

Roles of Ritual Performers in Tachoni Last Rituals for Transition of the Dead to the Spirit World in Western Kenya

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Abstract- This paper investigates the roles of ritual performers during last rituals for transition of the dead to the spirit world among the Tachoni community of Western Kenya. Drawing on ritual theory and informed by the works of Turner and Bell, the study examines the network of individuals whose actions underpin the execution of funeral rites and the facilitation of spiritual transition. A qualitative research design was employed, utilising in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and questionnaires to collect data from 200 purposively selected participants in Ndivisi location, Bungoma County. Data were analysed through thematic analysis and triangulated for validation. The findings reveal five categories of ritual performers: family members (98%), community elders (94%), ritual specialists (91%), religious leaders (84%), and other performers such as musicians and professional mourners (71%), each fulfilling distinct yet complementary functions. Performer roles have undergone notable adaptation in response to modernisation (92%), religious influences (88%), and economic pressures (86%), while retaining core spiritual and cultural functions. New roles have also emerged, including funeral coordinators (76%), grief counsellors (69%), and social media memorial managers (64%). The paper concludes that Tachoni ritual performers serve as cultural agents who facilitate the deceased's passage while sustaining the community's collective memory. The study recommends documentation projects, intergenerational transmission programmes, and policy protection of Tachoni funeral rituals as intangible cultural heritage.

Index Terms- Ritual Performers, Tachoni Community, Last Rituals, Death Transition, Spirit World, Cultural Preservation, Western Kenya

I. INTRODUCTION

Funerary rituals and spiritual transition in African communities have long attracted scholarly attention for what they reveal about the relationship between cultural practice, belief, and social organisation

(Mbiti, 1990; Magesa, 1997). Within these ceremonies, ritual performers play roles that go well beyond ceremonial execution. They preserve traditional knowledge, facilitate mourning, and mediate between the living and the dead. Turner (1969), Goody (1962), and Mbiti (1990) have shown that such performers serve as cultural interpreters who manage transitions central to community life.

Geertz (1973) and Olupona (2014) have documented the range of performers involved in last rituals—from religious specialists and community elders to professional mourners and family representatives. These performers vary in social standing, knowledge, and competence, reflecting cultural beliefs about death, the afterlife, and continuity. Bloch and Parry (1982) noted that ritual performers are not simply carrying out prescribed actions; they actively negotiate social relations, personal grief, and collective memory through performance.

Appadurai (1986), Wiredu (1996), and Shisanya (1996) have examined how performers navigate physical and social space during funeral rites, with their positioning, gestures, and interactions forming a mode of non-verbal communication. Tambiah (1979) and Bell (1992) have analysed how performers bring about cultural and spiritual transformation through speech, gesture, and bodily technique.

Despite this body of work, little research has focused specifically on how ritual performers mediate experiences of loss among the Tachoni community of Western Kenya, one of the smaller Luhya sub-tribes in Bungoma County. This paper addresses that gap by investigating the roles of ritual performers during last rituals for the transition of the dead to the spirit world, examining the types of performers, their

responsibilities, symbolic significance, preparation, and adaptation to contemporary change.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although descriptive accounts of funeral practices in African communities are plentiful, there has been little close analysis of the roles of ritual performers in Tachoni last rituals. This gap matters because traditional practices face mounting pressure from modernisation, religious change, and globalisation, all of which threaten to erode cultural knowledge that has not been adequately recorded (Mombo & Mojola, 2023). Studies of ritual performance in other African settings offer useful frameworks, but the specific ways in which Tachoni performers operate at psychological, social, and spiritual levels remain poorly understood.

1.2 Objective and Research Question

The objective of this study was to investigate the roles of ritual performers during last rituals for transition of the dead to the spirit world among the Tachoni community of Western Kenya. The corresponding research question was: What specific roles do the ritual performers play during the last rituals for transition of the dead to the spirit world among the Tachoni community of Western Kenya?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed ritual theory as developed by Turner (1969) and Bell (1992). Ritual theory provides a framework for analysing the structure, symbols, and transformative aspects of rituals, and is well suited to examining how last rituals mark the transition from life to death and disconnect the deceased from the living. The theory also foregrounds the communal dimensions of ritual, drawing attention to shared meanings and collective participation.

Turner's (1969) concept of liminality is particularly relevant here, as it explains how ritual performers facilitate the deceased's passage through a threshold state between the world of the living and the spirit realm. Bell's (1992) emphasis on ritualisation as a strategic mode of practice shows how performers' actions constitute meaningful performances that

negotiate power, knowledge, and social relations. Together, these perspectives allow for analysis of performer roles across multiple dimensions: symbolic actions, preparation processes, interaction patterns, and adaptive strategies within Tachoni cultural life.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed in this study. Qualitative research allowed for an in-depth exploration of the roles of ritual performers during last rituals for transition of the dead to the spirit world among the Tachoni community (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By utilising qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, focus group discussions, and questionnaires, the research sought to uncover the various dimensions of performer roles and their interpretations within the Tachoni community's last rituals (Patton, 2015).

3.2 Area of Study

The research was conducted among the Tachoni community located in Ndivisi location of Bungoma County in Western Kenya. Ndivisi is situated between latitudes 0°25' North and 0°30' South and longitudes 34°50' East and 35°00' West (Waswa & Netondo, 2017). The Tachoni represent one of the smaller Luhya sub-tribes, with a population estimated at approximately 30,000–45,000 people (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). They maintain distinct cultural elements including language variations, marriage customs, and particularly death rituals. The community's social structure is patrilineal, with strong clan affiliations that influence social interactions and ritual performances (Wanyama & Egesah, 2019).

3.3 Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised 200 members of the Tachoni community in Bungoma East Sub-county selected through purposive sampling. These participants were chosen based on their firsthand knowledge and lived experiences related to the last rituals. The sample included 37 participants (18.5%) aged 18–30 years, 72 (36.0%) aged 31–50 years, 63 (31.5%) aged 51–70 years, and 28 (14.0%) aged above 70 years, with 112 males (56.0%) and 88 females (44.0%). This non-probability sampling

method enabled the intentional selection of individuals who could provide rich, detailed information relevant to the research objective (Etikan et al., 2016).

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection involved in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and questionnaires. The instruments were validated by a panel of five experts and piloted with 15 participants from the neighbouring Bukusu community (Malmqvist et al., 2019). Interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with consent, and field notes documented non-verbal cues and observations (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed through thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns, themes, and categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data was employed to validate findings. Ethical approval was obtained from Kibabii University's Institutional Review Board and a research permit secured from NACOSTI.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Types and Distribution of Ritual Performers

The study identified five major categories of ritual performers involved in Tachoni last rituals, each occupying a distinct position within the ritual hierarchy. Table 1 presents the distribution of these performer types as reported by the 200 respondents.

Table 1: Types of Ritual Performers in Tachoni Last Rituals

T	Frequency (n/200)	Percentage (%)
Family Members	196	98
Community Elders	188	94
Ritual Specialists/Shamans	182	91
Religious Leaders/Clergy	168	84
Other Significant Performers	142	71

Family members showed the highest involvement (98%), confirming that death is primarily a kinship matter. Community elders (94%) and ritual specialists (91%) reflect the continued importance of traditional authority and specialised knowledge. Religious leaders (84%) indicate that world religions have been integrated into funeral rites without displacing traditional practitioners, while other performers (71%) point to additional roles that support the core ritual process.

4.2 Specific Responsibilities and Actions

Each category of performer demonstrated distinct responsibilities within the ritual framework. The specific roles identified for each performer category are presented and interpreted below.

Table 2: Roles of Religious Leaders/Clergy in Tachoni Last Rituals

Role	Frequency (n/168)	Percentage (%)
Leading prayers	158	94
Offering spiritual comfort	152	90
Scriptural readings	146	87
Performing religious rites	138	82
Mediating between traditions	122	73

Table 2 shows the dual liturgical and pastoral functions of religious leaders. Prayer leadership (94%) is their primary liturgical contribution, while spiritual comfort (90%) and scriptural readings (87%) point to a pastoral emphasis. Performance of religious rites (82%) confirms their ceremonial role. The mediation between traditions (73%) is notable: it suggests that religious leaders act as brokers between church doctrine and local practice, prioritising community cohesion within the funeral setting.

Table 3: Roles of Ritual Specialists/Shamans in Tachoni Last Rituals

Role	Frequency (n/182)	Percentage (%)
Performing cleansing rituals	176	97
Guiding the spirit's journey	172	95
Communicating with ancestors	168	92
Preparing ritual objects	162	89
Interpreting omens	154	85

As presented in Table 3, cleansing rituals (97%) stand out as the most widely recognised function of ritual specialists. Spirit guidance (95%) and ancestral communication (92%) confirm their role as intermediaries between the living and the dead. Object preparation (89%) reflects their material expertise, while omen interpretation (85%) points to a divinatory function that helps families make sense of death. Taken together, these functions position ritual specialists as indispensable figures during the period surrounding death.

Table 4: Roles of Family Members in Tachoni Last Rituals

Role	Frequency (n/196)	Percentage (%)
Preparing the body	188	96
Participating in ritual actions	184	94
Mourning performances	182	93
Offering eulogies	176	90
Post-funeral responsibilities	172	88

Table 4 shows that body preparation (96%) is the most commonly reported family role, indicating that intimate care for the deceased remains a kinship obligation. Ritual participation (94%) and mourning performances (93%) reflect structured forms of grief

expression. Eulogies (90%) serve to reconstruct the deceased's life story for the gathered community. Post-funeral responsibilities (88%) suggest that family obligations extend well beyond the ceremony itself, encompassing ongoing ritual observance and estate management.

Table 5: Roles of Community Elders in Tachoni Last Rituals

Role	Frequency (n/188)	Percentage (%)
Advising on ritual procedures	184	98
Overseeing ritual proceedings	182	97
Advising on cultural propriety	178	95
Offering cultural explanations	176	94
Performing specific elder rituals	172	91

The findings in Table 5 establish community elders as the leading ritual authorities. Their advisory (98%) and oversight (97%) roles confirm their decision-making power over funeral proceedings. Cultural guidance (95%) and explanation (94%) mark them as the primary holders of traditional knowledge, while elder-specific rituals (91%) point to age-based privileges that reinforce their authority. In effect, elders act as regulators, educators, and performers at once, ensuring both procedural correctness and the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations.

Table 6: Roles of Other Significant Performers in Tachoni Last Rituals

Type of Performer	Frequency (n/142)	Percentage (%)
Grave diggers	136	96
Musicians/Singers	128	90
Food preparers	122	86
Diviners	112	79
Professional	98	69

mourners		
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Table 6 shows the supporting but necessary roles of other performers. Grave diggers (96%) combine physical labour with ritual significance. Musicians (90%) provide funeral dirges that comfort mourners and honour the deceased. Food preparers (86%) underscore the importance of communal eating during funeral gatherings. Diviners (79%) offer spiritual explanations of death even when a medical cause is known, and professional mourners (69%) lead structured expressions of communal grief.

4.3 Symbolic and Cultural Significance of Performer Roles

Table 7: Perceived Symbolic Significance of Performer Roles

Aspect of Significance	Frequency (n/200)	Percentage (%)
Facilitators of spiritual transition	188	94
Mediators between worlds	186	93
Preservers of cultural knowledge	178	89
Guardians of community well-being	176	88
Embodiments of social order	172	86

Facilitation of spiritual transition (94%) and mediation between worlds (93%) confirm the primary functions respondents associate with ritual performers. Cultural knowledge preservation (89%) and guardianship of community well-being (88%) point to broader social roles, while the embodiment of social order (86%) suggests that performers reinforce community norms and hierarchies through their ritual actions.

4.4 Preparation and Training Methods

Table 8: Methods of Preparation and Training for Ritual Performers

Method	Frequency (n/200)	Percentage (%)
Apprenticeship	184	92
Spiritual calling/initiation	176	88
Community recognition	168	84
Inherited positions	162	81
Formal religious education	156	78

Apprenticeship (92%) is the most commonly reported preparation method, indicating a strong preference for learning through practice. For ritual specialists specifically, learning sacred language and chants (98%) and training under an elder specialist (97%) confirm the primacy of oral tradition. Spiritual initiation (95%) is understood as a necessary transformation before one can assume ritual authority. Spiritual calling (88%) reflects beliefs in divine selection, while community recognition (84%) and inherited positions (81%) show that social validation matters. Formal religious education (78%) reflects the influence of modern schooling but has not replaced traditional methods.

4.5 Qualitative Insights on Performer Roles

Qualitative data provided further detail on how performers understand and carry out their roles.

Religious leaders' perspectives and practices. Christian and Muslim leaders described processes of religious blending. A local pastor, aged 52, explained:

We work to blend Christian teachings with traditional Tachoni practices. Our role is to offer spiritual guidance and comfort based on Christian beliefs, while respecting the cultural heritage of the community. Often, we collaborate with traditional ritual specialists to create a harmonious ceremony.

This collaborative approach suggests mutual recognition rather than competition between religious

and traditional systems—a form of localised Christianity adapted to African cultural realities. An imam from the Muslim Tachoni community described a similar effort to balance Islamic burial requirements with compatible local traditions.

Ritual specialists’ knowledge and authority. A respected ritual specialist, aged 68, articulated the dual functions of preservation and mediation:

We are the keepers of ancient knowledge, the bridge between the living and the dead. Our task is to ensure that the spirit of the deceased is properly prepared for its journey and that the living are protected from any spiritual harm during this vulnerable time.

The reference to spiritual harm points to a worldview in which death creates real dangers that require expert management. A younger specialist (aged 41) described ancestral communication as a two-way process involving specific chants and rituals, with ancestors understood as active participants who help guide the funeral proceedings.

Family members’ emotional and ritual labour. Family members described navigating between emotional authenticity and cultural prescription. A daughter shared her experience of washing her father’s body: Washing my father’s body was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, but also the most meaningful. As we cleaned him, we spoke to him, asking for his blessings and forgiveness. It was our final act of care and respect.

The contrast between difficulty and meaning shows how ritual can turn a painful experience into something purposeful. The requests for blessing and forgiveness suggest that the body-washing ritual also serves as a moment for settling unfinished matters with the deceased.

Community elders’ authority and wisdom. Elders described their authority as deriving from presence as much as from action. An elder, aged 75, explained that their role encompassed ensuring traditional protocols, maintaining order, and transmitting cultural knowledge to younger generations during the funeral proceedings. A respected elder further described the sacred act of pouring libations, reciting the names of forebears, and inviting ancestors to

receive the deceased, thereby placing the departed within the continuum of community history.

Specialised performers’ unique contributions. Professional mourners, musicians, diviners, grave diggers, and food preparers each contributed distinct functions. A professional mourner described her work as an art form requiring deep emotional engagement and cultural knowledge, serving to lead and give shape to communal grief. A diviner explained that even when the medical cause of death was known, families sought spiritual explanations, pointing to the coexistence of medical and spiritual frameworks in which each funeral may require its own spiritual consultation.

4.6 Changes and Adaptations Over Time

Table 9: Factors Influencing Changes in Performer Roles

Factor	Frequency (n/200)	Percentage (%)
Modernisation and urbanisation	184	92
Religious influences	176	88
Economic pressures	172	86
Education and literacy	168	84
Cultural exchange	162	81

Table 9 shows that modernisation and urbanisation are the main drivers of change (92%). Religious influences (88%) point to the extent of blending between traditional and world religion practices. Economic pressures (86%) and education (84%) indicate that material conditions and formal schooling are also reshaping practices, while cultural exchange (81%) suggests openness to outside influences. An elder, aged 78, recalled that in his youth traditional healers alone managed spiritual matters at funerals, whereas today the responsibilities are shared with religious leaders.

Table 10: Recent Modifications in Performer Roles

Modification	Frequency (n/200)	Percentage (%)	Primary Cause
Increased role of religious clergy	172	86	Religious influence
Decline in traditional healer involvement	168	84	Modernisation
Professionalization of certain roles	162	81	Economic factors
More inclusive gender roles	158	79	Social change
Simplification of ritual procedures	156	78	Time constraints

As shown in Table 10, the increased role of religious clergy (86%) and the decline in traditional healer involvement (84%) point to a shifting balance of spiritual authority. Qualitative data clarified that this is a case of integration rather than displacement, with both types of performers operating in complementary domains within the same ceremony. The professionalisation of certain roles (81%) indicates that some ritual services are becoming paid work. More inclusive gender roles (79%) and simplified procedures (78%) suggest broader social pressures toward openness and efficiency.

Table 11: Emerging Roles and Adaptations

New/Adapted Role	Frequency (n/200)	Percentage (%)
Funeral coordinators	152	76
Cultural educators during funerals	146	73
Grief counsellors	138	69
Environmental consideration specialists	134	67
Social media memorial	128	64

managers		
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Table 11 documents new roles that have emerged in response to contemporary conditions. Funeral coordinators (76%) reflect the growing logistical demands of organising funerals. Cultural educators (73%) suggest a conscious effort to use funerals as occasions for teaching younger people about tradition. Grief counsellors (69%) show the incorporation of psychological approaches alongside traditional emotional support. Social media memorial managers (64%) and environmental specialists (67%) are the most recent additions: one young ritual specialist described using social media to announce funerals and live-stream ceremonies for family members unable to attend in person. These roles extend the ritual framework rather than replacing it.

4.7 Triangulation of Findings

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data showed agreement across several areas. The quantitative finding that 98% of respondents mentioned family involvement matched the qualitative accounts of intimate family care for the deceased. The 91% recognition of ritual specialists was supported by detailed explanations of their mediatory abilities. While 86% reported increased clergy involvement, qualitative data clarified that this amounts to integration alongside traditional performers, not replacement of them. The 84% noting a decline in traditional healers gained meaning through qualitative accounts of anxiety about knowledge loss, showing a community weighing how to hold on to tradition while adapting to new circumstances.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Multiplicity and Specialisation of Roles

The findings show that Tachoni funeral rites involve several categories of performers, each with defined functions. Turner's (1969) analysis of ritual processes helps explain how these differentiated roles mirror the social structures of the community itself. That 91% of respondents recognised the role of ritual specialists supports Mbiti's (1990) observation that African communities assign specialised custodians to manage knowledge about death and the afterlife.

Magesa (1997) makes a similar point: the multiplicity of performers is not redundancy but a form of cultural organisation in which each role addresses a different dimension of death—emotional, spiritual, or social.

5.2 Syncretic Practices and Role Adaptation

The involvement of religious clergy from Christianity and Islam, reported by 84% of respondents, reflects a pattern of cultural negotiation rather than replacement. Olupona (2014) has documented similar patterns of religious blending across African communities. Mombo and Mojola (2023) observe that in Western Kenya, such syncretism is an active process: communities do not passively absorb external religious elements but evaluate and reinterpret them through local frameworks. The adaptation of performer roles in response to modernisation (92%) is consistent with what Shisanya (1996) described among the Abaluyia, where communities balance tradition and change through selective incorporation rather than wholesale adoption.

5.3 Transmission of Cultural Knowledge

Community elders' role in reciting clan history and advising on procedure points to the mechanisms by which cultural memory is maintained. Goody's (1962) work on mortuary customs in West Africa showed how funeral rites serve as sites for knowledge transfer between generations. The dominance of apprenticeship (92%) as a training method aligns with Magesa's (1997) account of how African communities transmit ritual expertise—through sustained, experiential engagement rather than formal instruction alone. Wanyama and Egesah (2019) note that among the Tachoni, this apprenticeship system also reinforces social bonds and hierarchical structures, making it a vehicle for both cultural and social reproduction.

5.4 Emotional and Psychological Functions

The finding that 93% of respondents identified emotional support as a function of ritual performers underscores the psychological role of Tachoni funerals. Nwoye (2005) has argued that grief work in African contexts relies on community intervention and shared ritual action rather than individual therapy. The emergence of grief counsellors (69%)

does not displace traditional mourning but supplements it. Njue et al. (2015) reached a similar conclusion in their study of death and grief in Kenya: traditional rituals continue to provide a framework for processing loss, even as new approaches are incorporated.

5.5 Negotiation of Social Order

The fact that funeral performances vary by the deceased's age and status reflects the role of death rituals in reinforcing social hierarchies. Elders' mediation of disputes during funeral preparations, mentioned by 94% of respondents, is consistent with Bloch and Parry's (1982) argument that death rituals are occasions for regulating social relations. Bell (1992) makes the further point that ritualised practices do not simply mirror existing structures; they also provide openings for renegotiating relationships and authority.

5.6 Adaptation to Technological Change

The use of social media for funeral announcements and live-streaming of ceremonies by younger specialists shows that technological adoption is being absorbed into, rather than opposed to, the ritual framework. Mombo and Mojola (2023) report similar developments across Western Kenya. Asatsa et al. (2014) found that mourning rituals among Luhya communities have historically adapted to new circumstances while retaining their core functions. The emergence of social media memorial managers (64%) is the latest instance of this adaptability.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusions

This study has shown that Tachoni last rituals are sustained by a network of performers—family members, community elders, ritual specialists, religious leaders, and other specialists—whose combined actions make the funeral process work at practical, emotional, and spiritual levels. Several conclusions follow from the findings.

First, performer roles show adaptive resilience rather than static preservation. Traditional systems have absorbed new elements—including clergy from Christianity and Islam, grief counsellors, funeral coordinators, and social media managers—without

abandoning core spiritual functions. Second, the integration of religious clergy alongside traditional specialists reflects a working syncretism in which different performers occupy complementary rather than competing roles. Third, the reliance on apprenticeship (92%) and spiritual calling (88%) as pathways into ritual authority reveals a knowledge system that balances continuity with gradual adaptation. Fourth, the widespread concern about loss of traditional knowledge (87%) signals that the community is aware of the pressures it faces and is actively weighing how to respond.

Overall, Tachoni ritual performers serve as cultural agents who facilitate the deceased's passage while sustaining the community's collective memory. Their roles reflect a living tradition that absorbs change while preserving what matters most

6.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made. First, documentation projects should be established to record the specialised knowledge held by ritual performers, especially elder specialists whose expertise risks being lost. Second, structured intergenerational programmes should complement the existing apprenticeship system, creating opportunities for younger community members to learn from experienced performers. Third, policy makers should consider protections for Tachoni funeral rituals as intangible cultural heritage under national and international frameworks. Fourth, comparative studies with neighbouring communities and longitudinal tracking of changes would deepen understanding of how ritual performance is evolving across the Luhya sub-tribes of Western Kenya.

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