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John Gafabusa, custodian of the Mutiyona natural sacred site near Buliisa, Uganda, points at a water covered sacred site on Lake Albert at the Karakaba landing site, Aug. 3, 2023. As TotalEnergies invests billions into oilfield development and acquires more and more land, Bagungu people who practice traditional beliefs worry the spiritual power of at least 32 sacred natural sites in Buliisa keeps deteriorating. (AP Photo/Hajarah Nalwadda)

Rodney Muhumuza

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BULIISA, Uganda — August 25, 2023

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Alex Wakitinti is worried about the sacred natural sites he tends in the large swath of bushy grassland near Lake Albert. It's the same slice of his homeland that oil companies are developing in order for [Uganda to become an oil producer](#) by 2026.

But French oil company [TotalEnergies](#) and others working toward that goal are recklessly ignoring the significance of Wakitinti's spiritual work, he said, as well as that of the other custodians minding hallowed natural sites in the remote district of Buliisa near the Congo border.

"According to the program of Total, custodians are not there," said Wakitinti, chief custodian of sacred sites in Buliisa. "We are not in their program."

That is a mistake, he said, making note of the bad luck that can come from disturbing these special places without performing the necessary rituals or making sacrifices to spirit mediums — like the tree Wakitinti recently knelt under to pray and present a bird's nest.

Sacred natural sites here range from single trees in the bush to the rift in the land where the Nile River merges with Lake Albert, creating a spectacular landscape that intensifies the Bagungu's respect for nature. They believe these sites are repositories of occult mediums with the power to solve problems that range from a thief in the community to a sickness in the family.

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As TotalEnergies invests billions into oilfield development and acquires more and more land, Wakitinti and other Bagungu people who practice traditional beliefs worry the spiritual power of at least 32 sacred natural sites in Buliisa keeps deteriorating. There are already signs, like the region's prolonged dry spell some say is proof the sanctity of some sites has already been breached.

"You can see we have no rain. ... We are crying," said farmer William Byabagambi, who noted that communal offerings to spirits will be fewer as community members move out to make way for oil infrastructure.

Uganda is estimated to have recoverable oil reserves of at least 1.4 billion barrels, and officials see future oil earnings lifting millions out of poverty. Investors from Australia, Ireland, China and, most recently, France have been involved over the years.

TotalEnergies — the top shareholder in Uganda's oil project — faces a [legal challenge](#) and [pressure to pull out](#) because of concerns over a heated pipeline that campaigners say undermines the Paris climate accord.



Alex Wakitinti, chief custodian of sacred sites in Buliisa, performs a ritual at a sacred site in the village of Kibambuura , near Buliisa, Uganda, Aug. 4, 2023. Wakitinti is worried about the sacred natural sites he tends in the large swath of bushy grassland near Lake Albert. It's the same slice of his homeland that oil companies, like France's TotalEnergies, are developing in order for Uganda to become an oil producer by 2026. "According to the program of Total, custodians are not there," said Wakitinti. "We are not in their program." (AP Photo/Hajarah Nalwadda)

A TotalEnergies spokesperson in Uganda did not immediately respond to detailed requests for comment on the concerns of the Bagungu.

In 2006, a commercially viable amount of oil was discovered in Buliisa, which is home to less than 100,000 Bagungu, a community of farmers and others who depend on the Albertine area for everything from food to religious practice. Their traditional beliefs are seen as peculiar in this Christian-majority country of 45 million people, contributing to the sense of injustice that's now driving a campaign to protect their sacred natural sites from oil activities.

"The sites are threatened," said Robert T. Katemburura, an activist with the Uganda-based African Institute for Culture and Ecology.

Most families in Buliisa maintain small shrines to ancestral spirits close to home but sometimes take trips to sacred natural sites, seeking revelations and blessings in response to their more serious matters.



John Gafabusa ties a cowrie shell on Abiri Ntarwete's arm before visiting the Mutyona natural sacred near Buliisa, Uganda, Aug. 3, 2023. As TotalEnergies invests

billions into oilfield development and acquires more and more land, Bagungu people who practice traditional beliefs worry the spiritual power of at least 32 sacred natural sites in Buliisa keeps deteriorating. (AP Photo/Hajarah Nalwadda)

While the sites remain largely intact, the sanctity of two has been violated by a nearby pipeline and a processing facility. Excessive noise from oil-related work is believed to anger spirits, he said.

"We fault the oil companies because they have taken their roads and infrastructure through the sacred natural sites," he said.

In 2020, Irish firm Tullow Oil completed the \$575 million sale of its Ugandan assets to TotalEnergies, raising hopes of oil production after delays due to corruption scandals and tax disputes. But the French company faces challenges as some campaigners go to court and others urge banks to withdraw support.



John Gafabusa, followed by Abiri Ntarwete, walks from the Mutuyona natural sacred site near Buliisa, Uganda, Aug. 3, 2023. As TotalEnergies invests billions into oilfield development and acquires more and more land, Bagungu people who practice

traditional beliefs worry the spiritual power of at least 32 sacred natural sites in Buliisa keeps deteriorating. (AP Photo/Hajarah Nalwadda)

European lawmakers last year passed a resolution that urged TotalEnergies to suspend its activities in the region. This year the company faced a second lawsuit in Paris over its East Africa project. Filed in June by French and Ugandan civic groups, the lawsuit accuses the company of failing to comply with France's "duty of vigilance" law and seeks compensation for six years of alleged land and food rights violations.

TotalEnergies has long denied the charges, saying it's deploying state-of-the-art design — including horizontal drilling — to minimize ecological damage.

In Buliisa, the land rush destroyed the cultural "commons" as landowners fenced off their properties in anticipation of compensation, said Wilson Kiiza, founder of the Bugungu Heritage and Information Centre. He pointed out that unmarked natural sites in the jungle are especially vulnerable amid a cash bonanza.



John Gafabusa, right, and Abiri Ntarwete, pray at the Mutyona natural sacred site near Buliisa, Uganda, Aug. 3, 2023. As TotalEnergies invests billions into oilfield development and acquires more and more land, Bagungu people who practice traditional beliefs worry the spiritual power of at least 32 sacred natural sites in Buliisa keeps deteriorating. (AP Photo/Hajarah Nalwadda)

Human Rights Watch last month published a report that warned of a looming disaster, asserting that households affected by land acquisitions are worse off than they had been. "The land acquisition process has been marred by delays, poor communication, and inadequate compensation," that report said.

Newplan, a company contracted by TotalEnergies to handle the environmental aspects of relocations, didn't respond to the AP's questions. It contends that graveyards and shrines have been relocated respectfully, with family members themselves paid to carry out the appropriate rituals.

The oil boom caught people off guard, with community leaders too slow to identify possible threats to sacred natural sites after oil deposits were discovered, said Gilbert Tibasiima, the second-in-command official in Buliisa.



Wilson Kiiza, executive director at the Bugungu Heritage and Information Center in Buliisa, Uganda, holds cowrie shells which are iconic to the Bugungu culture Aug. 4, 2023. As TotalEnergies invests billions into oilfield development and acquires more and more land, Bagungu people who practice traditional beliefs worry the spiritual power of at least 32 sacred natural sites in Buliisa keeps deteriorating. In Buliisa, the land rush destroyed the cultural “commons” as landowners fenced off their properties in anticipation of compensation, says Kiiza. (AP Photo/Hajarah Nalwadda)

Attempts to remedy that have stalled. The Buliisa assembly passed a bylaw in 2020 that would restrict access to sacred sites and impose fines for disturbances. But it is yet to be ratified by the office of Uganda's attorney-general, underscoring the politically prickly nature of the matter.

"The discovery of oil and gas found people when they were not prepared for the industry. These are people who did not know the potential impacts that come along," said Tibasiima, a Mugungu raised in Buliisa. "Had they known earlier, probably, maybe, they could have developed their local means of preserving the environment in general, including protection of their sacred sites."



A sacred site marked by a palm tree is stands in the rising waters of Lake Albert at Karakaba landing site, near Buliisa , Uganda, Aug. 3, 2023. Sacred natural sites range from single trees in the bush to the rift in the land where the Nile River merges with Lake Albert, creating a spectacular landscape that intensifies the Bagungu's respect for nature. (AP Photo/Hajarah Nalwadda)

Custodians of sacred sites were not able to predict the impact of compulsory land acquisitions, especially with oil contractors withholding information about project pathways to keep compensation costs down. Now some authorities regard the Bagungu's concern over sacred sites as a nuisance that could only delay the start of oil production, he said.

Wakitinti, the chief custodian, said he sees prolonged dry conditions in Buliisa these days as a sign the spirits are not happy with oil activities. He also cited the elephants that run rampant from the nearby Murchison Falls National Park, where TotalEnergies is digging oil wells, and trample people's crops.

Those are signs of bad luck, he said.