lugbara, the later Moru-Ma'di migrants as *Luku bara*; meaning 'cousin'. This was used to explain the common

features in the Ma'di and Lugbara cultures as a pointer to a historical social relation.

The Lugbara ethnic group emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century after the migration and settlement of the Moru-Ma'di group of people in the present-day West Nile region of northwestern Uganda and the north-east Congo. The Lugbara ethnic group, is described as a hybrid ethnic society that evolved from the nineteenth century migrations, settlement and foreign contacts, emerging from a result of cultural unification and assimilation process, Shiroya described as the "Lugbara-isation" process which occurred between C.1790 and 1850 (Shiroya, 1972, pp. 23–34; Shiroya, 1981, p. 129; Shiroya, 1984, p. 28). They were simply referred to as Ma'di. However, their founding families are traced to the Ma'di.

In Uganda, the Lugbara are found in present-day Arua city, and the districts of Arua, Maracha, Terego and Yumbe and the three parishes of Paduba, Oliri and Angar in Kango Division in Zombo District. According to the National Population and Housing census of 2014 and 2025, the Lugbara population was 1,099,733 and 1,218,121 respectively (UBOS Report, 2016 & 2024). The Lugbara group in the Democratic Republic of Congo occupy the district of Aru in the Democratic Republic of Congo settling in the counties of Nyio, Ochoo (Otso), Luu, Zaki and Adranga (Ndema Haruna, Manuscript. nd.).

The Liru-Wati-Midigo area is important to the Lugbara because their hero-ancestors were finally settled and buried there. Jaki was buried on mount Liru and Banale on mount Wati. In the Liru-Wati-Midigo area, the three Lugbara divisions: Jaki, Banale and the Aringa had intermingled and practically fused into one cultural group. In short, the rest of Lugbara-land owes its culture foundations to the Liru-Wati-Midigo triangle heartland.

The next group of settlers to arrive in Lugbara-land belonged to the Jaki division of the Lugbara. The

Lugbara oral tradition, indicates that this group broke away from the 'Bari in Bahr el Ghazal in the Sudan'. Their hero-ancestor Jaki or Zaki, left Bariland in search of a new home, and he finally settled near Mount Liru around 1570. The third major Lugbara group was the Banale (Banyale in Lugbara Ayivu dialect) division which, according to Lugbara tradition, was the last to arrive in Lugbara land in about 1600 led by Banale; their hero-ancestor. Banale's father, Utere or Tere, originally lived in 'Moru in the Sudan', but later migrated following the River Nile and settled in the present-day western Acholi (Shiroya, 1981, p. 127). This migrations and settlements, and ethnic and historical connections were yet to have implications for the later spread of the Yakani spirit among the Kakwa and Lugbara people.

Yakani Spirit and Cult among the Lugbara

The Yakani Spirit is a significant concept among the Lugbara people of North-Western Uganda, tied deeply to their traditional religion, cosmology, and moral values. The Lugbara believe in a relationship between spirituality and social order. This relationship is embedded in the Lugbara indigenous knowledge and meta-physics. Adebua and Olekua noted that Yakani is a spirit; but a bad spirit and does not have a physical body. This paper argues that Yakani continues to exist as a spiritual being and its existence takes the representational form such as piles of smooth stones, short sticks, whirl wind and its effects on the possessed person. Whereas Yakani had been used to define the Lugbara identity in the colonial period, its beliefs, practices and use have changed over the three historical periods: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. Religion becomes the channel through which social order is enacted. Middleton a colonial anthropologist, considered the Yakani spirit a cult (Middleton, 1963, p. 80).

Mika, (2019) argues that indigenous philosophy is considered the poor cousin of dominant western thought and, it is completely invisible or reduced to

something unphilosophical. Indigenous philosophy often shows itself in the form of ceremony or as a mystical garnish to an empirical explanation but not as a credible, theoretical base in its own right, in the formal discipline of philosophy. This is because, the metaphysics is not prominent in a setting that encourages more self-evident modes of description; and the fact that indigenous philosophy requires talk of metaphysics and a holistic. This opens directly onto a massive, colonial rupture between the indigenous self in an embodied and spiritual sense and dominant western thought. Being a colonial issue that becomes counter-colonial in indigenous philosophy, other thoughts resent indigenous metaphysics of holism and manifest resentfully in the space being considered (Mika, 2019, p. 110). When discussing Yakani, we must think about it in the 'thought-beyond-the-visible' (Mika, 2019, p.112). Indigenous metaphysics such as Yakani, encounters some difficulties from the very outset in the academia as it has not been privileged, and having sometimes been disregarded by more mainstream western philosophers. This lack of understanding evolves from the fact that indigenous philosophy rests on those fundamental principles that cannot be proven. Indigenous philosophers have often been asked to verify that the world is interconnected. The historical dominance of Western theorizing is being challenged at a very fundamental level of relevance to the Indigenous peoples (Mika, 2019, p.115).

Adopting Girma (2013) approach, this paper uses "ethnicity as a way of formulating new narratives, rather than one overarching narrative, devoid of metaphysics" (Girma, 2013, p. 84). It argues that indigenous metaphysics such as that of the Yakani spirit and cult is contextual to a people within a geographical scope. Creating one overarching narrative could result into an epistemic violence to indigenous metaphysics. To relegate indigenous meta-physics, colonialism used individualisation, futurism and secularisation. "Individualisation is seen as a helpful tool for formulating moral and

political rights and obligations while futurism, coupled with rationality, is used to bring about relentless progress. Secularisation, on the other hand, is a mechanism that prevents any possible relapse into traditional religious dogmatism” (Girma, 2013, p. 85). The key question remains, what is Yakani?

According to Middleton, among the Lugbara; Yakani has been referred to by different names including: Yakan, Yakani, Yakag or Yakanye. Yakani meant traditional religion and was a spirit taking possession of a person and causing disease (Middleton, 1963, p. 80). It was later closely associated to traditional religion. People grew into it acquiring a participatory knowledge of it and trying to fulfil it experientially and the practical religious knowledge was not a product of any formal teaching (Dalfovo, 2001, p. 34). “It appeared among the Lugbara at the end of the nineteenth century, and the cult was centred upon the drinking of sacred or magic water. The Uganda Administration became aware of it during the First World War, when there was considerable unrest which culminated in affrays in 1919 and 1920; it was known to the Administration as the Allah Water Cult. It is still in existence among the Lugbara today, although in a different form, as one of several spirit cults” (Middleton, 1963, p. 80). Dalfovo (2001) noted that, “religion provides a mythical model on which the behaviour of the people belonging to the same ethnic unit, the way to till the soil, the architecture of buildings, dance steps, kinship system, the political organisation, the gestures of the sexual embrace have to be fashioned” (Dalfovo, 2001, p. 35).

Ramponi (1937) asserts that Yakani is “a rite under the direct control of the diviner, and it is believed to offer protection against the evil eye. A few small stones, placed on top of one another in a slipshod manner, go to form it. Nearby there is an ant hill. As usual, offerings are made on it, and one of the general things offered is dry fish” (Ramponi, 1937, p. 860).

Origin of the Yakani Cult

Oral tradition among the Lugbara and colonial anthropological sources noted that Yakani came from the Sudan, from the water of Allah also considered “The holy water” (Ramponi, 1937, p. 860). Rembe, a Kakwa, was associated with the Yakani cult centered on the distribution of a miraculous water from which the name “Allah Water Cult” originated (Dalfovo, 2001, p. 32). It appeared among the Lugbara at the end of the nineteenth century, and the cult was centred upon the drinking of sacred or magic water (Middleton, 1963, p. 80).

McConnell (1925) noted that the Allah water cult is stated to have begun among the Dinka, a Nilotic tribe of the Sudan. It then spread into Uganda, following the route followed by Emin Pasha's troops. It was believed that those who drank of the water developed irresistible strength, and became invincible to guns and spears. This belief gave unity and confidence to the ethnic communities fighting, leading to many overwhelming successes against the Nubi, the Turkish and Persian Dervishes and amongst themselves, which were attributed to the Allah (holy) water. The Uganda mutiny of 1898 was due to this cult having spread among the Nubi troops who at the time had felt their grievances acutely. While at battle, the Lugbara leader would hold the Yakani bowl filled with the Allah water and a branch of the inzu a local tree (McConnell, 1925, p. 464).

Historical records and oral tradition trace the origin of the Yakani Water Cult to the Agar Dinka revolt in South Sudan. According to Middleton, Fadl el-Mula Murjan's record showed that in 1883, the Agar Dinka revolted, attacking the garrison at Rumbek, killing eight hundred troops after having drunk the ‘Allah Water’. The Dinka, after the revolt, sold the Allah Water to the Bari claiming it would make them invulnerable to attacks by government forces. Chief Magoro of Mondo (Mundu) who had obtained Allah Water from the Dinka supplied it to

his subjects to drink and purportedly repulsed the Nubi attack. Avukaya, having been promised that the water would make the people invulnerable to Nubi spears and guns, bought the Allah water. Similarly, the Moro, Pajelu and Nambara followed and acquired the water. These ethnic groups having acquired the water, formed a combined force to wage successful wars against the most powerful societies (Wills, 1887, pp. 288–289; Driberg, 1931, p. 413; Middleton, 1963, p. 84; Middleton, 1971b, pp. 180–186). About 1890, Lagoro a Kakwa obtained the water from chief Magoro and later Rembe, a Kakwa and son of Achu (Lado) from the Yidu clan obtained it from Lagoro. In about 1891 or 1892 Anziku a Lugbara from Bileafe in Terego visited Rembe and his father in Kakwa land. He obtained the Yakani Water and passed some over to Mba of Terego. Mba passed it to Kamure of Offude Alarapi clan in Maracha, who passed it to Adia of Terego, and Njenje and Boroa of Omugo all of whom were appointed chiefs (Middleton, 1963, p. 84).

The Yakani Water was believed to provide immunity from death by disease, restore ancestors to life, and resurrect the dead cattle. It was further believed it provided immunity against the government if they disobeyed its orders and refuse to pay taxes. It was also believed that it provided immunity against government rifles. The belief was that government rifles would only fire water instead of bullets, and the drinkers would receive rifles after practising with reed rifles. The Yakani Movement prohibited the cultivation of grain. It was believed that individuals who had refused to drink the water would become termites when they died. Yakani movement was, therefore a socio-political revolutionary movement directed against both foreign and native domination (Driberg, 1931, p. 419).

Following Emin Pasha's withdrawal from Wadelai, four companies of troops were left under Fadl el-Mula Bey. In 1889, Fadl el-Mula Bey dispatched a patrol of eighty men inland towards Terego where

they were defeated by the Lugbara who attributed their victory to drinking Allah Water dispensed by Taaka of Biliafe. Only one Lugbara had been injured in the clash. Similarly, an avenging patrol from Wadelai was wiped off at Aupi on the eastern side of Mount Wati. No Lugbara was injured as the Equatorial troops lost sixty men and an officer (Driberg, 1931, p. 414; Middleton, 1963, pp. 84–85). In 1892, following the use of the magic water, the Lugbara were able to defeat two patrols of Sudanese forces in a battle at Wadelai along the Nile Banks after the departure of Emin Pasha. The Sudanese suffered heavy losses while the Lugbara almost none (Driberg, 1931, p. 414; Middleton, 1971a, pp. 13–14).

Between 1912 and 1913, Rembe a self-styled prophet entered Lugbara territory at Ole'ba, crossing through Maracha and Oluvu into Western Terego. At Ole'ba he fixed a pole from an indigenous tree called *Kuzu* around which rites were performed. He named it dini (Arabic word for religion). At the top of the pole was placed a branch of an indigenous tree species called inzu. The tree branches were later used in all rites and ceremonies. Rembe had a snake oracle called Dede in a pool at Ajebi in Ole'ba. Similarly, Yendu who was Rembe's assistant and successor had a powerful oracle he called acife. He performed his oracle by rubbing the stick oracles. He also had a powerful oracle called enyiriko (skin or leather) made up of strips of hide which he threw out before him. Historically the Lugbara neither had Yakani nor acife. It was common practice among the Kakwa and Gimara of Rigbo and Envipi on the Nile (Middleton, 1963, p. 89).

According to Driberg (1931), the Yakani movement was active among the Nubi remnants of Emin Pasha who had been brought to Masindi by Major Preston. They had acquired the knowledge of Yakani water at the time of the Mahdist revolt which occurred in the Sudan from 1891-1898. It was carried to Masindi and administered by one Corporal Lemini Marjuk living in Gulu by 1919. From Masindi it

spread to Kampala and Entebbe. In Busoga, it developed most strongly among the forces in Number Fourteen Company (Driberg, 1931, pp. 414–416). The Nubi are believed to be the descendants of former slave soldiers from southern Sudan who came into what is now Uganda in the late 1880s under the command of a German-born officer known as Emin Pasha, Governor of Sudan's Equatorial Province at the time of the Mahdi's Islamic uprising. It was these soldiers, taken on by Frederick Lugard of the Imperial British East Africa Company, who formed the core of the forces used to carve out, not just Uganda, but much of Britain's East Africa (Leopold, 2006, p. 180).

Coloniality and Crisis: Restoring Order in Lugbara-Land and Beyond

In the late 19th century, Lugbara-land, Yakani Spirit was considered as a means and tool to restore social, political and economic order. The countryside was characterised by disturbances by the slave traders, ivory poachers, the Mahdist rebellion and Emin Pasha's soldiers' invasion, and the Belgian and British colonialist activities. Key among the foreign invaders were the two groups of Arab slavers, the first arrival known as the Tukuria or Kuturia Arabs (c.1841-1868), and the second group; the Wolo-Wolo or Jahadia. They came principally for slaves and cattle. They brought with them the Nubian and Bari black attendants. The Tukuria and Jahadia Arab invaders attacked villages and raided cattle, women and children as slaves who were taken into the Sudan. The Arabs marked the captives' cheeks by making three deep vertical cuts on each cheek for easy identification. The slaves were forced to carry heavy loads including ivory and Rhino teeth (Leopold, 2006, p. 184; Geria, 1973, pp. 80-81).

Junker (1887, 1890), reported that the first contact between the people of what was to become West Nile and outsiders was a group of raiding Arab slavers from the (Turco-Egyptian) Sudan, around the middle of the nineteenth century. This resulted in social and economic disorder and violence as a

tripartite trade in people, guns and ivory developed, and armed raiding of homesteads and abduction of local people was set, and continued in the next 150 years (Junker, 1887, p. 401; Junker, 1890, pp. 460–468). The Italian ivory trader Giovanni Miani arrived in March 1860, with Andrea de Bono and established an ivory station at the east bank of the Nile at Faloro opposite the present-day Rhino Camp (Gregory, 1901, pp. 209–210; Perham, 1956, pp. 174–176; Perham & Bull, 1959, p. 210).

By the Uganda Order in Council, 1902 Section 1(1), the West Nile District was created. This Order in Council defined the limits of the territories constituting the Uganda Protectorate referred to as “Uganda” or “the Protectorate” (Uganda Protectorate, 1951, p. 82). Section 6(1b) of the Proclamation empowered the Protectorate Governor, to “divide those territories into provinces or districts in such a manner and with such subdivisions as may be convenient for the purpose of administration, describing the boundaries thereof and assigning names thereto” (Uganda Protectorate, 1951, p. 84). By this Order in Council, the West Nile District was created. On April 21, 1914, the territory was ceded to the Uganda Protectorate (Leopold, 2006, p. 187, Acemah, 2013). In June 1914, Arua became the centre of a British administration premised on an extractive design, whereby the West Nile region served as a ‘labour reserve’, providing labour for plantations in Southern Uganda, and colonial armies (Storer, 2025, p. 117).

As the West Nile District came under effective British Colonial administration, a Native Administration managed by chiefs appointed from the clan heads or persons with local authority was established. They enforced law and order, administered justice in the native courts, mobilized labour for public works and assessed, and collected taxes among others (Hailey, 1951, p. 1; Morris & Read, 1966, p. 35).

The new British District Commissioner of West Nile, A. E. Weatherhead, who arrived in 1914, only

began to try to collect taxes in 1917. This process met with some opposition, forcing him to remove the local chiefs most of whom had been appointed by the Belgian and Sudanese administrations. He replaced them with Nubians loyal to the British. In 1920, he placed the Lugbara as a whole under the rule of a Nubian 'Agent', Fademulla Murjan of Aringa County, a post that was abolished in the late 1920s (Leopold, 2005). Fademulla Murjan was born around 1886. His father, a Bari speaker, was one of Emin Pasha's troops who settled in Aringa; his mother was a Lugbara woman (Leopold, 2006, p. 188). He had joined the ranks of the King's African Rifles (KAR) and was appointed Wakil of Romogi in 1916. Fademulla Ali Adu (Akutre Anyule) a Nubi who had made his first contact with the British officers in 1913 when the Sudanese-Uganda commission surveyed and demarcated the Sudan-Uganda boundary, was appointed chief of Aringa (Blake, 1997, p. 3; Leopold, 2006, p. 189).

Colonial and foreign presence was thought to have disrupted the people's everyday life, as it brought with it epidemic diseases including meningitis, smallpox and Spanish influenza and rinderpest disease to the area, which led to devastating mortality rates. This triggered discontent and anti-colonial agitation among the Lugbara people. To restore order, the Lugbara communities turned to indigenous religion and the Yakani Spirit and Allah water as a form of protection for the land. Though counteracted by British Protectorate forces, the movement gained prominence in the region and was driven underground. Yakani Spirituality and divinatory techniques provided a means for the Lugbara people to manage the crisis of sickness (Storer, 2025, p. 117).

The Yakani (O'dupi) Revolt 1919: A Cultic Movement or Revolution?

The Yakani rebellion was the first historical event that destabilised both the indigenous and colonial order among the Lugbara. It broke out in March 1919 (Uganda National Archive: Secretariat Minute

Paper No A46/1870). Like the Maji-Maji insurrection of 1905-1907 in Tanganyika, the Yakani revolt was associated with the 'Allah Water' which was believed to provide protection against the European bullets and was said that no bullets but only water would come from the soldiers' guns (Koponen, 2010, pp.7, 20).

The prophet Rembe, who established the Yakani water cult among the Lugbara at the end of the 19th century, incorporated vast changes into their social system. The physical characteristics and notions associated with Rembe are usually defined by their inverted qualities which image disorder and evil. "Rembe is regarded as a semi-mythical figure, with the attributes of miraculous behaviour and other 'inverted' features of mythical personages" (Middleton, 1963, p. 91). Divination, spirit mediumship, dede ("grandmother"), snakeheads, and the power of Adro are directly related to Rembe (Casale, 1982, p. 394).

Rembe and his followers adopted the term 'Dini' (Swahili/Arabic word for religion) when they began to spread their new cult among the Lugbara at the end of the 19th century. His activity in Lugbara-land was particularly intense from about 1914 to 1920. They used to plant a pole as a symbolic reference of their religious activities, performing around it the rites of their new cult called "Yakani" or "Allah Water Cult." That pole was called *Dini* and here, too, the name stood as indicative of novelty and identity within this religious movement (Dalfovo, 2001, p. 32; Middleton, 1963, pp. 89, 96). The influence of the Yakani Movement spread throughout Maracha and Terego. In 1918, the District Commissioner, Weatherhead, was given notice of its existence as a threat to peace and order. Subsequently, in April 1919, there was an attack on the government police who had attempted to close a Yakani meeting at O'dupi in Terego. The Sub-County Chief (Wakil) called Olia and eleven police officers were killed in the skirmish between the native authority and the Yakani followers. The insurrection spread over to Maracha, Ole'ba and

Paranga in the western part of Lugbara territory. Weatherhead requested for reinforcement of troops from Masindi and the cult leaders were arrested. By 1920, the cult had appeared in Vurra among the southern Lugbara (Driberg, 1931, p. 415; Middleton, 1963, pp. 90-91, 93).

Most of the government chiefs in Maracha and Terego were implicated and tried and many were deported to Ankole until 1925. Chief Mba of Terego died in Ankole. Lesser offenders were fined cattle. Lagoro was arrested by the Sudan Administration at Loka and his shrine was destroyed. Rembe was arrested and executed at Yei (Middleton, 1963, p. 90). The Foreign Jurisdiction Act, 1890, relating to fugitive offenders or colonial prisoners and the 'Uganda Removal of Undesirable Natives (Amendment) Ordinance, 1916' derived from "The Uganda Deportation Ordinance, 1908" were used to suppress the revolt and apprehend the leaders. "These were people who were conducting themselves so as to be dangerous to the peace and good order of the Protectorate and are endeavouring to excite enmity between the people of the Protectorate and his Majesty" (Jenkyns, 1902, p. 185; National Archive, Uganda Protectorate Ordinance No. 2 of 1916).

Middleton described Rembe as a prophet, political leader and reformer who enjoyed power and prestige. Through the Yakani Movement, he attempted to rid the Lugbara of their traditional form of social organization, the segmentary lineage system, and also of the cult of the dead associated with it. He introduced a series of grades and appointed dispensers as chiefs. The Yakani Movement was open to both men and women regardless of age and clan affiliation. He promised them peace and order, reversion to a former age of goodness when ancestors and cattle that had died in the recent epidemic would return and Europeans would go. He assured them a life in which no one would die and all would live in happiness in the sky with the spirits, and there would be no epidemics. He asked them not to fight against the Europeans

and cause destruction or bloodshed since his mystical powers would cause the Europeans to leave (Middleton, 1963, p. 100; Middleton, 1969, p. 228; Middleton, 1971a, pp. 19–20). The consequence would be the emergence of a new utopian reign-Yakani Reign.

Effect of the Yakani Revolution (O'dupi Revolt) 1919 on Colonial Law and Order among the Lugbara

The effect of the Yakani Revolution was political, economic and social. Yakani spirit was viewed as a tool for fighting colonial administration in Lugbaraland. In an interview with Deboru Rakeli, she observed that in Maracha, the Yakani were used to fight the colonial administration. She reminisced that Mba; a Yakani priest, used Yakani to burn colonial buildings which at that time were grass-thatched. She noted that Mba would send Yakani to set fire to the colonial building especially when it was raining and no one would expect the building to catch fire. According to the Ombia Clan elders, arson was a common act among the Lugbara. They are reminiscent of colonial narratives on Mba who owned the Yakani water and Ombia fe, a small piece of wood which had Yakani powers to ignite fire. They reported that each time Mba was arrested or fined for an offence, he would invoke the Yakani spirit to burn down colonial buildings. According to Hopkins, there was increased arson on colonial buildings especially in Ankole with the intent to destroy colonial buildings (1973, p. 732). It led to the enactment of the Prevention of Incendiarism Ordinance of 1926. Following the Yakani insurrection, Mba was deported to Ankole until 1925 when he died. Before being transferred to Ankole, the local narrative reported that Mba would use Yakani to accomplish the prison punishment including felling trees.

Yakani Movement through its mass mobilisation relegated the reverence of the age and personality cult practised by the council of elders. An important effect of the Yakani Revolution was the changing

position of young men and women who formed the bulk of the adherents. Their independence from the clan elders was implicitly recognized in the Yakani organization (Middleton, 1971a, p. 20). The young generation became less attached to the clan elders and questioned the old order based on the elders' authority and inability to address the looming threats to the indigenous and old order. Therefore, weakening the indigenous authority of the council of elders and the clan elders among the young people.

The Yakani Movement was viewed as a source of social order. Middleton (1963) noted that "the cult also spread because it 'brought' peace" (Middleton, 1963, p. 90-92). The peace which had prevailed after the defeat of the Mahdist and Nubi invaders had been attributed to the supernatural effect exhibited in the use of Yakani water among the Agar Dinka and Terego. The Yakani Water was thought to protect people from epidemics and bring peace and order to the Lugbara. About the year 1912, occurred outbreaks of smallpox (local name Mmua), cerebrospinal meningitis (local name ndindia) and cattle disease in the Lugbara territory. An outbreak of Spanish influenza was reported in Vurra in the same period. Rembe had reportedly attached socio-religious importance to the magic water as having powers to remove sickness and death, bring the dead to life, protect animals and bring prosperity (Middleton, 1971a, p. 18). Although no specific case related to the healing powers and those to bring back life were mentioned, the Lugbara had a strong belief in Yakani. It is often difficult to draw a line between religion and magic as the two are embedded within the belief system and the place of the ancestral spirit in the life of the society. The belief among the Lugbara was that ancestral spirits had the power to harm or show favour depending on the nature of the rituals performed. Using Marx's thoughts, "religion provided a consolation for a miserable world, and that when the need for consoling stories was over, religion would vanish", he, therefore, concluded

religion was an opium to the oppressed (Ryan, 2013, p. 773). Therefore, the Yakani movement flourished in the difficult periods characterised by the outbreak of epidemics. However, the belief in the Yakani Water still exists among the contemporary rural Lugbara family, especially in Maracha and Terego clans as protection against any evil attack or adversary (Field interview: Naima Ngulua, 2019).

The outbreak of human epidemic and cattle disease among the Lugbara coincided with the Arab and European invasion of Lugbara land. The indigenous clan leaders had lost their authority as the younger generation lost confidence in them for failing to avert the emergent social crisis. This further weakened and destroyed the existing indigenous orderly social relations, a state of disorder among the Lugbara. The older generation and clan elders had perceived the Arab slave traders, Rembe the Yakani Movement leader, the Lugbara colonial chiefs and the British colonial administration as the cause of the prevailing social disorder among the Lugbara. The above-mentioned categories through their activities had interfered with and weakened the indigenous Lugbara social institutions, values and practices.

Following Rembe's death, the Yakani Movement was politicised among the Lugbara as a form of Lugbara reaction towards British rule. The former Belgian-appointed chiefs who felt that they had been excluded from their former privileges used the Yakani Movement as a tool for resistance. In the Yakani Movement, the death of cattle between 1890 and 1925 was attributed to the presence of the Europeans (Middleton, 1971a, p. 8). It instigated the Lugbara to disobey the Europeans and not pay taxes.

The Movement was perceived as a peaceful means to reorganise the Lugbara into a centralised society. Middleton reported that the Lugbara had claimed to have drunk the water because they wanted "peace and one chief" (Middleton, 1963, p. 92). Building on this background, this study interprets the Yakani

movement as a product of an Afro-Islamic state-building and imperial influence originating from the impact of the Mahdist rebellion. This signifies a period when the Lugbara were beginning to get into contact with foreign ideology and diplomatic relations.

The Lugbara, like the Azande, “seem to have reacted to the disruption of their notions of law and order by importing from neighbouring peoples, new ways of protecting themselves against unseen malice” (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. xiv). The blood brotherhood, marriage and trade relations between individuals and groups often led to the sharing of technological and cultural innovations, including articles for protection. The Yakani Movement was therefore viewed by the Lugbara as a revolution to restore social order.

Historical Continuity: Yakani in Contemporary Lugbara Society

Despite the forces of Christianity and modernisation, the belief in and practice of Yakani spirit reverence and rituals continue to thrive in the rural Lugbara families. Chiorazzi, (2015) asserts that; “there are many professed Christians and Muslims who participate in one form of indigenous religious rituals and practices or another. That testifies to the enduring power of indigenous religion and its ability to domesticate Christianity and Islam in modern Africa” (Chiorazzi, 2015, p. 3). Olekua and Adebua in an interview noted that Yakani is still popular in the Orivu clan near Aripea and Luruja clan near Mount Wati and around Ewafa (Owafa) in Terego District. Similarly, Yakani still exists in Maracha Yivu and Tara areas. A participant noted that Yakani Spirit is real and still works. She confided that despite being a staunch Christian and believer, she almost lost her life to the Yakani Spirit in their home in the village (Oyeru not real names). Whereas, the Christian converts, described Yakani as a spiritual force associated with evil and malevolent powers, a section of the Lugbara especially in Maracha and Terego

venerated it. Similarly, in an interview with a clan leader, he noted that the Christian converts had considered that Yakani represented the moral and spiritual disorder in a community, which to him, was due to indoctrination by the church.

Religion was the centrifugal force in the Yakani movement. The clan elders were given the privileged function of representing the ancestors, being the custodians of the clan and land, and performing rituals. Religion, according to Merton (1968), functions as a social usage to make the total social life the functioning of the social system (Merton, 1968, p. 79). Yakani movement, successfully recruited into its ranks, the young generation opposed to elders’ domination. It is this rational action resulting from the assumed belief in the value of religion, which provided the Yakani movement with the potency for mass mobilisation. Claris (1992) the Durkheimian, argues that religion, a form of custom, is a product of habit, “an assembly of ways of acting fixed by custom” (p. 33). Customs, habits and prejudices will become more important as “civilization increases its store of knowledge and practice” (p. 33).

In an interview with Jeffer Olekua a member of the Lugbara-Kari cultural institution, he noted that Yakani is known by a different name among the Lugbara clans. Among the Orivu and Luruja clans, it is known as Yakani. Among the Ayaa-Okaa clan, it is called *Alikoro*. Oftentimes, it is also called Dede. Yakani is not physically seen, and it is considered a god, and a bad spirit used to identify and punish wrongdoers, especially those who deny having committed the wrong. It is thought of as a god, because of its all-knowing character and nothing is hidden from it. The Lugbara believe in a god, who is all-knowing. If the person commits a wrong and does not disclose or deny it, the Yakani spirit would be invoked to identify and punish by inflicting sickness or pain on the culprit. Inheritance of Yakani is along the family or lineage line. However, some people acquire it by buying. The custodian either initiates the potential heir through

apprenticeship or the spirit possesses such a person to take up the responsibility (Interview, 18/04/2025).

According to Adebua Asaf, Yakani is considered a god and a bad spirit believed to provide protection against evil people who are described as having evil eyes. It is used to protect children, the household, animals and crops, and property from evil eyes. Yakani or Dede yii (Yakani Water or Holy water) is a concoction prepared by the custodians of the Yakani spirit to invoke the spirit or provide protection by sprinkling the concoction on a person using leaves. Adebua noted that, before the spirit goes out to take effect, it would first attack the owner or his household, causing the victim to catch a strong cough, headache, body shaking and shivering with fever. A sacrifice of food prepared with chicken is then offered to the spirit by placing it on a heap of smooth round stones arranged as a place of abode for the spirit. (Interview, 18/04/2025).

According to Olekua and Adebua, Yakani is acquired by offering chicken to the person who owns the spirit. As such a person returns home, the Yakani follows in the form of a whirlwind. The new owner, according to his/her choice prepares a place for the spirit by carefully arranging smooth stones, hardened soils (*otomoloko* in Lugbara) or huge woods into piles and enchants as he/she names the item as a representation of Yakani. This spot is kept off from people lest they step on the spirit. The owner and family revere it by first dropping food on the ground or the pile before anyone has tasted it or through blood and food sacrifices in order for it to take effect. According to Adebua, Yakani communicates to the owner and family through sickness and the owner responds by performing a sacrifice. Similarly, he noted that the Yakani spirit speaks, authoritatively asking short questions or making short statements. According to a respondent, there were similar spirits including one called Akuo which causes cough and Adraa which causes rushes (Interview, 18/04/2025).

The study established that Yakani is not only a bad spirit but it comes with a lot of demand for food and animal sacrifice which takes the form of chicken or goats and sheep. In the event that the owners fail to provide, the bad spirit unleashes its anger on the family often causing sickness and deaths when interventions are delayed. Weary with the burden of Yakani spirit, and the devastating effect, the owners would return the spirit to the one who sold or gave it to them. A respondent noted that when his mother was converted to Christianity and had not returned the Yakani nor got someone to inherit it, the spirit multiplied. Shortly after his mother's death, the spirit attacked him, the youngest child in the family. He began falling sick and was frequently admitted to the hospital with little hope of recovery. In the culture of the Lugbara, the family was required to investigate the source of the problem. It was traced back to the Yakani which the mother had come with when she was getting married. Asked why the Yakani attacked him the youngest in the family? He noted that the spirit would target the most productive and promising person who is the pillar of the family. His maternal uncles brought someone who had the power to remove the spirit and return it to the home where it was picked. The family had to pay for a cow, goats and chicken. The team returning the spirit were instructed to look forward, not to look behind, nor speak to any person. As they began the return journey, a whirlwind appeared and followed them back home. That ended the episodes of his sickness.

In a Focus Group Discussion with the Ombia clan elders, they considered it their police and security, and a tool for maintaining morals and societal order. They observed that the Yakani spirit is used to protect property and crops in the field. When someone has Yakani, it would protect their property and crops from trespassers and thieves. For example, when a passerby picks a leaf of sorghum or uproots some cassava tubers from the garden without permission, the Yakani would pump gas into the culprit's stomach; causing abdominal

swelling, anaemia and the skin to turn pale. Whereas the hospital diagnoses it as liver cirrhosis, the treatment prescribed would not bring healing unless the culprit gives chicken or goat for atonement. In another situation, a person who has stolen the property of a family having Yakani, the spirit would possess and cause him to climb up a tree with a big trunk to the highest tip without breaking or falling. When this happens, the village would gather and the Yakani spirit would be invoked to bring him down.

Yakani is used to uphold morality and prohibit fornication and adultery among the Lugbara people. For instance, Olekua noted that, when a man had an intimate relationship with a girl/woman without paying dowry or meeting any cultural obligation, in situations where the girl comes from a home with Yakani, it would inflict sickness on such a man. Men are often cautioned not to have pre-marital intimacy with the daughters of such a family. Similarly, when a married woman from a family with Yakani is involved in a secret adulterous relationship, Yakani would inflict sickness or disability on her and the adulterous partner. In an interview, the respondent noted that her adulterous sister-in-law had become disabled because the family Yakani had affected her pelvic bones as she was involved in an adulterous relationship despite being a married woman. The belief is that when people engage in immoral acts, the Yakani spirit can possess or influence them, bringing harm to the individual, family and society.

Yakani spirit was often acquired to protect the family from death. A female respondent revealed that when her grandmother lost four children in a row, she acquired Yakani to protect her remaining children. Her grandmother believes that without Yakani, her children would have all died and she would not have them as grandchildren. This is confirmed by Storer (2025) who noted that the Lugbara communities turned to Yakani priests to get protection in the form of divine water- Allah water (Storer, 2025, p. 117). Therefore, among the Lugbara, Yakani is linked to the control of anti-

social behaviour, such as witchcraft, jealousy, theft, or greed.

Among the Lugbara, Yakani is considered a source of personal protection. It is alleged to protect persons or a family from keeping the spirit. For instance, in an Interview with one of the clan elders, he confided that, during political campaigns, some politicians would seek protection from the Yakani spirit. Similarly, some people use it to protect their jobs and envied positions at the workplace. He acknowledged that as a custodian of the Yakani spirit, it is effective in its purpose. In a key informant interview, the respondent revealed that Yakani is used to manipulate court outcomes. He observed that, when the plaintiff or defendant is to appear in court, they would first consult the Yakani spirit to manipulate the court process and judgement in their favour which was believed to happen.

Yakani played an economic role in the family. Another perspective emerged when a respondent asserted that Yakani's practice was a business for the owners. The Yakani owners convinced their unsuspecting clients that the spirit provided protection and good crop yields and it would manipulate court process and judgement. The clients would exchange money, cow, goat, sheep or chicken for Yakani. The spirit continues to thrive in the Terego and Maracha clans in Lugbara-land.

Today, Yakani is considered highly as a Traditional justice system mechanism of identifying and punishing the wrongdoers in the community. Being a supernatural force feared in the community for its omniscient, omnipresent and retributive nature, aggrieved persons seek justice from the Yakani spirit. It has a strong component of truth-telling, symbolic reparation and compensation. Olekua and Adebua acknowledged that in a situation where a person's property was stolen or destroyed by an unknown culprit, Yakani was consulted. The spirit would unleash madness, sickness, and death on the individual, family or the immediate lineage. It is the basis of cursing of wrongdoers who deny being

involved in the act. The victim then says I leave all the wrong acts and pain inflicted upon me by the unknown person to the almighty god who is all-knowing and a punisher. The Yakani custodian would then enchant saying: Yakani, our revered god and spirit who is all-knowing and knows the person who has stolen or destroyed the property, send your revenging and avenging spirit to bring justice by attacking and punishing the wrongdoer through pain. After some time, the offender will begin to experience afflictions caused by the Yakani spirit. He then seeks for apology and makes symbolic compensation. The aggrieved person would then plead with Yakani to leave the culprit and the sickness disappears.

One of the basic reasons for the continuity of the Yakani cult like any other indigenous African spiritual beliefs, is that they “are not bound by a written text, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Indigenous African religion is primarily an oral tradition and has never been fully codified; thus, it allows itself to be more easily amended and influenced by other religious ideas, religious wisdom, and modern development. Holding or maintaining a uniform doctrine is not the essence of indigenous African religions (Chiorazzi, 2015, p. 5). Similarly, the Yakani cult keeps on transforming itself in substance and practice adopting aspects of Christianity and Islam. The practice of holy water sprinkling and aspects of Christian prayers are being incorporated into the cult as practised in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches. The cult priests often made reference to the Biblical scripture to emphasize that Jesus whom the Christians believed in had a culture. He was circumcised and dedicated at the Temple: *“On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus...” (Luke 2:21-24).* He was brought up according to the Law of Moses. *“Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover” (Luke 2:41),* and He continued to observe Passover throughout His life (cf. Matthew 26:17-19). They made their followers

and believers believe that Yakani Spirit was not evil as alleged by the Christians.

CONCLUSION

Yakani among the Lugbara plays a complex, multifaceted and intersectional role between spirituality, morality, security and traditional justice. This study and work preserve a worldview that has collectively sustained, enriched, and given meaning to the Lugbara clans and people for a century through its epistemology, metaphysics, history, and practices. Yakani spirit is a moral compass as it serves as a social control mechanism, reinforcing ethical behaviour and communal harmony. It further provides a cultural worldview which it reflects the Lugbara cosmological understanding of good and evil and the interconnectedness between the spiritual and physical worlds. Similarly, Yakani points towards community health as its presence is not just an individual issue but a collective concern, highlighting how individual behaviour affects the wider community. Yakani is a tool and mechanism of Traditional Justice. Spiritual interventions to deal with Yakani also show the importance of traditional justice and healing systems alongside formal structures.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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