



The ritualistic nuances of *Efumbo*: The Mystical Bukusu Drum

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Abstract

Communities in Western Kenya have over time used drums and drumming for education, emotional expression, aesthetics, communication, symbolic validation, condemnation, information, therapeutic, and religious rituals, contributing to the continuity and stability of culture. However, critical aspects of traditions and rituals around the drums are likely to be lost due to a lack of sufficient documentation and the dwindling social institutions for which they were initially known (such as traditional circumcision ceremonies). This article investigated the ritualistic nuances associated with *Efumbo* 'the mystical Bukusu drum'. The article argues that there is a rich cultural expression of the rituals of the Bukusu manifested through the drum tradition. As such, *Efumbo* in the Bukusu community is played in various functions such as circumcision, weddings, funerals, invoking spirits of barrenness, and prayer sessions when a spirit possesses one. The documentation of *Efumbo* and the traditions associated with it will improve and preserve the creative and cultural works of the drummers, drum makers, and allied.

Introduction

The drum is the predominant instrument played at drum circles and is a member of the percussion family of musical instruments (Amegago, 2014). Percussion instruments are musical instruments that produce sound by striking, shaking, or scraping. In ancient times an interest in percussion developed after repeatedly scraping and striking hollow trunks (Mowitt, 2002). Perhaps percussion evolved through an observance of nature, of hearing the rhythmical knocking sound of the woodpecker high up in the canopy or a gorilla beating its chest. Although this history is now lost, what is known is that drum rhythm has the power to intuitively motivate and inspire humans (Nugent, 2016).

Drums are categorised as membranophones, a musical instrument division that produces sound from a vibrating stretched membrane (Amegago, 2014; Lotha et al., 2017). At its most basic, the drum is a tubular form of differing lengths made from a variety of materials; including wood, metal, clay and plastic. In Africa, each drum sound is unique. They are called membranophones, according to Lee (2019) classification, as membrane skin is stretched and secured over the form of the top, bottom, or both top and bottom aperture or drumhead. So, sound depends on the shape and construction of the drum shell, the type of drumheads and their tension (Wagner, 2006).



The shape of the resonance chamber can be used to understand the broad classification of drum types. A drum with a drumhead wider than the height of its resonance chamber is categorised as a frame drum, and examples would include drums used by shamans throughout the world (Dean, 2012; Waring, 2007). In comparison, a resonance chamber that is longer than the width of the drumhead is categorised within the tubular (barrel or goblet shape) family of drums, and examples include African djembes and congas (Amegago, 2014; Durojaye, 2017; Lotha et al., 2017). The other types of drums are kettle or pot-shaped drums originating from Asia and Europe and developing into modern timpani (Waring, 2007).

The type of materials used and the amount of tension placed upon the drumhead influences the sound, which ranges from high pitch (small diameter, shorter depth of the resonance chamber, and greater tension) to low pitches (larger diameter, thicker drumhead material, longer depth of the resonance chamber, and lower tension) (Kalani, 2004). For these reasons, drum shapes also vary in style and scale. They can be tabular, hourglass, kettle barrel shaped or round. Drums were often shaped by the blacksmiths' caste or ritual specialists who carved masks, creating robust dynamic forms (Dean, 2012).

Depending on the style, drums are played with one or two hands, one drumstick and one hand, or one or two drumsticks, also called mallets or beaters (Dean, 2012). Drumsticks are made of wood, bone, antler, or synthetic material with optional brushes, cloth, or hide attached to the striking end to influence the sound produced. The drumhead is a membrane consisting of animal raw hide, wood, metal, or synthetic material, which produces a vibration resulting in the drum sound (Dean, 2012). The drumhead is stretched across a resonance chamber constructed of wood, clay, or metal (Kalani, 2004; Lotha et al., 2017). The resonance chamber's primary role is to resonate with the vibration of the drumhead (Waring, 2007). The drum can also be struck with hands, curved beaters or mallets at different speeds and positions on the skin, creating cadence and rhythm. For instance, the Sabor drum is played by combing one hand and a stick (Wagner, 2006). The body position concerning the drum changes as drummers sit or stand to beat instruments. Depending on the weight, drums are hand-held, placed under the arm, squeezed between thighs, and leaned at an oblique angle to be played, or they are freestanding on curved legs allowing the drummer a greater range of movement around the drum. The reverberation depends on the shape of the internal hollow and the crafting of the sound (Wagner, 2006).

There exists no remaining record of the first drums produced or the origins of the use of rhythm by early humans. Drums created from animal hide and wood are not easily preserved, although speculation based on cave paintings dating between 11,000-17,000 years ago depict dancers accompanied by musical instruments (Dean, 2012). Different types of skin are used. For example, the best Djembe drum skin originated from goats in Mali or for effect for example when hair is not shaved off the skin sound appears rich and deep such as the Bouganabou drum or for status as in when leather is used for example, the monitor skin on Kubo royal drums of the Congo (Waring, 1974). Each group has preferred method of attaching skin to drum frame. Sometimes used when hot membrane or skins are tied over the drum head and pulled tight with fastening such as strings, leather thong or by being pegged securely at intervals on the outside of the drum. From this image, anthropologists suggest that some early percussion instruments accompanied music and dance (Waring, 1974).

The presence of drums has been documented in Egypt from 4000 BCE and in Sumeria and Mesopotamia from 3000 BCE (giant frame drums and small cylindrical drums) (Lotha et al., 2017).



There is speculation that the rituals of early religions evolved around the frame drum (Redmond, 1997). The origins of frame drums are based on the spread of Islamic culture throughout the Middle East and Europe. Shamans spread drums by a secondary source frame as they migrated through Central Asia into Arctic regions and eventually into North and South America (Dean, 2012; Lotha et al., 2017; Redmond, 1997). Another example of early African music and dance is in Algerian rock paintings dating from 6000 to 4000 BCE (Dean, 2012).

African drums are an integral part of African culture and history. They are used to communicate and celebrate, thus providing an important connection to the spiritual world. The drums invoke joy and togetherness in religious ceremonies and gatherings. African drums have also been used for centuries to connect with spiritual forces. Not only do they provide a means of communication between communities, but they are also used to invoke a certain kind of spiritual energy. African drums are used to call upon the gods and invoke the spirits of the ancestors. They are often used in rituals and other ceremonies to create a sense of harmony. They are also used for divination and invoking the spirit of the dead; hence, they are powerful tools for connecting a spiritual atmosphere, and the drummers consider their practice a spiritual meditation (Moodley & Bertrand, 2011).

The functions of drums in Africa also vary depending on the drum type and community. Drumming varies with the beat, logically changing from secular occasion to the sacred. At some events, it is for entertainment, jollying up marriages or at births (Mandillah et al., 2022). As such, drumming is important to a community's sociocultural heritage (Singh, 2016). Besides the entertainment role, drums and drumming is a form of emotional and psychological release, a channel of messaging to sound an alarm, call people to action, announce an important event such as the birth of twins, chase away dangerous animals, and actualise the beliefs of the African indigenous religion (Bokor, 2014).

Studies such as Kizito (2022) assert that the Bukusu of Western Kenya have several traditions and cultural practices which inform their concepts of life and the world. The Bukusu are a Bantu-speaking ethnic group predominantly found in Bungoma County of the Western region of Kenya. They are also found in TransNzoia county and some areas of Uasin-Gishu and Kakamega counties in Western Kenya (Wafula, 2023).

According to Lumbasi (1997), the Bukusu are said to have migrated to the present district from the North West in the late 15th or early 16th century. Western Kenya includes Kakamega, Vihiga, Bungoma, and Busia counties. The region consists of more than 19 ethnic groups, majorly, the 17 Luhya ethnic groups, the Iteso, and the Sabaot (cf. Barasa, 2018). Each of these communities come along with its own unique culture, art, and, specifically, drum traditions that have been developed over centuries of history. Traditionally, the Bukusu lived in separate homesteads enclosed by hedges and stockades. Their local community is mainly a patrilineal lineage of husbands, wives and children (Lumbasi, 1997).

Whereas opinion is divided about the authentic Bukusu traditions, cultural informants from the community identify traditions such as childbirth, marriage, death-related traditions, and circumcision as the most significant traditions that bring an entire clan and often more than one clan together to celebrate or mourn depending on the case. According to a cultural expert cited in Kizito (2022), there are about eleven Bukusu sets of traditions. Each set is associated with corresponding elaborate rituals, which include *bukhebi* 'circumcision', *bukimba* 'rain making', *bubasi* 'blacksmithing', *buliuli* 'witchcraft casting', *bung'oosi* 'prophesying', *bufumu* 'divination', *kumuse* 'funeral oratory', and *kamaiya* 'magic'.



Other experts believe that the traditions and rituals should include *bubini* 'night running' and rituals related to death, including *khuswala kumuse* 'funeral oratory' and *khukhala kimikoye* 'literally, cutting ropes/connections'. The latter is a let-go ritual performance to cut the links between the living and dead to allow the dead to take up residence in the world of ancestors and grant freedom to the woman (the deceased's wife) to remarry if she so wishes. Each set of traditions is inspired by a specific *kumusambwa* 'spirit', and the practitioners and leaders of each tradition are selected through procedures specific to the traditions, which are respected and held as sacrosanct by all the Bukusu. For instance, funeral orators are believed to come from particular clans such as *Babuya*, *Bameme*, and *Bamwayi*. At the same time, *Buliche* is associated with clans such as *Barefu*, *Balukulu*, and *Bakobolo* (Kizito, 2022).

Among the Bukusu, clan identities are important since each clan is believed to have a unique quality or characteristic feature. For example, the *Bakhone* and *Babasaba* people are circumcisers, while the *Balunda* people are traditionally known as rainmakers (Masasabi, 2011). As demanded by culture, the drums are kept at the centre of the house. People of specific clans like *Batukwika*, *Bamusabi*, *Basekese*, *Bakuta* or *Bamusonge* own them. Nevertheless, anyone outside the clan can learn to beat the drums on condition that they have permission.

The Bukusu drums play a sacred role and accompany certain important rituals such as circumcision nurturing talent, cultural training and during *chiswa* 'termite' harvesting (Were, 2014). *Efumbo* is a mythical sacred drum used among the Bukusu community that accompanies important rituals and practices. The drum is used for emotional expression, symbolic validation, condemnation, religious rituals, and contributing to culture's continuity and stability. The study used a phenomenological, interview-based approach to explore the primary research questions: a) What are the salient physical features of *Efumbo*? And b) What ritualistic functions and sociocultural beliefs are associated with *Efumbo*? Thus, relevant data taken from different sources was examined. The data were analysed using content analysis, one of the qualitative research techniques (Starks & Brown, 2007).

Drums of Western Kenya

The drums of Western Kenya are made by hand. The materials used to make drums include wood, animal skin, leather strips, ropes, and rings. Wood is the basic material for making drums in Western Kenya. Different types of wood are used to form the drum base, hard wood being the most preferred. Different types of wood used to make the drum base determine the sound quality produced. Also, the thickness of the wood determines the pitch of the sound. *Kumurembe* 'maple wood' is used to produce a standard drum. The inside of the tree log is chipped off to leave a hollow canal on one end. The log is then cut and chopped into desired sizes and thicknesses equivalent to the drum size, and then covered by the monitor lizard's skin, skillfully attached by small pins / sticks. After this, the drums are put in the sun to dry and take about a week to prepare. The older the *kumurembe* tree, the better wood it produces, resulting in a better sound. Generally, *kumurembe* produces the most even tone of all the wood types. Birch is also a popular type of wood used to make drums, but mahogany is the most sought-after wood for drum making since it produces the best and most sought-after sound. In Western Kenya, most drums are made from *Kumurembe* tree, which is believed to be mythical and loaded with healing powers over man's body, heart and soul. Owing to the scarcity of these trees in recent days, this part of the drum is made from used tins, as can be noted in the pictures in Figure 1.



Animal skins are used to make the membrane of the drums. Drums are made from the skin of either a monitor lizard, an antelope or cow skin. The most commonly used skin is the monitor lizard skin, which has recently been largely replaced by cattle hide due to the unavailability of the monitor lizard species. Different communities use different animal materials to make different types of drums for different societal functions. The thickness of the skin determines the quality of the sound produced. Thin skin creates a more open sound, and thick skin creates a full base sound. Elsewhere, synthetic skin is used to make this part of the drum, but drum makers of Western Kenya shun them. The skin is normally dried; in some communities, the hair is shaved before it is stretched over the hollowed wood base. The skin is tightened onto the wood with either leather straps or ropes, nailed or pegged onto the wood. Ropes or leather strips and rings are used to hold or tie the skin onto the wooded base of the drums. The rings are used with leather strips to clamp the skin onto the wood.

Efumbo

This article paid great attention to the mythical Bukusu Drum: *Efumbo*. This drum is spiritually believed to be powerful and could be used as a catalyst to bond or dismantle the community depending on how it is handled. Some Bukusu ceremonies, festivals and funerals may not be complete without this drum. Wanyama (2008) observes that the *Efumbo*, found among the Bukusu, is similarly found among the Samia and Marachi (who call it, *Engalabe*) in Busia with slight variations in shape. It is slightly longer than the *Isukuti* of the *Isukha* in Kakamega and resembles the *musondo* of the Giriama and slightly shorter than *embegete* of the Kuria. All these drums are covered with a skin and is single-headed, that is, only one side is covered by the skin. The tuning is done by warming the drums on a fire or leaving them in a hot sun (Wanyama, 2008; Senoga-Zake, 2000).

The drummers make the *Efumbo* from tree trunks of the *kumurembe* tree. Apart from its use in making drums, *kumurembe* is a special tree believed by the Bukusu to cure many ailments related to witchcraft. The drum is made from a narrow, longer, hollow wood of the *kumurembe* tree. The trunk of the *kumurembe* tree is cut into a shape and size equivalent to the drum's size. A piece is cut from a log of the *kumurembe* tree and chopped into a cylindrical shape with a narrow lower part. The top and the bottom are skillfully chopped into serrated ends for the drum's beauty. The wooden piece is smoothened and dried before the monitor lizard skin is fastened over it while still raw. The monitor lizard skin is tightly stretched over the upper end and fastened using wooden pegs around the head of the drum. The skin is attached to the drum using wooden pegs as it is tightened to the required pitch.

The drum is uniquely big and relatively long and exists as a family with two other small drums called *chindonyi* which are 'male' and 'female.' The drums are set so that the big drum (*Efumbo*) is placed in the middle, while *chindonyi* have the male one placed on the right and the female one on the left. *Efumbo* is made from the wood of *kumurumba* tree and the skin of a monitor lizard, while *chindonyi* are made from cow skin. All the drums have strappings fastened from one end to the other to make it easy for the drummer to hold when playing. There is also a pair of mallets to beat the drums. The *Efumbo* has the drumhead on one end tightly covered with the monitor lizard skin, which is long-lasting and has good sound quality, whereas *chindonyi* are covered with cow skin on both ends.



Figure 1: *Efumbo and Chindonyi*

Although the drummers usually make the drums, it was established that making them has several challenges. For instance, the *kumurumba* tree from which *Efumbo* is made is no longer readily available. The *kumurembe* tree is also hard to find. A study carried out by Wanyama (2008) corroborates this view. It asserts that some materials used to manufacture traditional instruments, especially the monitor lizard skins, have become rare due to most African countries' efforts to conserve wildlife, and a violation or disobedience of rules in this regard often attracts severe penalties.

According to Mulongo, G. (Personal Communication, March 18, 2023), *Efumbo* has existed for many years and was inherited from spiritual owners or forefathers in the Bukusu community. The drumming is inspired by the *kumusambwa* 'spirits of the forefathers in possession of the drummer', passed to the subsequent generations. The unique essence of the drum is the expression of an intricate relation between the drummer and the spiritual realm since the Bukusu believe that the unseen ancestral spirits attend ceremonies where *Efumbo* is played. Therefore, participants must adhere to the rules and customs that accompany *Efumbo*, to impress the spirits.



Figure 2: *Efumbo* (centre) and *Chindonyi* (male on the left and female on the right)

In Figure 2, the drums are made in three sets: one big (*Efumbo*, 0.9 metres long), and two small ones (*Chindonyi*). The *Chindonyi* drums are gendered, the female on the left and the male on the right.

The mystic *Efumbo* has ritualistic functions manifested during various traditional events such as circumcision, weddings, the death of a clan's man, welcoming guests, or invoking the spirits to allow a barren woman to conceive. Other specific occasions include prayer periods when one is possessed by a spirit, during funerals and when a leader visits or for entertainment. The sounds produced during these occasions depend on the reasons for playing *Efumbo*. For example, when it is being used to alert, the melody is louder, going beyond 30 kilometres.

Efumbo as an instrument of power is also manifested through taboos that are associated with it. There are restrictions on the person, the time and the occasion of playing. A woman cannot play *Efumbo*, ululate or put the drums between her legs. Also, *Efumbo* should not be played during unsuitable



occasions or by unauthorised persons such as women, children, youth or unauthorised clan members as this would reduce the magical powers of the drum. When the drums are played on the wrong occasion or by an unauthorised person, it is believed this may bring misfortune to the culprit or the entire community. This act may also attract thunder with hailstones. For this reason, the drums are only played by a person with permission from the *Efumbo* authorized drummer. Such a person is usually a middle-aged man from the clans with ancestral anointings, such as the *bamutwika*, *bamusabi*, *basekese*, *bakuta* and *basonge*.

Other taboos associated with the drumming of *Efumbo* include; when carrying *Efumbo*, the drummers are not supposed to cross the path of each other. If this happens, the *Efumbo* will break into pieces and the drummers will die. Moreover, the drummer is not supposed to fall during the drumming of *Efumbo*. He is usually protected from falling by standing in between the *chindonyi* drummers. The drummer should also be barefooted since the *Efumbo* is a 'spiritual drum' that carries the spirits of the community's ancestors.

When the *Efumbo* is being played, women are expected to sit down with their legs stretched. The Bukusu being a patriarchy-dominated community, leadership and power are exclusively in the hands of the male gender. In addition, according to one of the respondents, these restrictions are meant to prevent the drum as an instrument of power from being misused and to keep the drum holy.

Conclusion

The rituals associated with *Efumbo* encapsulate the traditional spirituality of the Bukusu people and express their connectivity to the ways of their ancestors. Through *Efumbo*, the people articulate the community's positive relations between men and women. At the core of this is the existing barrier of the cultural practices; certain persons in the Bukusu community cannot participate. On the other hand, the rituals are replete with beliefs in which challenges such as barrenness can be solved through invoking spirits by playing *Efumbo*. Thus, some of the rituals and practices associated with *Efumbo* are interpreted as a connection between humans and nature or the invisible world of spirits. Despite these, drums and drumming traditions remain an important cultural practice through which some cultural values of the Bukusu community are preserved. Largely, this article focuses on the rituals associated with *Efumbo*. This calls for another research to illuminate the musical aspects of the drum.

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