

Examination of Symbolic Objects Used in Tachoni Last Rituals for Transition of The Dead

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Abstract- Symbolic objects in death rituals serve as crucial mediators between physical and spiritual realms, embodying complex cultural meanings that facilitate the deceased's transition to ancestral status. This study examined the symbolic objects utilized in Tachoni last rituals for the transition of the dead to the spirit world, exploring their types, meanings, preparation protocols, and contemporary adaptations. A qualitative research design was employed with 200 purposively selected participants from Ndivisi location, Bungoma County, Kenya. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and questionnaires. Thematic analysis revealed six major categories of symbolic objects: traditional herbs and plants for purification and protection; oil lamps and lighting elements serving as spiritual guides; ceremonial cloths and textiles marking identity and status; sacred stones and natural materials connecting to ancestral power; ritual tools and instruments facilitating spiritual communication; and modern adaptations including photographs and religious texts. Each object category demonstrated specific preparation protocols, gender-based handling restrictions, and deep symbolic significance linked to Tachoni cosmology. Variations in object usage were primarily influenced by the deceased's age, social status, cause of death, and regional differences. Despite modernization pressures, traditional objects maintain high spiritual efficacy, though adaptations include the incorporation of modern materials and Christian or Islamic elements. The study reveals how symbolic objects function as dynamic cultural technologies that negotiate between tradition and modernity while maintaining core spiritual functions.

Indexed Terms Tachoni community, symbolic objects, death rituals, material culture, spiritual transition, cultural adaptation

I. INTRODUCTION

Symbolic objects in death rituals represent profound materializations of cultural meaning, serving as tangible bridges between the physical and spiritual realms in human societies' responses to mortality. Among African communities, these objects transcend mere ceremonial props to become active agents in spiritual transformation, encoding complex cosmological knowledge and facilitating the deceased's journey to ancestral status (Hallam & Hockey, 2017). The Tachoni community of Western Kenya exemplifies this sophisticated integration of material culture and spiritual practice, maintaining elaborate systems of symbolic objects that mediate between life and death, visible and invisible worlds, individual loss and collective continuity.

The Tachoni, a sub-group of the larger Luhya community inhabiting the slopes of Chetambe Hills in Bungoma County, have maintained distinctive funeral practices that prominently feature symbolic objects as mediators of spiritual transition. These objects range from naturally occurring materials imbued with spiritual significance to carefully crafted items requiring specialized knowledge for preparation and use. Despite growing scholarly attention to African death rituals, significant gaps persist in understanding the specific roles and meanings of symbolic objects within these ceremonial contexts (Wiredu, 2018).

This study addresses these epistemological gaps through systematic examination of symbolic objects in Tachoni last rituals, exploring their types, meanings, preparation protocols, variations in usage,

and contemporary adaptations. The investigation reveals how the Tachoni community employs symbolic objects as sophisticated technologies for managing the profound transitions occasioned by death, maintaining cultural identity, and negotiating the complex terrain between tradition and modernity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Ritual Objects

Material culture studies have increasingly emphasized the active role of objects in constituting rather than merely reflecting social relationships and cultural meanings. Miller's (2017) work on materiality demonstrates how objects and humans co-constitute each other through ongoing interactions, challenging subject-object dichotomies that fail to capture the dynamic relationships between people and things in ritual contexts. Within African death rituals, this theoretical framework illuminates how symbolic objects become partners in the ritual process, possessing capacities that exceed their physical properties to influence spiritual outcomes and emotional experiences.

2.2 African Perspectives on Death Objects

African scholarship provides distinctive insights into the spiritual agency of ritual objects that challenge Western material-spiritual dichotomies. The concept of "vital force" elaborated by contemporary African philosophers offers crucial perspective on how ritual objects function in death ceremonies. Gyekye (2018) demonstrates how objects can accumulate, channel, and transmit spiritual energy, serving as conductors for the life force that must be properly managed during death transitions. This framework helps explain why certain objects in Tachoni rituals require careful preparation and handling—they are understood to possess or attract powerful spiritual forces.

2.3 Material Symbolism and Transformation

Contemporary research increasingly focuses on how ritual objects adapt to modern contexts while maintaining cultural authenticity. Ranger and Werbner's (2020) work on "traditioning" processes shows how communities actively reconstruct traditions through creative engagement with inherited practices and contemporary innovations. This

dynamic view of tradition helps explain how Tachoni communities incorporate modern objects like photographs into ancient ritual frameworks without compromising spiritual efficacy.

2.4 Research Gaps

Despite rich scholarly engagement with ritual objects, significant gaps persist in understanding their specific functions within smaller African communities' death practices. The dynamic relationships between traditional and modern objects in contemporary rituals require more nuanced investigation that avoids simplistic tradition/modernity binaries. This study addresses these gaps through detailed ethnographic investigation of Tachoni symbolic objects.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to capture the complex meanings and uses of symbolic objects in Tachoni last rituals. The qualitative approach enabled deep exploration of cultural symbols, community interpretations, and the nuanced relationships between material objects and spiritual beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Study Area and Population

Research was conducted in Ndivisi location, Bungoma County, Western Kenya, among the Tachoni community. The target population comprised 200 participants selected for their knowledge and experience with funeral rituals and symbolic objects. Participants were purposively selected based on their involvement in funeral ceremonies as ritual specialists, community elders, religious leaders, or family members.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple methods to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation. In-depth interviews were conducted with 50 key informants including ritual specialists, community elders, and religious leaders. Eight focus group discussions were organized with 6-8 participants each, facilitating community dialogue about symbolic objects and their meanings. Direct observation of three funeral ceremonies provided firsthand documentation of object usage and handling

protocols. Structured questionnaires were administered to all 200 participants to gather quantitative data on object usage frequency and variations.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis process involved data familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts, systematic coding of data segments, organization of codes into coherent themes, cross-validation of findings across different data sources through triangulation, and verification of interpretations with community members through member checking.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Types of Symbolic Objects

The study identified six major categories of symbolic objects used in Tachoni last rituals, each serving distinct yet interconnected functions in facilitating the deceased's spiritual transition.

4.1.1 Traditional Herbs and Plants

Traditional herbs emerged as the most universally used category, with nearly all participants reporting their essential role in funeral rituals. These botanicals serve multiple functions—purification, protection, communication, and healing—demonstrating sophisticated ethnobotanical knowledge systems. Specific plants mentioned include mugwort (omusala) for opening spiritual sight, sage (omukhuyu) for cleansing negative energies, and wild basil (omutundwa) for creating protective barriers. The preparation involves gathering at specific times, with ritual specialists emphasizing the importance of speaking to plants and explaining their purpose before harvesting.

4.1.2 Lighting Elements

Lighting objects serve as powerful symbols of life force and spiritual guidance. Traditional oil lamps (tsimanga) maintain the highest usage, with participants explaining that the flame represents the deceased's life force made visible. The lamp must burn continuously from death until after burial, with specific prohibitions on extinguishing methods.

Modern adaptations include battery-powered LED candles for practical purposes, though traditional flames remain essential for crucial ritual moments.

4.1.3 Ceremonial Textiles

White cotton shrouds have achieved near-universal adoption while traditional bark cloth maintains symbolic importance despite declining availability. Participants explained that white shrouds represent purity and new beginnings, often described as "wedding dresses for the spirit." The inclusion of personal clothing beneath ceremonial shrouds reveals beliefs about identity persistence after death, with families ensuring the deceased feels recognizable to ancestors.

4.1.4 Sacred Stones and Natural Materials

Sacred stones and earth materials connect the deceased to land and ancestry while serving protective functions. Different stone types carry specific properties: river stones for cooling angry spirits, red laterite for grounding, and crystals for opening spiritual sight. Regional variations reflect local geological features, with communities near rivers emphasizing water-smoothed stones believed to guide spirits along aquatic paths to ancestral realms.

4.1.5 Sound-Producing Objects

Ritual bells, drums, and rattles create sonic environments facilitating communication between worlds. Different instruments serve distinct functions: large drums (isukuti) call the community, smaller drums (litungu) speak to the deceased, and rattles (chisasi) chase away evil spirits. Modern additions include keyboards and guitars, though traditional instruments remain essential for key ritual moments.

4.1.6 Modern Adaptations

Contemporary objects increasingly appear in Tachoni funerals, with photographs and religious texts showing high adoption rates. Photographs are believed to capture the person's essence and help ancestors recognize newcomers. Religious texts, particularly Bibles opened to specific passages, represent successful syncretism between world religions and traditional practices.

4.2 Symbolic Meanings and Functions

The symbolic meanings attributed to ritual objects reveal complex cosmological systems where materials mediate between multiple reality levels. Analysis of participant responses and observed practices revealed five primary symbolic dimensions through which objects operate in Tachoni funeral rituals.

Purification and protection emerged as the most fundamental symbolic function, with nearly all object categories serving to cleanse spiritual contamination and create protective barriers. Participants consistently emphasized how death opens dangerous portals between worlds, requiring material interventions to manage spiritual vulnerabilities. Traditional herbs are burned to cleanse the air of death's pollution, while sacred stones placed around the deceased create protective boundaries preventing malevolent spirits from interfering with the transition process. An elder explained that without proper purifying objects, death's contamination spreads like disease through families and communities, affecting health, prosperity, and spiritual well-being.

Objects also function as crucial communication mediators, facilitating dialogue between the living and dead across existential divides. Smoke from burning herbs and incense carries prayers and messages upward to spiritual realms, while drums create rhythmic languages that travel between worlds. Participants described how different drum patterns convey specific messages—calling ancestors, guiding spirits, or announcing arrivals in the spiritual realm. Sacred stones serve as message holders, with family members speaking their final words to stones that are then placed with the deceased, believing the spirits will retrieve these messages during their journey.

The preservation of identity and memory through objects ensures that social personhood survives biological death. Personal items buried with the deceased—tools for craftsmen, cooking utensils for renowned cooks, books for teachers—maintain occupational identities in the afterlife. Photographs have become particularly significant in this regard, with participants explaining how images help ancestors recognize and properly welcome newcomers to the spiritual realm. These identity

markers address deep anxieties about anonymity after death, ensuring the deceased remains a recognized individual rather than becoming an anonymous spirit. Objects serve transformative functions, actively facilitating the metamorphosis from living person to ancestral spirit. The white burial shroud, universally used across Tachoni communities, exemplifies this transformative power. As ritual specialists wrap the body, they speak specific words believed to loosen the bonds between body and spirit, with the cloth itself becoming a chrysalis enabling spiritual transformation. Similarly, the process of washing the body with herbal preparations not only cleanses physical remains but initiates the spirit's journey, with different herbs opening specific spiritual pathways.

Finally, objects create vital connections maintaining continuity between past, present, and future generations. Traditional items like bark cloth strips or ancestral beads link contemporary funerals to historical practices, while modern additions like recorded music connect to current cultural expressions. These connective objects ensure that each funeral becomes a link in an ongoing chain of cultural transmission, with material culture serving as the primary medium through which tradition persists and adapts.

4.3 Preparation Protocols

The preparation of ritual objects involves elaborate protocols that transform ordinary materials into spiritually potent items capable of mediating between physical and spiritual realms. These protocols, transmitted through generations of specialists, reveal sophisticated knowledge systems that combine practical expertise with spiritual understanding.

Temporal considerations govern every aspect of object preparation, with specialists emphasizing that timing determines spiritual potency. Herbs must be gathered at specific moments—some before dawn when dew preserves their spiritual essence, others at midday when solar energy peaks, and certain roots only during new moon when earth energies concentrate underground. A renowned herbalist explained that matching harvest time to the deceased's time of death creates sympathetic connections enhancing ritual efficacy. For instance,

herbs for someone who died at dawn should be gathered at dawn, creating temporal alignment between object and spirit. These temporal protocols extend to preparation activities, with certain mixtures requiring preparation during specific lunar phases or seasonal transitions.

Purity requirements for those preparing ritual objects reflect beliefs about spiritual contamination and the transmission of qualities between persons and materials. Preparers must maintain strict ritual purity through sexual abstinence for specified periods, dietary restrictions avoiding certain foods believed to carry conflicting energies, and behavioral modifications including avoidance of quarrels or negative emotions. Gender-based restrictions create specialized knowledge domains, with post-menopausal women preparing inner burial garments due to their "cooling" energy that facilitates spiritual release, while men handle weapons and tools associated with more aggressive spiritual energies. These purity protocols ensure that preparers' spiritual states enhance rather than compromise object potency.

The activation of ritual objects through specialized procedures transforms inert materials into spiritually active agents. This process typically begins with verbal acknowledgment of the object's origins and intended purpose, including praise songs for the plants or materials, recognition of the craftspeople or natural forces that created them, and formal statements of ritual intent. Physical manipulation follows, with objects passed through sacred smoke specific numbers of times, anointed with consecrated oils or waters, and marked with symbols representing various spiritual authorities. A ritual specialist demonstrated how ordinary cloth becomes ritually potent through this activation process, explaining that each step adds layers of spiritual power until the object "awakens" and becomes ready for its ritual work.

Knowledge transmission regarding these protocols faces contemporary challenges as urbanization and modern education draw younger generations away from traditional learning contexts. However, innovative adaptations ensure continuity, with some specialists creating written records supplementing

oral instruction, using smartphones to document complex procedures, and establishing WhatsApp groups for knowledge sharing among dispersed practitioners. These modern transmission methods maintain the essential elements of preparation protocols while adapting to contemporary communication technologies.

4.4 Variations in Usage

Symbolic object usage within Tachoni funeral rituals demonstrates significant variations that reflect complex social differentiations and contextual requirements. These variations reveal how material culture responds dynamically to social categories, individual circumstances, and regional distinctions while maintaining overall cultural coherence.

Age-based variations represent the most systematic differences in object usage, with distinct material assemblages corresponding to different life stages. For infants and young children, the predominance of white materials—feathers, flowers, and light fabrics—reflects conceptualizations of incomplete earthly attachment and spiritual purity. Participants explained that infant spirits require minimal material anchoring, having barely settled into physical existence before departing. Youth funerals incorporate growth-oriented symbols, particularly seedlings and fresh vegetation, addressing the tragedy of unfulfilled potential through material promises of continued development. Adult funerals receive the full complement of traditional objects, reflecting complete social incorporation and the need for comprehensive spiritual provisions. Elder funerals command the most elaborate object arrays, with accumulated possessions, ancestral items, and extended displays that honor lifetime achievements and proximity to ancestral status.

Social status profoundly influences object selection and usage patterns, with different social positions requiring specific material recognition. Community leaders' funerals feature distinctive regalia—ceremonial staffs, special garments, and authority symbols—ensuring continued leadership capacity in the ancestral realm. Spiritual specialists receive enhanced object assemblages including their ritual tools, sacred texts, and power objects, reflecting their mediatory roles between worlds. Warriors and

accomplished hunters are buried with weapons and trophies, while renowned craftspeople include their finest tools and creations. These status-based variations serve multiple functions: honoring earthly achievements, ensuring continued occupational capacity in the afterlife, and communicating social hierarchies to both living and spiritual communities.

Regional variations within Tachoni territory reflect diverse ecological contexts and historical influences shaping local practices. Northern communities extensively employ red ochre in body preparation and ritual marking, drawing on local clay deposits believed to possess particular spiritual potencies. Southern regions emphasize extended textile displays and elaborate cloth arrangements, possibly reflecting historical trade connections and wealth accumulation through textile commerce. Eastern communities integrate agricultural symbolism, timing funerals with planting or harvest cycles and including seeds, farming tools, and soil from productive fields. Western communities near rivers and lakes have developed distinctive water-based practices, using river stones for spiritual guidance and conducting purification rituals at water sources.

Gender considerations create another layer of variation, with distinct object assemblages for male and female deceased. Women's funerals typically include domestic items, jewelry, and fertility symbols, while men's incorporate tools, weapons, and symbols of public achievement. However, these gendered patterns show increasing flexibility, with families adapting object choices to reflect individual personalities and achievements rather than rigid gender categories. Cause of death introduces additional variations, with sudden or violent deaths requiring enhanced protective objects and purification materials, while deaths from prolonged illness may emphasize healing herbs and comfort items.

4.5 Contemporary Adaptations

The integration of modern elements into traditional Tachoni funeral practices reveals sophisticated processes of cultural negotiation rather than simple replacement or abandonment of established customs. These adaptations demonstrate how communities actively reconstruct traditions to maintain relevance while preserving essential spiritual functions.

Material substitutions represent the most visible adaptations, with modern fabrics almost universally replacing traditional bark cloth in burial preparations. However, this substitution involves careful ritual management to ensure spiritual equivalence. Ritual specialists explained that commercial cloth undergoes special preparation procedures—washing in herbal solutions, exposure to sacred smoke, and verbal activation—that imbue it with properties equivalent to traditional materials. The key insight is that spiritual potency derives not solely from material composition but from proper ritual treatment. Similarly, synthetic incense may substitute for rare traditional resins, but only after undergoing consecration procedures that transfer spiritual efficacy. These substitutions reveal pragmatic flexibility within firm spiritual frameworks.

Religious integration has produced particularly creative syncretic forms, with Christian and Islamic elements seamlessly blending into traditional object assemblages. Bibles and Qurans appear alongside ancestral items, creating multi-religious displays that acknowledge contemporary spiritual pluralism. A pastor explained how biblical texts are selected to resonate with traditional beliefs—Psalm 23's pastoral imagery connecting with Tachoni cattle-keeping traditions, or resurrection passages aligning with concepts of spiritual continuation. Islamic prayer beads coexist with traditional counting stones, while Christian crosses merge with ancestral symbols in hybrid designs. This integration goes beyond superficial addition, representing theological reconciliation where different religious traditions contribute complementary spiritual resources.

Economic pressures have prompted innovative collective responses ensuring continued access to essential ritual objects despite rising costs. Communities have developed sharing systems where expensive items like ceremonial cloths or special vessels rotate among families, maintained by designated keepers who ensure proper care between uses. Simplified versions of elaborate objects maintain essential symbolic functions while reducing financial burdens—a small portion of expensive incense mixed with local herbs, or photographs substituting for commissioned portraits. Some communities have established funeral societies that

collectively purchase and maintain ritual objects, demonstrating how economic challenges stimulate social innovations that potentially strengthen communal bonds.

Technological adaptations introduce entirely new possibilities for ritual practice. Photography has become nearly universal, with funeral portraits serving multiple functions from identity preservation to spiritual communication. Some families now include video messages recorded by the deceased, played during funerals as contemporary forms of final testimony. Social media platforms enable distant family members to participate virtually in rituals, while digital payment systems facilitate contribution collection for funeral expenses. These technological incorporations raise fascinating questions about virtual presence in ritual contexts and the potential digitization of sacred objects, suggesting future directions for tradition adaptation in an increasingly connected world.

V. CONCLUSION

This examination of symbolic objects in Tachoni last rituals reveals sophisticated material technologies for managing death transitions. The findings demonstrate several key insights:

5.1 Dynamic Material Culture

Tachoni symbolic objects exemplify dynamic tradition where materials actively mediate spiritual processes rather than passively representing beliefs. Objects demonstrate remarkable adaptability, incorporating modern elements while maintaining core spiritual functions through careful ritual management.

5.2 Embodied Knowledge Systems

The complex preparation protocols and usage variations reveal extensive embodied knowledge combining practical expertise with spiritual understanding. This knowledge faces transmission challenges requiring innovative preservation strategies balancing oral tradition with modern documentation.

5.3 Creative Syncretism

The integration of modern and religious objects demonstrates sophisticated theological reasoning rather than simple substitution. Communities creatively blend materials from different sources, creating hybrid assemblages that satisfy multiple spiritual orientations while maintaining cultural authenticity.

5.4 Implications for Cultural Continuity

These findings suggest that material culture serves as a crucial site for negotiating cultural continuity and change. Through strategic object management, the Tachoni community maintains spiritual efficacy while adapting to contemporary realities. This offers important insights for understanding how traditional communities preserve cultural integrity through material practices.

Future research should explore comparative analyses of symbolic objects across related communities and investigate the long-term impacts of material adaptations on spiritual efficacy and cultural identity.

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