



Oral performance as substitute for ritual: *Ekutet*, a Teso exhumation ceremony

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Among the Teso of Western Kenya, *Ekutet* (the exhumation ceremony) has for centuries been practised to treat physical, mental, and/or emotional problems. A family's, or the community's, persistent misfortunes such as frequent deaths, illnesses, accidents, or unexplained feuds and such other grief causing occurrences may be attributed to an unhappy dead member of the family or community. To correct the situation and bring life back to normal, the unhappy dead member's bones are exhumed, either for reburial or display in a sacred place. Notably, the ritual is performed to the accompaniment of oral performances, rendered as narrations, incantations, swearing, prayer chants, and occasional re-enactments of attendant dramatic anecdotes. This article is written against the backdrop of the realisation that the *Ekutet* ritual itself appears to be diminishing, which then raises a pertinent question: What replaces, or has replaced, the role that this highly psychological ritual has usually played in the lives of the Teso people? I interviewed members of the community, while analysing the oral performances incorporated in this socio-cultural cum spiritual endeavour. Due to the fact that the actual ritual has become quite rare, people apparently try to keep it alive by revisiting the memory of the ritual, which they do through re-enactments and mock exhumations. This then also draws attention to the role of memory, narration, and re-enactment in either the resuscitation of, or the reliving of, diminishing ritual practices. **Keywords:** *Ekutet*, ritual, memory, narration, re-enactment, emotions, displacement, replacement, representation.

Introduction

The role of ritual in shaping the thoughts and worldview of a people cannot be gainsaid. For a long time, before and even after the arrival of Christianity in Africa, ritual was, has been, and to a large extent still is a popular practice among African societies. From time immemorial, these rituals have remained deeply rooted and felt among the people that practise the particular rituals. In a way, the rituals define the said people and become part and parcel of their lives. Researchers in ritual such as Samovar *et al.* have argued that ritual serves to reduce a people's anxiety, boost their confidence, alleviate their grief, or simply serve a psychological relief. In a good number of cases, ritual may serve a religious purpose just as much as it serves secular purposes. Among the Digo at the Kenyan Coast, for instance, the *Kayamba* dance is performed for ritual healing, i.e., it is used as alternative medicine, in the same way *Kilumi* is performed among the Kamba in Eastern Kenya. In Western Kenya, the Luo perform *Tero buru* for the purpose of driving the spirit of death from the village. The spirit of death—it is believed—remains active and should not be left to hover around lest it victimises another member; rather, it must be cast away, presumably to the land of the enemy. Meanwhile, the shaving ceremony among the Luhya, other than being a sign of loss and suffering, reassures the bereaved of a new beginning without the loved one. The shaving, thus, is a kind of release and self-liberation from the deceased's grip so that life can start afresh. Of course, other communities have their own rituals that serve different purposes. Indeed, these practices touch strongly on the people's belief systems. In other words, ritual is often rooted, not only in the people's social life, but in the spiritual or religious dimension as well. Sometimes, there is such strong belief and adherence to some rituals that this can, in some cases, mean life and death.

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My focus in this article is on the *Ekutet*, which is a death ritual among the Teso people of Western Kenya, Busia County. I interrogate the practice of the ritual that involves the exhumation of a dead person's bones for reburial or display and what it means to the people, past and present. The article is the result of several fieldwork visits among the Teso and extensive interviews with members of the Teso community. My interaction with the Omong'oluk cultural group (believed to be strong custodians of the Teso culture) was extremely valuable regarding the practices of the Teso community. Under the guidance of the late Mr. Mwalimu Charles Ogola and later Mr. Anthony Adeng'oi, I was able to meet interviewees from different corners of the Teso region, including Malaba, Kaliwa, Amukura, Okame, Aterait, Kocholia, Adung'osi, and many other places. The climax of my visits was my interview with the late Omoding, the man who was believed to have the powers to make people who had committed crimes to eat grass as punishment, and/or to make them own up to their crimes. I conducted one-on-one interviews with individuals and groups. I also witnessed cultural dances, mock dramas, and re-enactments of the *Ekutet* ritual and recorded the accompanying oral narratives, songs, and proverbs, which I analysed with the assistance of Adeng'oi to get further insight into the *Ekutet* ritual.

The role that *Ekutet* performance has always played in the socio-cultural and emotional wellbeing of the Teso community notwithstanding, the ritual—according to the findings during my research—appears to be diminishing or has already diminished altogether in some parts of the Teso community. I noted that a majority of the youth, some in their late twenties, have never witnessed an actual performance of the *Ekutet* ritual, thereby confirming its rareness. The pertinent question I posed in this article, therefore, is: How is the community accessing the remedies that this ritual always served, in the absence of *Ekutet*?

I realised that while the performance of the ritual is becoming rare, literature about the ritual abounds. Individuals and groups will, on inducement, readily engage a willing listener in oral performances about the ritual, rendered as narrations, incantations, swearing, prayer chants, occasional re-enactments of attendant dramatic anecdotes, and mock exhumations. This is a factor that has prompted me to ask: Are the oral performances a sort of psychological substitute for the diminishing actual *Ekutet* ritual performance? Indeed, what is the relationship between orality and ritual performance in general and/or the oral performances witnessed in the field and the *Ekutet* ritual in particular?

In this article, I firstly briefly recap the role and meaning of ritual in general and death ritual in particular, as considered by various scholars in different contexts. I then explain the *Ekutet* ritual itself: its context, purpose, and the process of its performance. I follow this with a discussion on the current state of the ritual among the host community, the Teso. I then conclude with how oral literature, through memory, narration, and dramatic re-enactment, act as a way to keep alive the otherwise diminishing ritual.

Ritual in society in general and the *Ekutet* ritual in particular

Commenting further on the central role of ritual in society, Samovar *et al.*, posit that “ritual recalls past events, preserving and transmitting the foundations of society” (80). This observation appears to echo an earlier stand by Annemarie de Waal Malefijt that “participants in the ritual become identified with the sacred past, thus, perpetuating traditions as they re-establish the principles by which the group lives and functions” (47). Both scholars appear to agree on ritual as a people's connection to their past and perhaps how that past impacts their present.

Meanwhile, William Haviland, on the importance of ritual, notes: “Not only is ritual a means of re-enforcing a group's social bonds, and for relieving tensions, but it is also one way important events are celebrated and crises such as death made less disruptive and less difficult for individuals to bear” (48). In Haviland's view, therefore, ritual is a kind of social support system, without which a community as an established entity runs the risk of disintegrating.

Ekutet being a death ritual, in this article I also take an interest in how scholars relate ritual and death. Commenting on *The Strong Breed* in which Wole Soyinka presents a death ritual, Thierry Dubost posits that what the playwright is in fact saying is that ritual should prevent death. According to the critique, this is because ritual testifies to the connection between the world of the living, that of the dead, and that of the unborn. If this be the case, then ritual dissolves the barriers that exist between life and death such that the dead and the living remain one community. Of course, the very expression of the ritual being a “tragedy of hope”, in Dubost's words, sounds paradoxical. This, however, apparently ties in with William Haney II's assertion that while participating in ritual—in particular one involving death—the audience undergoes a “cathartic transformation”. Haney, who

analyses Soyinka's ritual drama *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Road*, interprets the works as involving the process of self-discovery through which the gulf between the self and the other, as well as mortality and immortality, is momentarily crossed. The sum effect of the two assertions by Dubost and Haney is that a death ritual should bring life back to the living, which—it appears—the *Ekutet* death ritual is purposed to do.

Perhaps among the most revered rituals in the Teso community is the *Ekutet*, a ceremony that involves the exhumation of the bones of the dead for reburial, or preservation in the family shrine. This could happen at two levels. It could be a normal exhumation, or one that happens when there is a crisis. A normal exhumation takes place after fifteen years since the dead were buried. The family then feels that the spirit (*eparait*) of their dead is ready to be honoured, by being ascended to ancestral status. The bones are, therefore, exhumed and reunited with the *eparait*, believed to have been living in the bush since it was separated from the body at burial. Several rites by elders who are past child-bearing age are performed for the exhumed bones, which are then transferred to the shade in the family shrine. Meanwhile, a crisis exhumation is done when it is felt that the dead is not happy for one reason or another. In such cases, the dead could be disturbing the living and causing calamities. This necessitates early exhumation, so as to perform the rites of appeasement before the bones are either reburied or taken to the family shrine for safe keeping.

Depending on the purpose of the exhumation, the subsequent treatment of the bones could involve other/more attendant rituals that also aim to appease the dead person's spirit. In a majority of cases, one may deduce the purpose of the exhumation from the accompanying oral performances such as declamations, incantations, swearing, and prayer chants as the community elders implore the dead for mercy, leniency, support, and protection against misfortune and suffering. The afflictions calling for the *Ekutet* ritual may be physical, mental, or emotional. The ritual may be performed to remedy an individual's, family's, or community's persistent misfortunes such as frequent deaths, illnesses, accidents, or unexplained feuds. As already explained, the said calamities may be attributed to an unhappy dead member of the family or community. Thus, the need to right a wrong done against the dead person.

Often, the activities of the community may perceivably anger the entire council of ancestors, a situation that will affect people on a larger scale. The entire Teso community may then suffer great calamities such as extended drought and/or consequent famine, massive crop failure, and other widespread hardships. In these cases, the *Ekutet* ritual is performed accompanied with song and dance. As I established during my field research, the rendition of the accompanying song and dance must attain purity and perfection, which calls for the best musicians in the community. The purpose of flawless musical renditions, as believed by the members of the community, is to excite the nostalgia of the living dead and render them more approachable. As a custom, the main musical instruments of the community (particularly the ones that the living dead are expected to relate to, or instruments they played when they were alive) make part of the ensemble. They will include but not be limited to special *atenusu* (drums), *adeudeu* (a five stringed lyre), *arupepe* (the traditional horn), and *adongo* (the plucked lamella-phone). Through the appealing music and dance the community's prominent ancestors may also be implored over those times of hardship and appeased to forestall more disaster. Of course, *Ekutet* may also be performed to thank the ancestors for provision(s) as a way of attracting more in the future. It then becomes a good show to preserve the bones of such dead with greater care and honour to ensure continued favour from the benevolent ancestors. All in all, *Ekutet* is thus for sustaining a favourable situation or correcting a bad one and bringing life back to normal.

(Dis)placement, (re)placement, and (re)presentation in the Teso community

During my fieldwork, I was assisted in my choice of respondents by my two guides, Mwalimu Charles Ogola and Anthony Adeng'oi, who were knowledgeable members of the community. The guides knew the groups and individuals that could provide me with the answers I was seeking on the position of ritual in general and *Ekutet* in particular for the Teso people. Ogola in particular was instrumental in my task of understanding the role of oral performances in the ritual. The interviews with the respondents took many forms: conversation, narration, demonstration, and dramatic performances. I sought explanations on the question of oral renditions (in particular music and dance, incantations, declamations, swearing, prayer chants, and dramatisation) during the performance of the ritual. I similarly sought the people's views on both the current position of *Ekutet* and its future.

Coming to the key question of how, in the absence of *Ekutet*, the community was dealing with the spiritual and psychological remedies that the ritual had always served, I resorted to psychoanalysis in the attempt to establish what fills the gap created by this absence. In the process three terms related to psychoanalysis offered

themselves, which I use here not in their strict theoretical sense, but rather in their ordinary day to day reference. These are (dis)placement, (re)placement, and (re)presentation. The prefixes 'dis' and 're' in brackets allow me to address the antithetical component of normal 'placement', while 're' before 'presentation' introduces the element of meaning and role of the presentations. With these three terms, considered side by side with the expressions coming through the oral renditions, I came to make my conclusions on the position of *Ekutet* in the contemporary Teso community.

The term (dis)placement is used to serve the dual purpose of 'placement' and 'displacement' in which something accustomed to being in a place is shifted to another, thereby altering its position and/or significance. The Teso *Ekutet* ritual can be seen in this light of placement and displacement. While none of the respondents wanted to admit outright that the *Ekutet* ritual was, as a matter of fact, dead, all were in consensus that its performance had become rare, perhaps only still regarded by quinquagenarians, sexagenarians and those older. Indeed, the middle-aged and elderly who lived during the active days of the ritual recalled it with nostalgia and reverence. They attributed several of the community's afflictions today to the abandonment of this sacred ritual: "In the olden days, cases of, say, sons killing their parents, leave alone just fighting them over land, were unheard of," complained Mzee Adung'o, the chairman of the famous Omong'oluk Traditional Cultural Group, who was in his seventies. He then added:

"Of course, the parents who happen to die in that manner, instead of bequeathing blessings to their children, descend on them with bitterness, causing misfortunes. *Ekutet* must then be performed so that the bones of that dead parent may be appeased then reburied, or preserved in the family shrine where the offending son would regularly visit to atone himself with the malevolent spirit of his aggrieved father." (Adung'o and Muleka)

"But why have you as a community decided to abandon a practice you seem to still value so much", I asked. "It is today's young generation. They have relegated our practices and chosen to replace them", Adung'o lamented. "Replace them?" I probed further. "They have relegated our practices such as *Ekutet* in favour of Western education and practices. They have replaced our practices with Christianity; what they call modernity and other apish cultural practices". One could feel an element of agitation in Adung'o's tone of voice. Then, without waiting for me to ask him another question, he spoke again, this time more calmly, a kind of confirmation that he had perhaps recovered from his earlier outburst or had reconciled himself to the way things were: "The faith of the young people today appears to be wholly represented in Christian prayers. They believe that Christian prayers will address all their concerns". "And won't they?" I asked, perhaps to remind Mzee that he still had an audience before him. To which he responded like one who had not heard me:

"Diseases such as madness, epilepsy, leprosy and many others, as well as conditions such as barrenness and others are now referred to hospital. The hospital cannot manage some of these conditions because they are associated with the spirits, more so, evil spirits. Only our ways of dealing with evil spirits can address them. It is then no wonder that our world is now reeling under the weight of a myriad problems". (Adung'o and Muleka)

I observed that the sentiments from Adung'o seemed to set the tone for sentiments from other respondents across the spectrum. And because the ritual could now only be placed in the distant past, one would be right to conclude that *Ekutet* as a therapeutic ritual had been displaced and replaced. In its place were the Christian faith and modern medicine as representative remedies to the psychological, physical, and even emotional concerns of the community, particularly for the younger generation who seem to trust that prayers could protect them from the ravages of the evil spirits. "Take everything to the Lord in prayer", is perhaps their clarion call. Would this by any chance mean that the elderly who still looked up to *Ekutet* had nothing to do with Christianity? A majority of the elderly people who I talked to admitted to being believers in the Christian faith. Many said that they never missed attending their local Christian churches. But from their sentiments, one notes that deep inside, *Ekutet* remains part of their spirituality even as they go to the church services. Indeed, from the responses of some, they would be prepared to perform the ritual, albeit secretly and outside the knowledge of their Christian priests and pastors. Many are also those who go to hospital but come back to reconsider *Ekutet* as the ultimate solution if they believe that the afflictions are (in their own terms) "African" in nature, thus, requiring the enlisting of some of the African practices such as *Ekutet*. For instance, where it is believed that the afflictions are a result of, say, witchcraft, then hospitals become irrelevant. It became clear to me that the displacement of *Ekutet* had occurred in

the face of the Christian faith, which had psychologically replaced the earlier reliance on the traditional practice. The presentations that were being displayed were a mere representation of a nostalgic memory.

The role of oral literature in keeping *Ekutet* alive

In spite of the above revelations, I still asked myself a couple of questions: Firstly, did the *Ekutet* ritual stand a chance in the face of the invading Western practices, and Christianity in particular? Secondly, in view of the diminished stature of *Ekutet*, what would happen to the memory of the ritual that worked for the people before? To put it another way, what were the people to do with their nostalgia about the ritual? Were there any remedies for keeping *Ekutet* alive? I found these to be weighty questions, not only in relation to *Ekutet*, but also in relation to other traditional rituals in African society.

In this section, I want to start with the latter concern, i.e., the possible remedies for keeping *Ekutet* alive. The other concerns are likely to be addressed in the process of interrogating this latter concern. To start with, if I am to go with what I gathered from their responses, the people, particularly the elderly, have a memory of and nostalgia about the *Ekutet* ritual. Adeng'oi confirmed that some cultural adherents in the community have—on cultural days—tried to campaign for its resuscitation. But, as he pointed out, this interest clearly appeared to be going against the tide and the resuscitation of the ritual has to surmount the objections of the Christian church which most, if not all, cultural adherents are members of. Consequently, open participation in the ritual—which, as I learnt, the church ministers had time and again dubbed 'satanic'—would be tantamount to open and deliberate 'sinning'. This in itself, the people have always been warned, would—invite condemnation to "burn in the fire of hell", as Adeng'oi quoted some church leaders. Meanwhile, one can predict that participating in what some members of the society appear to shun is likely to attract scorn or cause stigma socially. However, the biggest obstacle to the resuscitation of *Ekutet* could perhaps be said to be the disregard by the youth who view the ritual as outdated and/or obsolete, at least according to what those I managed to interact with said. This means that the ritual is easing out with the older generation who have nobody readily willing to be handed over the baton to when they're ready to exit—mostly through natural attrition. So, how may *Ekutet* survive? Incidentally, the answer to this question could be found in oral literature.

It may sound idealistic, abstract, or even farfetched, but during my research into the ritual, I concluded that its continued survival resided in orality realised through narration and dramatic re-enactment of the ritual. This may be an unconscious process, but the eagerness with which the cultural adherents talk about the ritual makes it clear that perhaps this is one of the ways it will remain 'alive': through frequent narrations to the youth and visitors about its process and value. I would argue that, for those who heavily feel the loss of the ritual, there is a kind of self-actualisation and fulfilment in the very process of narrating the ritual and conducting 'mock' exhumation. This is perhaps akin to the psychological concept of wishful thinking and wish fulfilment in which a wish that cannot be met is realised in a disguised manner. Indeed, talking about the ritual puts the narrator on the psychological journey of rediscovering, if not resuscitating, the practice. Narration, therefore, seems to bring the ritual back to life.

Meanwhile, as the ritual is narrated, it is clear to those listening how vivid the memory of the ritual is to the narrator. Even for the listeners themselves, there is a feeling of freshness of the events of the ritual due to the manner in which they are told. Indeed, the narrator makes it sound like it is perhaps only yesterday when the events of the ritual took place. And, since the said narration is done from the narrator's memory of the ritual, this posits oral literature memory—and preservation in whatever form—as the repository that will keep the ritual always alive and as a part of the people's culture. From the memory of the ritual, its re-enactment becomes a reality. It therefore behoves researchers to be ready to record—especially with modern audio-visual instruments—yearly cultural performances of *Ekutet* and post them into the internet, so that it becomes a kind of repository to pass the ritual on to the next generations.

While narration only explains the events of the *Ekutet* ritual, mock exhumations involve practical demonstration of how the exhumation itself was done. As a matter of fact, mock exhumations sound and feel like the actual exhumation and the observer can hardly tell the difference in most instances. In fact, on one occasion, I thought that I was witnessing an actual live exhumation. The person performing the mock exhumation had prepared the ground in advance and had even ensured that the object to be exhumed had been buried there and that the grave looked convincingly old. As the digging went on, I found my apprehension growing. When the object to be exhumed was reached, it was a well-wrapped decayed object that made one believe that it was a real

human corpse. Those accompanying me believed and continuously insisted that it was a real exhumation. As the old man performing the mock exhumation explained to me and my companions, the exercise was designed to be like an actual exhumation. Those assisting in the process dug out the soil carefully to make sure that the bones were not crushed in case they were reached. One has to bear in mind that burying bodies in coffins was not part of the Teso culture. When the bones are found, these are lifted out carefully, trying as much as possible to keep the skeleton intact. All this time, strict silence is kept. As some elders explained to me later, silence is kept to avoid scaring off the dead person's spirit, which having been living in the 'bush' since it left the body during burial, has to return to the now exhumed body. The returning of the spirit, as the elders explained, is crucial because it is the very spirit that is either bound, appeased, implored, reprimanded, and/or sacrificed to if the exhumation was about curing a bad relationship between the dead and the living. Once the skeleton has been extracted and is on the surface, people break into song and dance around it. Those who were fasting can now break the fast. From the songs, chants, incantations, declamations, swearing, prayers, and dramatization, one can tell what the exhumation was all about. If the spirit was, for example, disturbing the living, the leader of the ceremony may curse, reprimand, swear, and so on. If the body was to be reburied, the body would, after numerous rituals and libations, be buried back in the same grave or in another grave dug afresh. If the body was to be taken to the family shrine, this would be done by designated individuals, after which the occasion is opened to eating and drinking *ajon*, the traditional beer brewed from fermented millet. The celebrations also become another rich source of oral performances in which stories are told, songs are sung, and prayer chants are recited.

What comes out then is that the act of re-enacting the ritual seems to bring it back to life. Re-enactment, thus, becomes a very potent repository of this revered ritual and could serve as an encyclopaedia to teach future generations as well as visitors to the community. Much as I have pointed out that the youth today tend to disregard the ritual, it is not the entire population of the youth. Some young people that I talked to still believe that the ritual is in fact useful. Depending on the particular exposure of the youth, some confirmed to me that they had had the opportunity to witness and/or participate in a number of mock ceremonies at a tender age. This meant that perhaps the ritual still had chances of being carried into the future.

As I found out, the educated population is incidentally the one advocating for the resuscitation of not only *Ekutet*, but also the other cultural practices that appear to be fading out. As Ogola explained to me:

[...] the more enlightened and financially able members of the community have of late been sponsoring annual cultural festivals which bring together Teso people of all walks of life. During such festivals, induced performances of the *Ekutet* ritual, like many other community rituals, are given special shows in what has come to be known as "cultural displays of our traditional way of life". (Ogola and Muleka)

One then concludes that the *Ekutet* ritual may be diminishing or in fact is already diminished in most parts of the Teso region, but it continues to remain alive through memory, narration, and re-enactment as a substitution, even if the substitution is only psychological in nature. In essence, multiple audio-visual recordings are the direction to take: this, in a way, cements the place of oral literature as the encyclopaedia of the people's indigenous knowledge and practices.

Conclusion

In this article, I examined *Ekutet*, the Teso exhumation ceremony that involves the exhumation of the bones of the dead for reburial, or preservation, in the family shrine. The ceremony, said to have been performed from time immemorial, is believed to protect the family from the wrath of displeased ancestors. Incidentally, the ceremony appears to be dying out due to the divided opinion concerning its continued usefulness. Despite the diminishing or diminished position of the Teso *Ekutet* ritual, a section of the population, mostly the more elderly in society, still feel nostalgic about it and hold it in great reverence. For this section of the society, their apparent hope is that the ritual may regain its former role, which perhaps explains their eagerness to narrate or re-enact it whenever an opportunity arises. Some members of the Teso elite are making attempts to re-popularise the ceremony but they have to deal with prevailing contexts such as multiculturalism, better hospitals, and the ever expanding Christian Church, all of which make the revival of the ceremony an uphill task. The continued existence and survival of *Ekutet* and many other rituals like it are likely to depend on memory, narration, and re-enactment—and especially recording—albeit as a psychological fallback. Literature in general and oral literature in particular, therefore, is

what may become the main, if not only, platform depended on to offer the lifeline for diminishing or diminished rituals as they are memorised, narrated, re-enacted, and safely stored on the internet.

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