

# Perception of the Living Dead and the Invisible Hand in Teso-Turkana

## 9.1 Introduction

In the border area between Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia a group of Nilotic languages is spoken which has come to be known as the Teso-Turkana cluster. It forms part of the Eastern branch of Nilotic and consists of two languages: Teso, and a dialect continuum spoken by different ethnic groups, more specifically the Jiye, the Karimojong, the Nyangatom, the Toposa, and the Turkana. It should be pointed out, however, that the dialect boundaries within the latter cluster do not coincide with the traditional territorial boundaries of these respective ethnic groups. For example, northern Turkana is distinct from southern Turkana, but essentially identical with the neighbouring variety of Toposa.

Traditionally, these groups are transhumant pastoralists, although all of them also practice agriculture. In the course of the twentieth century, many Teso became sedentary and started concentrating more on agricultural activities (Lawrence 1957, Karp 1978). Also, some Turkana groups have become fishermen along the shores of Lake Turkana, often as a result of cattle loss during severe draughts.

Several anthropologists have studied the culture of a number of these groups, and this chapter discusses their contributions. In addition, I myself have carried out linguistic fieldwork in the Turkana area, resulting, among other things, in a grammatical description of the language (Dimmendaal 1983), so part of the data and analyses presented here are based on my own field observations.

This chapter takes a traditional anthropological-linguistic approach sometimes referred to as “ethno-science”. It involves the investigation of lexical terminology as the “linguistic manifestation” of material and spiritual culture, and the study of contexts in which these lexical concepts are used. More specifically, section 9.2 investigates widespread terms for the “living dead” as (partly) invisible forces. The meaning of at least one cognate lexeme varies across these groups. It is this second aspect—semantic change and the metaphorical concept of the “invisible hand” of speakers using these terms in different contexts,

thereby changing their meaning (Keller, 1994)—which is central to section 9.3. The chapter concludes with some observation on perception verbs in these languages (section 9.4).

## 9.2 Invisible Forces in Teso-Turkana

Over the past few decades, a number of studies have appeared which investigate religious concepts among groups speaking Teso-Turkana languages, for example Barrett (1987; 1998) on Turkana, and Novelli (1999) on Karimojong cosmology. Both Barrett and Novelli were Catholic priests who lived among these groups for several decades. Van der Jagt (1989) also based his anthropological and theological account of Turkana religion on fieldwork in the area.

As these and other studies on Teso-Turkana point out, there is a general term, (*n*)*a-kuj(u)*, which may be translated as ‘God’. The prefix *a-*, which interestingly is a feminine gender marker, is pronounced as *na-* in Jiye, Toposa and northern Turkana, a generalised dialect variant that applies to the other examples below. The vowel in parentheses indicates that it is devoiced prepausally and realised as an extra short vowel otherwise. Etymologically, the nominal root is related to *kujū* ‘up, higher elevation’, a term which is also used these days to refer to the cardinal direction ‘north’. Its antonym *kwap* may be translated as ‘down, on the ground’ (compare *a-kwap* ‘land, country’) or ‘south’. These directional markers are associated with the direction in which water flows, from higher (mountainous) zones towards lower regions, or from the sky towards the earth.

As is common cross-culturally, specific human beings are assumed to be capable of acting as malefactors in Teso-Turkana speech communities. Teso refers to this act of bewitching as *-cöd* (Hilders and Lawrance 1958: 33). A cognate form usually combined with a habitual suffix, *-cöd-aan*, occurs in the remaining lects of the Teso-Turkana cluster. For example, the corresponding root form, *-cöd*, expresses ‘weed, pluck, pick, shear, nibble, mow, cut’, in Turkana, according to Barrett (1990: 9). Somebody capable of bewitching other members of the community, however, is usually referred to by way of a *nomen agentis* form, *ε-kapılan(ɪ)* for a male and *a-kapılan(ɪ)* for a female, based on a verb root *-pɪl*. The latter is apparently no longer used in its root form. Instead, one finds a partially reduplicated adjectival stem *-pɪpɪl* ‘painful, aching, susceptible’. In addition, there is an abstract noun, *a-kapılaanut*, expressing the state or structural property of ‘causing pain, looking with evil eyes, thinking evil’.