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A Study Of Dosteo Bisaka’s Contribution To The “Faith Of Unity” Religious Movement In Western Uganda

Ismail Kadala Murutha¹ Saud Bin Mohammad²

Abstract: This study attempts to discuss the emergence of a new religious movement in Uganda called Faith of Unity (FoU). The goal of this paper is to explore why and how FoU emerged and became a dominant religion in Uganda. This study is crucial because it reveals the various approaches of Dosteo Bisaka (the founder of FoU) and his contributions to FoU. It highlights the vision of FoU and identifies the factors that contributed to forming FoU as one of the dominant religious movements in Uganda. The research follows both descriptive and analytical approaches while addressing the topic. It finds FoU to be a suitable example of a new religion in the African contour - albeit having many similarities with Christianity - that emerged as a response to the destitution caused by colonialism in African societies. Last but not least, this paper acknowledges various challenges in studying FoU.

Keywords: Politics, Imagined Communities, Imagined Geography, Muslims, Sri Lanka, Identity Crisis.

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Introduction to New Religious Movement in Uganda

Africa in the last 20 to 30 years has been a booming place and has witnessed the birth and massive explosion of what is currently referred to as new religious movements. Many movements claiming to present “new” religious orientations have emerged and continue to emerge on the continent, attracting huge numbers of followers. Although there is no consensus among scholars on whether such movements fall under the rubric of religion or whether the term “new religious movement” is a proper designation, it has been preferred as a neutral term to “cult” or “sect”. “Cult” - which comes from the Latin word *cultus* that literally means “care” - has been mostly used in a derogatory and pejorative sense to refer to any group, whether religious or not, that is seen as marginal and dangerous and whose aim is to exploit the gullible masses (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979; Bromley & Melton, 2002). “Sect”, on the other hand, is mostly used to refer to any organised religious group that breaks away from a parent mainstream religion. The group’s breakaway is seen as a form of protest or call for a return to the original true religion. Such groups are usually regarded as heresies and accused of apostasy by their parent religions (Stark & Bainbridge, 1979; Stark & Finke, 2000). The fact that these terms bear negative and pejorative connotations have driven scholars to settle for the term “new religious movement”, which is more neutral even though there is still no consensus on its definition and what the boundaries of such movements are.

Although new religious movements in Africa share a number of traits and reasons for their emergence, they differ in their attributes, the different shades and articulations they present themselves in, their visions and worldviews, their doctrines and beliefs, their rituals and practices, their leadership and organisation, their sizes and ways in which they recruit members as well as their attitudes towards other religions. This is perhaps the reason why there is no agreed upon term under which to designate them. They are regarded new because they are of recent origin; they emerged mostly after the Second World War and present themselves as being different from prevailing mainstream religions and cultures. They are posited under the rubric of religion because “they profess to offer a vision of the religious or sacred world, or means to reach other objectives such as transcendental knowledge, spiritual illumination, or self-realisation, or because they offer to their adherents answers to fundamental questions” (Ndeda, 2013, p. 34). They offer

innovative religious solutions to problems facing modern societies and the world at large; solutions they regard that mainstream religions are unable to or fail to offer. Indeed, the many political, economic, social, spiritual and cultural disruptions and crises in postcolonial Africa led many Africans to look for answers. While Africans are "notoriously religious" (Mbiti, 1969) and religion penetrates through all aspects of their lives, they turned to religion to find answers. When mainstream religions could not provide them with solutions to their crises, new religious movements appear with "good news" and answers to their life problems.

It is difficult to single out one main cause for the emergence and development of new religious movements on the African continent in general and Uganda in particular. In all their diversity, they have emerged and continue to emerge as responses to various challenges. Two theories, however, may sum up the reasons for their emergence and development in Africa: the deprivation theory and sacral trauma. The common denominator underlying these theories, as many scholars have pointed out, has been a catalyst to the emergence of new religions in Africa in one way or another: colonialism and its negative long-term effects on all aspects of African lives. The deprivation theory was first presented by H. Richard Niebuhr (1929), who saw the rise of new sects and denominations in Western Christianity as a result of social forces such as politics, economics and racism (Niebuhr, 1992; Glock, 2018). Members of the Church who are less privileged and lack economic, social and political power become easily attracted to join sects because the latter provides solace and offer support for personal and social prosperity. Similarly, new religious movements attract deprived members of the society by offering religious solutions, a new way of life filled with hope, answers to their powerlessness and also a way to redress their grievances through the garb of religion.

Sacral trauma, on the other hand, was the theory used by Kaczynski (2012) to explain the emergence of new religions in Africa. The disruptions of African spirituality and worldview caused by modernisation and clashes between African and foreign cultures led to the emergence of new religious movements calling for a return to the African way of life (Kaczynski, 2012). While some of these new religious movements emerge as a response to the threats that the presence of foreign religions pose to their African way of life and aim to restore

and preserve their indigenous religious beliefs and practices, others also seek to rehabilitate African traditional religions in new forms that are relevant to present and future contexts (Kaczynski, 2012). These movements have appealed to many Africans and have gained large followers across the continent because they seem to provide immediate remedies to many of the people's problems.

In post-independence Uganda, the negative effects of colonialism and numerous civil wars and struggles for power that followed after independence led to the inadequate and sometimes total absence of proper social, economic and political structures, leaving the country in a state of turmoil and uncertainty. Societies lost hope and became vulnerable and ready to accept any message that appeared to offer answers and solutions to their life problems. In such a midst, many new religious movements appeared on the Ugandan religious scene. Some of these were partly-religious partly-political movements³ (Tinkasiimire, 2004; Cline, 2003; Behrend, 2011; Turyomumazima, 2005; Mayer, 2001). They presented themselves as offering new hope for the people and satisfying not only the latter's spiritual needs but also healing their social, cultural and political wounds. They reached out mostly to the deprived and marginalised people and offered them a sense of belonging. They also offered to provide instant remedies to the political and economic struggles of marginalised societies. The Lord's Resistance Army and The Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena, for example, presented themselves as spirit-led movements that want to establish democracy, promote nationalism and rule the country in accordance with the Ten Commandments of God. They appealed to many marginalised groups who did not agree with the government's ideology and policies. More importantly, these new movements offered emotional and spiritual satisfaction and immediate answers and solutions to most of the problems their members faced. Members could freely go to them whenever they searched for answers to their failure and suffering in life, material and spiritual needs as well as protection from the evils of the world they lived in. They could find instant solutions to many such

³ Movements such as The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, The Marian Workers of the Laity, The Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena, The Group of Mr Anatoli Ssentamu, in Masaka, Central Uganda, The Lord's Resistance Army, World Message Last Warning and many others.

problems, especially through the psychological and physical healing offered by these movements. These movements also offered vision and hope and new perspectives about life and the meaning of existence. They provided a place and space where members easily felt at home and fulfilled their need to practice righteousness, a gap which their previous religious affiliations had failed to fulfill (Welbourn & Ogot, 1966).

Statistics show that in the 1970s, those who identified as following religions other than the state-recognised religions of Islam, Anglicanism and Catholicism constituted 0.7% of the total population of Uganda (Turyomumazima, 2005). This was attributed to the then-President Idi Amin Dada who, it was claimed, suppressed and cracked down on all religions that were not recognised by the state (Turyomumazima, 2005). With the coming of the current government in 1986 and the declaration of religious freedom in the 1995 Constitution, the religious terrain in Uganda witnessed the emergence of many new religious movements, with several flourishing in some cases, while several others disappearing as quickly as they had emerged. Although some of these new religious movements have been associated with violence of political and religious nature,⁴ an increasing number of them have been continuously appearing and attracting huge numbers of followers. The current census puts those who are affiliated with religions other than traditional religion, Islam and Christianity (with all their denominations) at 1.4% of the total population (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

The Faith of Unity religion (henceforth known as FoU) is one such new religious movements that emerged in Uganda in the past few decades. It is claimed that contrary to the widespread belief that Pentecostal Christianity and Islam are the fastest-growing religions in Africa, FoU is the fastest-growing religion in Uganda, with members spread across the whole of the Great Lakes Region of Africa (Ukah, 2018 & 2019). This paper aims to reveal the contribution of Dosteo Bisaka to FoU and examine the leading factors that made FoU popular to the common people.

⁴ Such as The Lord's Resistance Army, whose leaders have been charged with many crimes, including abductions, killings and rape, among others. There is also The Movement for the Restoration of Ten Commandments of God, which caused the Kanungu massacre in 2000 where it is believed that more than 500 followers were burned to death.

Background and Formation of the Faith of Unity

The primary source of all information about the founder, history, doctrines, rituals and practices of FoU is the founder himself, who wrote the religion's official scripture. FoU was founded by Dosteo Bisaka on February 22, 1980 in Kapyemi, a small village in Muhorro town in Kagadi District, which is located in the western part of Uganda, about 251 kilometers from the capital city of Kampala. Kagadi, together with five other districts, namely Buliisa, Kakumiro, Kiryandongo, Masindi and Hoima, make up the Bunyoro homeland whose population is estimated to be a little more than two million people (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Bunyoro is a rural area and most of its population practice and depend on agriculture and animal husbandry. The language spoken by the people of Bunyoro is Runyoro.

To properly understand the formation of FoU, it is important to understand the circumstances and context in which it emerged. The present-day Bunyoro was part of the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom, which was founded in the 15th century by the Bachwezi people. It was under a kingship system ruled by a king named Omukama of Bunyoro. As a vastly powerful, wealthy and prosperous kingdom, it dominated most parts of the Great Lakes Region of Africa until its decline in the 19th century, which was attributed to, among other factors, the arrival of European colonialists whose presence created conflicts. The confrontations between them and the kingdom rulers as well as with the rulers of neighboring kingdoms led to political instability, which eventually led to the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom's loss of power in the region (Dunbar, 1965; Shane, 2000; Okoth, 2006).

Before the arrival of European colonial missionaries, the people of Bunyoro Kitara practiced indigenous traditional religions that were inherited from their forefathers and passed onto their children. Their cultural and social identities were shaped by their beliefs and traditions and were a force of unity in the society since they brought communities together, both in times of happiness and sadness. When Christian missionaries arrived with their respective denominations, they were very evangelistic and propagated their religion with all their different denominations to the indigenous people, with each denomination aiming to win as many converts as they could. Not only that, they also came imposing their civilisation to indigenous people whose lives,

they claimed, were steeped in "barbaric" and "primitive" beliefs and traditions. They supplemented their missions with services such as education and medical aid to the indigenous people with the belief that such services would stop the latter from practicing their traditional beliefs and join the religion of the civilised service provider. While it is not denied that these services did indeed improve the lives of the indigenous people, the price the latter paid was too heavy. Their social, cultural and spiritual identities and almost entirely their way of life were changed because, for example, in order to become a Christian, one had to abandon all his traditional beliefs and customs and enter into a religion with a worldview and way of life that were totally different from the one he has known his entire life. In simple terms, one had to give up his identity and take on the identity of the "civilised" man in order to become a Christian. Also, the fact that these imported religions came in different denominations, with each denomination competing for converts, created conflicts, divisions, discrimination and sometimes even violence among followers of different groups.

Decades later, in post-independence Bunyoro, the seed had already been sown and communities visibly identified themselves according to the Christian missionaries and divisions based on religious affiliations. For example, as mentioned earlier, during the presidency of Idi Amin, all religions other than the state-recognised ones - which, as a matter of fact, were all imported foreign religions - were suppressed. Moreover, even those state-recognised religions were in constant conflict and competition for power. The country became divided along religious lines brought by foreign agents. It is also important to note that although post-independence Uganda saw a drastic decrease in the number of people associated with traditional indigenous beliefs and practices, not all those who embraced the foreign religions entirely abandoned their traditional beliefs and customs. Practices such as paying homage to Chwezi deities,⁵ cannibalism and witchcraft remained rampant, especially in

5 The Chwezi are believed to have been powerful figures who ruled and dominated the Great Lakes Region in the 14th and 15th centuries. When they died, their spirits were deified because they were believed to have possessed spiritual powers. People venerated them and began seeking their help in cases of uncertainties and also to cater for the wellbeing of individuals and communities. People in the Bunyoro region have continued going to them for good health, wealth, protection from calamities and general wellbeing.

the Bunyoro region. Behrend (2011) attributes the rise of such practices to modern Christianity and increased death rates caused by AIDS and local wars. She argues that although Christianity vehemently opposed practices such as witchcraft, Christian fundamentalist movements unintentionally gave rise to this practice since they recognised witchcraft as a form of Satanic power, which somewhat acknowledged its reality (Behrend, 2011). Also, the fact that Christianity denounced and condemned witchcraft but approved and recognised miracles did not help in stopping these practices because they could be perceived by some as a form of miracle (Behrend, 2011). Also, the region of Bunyoro, just as the rest of the country, equally suffered the consequences of the many civil wars that ravaged the country after independence, which led to the state's inability to provide basic services to citizens.

In the midst of all this, Dosteo Bisaka formed a new religion with which he sought to provide solutions to societies' predicaments. His main purpose was to bring back unity among the people, revitalise African spirituality and strengthen the African way of life that had been dispirited by foreign religions while, at the same time, be cognizant of the needs and requirements of the modern society by rehabilitating some of the indigenous African practices in new forms that are relevant to modern society. In the beginning, Bisaka presented FoU as an association with the official name in Runyoro language: *Itambiro ly'Omukama Ruhanga Owamahe Goona Ery'Obumu*, which loosely translates as "The Association for the Healing Place of God of All Armies" (Ukah, 2018, p. 141). He later changed its name to "Faith of Unity" and took Kapyemi as the official headquarters and the most sacred place for his new religion. The official scripture of FoU was written in Runyoro in 1985, five years after the formation of the religion, and two years later, the official English language translation was published.

Dosteo Bisaka: His Early Life, His Calling and Founding of New Religion

The history of many of the world's great religious traditions shows that they were founded as a result of profound religious experiences undergone by their respective prophets or founders. Such experiences made them the recipients of a message (revelation), which came from outside the physical world. They were then seen by their contemporaries

as individuals who had some kind of special spiritual insight and authority. Such was the case with Dosteo Bisaka, who calls himself *Owobusobozi*, which is Runyoro for "The Almighty one".

Studying the context of Bisaka's birth and the environment in which he grew up is critical in order to understand how and what led him to form this new religion and promote this kind of worldview. Bisaka mentions in *The Book of God* that he was born on June 11, 1930, in Kitoma Kiboizi to a staunchly Catholic family. His grandfather, Alifonsio Wenkere, as well as his father, Petero Byombi, were Catholic Church catechists at their Parish in Bujuni. His father had served the Church for 58 years while his grandfather served for 60 years (Bisaka, 1987). At the age of eight, Bisaka was taken to live with his grandparents. His grandmother, Martha Nyakake, who was also a staunch Catholic, taught him profoundly about the Catholic doctrines, teachings and traditions. She played an immensely important role in his upbringing and had a lifelong influence on his Catholic strand and how he would later formulate FoU's worldview. Bisaka mentions that his grandmother "used to teach him a lot about the goodness of God. The words he was taught stayed in his mind for a long time" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 7). What seems to have been a defining moment in Bisaka's life was his grandmother's experience of the religious violence and atrocities that were carried out on a group of 45 Anglican and Roman Catholic converts (now known as Uganda Martyrs), who were executed in the late 18th century in the Kingdom of Buganda under the reign of Mwanga II (Faupe, 2007; Okoth, 2006; Kassimir, 1991). This experience was significant to Bisaka because it was clear evidence of the dysfunctional features of violence, intolerance and divisiveness upon which Christianity was rooted. The role that it played in destabilising and disrupting the political institutions of Buganda Kingdom and also causing disunity and division between previously united people "must have left an indelible mark in the mind of young Bisaka to influence the emphasis on religious unity which is the distinctive doctrine of the FoU" (Ukah, 2018, p. 15).

Having grown up in a staunch Catholic family, Bisaka always had the desire and determination to become a Catholic priest. In 1944, he sought admission to the Catholic seminary but failed. This, however, did not weaken his quest and desire to serve in different capacities in the Catholic Church. He went to Nsamizi Teacher's College in Mityana, where he graduated as a Grade III primary school teacher. He taught

at a Catholic primary school in Kagadi for 35 years. He also served as the secretary to the Muhorro Catholic Parish and also as the advisor to the Confraternity of the Legion of Holy Mary Mother of Grace in Muhorro Parish (Bisaka, 1987). He was also appointed into the Diocesan Liturgical Committee by Bishop E. Baharagate, a position that elevated his religious profile.

Bisaka was a “gifted” liturgical song and music composer. His liturgical songs were central to his future ambition and mission and in the founding of FoU. In 1966, he began composing Catholic Church hymns, some of which, such as *Guba Mugisa Kuteranizibwa*, were included in the Runyoro/Rutooro Catholic hymnal books. This marked the first manifestation of the era of *Owobusobozi* although Bisaka claimed that it began in 1930 when he was born (Bisaka, 1987). The gift of composing church hymns elevated Bisaka’s status: he became a well-known figure in Catholic circles in Bunyoro for many years and was recognised by different priests and nuns for his musical talent and even received many gifts, both monetary and non-monetary. Among the members of local clergy, Rev. Fr. Kibira told Bisaka that “the Holy Spirit chose You,” whereas Rev. Fr. Musoke told him that “God chose You”; they believed that Bisaka’s musical talent was a special gift that God had chosen him for (Bisaka, 1987).

Composing hymns was an effortless task for Bisaka because whenever he wrote a new one, “He would receive special inspiration until He would write it up, accompanied by its tune...” (Bisaka, 1987, pp. 9-10). Based on this claim, Bisaka saw himself as someone who had direct communication with the divine, a task for which he had been made ready through many years of Catholic upbringing and teaching under his parents and grandparents as well as his active participation and contribution to the liturgical life of the Bunyoro Catholic community. Although Bisaka had been composing church hymns since 1966, it was in 1975 with the composition of the hymn *Nkaikiriza Ruhanga Murungi*⁶ (loosely translated as “I believed, God is good”) that became a turning and defining moment in his religious life and gave rise to the formation of FoU. The hymn became highly popular and a favourite for many parish choirs who used it in Catholic Mass and liturgical celebrations (Ukah, 2019). The significance of this hymn was that whenever it was used in

⁶ It is a hymn made of 24 short sentences.

church, Bisaka claimed to have received an unusual bodily sensation, "a special kind of power" around his arms. This same bodily sensation would occur to him whenever the prayer "Our Father" was sung during the liturgy (Bisaka, 1987). He did not know what to do of or how to interpret these experiences. He said that religious leaders who noticed his unusual bodily change informed him that it occurred because of the praises received for composing *Nkaikiriza* (Bisaka, 1987).

This experience went on for five years until the end of the fifth year when he heard "a voice of God" tell him, "You shall heal people by touching them" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 10). Although the voice persisted several more times, Bisaka remained hesitant for three months because he did not know how to proceed with such a command. On February 22, 1980, he "accepted and touched a person and that person got healed!" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 10). This event marked the official formation of FoU and the start of Bisaka's mission to heal and unite people. It also marked his breaking away from the Catholic Church. Ukah mentions that the sick person that Bisaka touched and healed was a young woman suffering from high fever attributed to malaria, a disease that is endemic in that part of Uganda (Katuura et al., 2007).⁷

Behrend (2011) mentions another version of Bisaka's spiritual experience: when Bisaka was composing *Nkaikiriza* in 1975, he received a revelation from the "Lord God of Hosts" where he went to heaven and God bestowed on him spiritual powers and the power to heal sick people by touching their heads. This vision continued to grow and his spiritual powers gradually became more powerful. During this period, he also increasingly disassociated himself from the Catholic Church. Five years after receiving his spiritual powers, the voice of God commanded him, "You shall heal people by touching them." Although he received this message numerous times, he remained hesitant for three months until one day, on February 22, 1980, he touched a sick person who was instantly healed. He then went on to heal people from various diseases (Behrend, 2011).

⁷ It is, however, not certain if she was indeed suffering from malaria since there is no clear evidence of whether she was clinically examined to determine if that was, indeed, the case.

It appears that in the early stages of FoU, Bisaka wrote the first edition of FoU's scripture. He later wrote a second revised edition that is currently available, where the former version of his spiritual experience is the recognised version (Behrend, 2011). Behrend (2011) states that she was told that after writing the second edition, Bisaka ordered his followers to collect and burn all copies of the first edition.

The Faith of Unity's Worldview and Vision

In the preface of FoU's scripture, Bisaka mentions that The Lord God of Hosts, through talking to him, caused the scripture to be written with the intention to deliver His message of healing and uniting people and bringing an end to disunity. This statement embodies the kind of vision that FoU espouses as well as Bisaka's mission and purpose, which is uniting humanity through healing. According to FoU, Bisaka's birth in 1930 was the beginning of a new age for humanity: the age of healing and uniting mankind into one flock and fighting the disunity that was caused by two previous ages. The first age was the age of human ignorance and lawlessness in the reign of the empire of Satan. The second was the age of Jesus Christ, his religion and the Bible, which were sources of hatred, disunity and disharmony. FoU takes an extremely critical and hostile attitude towards Christianity and the Bible. Bisaka (1987) declares that the Bible has been the main source and cause of division and disharmony among societies: it is in the Bible that "some of the words which have been disuniting people were written" (p. 20). He says that Biblical statements such as "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (John 20: 23) have been the reason for the proliferation of religious sects, mostly because of the many and often contradictory interpretations of such verses by religious leaders. With each leader claiming to represent the correct interpretation, religious differences, conflicts and hatred develops, causing divisions among people and thus violating God's commandment of loving one another (Bisaka, 1987). Furthermore, Bisaka states that "evil spirits" led religious leaders to insert their own words into the Bible because they were "empowered to do so by [John 20: 23]", thus making it a book full of lies and falsehoods that have been teaching hatred and causing disharmony (Bisaka, 1987). Realising that people have been divided and God's commandments

have been violated, The Lord God of Hosts "decided to remove the old words and hand them these new ones of uniting them, so that mutual love may prevail and people unite" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 22). Bisaka viewed Christianity and, as a matter of fact, all other religions as superfluous and regarded them a necessary phase of religious advancement, which, by the inauguration of the third age of unity and oneness, were ineffective and not needed anymore (Bisaka, 1987). Although the birth of Bisaka in 1930 was the beginning of this third age, it was in 1966 when its active mission started with the composition of hymns. The actual practice of healing in 1980 was the official beginning of this age of oneness. It is identified as the age of fighting Satan, healing sickness and unifying humankind, all done by Bisaka, the sacred healer and fighter.

Bisaka's vision of ending disunity through healing also carries a social dimension. FoU sees disunity as a cosmic disease that affects the social body, whereby societies plagued by divisions cannot function to their optimal capabilities, hence affecting their capacity and potential to work towards human thriving. Similarly, physical and spiritual sickness also affects people's ability to optimise their potential to work towards human prosperity. Therefore, "healing people everywhere and making people one" (Bisaka, 1987, p. 6) became Bisaka's main mission and vision. He views healing as a strategic instrument for bringing humankind together. It is through healing sickness and restoring spiritually and physically broken bodies that humankind will realise social, political and religious oneness and unity, thus reaching the sought-after age of oneness and human thriving. Human thriving is God's will for humanity. Bisaka, as the power of God, is considered as the sacred healer and fighter mandated to see the realisation of that goal.

FoU presents itself as a religion that came with "good news" for the people who have been divided, putting an end to disunity and bringing about a new age of oneness and human thriving through healing, both materially and spiritually. It presents a totalising worldview that seeks to redress the believer's general attitude towards life, the world and his relationship with the society as well as the divine.

The Reception, Spread and Development of the Faith of Unity

The emergence of any new form of religious movement challenging traditional and mainstream religiosity is usually met with strong opposition and rejection from mainstream religions as well as skepticism from the general public. Such was the case with FoU; the religious terrain in Uganda, especially the Catholic Church, did not welcome Bisaka's new religion. For fear of undermining the unity of the Church and disrupting and confusing the faithful—coupled with the fear of reoccurrence of religious violence and massacres that were caused by previous religious movements—the Church in Uganda declared Bisaka's religion, together with other new religious movements, as not belonging to the Church (Catholic Bishops of Uganda, 2000). Bisaka himself was excommunicated and the Church strongly warned the public against joining his movement. Similarly, the government of Uganda at the time did not welcome Bisaka's movement; it was banned and Bisaka was imprisoned a few times. This negative reaction from the government can be attributed to various reasons. First, there were reports that Bisaka and his followers were preventing sick people from seeking medical attention in hospitals, which caused a number of them to lose their lives. Secondly, the government also had its suspicion and fear of new religious movements, especially after witnessing the atrocities carried out in the name of religion by previous religious movements. Lastly, the government was under pressure from the Catholic Church, which is an eminently strong and influential institution in Uganda.

The reaction of the Catholic laity and the general public towards Bisaka's movement was divided. Those who were loyal to the Church were happy with the reaction of the Church and the government's decision to ban FoU. Some believed that since Bisaka had served the Catholic Church for a long time but did not attain the status of the clergy, he was disappointed with the Catholic leadership who did not recognise the huge contributions and dedication he had given the Church, leading him to break away and form his religion (Kassimir, 1996). It is also claimed that there were incidents of clashes between Bisaka's followers and some Catholics, where FoU's houses of worship were burnt down (Kassimir, 1996). Conversely, there were also those who were skeptical and suspicious of Bisaka's intentions but were afraid of his potential powers. For Bisaka's followers, however, they had nothing but belief in the power of *Owobusobozi*, who had come to save them from the

hardships that life was throwing at them, especially after realising that neither the government nor their present religious affiliations could provide solutions to their predicaments. Bisaka was a redeemer and a sign of relief to them.

A few years later, in 1995, with the declaration of religious freedom in the 1995 Uganda Constitution, the ban on Bisaka's religion was lifted and it has since attracted and continues to attract hundreds and thousands of followers every day, with its growth witnessed both inside and outside of Uganda. It is claimed that it has congregations in more than seven countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda and Canada (Ukah, 2018). The Local Government Development Plan of Kibaale District noted that the number of those registered under other religions increased from 5% to 13% in the period between 1991 and 2002 and this was attributed to the large number of people joining FoU (Kibaale District Local Government, n.d). In one of his fieldworks in Hoima District in 2016, Ukah (2018) mentions that Bisaka initiated more than 800 new followers in one single night. Different reports put the total number of followers of FoU between five and seven million (Ukah, 2014). It has achieved public recognition through various means, including building majestic headquarters in Kapyemi to serve as the its most sacred place and mission control, celebrating Bisaka's birthday every year, which attracts government and local officials as well as the media, and setting up branches countrywide. As of January 2020, FoU has more than 2,000 places of worship administered under the management of 35 divisions (*Bukwenda*), similar to "dioceses", in Uganda alone (Omukwenda Magezi, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

The rapid growth and spread of FoU in a country such as Uganda, which has a history of religious violence and massacres attributed to new religious movements, is a result of many factors. The first factor is the physical, psychological and spiritual healing and satisfaction that FoU offers or seems to offer to its members. One of the major reasons why most Africans join new religious movements is the search for both physical and spiritual healing. FoU was founded with the main purpose and goal of saving people from physical and spiritual illnesses, restoring their health in order to function to their optimal capabilities. It also considers healing people as a force that unites them against disharmony, which impedes human thriving and prevents them from achieving

contentment. Bisaka, as the divine who is physically present, represents the healing power of God, a power that has the ability to perform miracles and solve people's problems, ranging from as simple as blessing one with a bicycle to as complex as curing incurable diseases. People flock to him in search for answers and solutions for their barrenness, cure from long illnesses, protection from evil spirits and witchcraft, financial wellbeing and many more predicaments that their respective present situations or religions could not provide answers for. Some people are even brought from hospitals and clinics to be healed by Bisaka. Magezi explains that people come with "illnesses which had failed medically but Omukama Ruhanga Owobusobozi Bisaka cures them within a second! And one wonders how it has happened thus they end up confining in the faith" (Omukwenda Magezi, personal communication, January 22, 2020). Also, converts' professions and testimonies of the miracles performed by Bisaka have been a major factor in attracting people to FoU. A big section of the Faith's scripture is dedicated to testimonies from people who witnessed Bisaka's miracles that changed their lives (Bisaka, 1987). When non-members who might be going through the same predicaments hear of such testimonies, they run to Bisaka and declare their faith for him.

Furthermore, since Bunyoro is a place that is ravaged by practices of cannibalism and witchcraft, many who were caught in such practices were excluded from society and sometimes lynched and killed. When Bisaka came, and after existing religious institutions and the government had failed to combat those practices, he carried out large-scale healing and rehabilitation of witches and cannibals. Since many of those involved in such practices could not find their way out or be allowed back into society, Bisaka's religion gave them an opportunity to heal, redeem and cleanse themselves. He accepted and transformed them into good and productive members of society. This attracted many others to join FoU because not only could they redeem themselves, but they could also receive psychological support where they gain a sense of belonging and feel accepted by society. FoU, for those who joined, means being "enlightened"; as Magezi explained, for many who had been involved in Satanic practices, it was a difficult task to be rid of it completely. Joining FoU and cleansing oneself meant that someone had seen light and joined the ranks of the purified ones (Omukwenda Magezi, personal communication, January 22, 2020). Bisaka has been, in fact, hailed by

both government and local leaders for being a major force in restoring social order and bringing down the numbers of witches and cannibals in the region by helping to rehabilitate them. One of the region's Member of Parliament was quoted saying, "I thank Owobusobozi Bisaka who has uprooted and healed cannibals" (Mafaranga & Kasooaha, 2013). Another woman Member of Parliament was quoted saying, "I personally know people who used to be drunkards but when they joined the Faith of Unity, they got transformed" (Mugerwa, 2012).

Bisaka's religion also offered its members new and innovative ways of expressing and feeding their spiritual needs. For FoU, unlike other religions, God's power and presence through Bisaka is directly and physically felt; members can directly communicate with him, present their problems and get instant remedies to their problems. Bisaka participates in his followers' liturgies, prayers and rituals, attends there in their time of need, shares in their sorrows and happiness, is easily approachable as anyone could directly lay bare their inner-most feelings in front of him and also fills and satisfies in his followers a spiritual void that other religions could not. His charismatic personality, which is associated with his divine characteristic of performing miracles, made him gain the respect and obedience of his followers, instilling in them the confidence to resort to him for their spiritual and all other needs.

The second factor that attracted people to join FoU can be attributed to the government's failure to provide basic needs, such as education and healthcare, to the people. The government of Uganda has not been able to set up proper structures to provide its citizens with good and adequate services such as proper healthcare. Being a rural area, Bunyoro has no well-established infrastructure with proper road networks and affordable healthcare facilities. Patients find themselves having to walk long distances to reach healthcare centres because they cannot afford transportation costs. Moreover, the healthcare facilities themselves tend to be in an abysmal state with no medical professionals and little or no drugs available, in addition to many people not being able to afford the expenses involved in consulting medical personnel and buying drugs. Faced with such challenges, patients resort to Bisaka, who has a reputation for curing all kinds of illnesses without asking for a single coin. The government's failure to provide people with services has fed directly into the popularity of Bisaka and led people to join him because he provides them with such services at no cost. Another weakness on

the side of the government is its inability to conduct any oversight on the healing and other claims of new religious movements, such as FoU. When there are claims that incurable illnesses are cured in FoU, without the government coming out to clarify to the public on the authenticity of such claims, many people join FoU in hopes of being cured.

Furthermore, the government's failure to provide jobs and create income-generating projects for the people left many living in poverty. Consequently, many people joined FoU looking for financial wellbeing while others joined as a form of protest and frustration against the social deprivation and abject poverty that the government is unable to alleviate them from. They find solace and solidarity by joining others in FoU who are also going through the same predicaments.

Additionally, the current government, which is the same government that once placed a ban on Bisaka's religion, has played a big role in promoting and making FoU popular to the general public. Having gained a significant following and becoming immensely popular and influential in Bunyoro region, Bisaka started to attract influential people from the government. From Members of Parliament to Ministers, and all the way up to the Head of State, all visit Bisaka at his headquarters in Kapyemi on different occasions and join in the official celebrations of FoU. The current President of Uganda himself, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, officially inaugurated both the FoU headquarters in Kapyemi in 2005 and Bisaka's living palace in 2014. The Head of State has, on numerous occasions, hailed Bisaka for uniting people and instilling in them the zeal to work and become productive citizens, which, he says, is in line with the government's vision for the country (Kasooha, 2018). Bisaka has been invited to many official government functions and has been provided with round-the-clock security protection, in addition to many incentives, such as cars and financial support. In return, FoU also takes great pride in its support and association with the current regime despite all its failures and weaknesses. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, according to Bisaka, "provide[s] political healing and unity to the nation, so also, he (Bisaka) provides spiritual and social healing to humanity" (Ukah, 2016). It is, therefore, no surprise that because of Bisaka's influential status, the government has managed to foster an alliance with him in a bid to spread their political ambitions in the region. This alliance has been translated by many people as the government's endorsement and validation of FoU, resulting in many more joining the movement. The

declaration of religious freedom in the 1995 Uganda Constitution also paved the way for many to join any religion of their choice, including FoU.

The third factor that led to the rapid spread of FoU in Uganda is the weakness of the Church in providing answers to the ailing state of both the individual and society at large, in addition to the divisions and scandals that have struck the Church, which, for FoU followers, were clear evidence of the truthfulness of Bisaka's message and mission of uniting people who had been divided by the Church. The Church was not able to provide emotional support for people, in that, people go to church not only to worship but also to find a place where they could feel at home and comfortably communicate all their problems before God, but the church has failed to provide this. Most Africans join new religious movements because they find comfort in them; a place where they can freely communicate their feelings, express their desires and bare themselves in front of God (Mbiti, 1969). This is also the case with FoU. Given the dull atmosphere in church, many people joined FoU because they could physically see and meet the divine and present to him all their material and spiritual needs; they could directly and freely communicate to a god who looks like them and understands and feels their emotions.

This emphasis on God's immanence is a force of attraction for joining FoU. Perhaps, it has to do with some African religious imaginations and their conception of the divine. It is a common belief in the traditional African worldview that the spiritual and material worlds are interconnected. God, the Supreme Being and Creator of everything, is believed to be transcendentally occupying the spiritual world while Man occupies the material world. Between God and Man, there are spiritual beings that are believed to act as God's intermediaries but with lesser powers (Mbiti, 1969). They can be found in both animate and inanimate places and objects. God, as the Creator of everything, stands at the top of the hierarchy of spiritual beings, which are believed to be associated with Him and carry out His activities in the material world. As such, He is believed to be remote and not directly involved in the daily affairs of the world (Mbiti, 1969). It is believed that Man cannot approach Him directly, except through these spiritual beings. As a result, Man does not direct his prayers and worship to God except through spiritual beings since they are his direct contact in the material world. In the African

worldview, therefore, although God is believed to be the Supreme Being, Man does not run to Him for his spiritual or material needs because He is remote and far from him. He instead directs his needs towards the spiritual beings, whose power and presence is directly felt. This perhaps explains why people run to Bisaka as a physically present divine being, rather than to the transcendent one.

The fourth reason why people join FoU is because the movement is a sign of hope and vision: a sign of “good news” of ending disunity. The postcolonial crises that affected and caused significant disruptions on the African cultures and way of life led many to lose hope and vision for their future. Their social, political and cultural structures were disrupted and they became divided by the many foreign religions that invaded their land, ultimately losing hope. When FoU emerged with the “good news” of offering a better future and a way out of their predicaments, many people flocked to join. With eye-catching statements such as “Disunity has ended”, many people who had felt lost found hope and faith for a better future; they found new meaning in their lives. They joined FoU because it provided them with a new vision and worldview: one that pushes out foreign, divisive, oppressive, enslaving and deceiving religions; one that aims to bring them into the age of oneness and human thriving; and one that preserves their African way of life while, at the same time, getting rid of and rehabilitating some indigenous practices in new forms that are unique to FoU.

Challenges in Studying the Faith of Unity

FoU has not attracted much scholarly research despite having been founded more than three decades ago and this can be attributed to different reasons. Despite having spread to many areas, both rural and urban, and despite having gained a large following and recognition from the government, many people still consider and perceive it as an aberrant, deceitful, pretentious and dangerous cult that everyone should be guarded against. This perception is not farfetched, given the previous religious violence and massacres by new religious movements. Many academics in Uganda, according to Ukah (2018), consider it as an evil and Satanic movement that does not deserve any scholarly investment. It is also seen by many as a movement would not stand the test of time and will disappear with the death of its founder. They, therefore, do

not consider it worthy of any academic time and investment. Likewise, claims of miracles performed by Bisaka, such as curing incurable illnesses, have led many to distrust and dismiss FoU and regard it as a form of religious brainwashing and exploitation since such claims are never medically proven or verified.

Another challenge facing the study of FoU and new religious movements in general is that most studies of such movements are conducted not entirely for academic purposes, but also for other reasons, such as evangelism and polemics. Regarding the Church's response to "cults" in East Africa, Divito (2008) expresses that they "must be carefully researched and analysed in order to develop effective biblical responses and evangelistic strategies - a task that has yet to be undertaken." Such approaches are not uncommon when studying new religious movements. However, academic research on new religious movements should be carried out for the right purposes of trying to understand their nature, the kind of visions and worldviews they propagate, the behaviours of their practitioners and the kind of change and impact they effect on societies. Studying religions such as FoU for the wrong reasons hampers scholarly efforts for an objective apprehension of the phenomena of new religious movements.

Another challenge in studying FoU culminates from the fact that there is no written commentary on the history of its founder as well as its rituals and practices, except for information provided by the founder himself. The reason for this is because most FoU members consider writing such commentaries as amounting to altering some parts of the revelation in the scripture. In an interview with Magezi, however, he affirmed that since Bisaka "made philosophical statements" in *The Book of God* that require explanations, "one is free to ask questions and make comments" (personal communication, January 22, 2020). Regardless, however, the fact that there is practically no written commentary about FoU suggests members' fear of altering the revelation. There is, therefore, no room for the expansion, development and refinement of ideas, except from Bisaka himself. This presents a challenge for researchers since the available information about FoU is scarce and scattered.

Conclusion

This study concludes that although it is hard to single out the main reason for the emergence of FoU, there is no gainsaying that it emerged as a response to various challenges existing in the Western Ugandan community. The emergence and development of FoU indicates a response to the social deprivation and trauma caused by colonialism and its resultant disruptions and disorganisations of African societies and their way of life. By selling their imported religions with all their denominations to Africans, missionaries created divisions among otherwise united societies. These foreign religions created tensions and became sources of violence and clashes between African cultures and those of the missionaries. In post-independence Uganda, foreign religions were also used to suppress and deprive those who did not follow certain faiths, thus creating more divisions. FoU appeared as a response to such conflicts and offered solutions to many problems that the government and existing religions had failed to resolve, thus attracting many followers.

Dosteo Bisaka's religious movement attracted the deprived and marginalised members of society by offering religious solutions; in turn, the movement appeared as a new way of life that is filled with hope for the powerless and grieving people through the garb of religion. Through his religious mission, Bisaka wanted to unite humanity and fight disunity by healing sickness and restoring spiritually and physically broken bodies so that humankind will realise social, political and religious oneness and unity.

FoU faced strong opposition and rejection in the beginning, similar to many other new religious movements, by mainstream religions. However, FoU's philosophies and approaches rapidly gained the hearts of the common people and, thus, became the fastest-growing religion in Uganda.

FoU is a good example of a new religion on the African religious terrain with its own new beliefs, doctrines and practices as well as its own new way of defining the relationship between Man and Divine. It is important to note that although FoU presents itself as an African religion that aims at reviving and restoring African beliefs and traditions through healing and uniting people, it is not an African indigenous traditional religion. As it has been observed, it vehemently criticises

most indigenous religious traditions of Bunyoro, such as honoring Chwezi deities and so forth. Also, unlike indigenous African religions that have no specific founder, are orally transmitted and do not aim at proselytising or attracting new members, FoU has a founder and a sacred scripture, with members (*abahereza*) who are appointed by Bisaka himself to spread the movement's message. Furthermore, although FoU is very anti-Christian, there are many striking similarities between the movement and Christianity. FoU's doctrines and concept of deity, scripture, houses of worship, congregational services and even attire, in one way or another, exhibits some Christian Catholic influence; this is perhaps due to Bisaka's Catholic background. To Bisaka and his followers, however, it is such features that make FoU a modern African religion that is distinct from other religions.

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