

## 1. Description

### 1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

**Name:** Bagisu (alternatively known as the Bagesu or Gisu)

**Language:** Masaaba

**Language Family:** Niger-Congo

### 1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

**Code:** myx

### 1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

Located around Mt. Elgon in eastern Uganda (01°07'06" N 34°31'30"E)

### 1.4 Brief history:

The tribe originally occupied the plains around Mt. Elgon, moving to its slopes around the 16<sup>th</sup> century BCE due to attacks from the Masai and Nandi tribes. In 1896, the British Empire took control of Uganda, naming the region the "Ugandan Protectorate." During the early years of colonialism, the tribe moved farther north due to land constraints, sparking territory conflict with the Sabei tribe. Arabica Coffee was introduced to the region in 1912; today the tribe is a strong producer, using Mt. Elgon's fertile soil to produce 10% of the nation's coffee. (1,2,5,6)

### 1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

Missionaries introduced the Bagisu to Christianity in the late 1890s. These European immigrants established an "Anglican" system that improved roads and infrastructure, subsequently dividing the area into districts. The Bagisu have been fighting with their neighbors, the Sabei, but the Bagisu tribe is larger and more affluent due to coffee and cotton production. (1,6)

### 1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

The tribe lives around the city of Mbale and on the slopes of Mt. Elgon, a volcano located in eastern Uganda. This area is well irrigated and contains some of the most fertile soils in the country, allowing the tribe to become dominant in agriculture. (1)

### 1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density

Today, the number of Masaaba speakers is around 1,120,000 with an ethnic population of 953,936; the area is the most densely populated region of the country with 250 people per sq. kilometer. However, during the time of colonial rule, the tribe had a population of roughly two thousand. The tribe was divided into clans—two or three around Mbale with the rest scattered around the slopes of Mt. Elgon. The clans were made up of villages containing ten homes, although this number occasionally reached forty. (1,2,5)

## 2. Economy

### 2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

The main crop grown for subsistence was small millet or *Bulo*, which was only planted once a year. However, corn, bananas, and sweet potatoes were also used for food. (5)

### 2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

The Bagisu hunted various wild animals for protein, usually small antelope. Domestic animals were also kept, although they were rarely used for meat. Every household owned a few cows for dairy and several goats and sheep for trading. Families kept various types of fowl to be eaten on occasion, but they weren't fed by the family and were subsequently not well nourished. (5)

### 2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

Hunting was primarily done with a spear, although nets were used on occasion. During warfare, men used spears and poison tipped arrows. (5)

### 2.4 Food storage:

The millet and corn, after drying, were placed into granaries—large wicker baskets with removable covers. The baskets were around five feet high and three feet in diameter. Villagers protected their crop from rain and insects by raising the stones off the ground with rocks or tree stumps and covering the outsides in cow manure. (5)

### 2.5 Sexual division of production:

Apart from agriculture, there was not much division of labor. Upon marriage, a man gave his wife a field for crops. This land was cleared and weeded by the man and sowed by the woman; once the crop had matured, men and women worked together to harvest the grain. Conversely, men or women could herd livestock or work as potters. Warfare and construction were among the jobs performed exclusively by males. (5)

### 2.6 Land tenure:

Pieces of land were rarely cultivated for more than four consecutive years. (5)

### 2.7 Ceramics:

Pottery was present among the Bagisu. Pots were baked out of clay (*lidiri*) from riverbeds between the new and full moons.

-Note: pregnant women were not allowed near pots while they were being made (5)

### 2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

Beer provided a sense of community and was commonly shared during the harvest festival. During this time, inter-clan hostility ceased and people could travel to villages outside of their clan. Large quantities of beer was brewed and shared among guests. However, sharing among families was otherwise infrequent, each wife having her own store of food that the husband would eat from. (5)

## 2.9 Food taboos:

Before the newly harvested grain could be dried or consumed by any member of the village, some was sent to a medicine man with a fowl and some grain from the previous year. These were offered to a deity. Afterwards the grain could be eaten, but it was customary for the husband and wife to eat the first of the harvest together. If the man were not home, a portion of the meal was set-aside for him to eat when he returned. (5)

-Note: Before sowing, a woman could have some of the seed blessed by a medicine man.

## 2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

No watercraft were utilized

## 3. Anthropometry

### 3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

**Males:** 172.2 cm. (3)

**Females:** N/A

### 3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

No information available

## 4. Life History, mating, marriage

### 4.1 Age at menarche (f):

No specific information is given pertaining to the specific age at which a Bagisu girl begins menstruating. However, girls begin to mark their foreheads with keloids at the age of 10 or 12 as a sign of clan membership. As a Bagisu girl is not allowed to marry until she has marked her face, it is probably closely related to the menarche. (5)

### 4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

No information available

### 4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

No specific information available, but it should be noted that the amount of wives and children a man had varied across the population and was only restricted by his wealth. Women could have as many as ten children, but due to high infant-mortality rates, only half usually survived. (5)

### 4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

Rather than waiting a specified amount of time to have another child, a woman's newborn child was considered "weaned" as soon as she became pregnant again. Likewise, if a woman lost a child in infancy, she would try to have another as soon as possible. (5)

### 4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

No specified age given for marriage

-Note: A woman could not marry if she hadn't gone through the initiation rites at the age of 12

### 4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

While divorce existed, it was a rare occurrence. A man was allowed to divorce his wife if she couldn't bear children. Similarly, if a wife had sex with a man other than her husband, she would often leave her husband for the other man, who would pay the husband the marriage fee he had paid to his wife's family. (5)

### 4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

While no specific percentages are available, polygyny was widely practiced among the Bagisu. (5)

### 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

The husband paid a marriage fee to the family of the bride; the father of the groom negotiated the price with the parents of the bride. Usually the fee was three or four cows (but up to ten could be asked for); this was occasionally supplemented with goats. However, the groom provided the family of the bride with other gifts, such as a spear and a hoe, out of custom. (5)

### 4.9 Inheritance patterns:

Usually, the eldest son inherits his father's property. This is not guaranteed, however, as the clan can intervene and deprive the son of this privilege. If the son inherits the property, it is his responsibility to provide for his siblings until marriage; using the marriage fees he receives for his sisters to fund his marriage and those of his brothers. Along with taking his father's property, the son may take his widows as wives. (5)

### 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

The father taught his sons how to herd and care for sheep while the mother taught her daughters how to work in the fields, cook, and carry firewood and water. No information was available on conflicts between parents and their offspring. (5)

### 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

No information available

### 4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

Exogamy was strictly enforced within a clan—males could only marry women outside of his own clan.

-Note: Men could also not marry sisters or women from the same clan, as they were also considered sisters. (5)

### 4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?

Although no specific information is available on the topic, the prevalence of polygyny implies non-partible paternity.

- 4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")  
No information available
- 4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?  
No information available
- 4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape  
No information on the occurrence of rape could be found, but during warfare women from other clans were kidnapped. Rape may have occurred during these instances.  
- "...Women and children were captured and carried off" (Roscoe, p. 22)
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)  
A man must marry outside of his clan—the consequence for sexual relations with other clan members was death. (5)
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?  
Women enjoyed a fair amount of sexual freedom. Unmarried women could have sex with members of other clans as long as she didn't become pregnant. If she did become pregnant, the man was expected to marry her and provide a bridal fee to the family. However, women were not allowed to have sex with clan members. (5)
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring  
No information available
- 4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?  
No information available
- 4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females  
No information available
- 4.22 Evidence for couvades  
There is no evidence for couvades—men continue their work daily work as usual.
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)  
No evidence for different distinctions for potential fathers
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?  
No information available
- 4.24 Joking relationships?  
No information available
- 4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations  
Not specified
- 4.26 Incest avoidance rules  
See 4.17
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?  
Before the marriage can occur, the groom must pay the marriage fee (see 4.8). After the bride's family receives the bridal fee, the bride and a number of female companions (as men could not safely cross into another clan's territory) stayed the night in the groom's village. The party returned to their village the next day with a gift of a sheep or a goat. After a feast in her village, the bride returned to the village of her future husband, staying the night in his house with a family member. The next day the family member left and the wife began working in her field. Aside from this tedious process, not formal ceremony or period of seclusion existed. (5)
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?  
A child was named as soon as possible after birth. If it were a boy, the father would name it, and similarly if it were a girl, the mother would name it. The child was always named after a deceased ancestor in the father's clan, whose ghost was said to protect it. (5)
- 4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)  
See 4.12
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?  
On occasion the groom's father arranged the marriage—however, men and women usually arranged their own marriages during the harvest festival, a period in which men could safely travel to villages outside of their clan. (5)
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:  
"There was little jealousy between men on account of women." (Roscoe, p. 35)

### **Warfare/homicide**

- 4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:  
There is no specific number of males that died from warfare. However, clan warfare was a common occurrence
- 4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:  
A man couldn't travel into the territory of another clan without expecting violence. Warfare between clans was also a cause of violent death. Murder occurred within the clan, but it usually occurred out of quarrels between members of different villages. (5)
- 4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:  
See 4.15

#### 4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

There are two other tribes that occupy the area around Mt. Elgon. The first is the Kalenjins, a Nilotic-Hamitic group that migrated to the area a century after the Bagisu. The second group is the Sabei, who have fought the Bagisu over territory since the early decades of colonial rule. (1)

#### 4.18 Cannibalism?

Cannibalism was at one point a common practice among the Bagisu, although it is unclear whether it is still practiced today. The most common manifestation was the cannibalism of the dead by family members. Rather than allow the body to decay, which was considered disrespectful to the dead, the flesh was cooked and eaten during a three-day mourning period. If the person died of smallpox, family members that had already contracted the illness ate the body far away from the village. (5)

### 5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

#### 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

A village was generally composed of ten homes, although this number could reach as high as forty. (5)

#### 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

The Bagisu weren't very mobile as clan territories were strictly enforced and families possessed plots of land for generations. (5)

#### 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

There was no singular, tribal government. Instead, the tribe was split into clans headed by an individual that handled serious matters within the group. (5)

#### 5.4 Post marital residence:

Each woman was provided a field and a house by her husband in which she lived, cooked, and raised her children. (5)

#### 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

Clan boundaries were strictly enforced. Women could travel through the territories of other clans, but a man faced hostility. This territoriality was eased once a year after the harvest. (5)

#### 5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

No information provided

#### 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

No information provided

#### 5.8 Village and house organization:

No information provided

#### 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

The walls of the homes were made of wooden stakes and the roof was thatched with bamboo saplings and grass. At the center of the home was the fireplace, set near the center post. The walls were lined with cow manure for insulation and protection from rain and wind. No chimney or windows were built to let in light or release smoke as the door and conical roof allows for both. (5)

#### 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

People usually slept on the floor of their homes around the fire without covering. However, after the 1890s, there were instances in which beds were made. (5)

#### 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

The Bagisu tribe was split into a number of clans. These were fairly autonomous and very territorial. These clans were subdivided into villages. (5)

#### 5.12 Trade:

There is evidence of trade among the Bagisu. Cowry shells, goats, and sheep were used as currency. Families also bought slaves on occasion. Today, the Bagisu grow Arabica Coffee and cotton as cash crops and have formed one of the most powerful agricultural cooperatives in Uganda, the Bugisu Cooperative Union. (5,6)

#### 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

Each clan has a designated head. Aside from this, villages appear to be fairly egalitarian.

### 6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

#### 6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

No specified time allocation

#### 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

Two men were designated as spiritual leaders- the medicine man and the rainmaker. The medicine man acted as a mediator to the spiritual world, making offerings to gods for various reasons. The rainmaker was responsible for procuring favorable weather. If the rainmaker failed, villagers didn't doubt his ability, but rather accused him of being lazy. (5)

#### 6.2 Stimulants:

Tobacco and beer were used with regularity among men and women. During the early years of British colonialism, "Indian Hemp" was also introduced. (5)

#### 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

##### **Birth:**

During pregnancy, women did not have to follow food taboos while men must be especially careful to not fall while walking

or climbing, as this was thought to cause a miscarriage. After the child was born, the placenta was carefully buried behind the house. Beer was then poured where the child was born and two trees were planted in front of the house, called *mbaga* and *mwima*.

For fifteen days after giving birth the wife remained in seclusion, after which she shaved the hair on her head and body and swept the floor of the house. (5)

**Death:**

After a death, the body remained in the home until the relatives of the deceased arrived. At sunset, the body was deposited at the nearest “waste ground.” As night fell, horns were blown and the children were told “jackals were coming to eat the dead.”

During the night, elderly women related to the deceased went back to the body and cut off pieces for mourning. Over the next three days, relatives mourned in the house and “ate the flesh of the dead.” (5)

**Initiation:**

*Girls:* Girls around the ages of 10 or 12 began the process of scarring their faces. Girls would cut the skin on their foreheads and rub ash into the wounds, the product of such actions being ornate keloids. Women could not marry if they hadn’t gone through this process. (5)

*Boys:* Boys showing signs of puberty were circumcised in a public ceremony that occurred every two years. For two to four months prior to the operation, the boys traveled to villages around the clan to receive gifts and dance.

The ceremony occurred two to three days after the arrival of the new moon. At this time, an offering of a fowl was made at the shrine to *Weri*, the god said to have made the universe, on Mt. Elgon. The boys were then taken into the forest by the medicine man and the chief—there a goat was sacrificed and the boys covered themselves with the contents of its stomach. After the boys feasted on the goat, they returned to a village where they danced as a group. The boys were taken to the shrine of *Weri*, blessed, smeared with clay, and told to return to their individual villages for the circumcision.

After having returned to their village, the boys were confronted by an old man that had them each agree to their duties to his clan. Once they agreed, a medicine man removed the boys’ foreskin and all of the skin on their penises, aside from a strip underneath.

After two months of healing, the boys were allowed to join the men in clan councils and marry if they chose to. (5)

**Seasonal:**

The harvest festival occurs immediately after the harvest. Clan members brew beer in large quantities and travel between villages in other clans, taking advantage of the temporary inter-clan peace. The festival lasts as long as there is beer. (5)

6.4 Other rituals:

**If twins are born:**

A medicine man offered a fowl to the gods. Three days later, the twins’ heads were shaved and their fingernails were trimmed for inspection. After they had been inspected by the medicine man, the families of the husband and wife feasted together. (5)

**If a man committed suicide:**

His house was broken down and burned. If a wife committed suicide the husband was blamed and he was stripped of his home and possessions. (5)

**Murder:**

If a man murdered someone outside of the clan he had to kill a goat and smear the contents of its stomach on his chest. Until he did this, the man was not allowed to eat food with his hands. (5)

6.5 Myths (Creation):

No specific creation myth could be found. However, the Creator’s name was *Weri Kubumba*. This particular god was not frequently prayed to for requests among the Bagisu. (5)

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

None specified

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

Initiation ceremonies are less formal among women. But, “men as well as women were consulted or asked to avert a threat by means of ritual acts” (1,5)

6.8 Missionary effect:

Christian missionaries helped establish colonial rule in the region and the Church Missionary Society established a “British and particularly Anglican system in the area.” (1)

6.9 RCR revival:

None specified

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

Family members consumed the dead during the three-day mourning period. Should the body be allowed to decay, it was believed that the ghost would cause illness to the children in the family. (5)

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

No evidence for this as children are named after deceased ancestors (5)

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

No information available

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

The religion of the Bagisu is polytheistic. However, there are aspects of magic and there is a certain reverence towards ancestors.

## 7. Adornment

### 7.1 Body paint:

Boys decorated their bodies with clay in preparation for their initiation ceremony (5)

### 7.2 Piercings:

“Though younger members of the tribe are now refusing to pierce their lips or ears, many people still wear lip ornaments, usually of wood, which is the undress ornament, while a few wear the full-dress lip ornament, a bit of white stone, some two inches long, half an inch thick at the end inserted in the lip, tapering towards the end which protrudes.” (Roscoe, p.6)

“...Both men and women pierced both the lobe and the helix of the ear, though they seldom enlarged the holes more than enough to insert straws.” (Roscoe, p. 6)

### 7.3 Haircut:

Men and women shave their heads on a monthly basis (5)

### 7.4 Scarification:

See 6.3

### 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

Unmarried girls only wore bracelets. However, married women wore anklets as well. These were made of iron or brass. (5)

### 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

No information found, although clay was used in certain rituals. (See 7.1)

### 7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

Men do not wear bracelets or anklets common among women.

### 7.8 Missionary effect:

No information available for how missionaries affected adornment.

### 7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

None specified

## 8. Kinship systems

### 8.1 Sibling classification system:

None specified

### 8.2 Sororate, levirate:

No evidence provided

### 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

Although a specific typology is not named, sources point towards a Hawaiian system as clan members of a similar generation are regarded as siblings, leading to strictly enforced exogamy.

## 9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

Both male and female members remove the bottom two incisors. While this is not required, it is seen as unattractive to keep those teeth. (5)

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