



Article History  
Received: 2023-08-22  
Accepted: 2023-11-20  
Published: 2023-12-13

Issue no: 1 | Vol no: 5 | December 2023: 282-301

## The socio-pragmatic interpretation of grief discourse among the Meru of Kenya

Lucy Gakii Inoti 

Laikipia University, Kenya.

Email: [lucygakiiinoti@yahoo.com](mailto:lucygakiiinoti@yahoo.com)

### Cite this article in APA

Inoti, L. G. (2023). The socio-pragmatic interpretation of grief discourse among the Meru of Kenya. *Editon consortium journal of languages and linguistics*, 5(1), 282-301. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjlls.v5i1.444>

### Abstract

This study sought to establish the socio-pragmatic interpretation of grief discourse among the Meru of Kenya. Although death is universal, the way people linguistically express the death of a person varies from culture to culture. The reasons for this variation in different social circumstances are not conclusive as research continues in this area. The main objective of this study was to examine the cultural concept of death among the Meru. The study employed an auto-ethnographical study design guided by Silverman's grief model, which consists of three modes of expression, four types of language, and three contingent factors. A purposive sample of twelve respondents comprising six male and six female respondents spread over the three key regions of Meru and nine death incidences provided data for the study. The instruments of data collection comprised observations, face-to-face interviews, and research diaries. Results of the study indicate that death is perceived and expressed differently among the Meru depending on the age, sex, and status of the deceased, as well as the circumstances of death. The study is expected to benefit scholars in applied linguistics, the general public, and policymakers. This study concludes that the verbal and nonverbal reactions during grief have a certain cathartic effect on the bereaved as a coping mechanism. Research is recommended for other communities of the world to carry out similar research in their communities for people to understand each other better and appreciate their cultures.

**Key words:** Cultural concept, death, grief process, Meru people, rites.



This article is distributed under the license of a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). It is permitted to be used, reproduced and distributed in line with Editon Consortium Publishing guidelines.

## INTRODUCTION

In this study, Meru's conception of death is based on the belief that human existence is cyclical and not linear. Based on this system of belief, the dead are alive in a different world and can reincarnate (and return to this world) through new borns (Bondi, 2015). Death is a rite of passage for those who die at a designated (old) age. It is generally believed that to be in the world of the departed gives one supernatural power over the living, such as the ability to bless or to curse and to give life or to take life, among others. After death, an individual lives in a spiritual world and receives a new body that is identical to the earthly body but has the capacity to move about as an ancestor. Becoming an ancestor after death is thus a desirable goal of every individual, and it is believed that this cannot be achieved if an individual did not live a meaningful life or had his or her life cut short, say through an accident or by an unnatural death (Bondi, 2015).

According to Ibui (2019), a Meru person would prefer death that comes naturally, as they would not only be able to tidy up many issues, such as making peace and saying farewell to relatives but also they would be admitted into the spirit world. Death in any group apart from the very old is considered unnatural and premature. The belief is that after death, one becomes an ancestor. After death, and a person is given a proper burial, as failure to do this may result in the dead becoming a wandering ghost, unable to live properly after death, and being dangerous to those who are still alive. It is believed that death marks the physical separation of the departed from the living. Funeral rites and ceremonies draw attention to this permanent separation, and funeral rites are conducted in a particular way to avoid undue offence to the dead.

Mukaria (2019) discusses that the Meru are a one-million-strong ethnic group who live on Mount Kenya's eastern slopes. Traditional Meru customs have been merged with modern-day behaviours. They farm coffee, tea, miraa, maize, peas, beans, potatoes, sorghum, and vegetables, among other things. Dairy and conventional cattle, sheep, goats, and other domestic animals are also kept. The majority of Merus identify as Christians, albeit following a blend of indigenous and Christian traditions. In Meru, burials are mostly done on the family's farm, with the deceased being placed in a wooden casket and interred in a grave. Meru people were not allowed to touch the dead in the past. Those who were dying were

dumped in the surrounding forest to be eaten by wild animals. Any member of the tribe touching a body was considered a grave offence under Meru customary law. The body was transported to mbirira, a woodland burial place. It was thought that if traditional burial rights were not followed, the departed would become a roaming ghost, unable to remain in a stable manner after death and posing a threat to those left behind. More than ensuring a safe exit for the dying, "proper" funeral ceremonies were viewed as a "promise of protection" for the living. It was thought that the dead wielded a powerful influence over the living.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This research investigates how culture influences the grief process. The research was carried out in part to complement the existing knowledge on the subject. Other research, including a few studies, suggests that social status influences grieving experience and expression (Catlin, 1992). At some point in their lives, everyone will endure the death of a loved one. When people suffer significant losses, they typically go through a grieving process, which Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) characterise as a healing process that eventually provides us peace of mind. The term "loss" in the study refers to "death-related loss." Although each mourner's experience, feelings, and themes are unique, all mourners share certain experiences, sentiments, and themes, race, ethnicity, culture and religion. A person's mood is influenced by a variety of things. Participants who have lost a "loved one," such as a significant other, a close family member, or a close acquaintance, have less organised dialogues about their traumatic occurrences and the many elements that shaped their mourning process. The study's main goal was to find an answer to the question, "How does culture affect the grief process?"

Despite the profusion of knowledge on various aspects of grief and death in general, such as the grieving process, how the bereaved people react to grief, common perceptions about death, and research on the "cultural impact of grief" is scarce, and most it is theory (Catlin, 2001). This research should lead to an enhanced understanding of grief in general and the role of culture in the mourning process in particular. Because death is a natural and expected part of life, this study benefits physicians who work with the bereaved, which includes all counsellors, those who have lost and those who do not know someone who has suffered a catastrophe.

According to Pang and Chang (2002), different cultures around the world have varied death rites, and this variance indicates fundamental differences in belief systems, which aligns with the study's first goal. Prior to the performance of these ceremonies, the departed is thought to be neither entirely alive nor completely dead. The dead can only join the ancestors when such ceremonies have been performed. Pang and Chang's (2002) study looked at how people see rituals in general, but they were not interested in the language used by grieving persons while doing rituals. As stated in objective one, this study established the Meru people's concept of death and mourning in their socio-cultural setting.

Webster's Dictionary (1993) defines culture as a form of civilisation which includes the beliefs, arts, and habits of a group of people. However, culture cannot be defined according to Laird (1998), and is an individual and societal creation, a continually evolving and changing collection of meanings that can be comprehended only in the context of a narrative past, a co-interpreted present, and a wished-for future. Webster's definition of culture was utilised as a guideline for this research. Rituals, according to Rando (1985 pg. 19), are "a special behaviour or activity that lends symbolic expression to certain sentiments and thoughts of the actor or actors, either individually or as a group." In death and burial customs, grieving people take on the role of actors and symbols, but it is recognised that each participant will have their own cultural definition.

Certain things are accomplished through the performing of these rites. Emotions and opinions are interpreted and provide symbolic meaning. People who undertake funeral and burial rituals appear to be symbolising a sense of loss that demands them to act in a particular way. They may also execute the rituals to demonstrate that they are mourning and in pain and that the rites would relieve them of that sorrow.

Death and burial rites in Africa, according to Shisanya (1996), are profoundly established in the continent's cultural beliefs, customs, and indigenous religions, influenced by Africans' belief in the existence of life after death and the power and role of the deceased ancestor. However, the rituals have evolved as a result of the integration of Christianity, Islam, and other influences, as stated in objective four of the study. Culture-specific

symbolisms indicate how a person's corpse is managed after death, such as how the deceased's body is cleaned and dressed, who handles the body, and whether the body is buried, cremated, or thrown away. Death rituals include public crying or wailing, whether mourning is expressed softly and discreetly or loudly and openly. It is a cultural concern whether people of different genders or ages grieve differently if there are rituals performed after death, and who is included in these rituals (Shisanya, 1996). Similarly, the cultural dimensions of sorrow and grieving include the symbolisms surrounding how long family members are expected to grieve and how they dress and behave during this time. Part of dealing with death is determining what new duties family members are expected to assume, such as if a widow remarries or whether the oldest son becomes the family leader. People frequently change their culture's ideas and values to match their specific needs and situations. As a result, mourning reactions within a society may differ from one individual to the next. In some cases, a person's experience of grief may be at odds with cultural norms due to the shifting and growing dynamics of loss and grieving as a result of various influences. Someone who is shy and reserved, for example, may not feel at ease sobbing in public. Others may be depressed to a degree that contradicts traditional beliefs about life after death. People are driven to grieve in ways that feel right to them due to changing circumstances, notwithstanding conventional expectations (Shisanya, 1996).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Meru express grief in a variety of ways that reflect their culture, including their understanding of death, circumstances and cause of death, status, gender and the age of the deceased. These expressions are the dynamics of language and expressions of ideas, values, behaviours, customs and rituals, which provide them with a sense of stability and security in the face of death. These traditions have changed over time due to influences of Christianity, education and modernity. This section deals with death conceptualisation among the Meru from their past beliefs, which have morphed over time. With respect to objective one of this study, the conceptualisation of death among the Meru, all the 48 informants were in agreement that death among the Meru is perceived in 4 (four) categories as indicated in the data below;

- a) **As losing a soul** (kuthirirwa Moyo)
- b) **As to be ripped off the soul** (kuritwa moyo)

c) As to be denied of the soul (gwatwa moyo)

d) As being robbed of the soul (gutunywa moyo)

**Table 1: Death Conceptualisation Data from 3 Regions of Meru (Imenti, Tigania and Tharaka)**

KIMERUVERSION	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	NUMBER OF INFORMANTS	PERCENTAGES
kuthirirwa moyo)	<b>to losing a soul</b>	48	62%
kuritwa moyo	<b>to be ripped of the soul</b>	48	83%
Gwatwa/kwimwa moyo	<b>to be denied of the soul</b>	48	49.82%
Gutunywa/ guchunwa mwoyo	<b>being robbed of the soul</b>	48	40.62%

## **Losing a Soul (kuthirirwa moyo)**

The data above show that the Meru conceptualise death as **losing a soul** (kuthirirwa moyo). This is natural death, as in the case of old age. The Meru believe that human beings has a soul (**moyo**), which is God-given. This is what connects God (Murugu) with humanity. It is God's wish that the soul live in the physical body till old age. The soul is believed to be eternal and does not wear out with time. However, the body that houses it is affected by time and age crops in. The body wears away and becomes frail with age. When old people die, the Meru regard that **as losing a soul**, which means that the dead person has lost the soul which they were given by God. This concept is alluded to in the Holy Bible in 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 ( For since death came through man, the resurrection can also by man, for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.) The Bible acknowledges the loss of the soul in old age and guarantees life after death in Christ Jesus. This is a belief that the soul is eternal and that death does not end life but transits it to another realm. The departed Merus are believed to join the ancestral world and become the link between the living and the Supreme God. In this respect, the burial rites and the resting place of the dead are an integral part of the Meru culture, religion and belief systems. (Nthamburi, 1982).

## **As to be Ripped of the Soul (kuritwa/kubura moyo)**

This is death which is instigated by an external force as in homicide. The Meru believe that there are people who evil in our society. These are murders and those who commit suicide. Such people are known to rip a soul out of another person or from themselves. The Meru ideology is that life is supreme and God given and that no human being is supposed to rip it off. The Meru disregard wrongdoers in the community. When a murderer dies they lament, *‘akangaa na miti iri ituro’*

(*wondering with sticks on his/her shoulders*), this means that the deceased will never find peace and that he will never join the ancestral world because of the evil life he had lived. The ‘sticks on the shoulders’ are a concrete domain of burdens and challenges of life which will follow an evil person to the next world. The Meru perception of evil people in the spirit world is that of pain and struggles in the domain of abstract according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Although they did not believe in the ideology of heaven and hell like the Christians do, they had similar believe of afterlife. The evil people are known to be enemies of the society. They include; the witches, sorcerers, murders and people with ‘red eye’ (riintho riritune). They have evil powers of killing people without any good reason. When a person dies (especially a young person) the Meru lamented ‘karogi’, (he/she has been bewitched) as seen in all the 48 informants in the 3 regions of Meru. The Meru believe that there are certain group of people, clans, age groups, for example people with red eyes, very old single people, squinted eyes who possess these destructive powers. The Meru have low regards for evil people.

The Meru believe all this evil can lead to death and this is witnessed in all the 3 regions of Meru. Most of the metaphors are linguistic metaphors which form the native speaker's mental lexicon. They derive from more basic sense of words and reflect a high degree of polysemy and idiomaticity in the structure of the mental lexicon. The magnitude of such cases of polysemy and idiomaticity in the lexicon is taken to be evidence of the pervasiveness of metaphor. This is in line with Conceptual Metaphor Theory where the Meru understand the linguistic Metaphor which are part of their mental lexicon in comprehending evil which is responsible for death.

This is alluding with Magesa (1998:157) who argues that

an individual with an evil eye harms others because he/she is evil. This means that the people's actions cannot be divorced in the Meru understanding of things and that it is the people who cause evil which in turn leads to death. Similarly, a study carried out in Meru show that, evil people still exist and that they cause harm to others and sometimes cause death.

Data show that witches are regularly credited with causing all manner of disasters and diseases, sickness and even deaths. They are also believed to cause misfortunes. In Meru, deaths are brought by witchcraft, people always lament 'ni urogi' (it is witchcraft), when disaster strikes like malaria, or cholera, 'kuragwa' (power of evil). This is witnessed in Meru where dissatisfied people will attribute their failures to evil people as they lament 'ka arogi'm (witchcraft), 'ka aogii' (has been tied), 'ka aiingi' (has been closed). This shows that they believe there are evil people among them who are capable of evil deeds.

The Meru attribute diseases whose causes are unknown such as the death mystery and strange and inexplicable misfortunes to witchcraft and people with 'red eye'. Therefore, it is common to find a Meru consulting a medical doctor and a witch doctor where the medical doctor treats the external symptoms while the witchdoctor uncovers the hidden causes. Thus the sick Meru will take preventive measures prescribed by the Medical doctor; they will also take steps against supernatural evil powers. In Meru a patient will take medicine prescribed by doctor and at the same time wear 'mukathi' kuumirwa (a string around the waist) to protect themselves from witchcraft. They will plant 'items' at the entrance to ward away witchcraft and evil spell from getting in the homestead, 'kuumira' (talisman), 'gukura nkuuro' (body marks). Witchcraft offer explanations to the problem posed when one seeks to understand why misfortune befalls a person rather than another. The reason to why one person's cow dies and another one's cow lives can invoke the explanation of the other person's success. Why one child has passed the exam and another one in the same class has not.

Data from the 3 regions of Meru show that witch doctors were as perceived as good or bad depending on their effect. The Meru believe that some leaders surround themselves with protective 'witchdoctors' to endorse them with supernatural powers so that they can remain in

power. During the time of voting, people end up voting then in regardless of the fact that they don't do much development. People lament 'bu ti bwa kuura' (this is more than voting), 'ni mithega' (it is evil power), 'ni kamuti' (it is a stick). This means that the witches have powers that can bring about good or evil to the people. This ambiguity between the good and evil witches is similar to the Chile among the Mapuche who believe that young women take up sorcery and old women become powerful witches who use underworld powers to affect the living.

From the above data which was echoed by all the informants from the three regions indicated that the Meru regarded death as having been caused by evil people who could be close family members who were jealousy of either the child or its parents, grandparents. Data indicate that when many people died the Meru regarded it as a sign of evil deed by the clan or family members of the deceased. Death of a young person a man or woman was regarded a curse 'mugiro' or meyia. The cause of death determined how the family reacted. If the person died out of sickness or accident like drowning, the Meru associated it to a curse, bewitching or evil spirit in the family lineage which is echoed by (Anderson, 2000) among the Tshivenda of South Africa.

The concept of 'wild death' is associated with evil deeds where a person died in a forest (kithaka) or isolation from a familiar environment and the inability to reach something or someone. The Meru view 'forest death' as a place where one dies away from family members as in times of tribal wars (maithene). The Meru people consider this type of death to be unnatural and cruel. This is because family members are absent and the person is dying away from the home environment which would have allowed the practice to take place. The Meru believe that people who have died a 'bad death' like suicide had been driven to it by evil spirits and these spirits were capable of coming back and repeating what they have done through someone else in the same family. This is because the Meru believe that if a member of a family committed suicide there was likelihood that another member of the same family would also do the same.

The Meru did not allow anybody to visit such a home for they believed the same evil spirit of death may before them. The Meru believe that death is caused by someone and it did not matter whether death is a 'good death' or a



'bad death' the bereaved is isolated and she is believed to have 'mugiro' (a type of a curse). This reaction is similar to Tshivende of Zimbabwe who also had a belief that the mother was 'unclean' and the whole family is cleansed upon death of their loved one (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). Cleansing was also a way of closure and continuity of life. Death of a young person a man or woman was regarded a curse 'mugiro'. The cause of death determined how the family reacted. If the person died out of sickness or accident like drowning, the Meru associated it to a curse, bewitching or evil spirit in the family lineage which is echoed by (Adersen, 2000) among the Tshivenda of South Africa who believed that death had a cause and that there was no normal death.

Data show that the Meru evil people were responsible for the death of young people. The Meru believe that witches practice incest and other perversions and that they derive their powers from evil spirit with whom they have agents such as dogs, cats, owls, snakes and insects. They say 'kaguci kaa agatumi', (this cat has been sent', The owls are also used as agents of witchcraft, 'ntuntuguru iu ikooraga muntu'(the crying owl will kill someone). Sometimes the Meru associate small insects like bees to be agents of witchcraft, they say 'ii juki getumi' (this bee is sent). This is similar to the Zunde of Congo who believe the source of evil is located in the stomach of a witch and its power and range increase with age (Evans-Pritchards, 1960). The Meru have the notion of witches as old people who they associated with witchcraft. They believe the witches have powers to put objects, animals and insects in a person's body and can claim that there is a frog croaking in a person's stomach, 'kiura igikurira kiuu'. They believe that the witches use their powers to put it there.

In most African societies witches are regularly credited with causing all manner of disasters and diseases, sickness and even deaths. They are also believed to cause misfortunes. This same belief is shared by the Meru who feel that any evil happening is attributed to witchcraft. In Meru, deaths are brought by witchcraft, people always lament 'ni urogi' (it is witchcraft), when disaster strikes like malaria, or cholera, 'ni marogi' (power of witchcraft).

The Asians and Africans who believe in witchcraft has the power of rational reasoning and witchcrafts come in play when rational knowledge fails. The Meru attribute

diseases whose causes are unknown such as the death mystery and strange and inexplicable misfortunes to witchcraft. Therefore, it is common to find a Meru consulting a medical doctor and a witch doctor where the medical doctor treats the external symptoms while the witchdoctor uncovers the hidden causes. Thus the sick Meru will take preventive measures prescribed by the Medical doctor; they will also take steps against supernatural evil powers. In Meru a patient will take medicine prescribed by doctor and at the same time wear 'mukathi' kuumirwa (a string around the waist) to protect themselves from witchcraft. They will plant 'items' at the entrance to wade away witchcraft and evil spell from getting in the homestead, 'kuumira' (talisman), 'gukura nkuuro' (body marks).

Witchcraft offer explanation to the problem posed when one seeks to understand why misfortune befalls a person rather than another. The reason to why one person's cow dies and another one's cow lives can invoke the explanation of the other person's success. Why one child has passed the exam and another one in the same class has failed. Why one girl is married and the other one even more beautiful is not married.

The perception between the good and evil witches is found in Chile among the Mapuche who believe that young women take up sorcery and old women become powerful witches who use 'bad medicine' to obtain their ends with evil forces which they use to harm and take advantage over others. EE Evans-Pritchards (1902-1973). In Meru, it is mostly the old people who are associated with witchcraft. Sometimes, when people become old and they are isolated, they are regarded as witches. 'uria ii murogi' ( that one is a witch).

Different African communities have different names for witchcraft; West Africa calls it 'Esali', the Safwa of East Africa is called 'Tiv', and the Meru calls it 'Urogi'. In most of the African communities, Meru included the bewitched person who may seek help from a diviner to a certain evil person responsible for the action. The diviner uses different techniques to discover the witchcraft, which may include throwing a dice 'kugera bugu', 'kugerera nguku mpempe' (to throw maize to a chicken), 'gutega kioni' ( to look at a mirror), ' gwitura ruuji nthi' (to pour water on the ground), 'kwaria migambo migeni' (speaking in tongues). In most cases the 'victim' finds the source of his/her woes among his rivals who are mostly

neighbours, relatives, co-workers and other competitors. What follows after this is accusations is enmity. In most of the polygamous communities Meru included, these accusations are prevalent between competing co-wives and business rivals.

According to Makondelele (2010) in her study about the bereavement rituals among the Tshivenda of South Africa, she noted that the fear of witchcraft of the women who participated in the research were derived from cultural and historical knowledge that explains death as having non-physical causes like witchcraft. According to Opoku (1989) death was considered to be caused by witchcraft. The participant's talk alluded with Opoku (1989) that death was caused by witchcraft. The Meru share a similar belief where the lament 'ii kurogwa' (it is witchcraft), 'ikwirijaniria' (it is mixing up), 'guciangaratania's (leading complicated life).

## **As to be denied of the Soul** (gwatwa moyo)

This happens when the giver of life (God) declines to grant continued life. The Meru believe that God (Murungu) is the giver of life and that He has power over it. The same God who gives life can also take away the life from an individual at will and that life is a privilege from God. This privilege can be terminated any time. This is seen by the way the Meru lament 'no Murungu wiji' (It is God who knows). This means that life is in the hands of God. When calamities strike and people die, it is attributed to God denying people life. This is similar to the way a person may be barren and another one is able to have children. One person lives and another one dies. The Meru perception of God gives life and God can deny someone life is alluded in the Holy Bible in Job 1:21 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away...' (New International Version Bible). The servant of God by the name Job lost all his children and property to calamities and lamented as stated above. Job knew what he had belonged to God and that God can take away at will. The same way the Meru believe that God can deny someone life at will and lament "murungu akujukia" (God has taken). This means that life (soul) has gone back to God the creator. This believe is alluded to by (Mukaria 2019) where he argues that the Meru believe that life is God given and that the dead transits to heaven to live with God.

## **As being Robbed of the Soul** (gutunywa/guchunwa moyo)

This is where death is instigated by evil deed through some craft, possibly witchcraft, curses and disobedience. The Meru believe the wages of sin is death. The Meru believe in living harmoniously with others and that the opposite can call for punishment from God. Death as an atonement for wrong doing. The Meru belief that death is a payback for a wrong deed or for disobedience. The Meru proverb, murega akiathwa atiregaga agikunjwa (literally, one can refuse counsel but cannot refuse resultant death) attests to this belief. A similar belief is captured in Romans 6:23 (King James Version). "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." To the Meru death is seen as a 'pay back's for crime committed. This is similar to Christian perception of Jesus dying on the cross to cleanse us our sins.

Data show that death of a child was not taken lightly. The data show that it was not considered as a normal death. The Meru lamented; 'ngina akurigwa' (the mother has been hit), especially those from Tigania, meaning being punished for a wrong doing just like the way a parent punishes a child for wrong doing. According to CMT, this is the "understanding of one domain in terms of another." The term "to be hit". Is mapped from the domain of source to the domain of target where another term that is frequently used in the literature for "correspondence" is "mapping". This is because certain elements and the relations between them are said to be mapped from the "source domain", onto the "target." For example, when the Meru say death is a 'kulingwa' they conceptually relate the aspect of being 'hit' and the physical pain a person undergoes to that of a 'the pain of losing a loved one which is abstract'. The mappings bring into correspondence the elements and the relations between the elements in the 'hit' domain (source) with elements and the relations between the elements in the 'death' domain (target).

It is the same mother who went to throw the body into the forest as a way of punishment. She was then isolated by the community. She was not supposed to shave her hair nor sleep with her husband due to the fact that she was considered unclean and to have a 'rukuo' (crack) / 'mugiro (curse)'. The food she cooked was only eaten by her own children and not her husband. This went on till she got her monthly periods, after which a 'mutheria' was called to come and cleanse her by having sex with her. After that her hair was shaved and that of the other

members of the bereaved family, the whole family resumed normalcy. The shaving of the hair was symbolised a new beginning of a new life after the contaminated one is gone. This believe is similar to Tshivende of Zimbabwe who also cleansed family members upon death of their loved one (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). Cleansing was also a way of closure and continuity of life.

Data from the three regions of Meru indicate that the Meru believe death is caused by evil spirits as a result of punishment for evil doing. The same notion is held by (Mbiti 1969), who argues that many African communities believe that evil spirits are malicious and malevolent spirits which cause pain and suffering to human beings. There are many things that can provoke evil spirits including breaking a taboo which makes one ritually unclean. The Meru usually lament 'tikwenda kwirijaniria' (I don't want to mix myself). Failing to give libations and offerings "kunda tutu nkoma cia bajuju" (eat this the spirits of our ancestors) curses can also bring about wrath of spirit. That is why the Meru acknowledged the dead in different ways, such as naming their children after them. "Ukandetera kirumii" (don't bring me a curse). These curses are from parents and older relatives like uncles, aunts and grandparents. Data show that the Meru were careful not to annoy the dead. They never talked ill of a dead person.

The Meru believe that neglect, insults and disobedience can attract the wrath of evil spirits, which can cause death. Breaking an oath and solemn promise can also attract wrath of evil spirit and consequently result to death. Oaths are made to seal arguments or to defend a person against malicious accusations, and breaking them can attract the wrath of evil spirits, and death can come as a result. The Meru regard death calamities and epidemics, locusts to be caused by evil spirits as a result of evil doing. Among the Meru, 'Nkoma' brings death, 'saitani' brings death, 'kirundu gia nkoma' (evil spirit) brings death. Among the Meru, many deaths are attributed to evil spirits, as is witnessed in all the three regions of Meru. These evil spirits, according to the data collected, are a result of evil deeds.

The Meru believe that evil spirits are the origin or agents of evil. The Meru regard it as 'Kirundu gia nkoma' (the evil spirit). The Meru believe that when the spirits of the ancestors ('nkoma cia bajuju' (spirits of our ancestors) get

detached from the human contact people believe they might cause evil or harm. These evil spirits are believed to cause diseases like epilepsy "kibaba" and (madness) "thuu". This Meru believe happens when the dead are not buried properly, and it is thought they revenge or punish the offenders. Other issues that can attract such revenge and punishment are when old parents are not taken care of and they die unhappy.

The data shows that the spirits of people who died unhappy like barren women or children who died before getting initiated into adulthood were responsible for deaths as a way of revenge. Such spirits avenge themselves and are never satisfied. The Meru lamented, "ii kirundu kia nthaati iria" (It is the spirit of the barren woman) "ii kirundu kia muthaka uria wetire ati na mwana" (It is the spirit of the young man who died without a child). However, the data show that the Meru had ways of appeasing these evil spirits through cleansing rituals. This is the act of reconciliation or making peace and making a new beginning. The ancestral and nature spirits are placated through sacrifices and offerings while those malevolent and unknown spirits are 'expelled' or 'driven away' to avoid them causing affliction. The Meru call it "Kwinga kooma" (To chase away evil spirits).

Today, services of religious specialists are required and they cast out and disown them and are made to go 'where they belong' "The priests cast them out sometimes using dirty language to show that it is not welcomed (Magesa 1987:89). In Meru, similar happenings are witnessed where the men of God (priests) chase out the evil spirit saying 'Ishidwe Kirundu gia Nkoma) Let it be defeated, evil spirit) "Toka toka pepo mbaya" (come out! Come out evil spirit) "nkoma irweta itije kairi" (evil spirit go away for good) which is reported in all the 3 main regions of Meru.

In Meru when life is threatened by evil spirits, prayers and rituals are most abundant both in private and public domain. These prayers are comprehensive which involves removal of evil and asks for the restoration of all that is good. There is a time in life when order and harmony in the world and in life depend on powers greater than human power.



## Death Metaphors and Expressions during the Phases of Mourning

Lakoff and Jomson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor

Theory this study has identified various metaphors of death among the Meru that have been categorised into seven conceptual segments:

**Table 2: Death Metaphors from 3 Regions of Meru (Imenti, Tigania and Tharaka)**

Kimeruversion		English translation	Number of informants	Percentages
kumama		To sleep	48	98%
kunogoka		to rest	48	93%
Gwita		to be called/summoned	48	82%
kuana		To go home	48	78%
Gwita rugendo		To go on a journey	48	88%
Kunyara		To wither	48	52%
Gukaba ruume		To crush tongue	48	43%
Kurega irio		To refuse food	48	41%

a) **GIKUU NI KUMAMA (DEATH IS A SLEEP)**

b) **GIKUU NI GWITWA (DEATH IS SUMMONS (CALL))**

c) **GIKUU NI RUGENDO (DEATH IS A JOURNEY)**

d) **GIKUU NI KUNOGOKA (DEATH AS REST)**

e) **GIKUU NI KUNYARA (DEATH IS TO WITHER)**

f) **GIKUU NI KUREGA IRIO (DEATH IS REFUSE FOOD)**

g) **GIKUU NI KURUMA RUUME (DEATH IS TO CRUSH THE TONGUE)**

The above Kimeru death metaphors are analysed in line with Silverman's theory of the language of bereavement and grief which covers both verbal and nonverbal expressions, as well as being in line with objective two of the study about the Meru metaphors of death during the phases of mourning which is analysed using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

The eight categories of death metaphors result from Lakoff and Johnson's premise that the metaphor is a conceptual mapping from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain.

In this study the seven categories of death metaphors were generated from a purposive sample of 48

informants. The study also used the cognitive linguistics model by Silverman (2007) to provide tools for understanding, interpreting and accounting for the metaphors of death in Kimeru.

Use of metaphors is a coping mechanism in the face of death. Avoiding directly address human mortality indicates fear of death which elicits psychological, social and religious interdictions in language such that people resort to the use of metaphors to avoid confronting death. This fear of death can be traced to ancient Meru culture in which the dead body was never touched and instead was tied with a rope and dragged to the nearby forest for disposal. The body was abandoned and was left to be defiled by wild animals.

The details of the death metaphors took the following form;

### Death as 'Sleep' (kumama)

Data from the study of all the 48 informants, as attested by the table above, indicate death is regarded as sleep:

The verb - mama - in Kimeru means "sleep" and when used in its past form, "naramamire" (he went to sleep) and 'kumama' where the helping verb 'ku' when used together with 'mama' means 'to sleep' in the context of sad body language socio semantically means "his physical life has ended". A life that ends is associated with death. "Kumana" (to sleep) in Kimeru is a metaphor

of death philosophically meaning an "eternal sleep" in which the affected never wakes up. Kumama is a euphemism of 'gukua' to die but the Meru consider the term *gukua* (to die) a taboo word to utter. In line with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the Meru view death as 'sleep' which is a euphemistic word. The attributes associated with sleep are used in structuring death as they are transferred from the domain of sleep to the domain of death. The conceptualisation of death as sleep portrays death as a quiet sleep or repose after earthly existence. These euphemisms demonstrate a positive view of and attitude towards death. This reveals that there are similarities in the linguistic realisation of the death as sleep metaphor in Kimeru. The horizontal position of a dead body is equated to the position of a sleeping person. To avoid the mention of the word 'death' the Meru use sleeping 'kumama' which has a positive connotation of hope of waking up though in another form and in the ancestral world. Since the human body and the brain are predominantly universal, the metaphorical structures that are based on them will also be predominantly universal. This explains why many conceptual metaphors, such as DEATH IS SLEEP, can be found in a large number of genetically unrelated languages. This does not mean, however, that *all* conceptual metaphors that are based on primary metaphors will be the same from language/culture to language/culture. It was recognised early on that the particular culture in which a metaphor develops is just as significant in shaping the form of the conceptual metaphors in different languages/cultures as the universal bodily experiences. The Meru perception differs in the way the domain of death does not mean finality or end of life. The soul is believed to wake up in a spiritual realm. It is the physical body that is left which does not respond to time, feelings, and remains in an inactive mode. Due to this notion the Meru have special respect for the dead body because they believe the soul lives on and can come back in form of reincarnation. According to Mukaria (2019), the Meru view death of an old person has 'sleeping'

## Death as a Summon (Call)

Data from all the 48 informants as indicated by the excerpt below indicate that the Meru regard death as a summon (call) (*gwitwa* in Kiimentu).

(*aitwa* in Gitania)

(*aitwa* in Kiitharaka)

The verb 'gwitwa' (to be called) when used in the past

tense 'naretirwe' (was called), in the present continuous tense 'agwita' (is going) literally means to be 'called' presumably by the creator Murungu. This is the process of the soul leaving the physical body to join the spirit form. When the word is used alongside nonverbal expressions in line with Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson means to die. Therefore, 'gwitwa' is a euphemism for 'gukua' which the Meru considered a taboo and when mentioned publically would bring wrath to people. Further, this metaphorical mapping transfers different attributes from the source domain of a call to the target domain of death. This is a conceptual mapping from the concrete source domain of a call which can be heard and the response seen to the abstract of death which is in the mind.

More specifically, it uses different conceptual correspondences as a result of using the knowledge about call to talk about death. For instance, it is common to hear mourner say that the late had responded to a call, so it was necessary for him/her to embark on the journey to answer the call. This call is unique and the Meru equate it a scenario where a man is called by a beautiful woman which they say is irresistible. They use a saying that 'mwitwa igikuo ni ta mwitwa ii muka' (to be called by death is like to be called by a beautiful woman). The concrete domain of a beautiful woman is compared to the domain of death. However to the Meru, the caller is the creator Murungu and just like the man going to the woman and the two living together, the same notion is embraced by the Meru who believe that the soul lives on with the creator. The Meru then believe that such a soul is closer to the maker and thus can intercede for the living. This seen by the way they handle and treat the body which is left behind when the soul receives 'a call' from the creator. The Meru never talk ill about the departed soul, for they have a notion that incase the soul is angered by such utterance can attract, disaster such as famine, pandemics, premature deaths, as well as sickness.

## Death as a Journey` (rugendo in Kiimentu)

(ruendo in Gitania)

(Kuthii in Kiitharaka)

Data from all the 48 informants expressed death as a journey; and depicts the aspect of variation in dialect depending on the region where the utterance was made. The difference between Kiimentu and Gitania is the

absence Of the morpheme [g] in Giitiania. The word (kuthii) in Kitharaka has similarities in the action of taking the journey which is 'gwita (to go) in Kiiminti and Giintiania.

The noun 'rugendo' means a journey. When it is used in the present tense 'gwita' 'to go' and 'a' is the singular person marker literally means a person has gone and 'rugendo' meaning journey is what the person has undertaken. The journey taken can also be to go home 'akwaana' or to go to Buuri 'gwita Buuri'. Going home is metaphorical to mean returning to the creator Murungu who the Meru believe created humanity. The Meru metaphorically states that when the life on earth is over the soul transits to the creator by taking a journey. To go to Buuri means to go back to the ancestors. Conceptualisation is the principle of understanding an idea or a concept in terms of another. With regard to death, it can be understood in terms of a journey whereby human beings are travelers on a journey, with death and/or 'going to heaven' seen as a destination to be reached.

The metaphors involve understanding one domain of experience, death, in terms of very different experiences, in this case, that of a journey. In other words, the metaphor can be understood as a mapping from the source domain (in this case journey) to a target domain (in this case death). Therefore, in Meru, issues dealing with death are developed by reasoning about the dead, dying and/or death in terms of other concepts or ideas, for instance, in terms of journeys. In this sense, Meru's euphemistic substitutes do utilise the knowledge about journeys when dealing or reasoning about death. The euphemistic substitutes that constitute DEATH IS A JOURNEY metaphors map the aspect of travel onto that of death. The unique aspect here is that the body sojourns with the soul and upon death the soul transits to another realm and leaves the physical body behind. Concrete mapping is that of the journey that a human being takes from the time of birth all the way till the time the soul departs to take the spiritual form. Many conceptual metaphors (both the similarity-based ones and the primary metaphors) are based on "image schemas." These are abstract, pre-conceptual structures that emerge from our recurrent experiences of the world (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987). Such skeletal pre-conceptual structures include SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, FORCE, VERTICALITY, and several others. For example, the

DEATH IS A JOURNEY metaphor from the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema. This mapping is in line with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which enables the Meru to process death as a journey in order to concretise death as a journey, which reduces its impact on the living.

According to CMT, metaphor resides not only in language but also in thought. We use metaphors to speak about certain aspects of the world and think about them. As we saw above, CMT makes a distinction between linguistic metaphors, i.e., linguistic expressions used metaphorically, and conceptual metaphors, i.e., certain conceptual patterns we rely on in our daily living, to think about aspects of the world. For example, metaphors such as DEATH AS JOURNEY can actually govern the way we think about life: we can set goals we want to reach, we do our best to reach those goals, we can make careful plans for the journey, we can prepare ourselves for facing obstacles along the way, we can draw up alternative plans in the form of choosing a variety of different paths, we can prefer certain paths to others, and so on. When we entertain such and similar ideas, we actually think about life in terms of the DEATH IS A JOURNEY CONCEPTUAL metaphor. And, consequently, we can use the language of journeys to also *talk* about DEATH.

**Death as Rest** (kunogoka/kuuruka in Kiiminti)  
(kunooka/kuuruka in Gintiania)  
(kunoka/kuuruka in Kiitharaka)

The above data from the 48 informants show that the Meru use the euphemistic word 'rest' as metaphor for death. The above words show the variation in accent used in various regions in Meru. In Giintiani there is the deletion of the morpheme [g] and in Kiitharaka the deletion of the syllable [go]. The Meru understand each other, and when the utterance is done, they know it is a metaphor for death.

The verb 'nogoka' means to rest. When used in the past tense, the Meru say 'akunogoka'. This literally means taking a rest from the earthly work. Lakoff (1993) states: Metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason. The language is secondary. The mapping is primary in that it sanctions the use of source domain language and inference patterns for target domain concepts. This means that Meru euphemistic language substitutes and utilises the

knowledge about resting when dealing with or reasoning about death. The euphemistic substitutes that constitute DEATH AS REST metaphors map the aspect of rest onto that of death. The source domain of rest is conceptualised from the concrete position of a dead person and inferred to the abstract death. A dead person appears as a resting person, which the Meru believe is the body that rests while the soul transits to the spiritual realm, which is abstract and cannot be seen.

## Death as to Wither ‘kunyara’

Data from the 48 informant show that the Meru use the metaphor 'kunyara' to wither to euphemise death. In this case, death is understood and conceptualised as a concept in terms of another. Following Conceptual Metaphor Theory where the mapping of a concrete domain the source domain is expressed in reference to the target domain which is abstract. The principle can be considered a metaphorical scenario, with regard to death, it can be understood in terms of a plant which is concreated and is seen. Its state is also seen and when it withers it is seen to lack life 'kwaga mwoyo'. This is mapped with death, which is abstract and not seen. The Meru believe that death is similar to withering of a plant where it lacks life. The Meru view death has 'to wither'. This means that they compare life to a plant, and upon death, the physical body withers just like the way a plant withers. The two domains share generic-level structure that can be given as follows: In both domains, there is an entity that comes into existence, it begins to grow, reaches a point in its development when it is strongest, then decline, and finally goes out of existence. Based on this shared structure, the plant domain can function as a source domain for the human domain. In other words, the similarity explains the pairing of this particular source with this particular target; that is, the metaphor is grounded in similarity – though of a very abstract kind.

Many conceptual metaphors (both the similarity-based ones and the primary metaphors) are based on "image schemas." These are abstract, conceptual structures that emerge from our recurrent experiences of the world (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987). Such skeletal pre-conceptual structures include SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, FORCE, VERTICALITY, and several others. For example, DEATH IS A JOURNEY metaphor from the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema.

The research on primary metaphors has intensified the study of metaphors in the brain. Lakoff (2008) suggested a "neural theory of metaphor". In it, individual neurons in the brain form neuronal groups called "nodes". There can be different types of neural circuits between the nodes. In the "mapping circuit" that characterises metaphor, there are two groups of nodes corresponding to the source and target domain, where the journey is the source domain and death the target domain. The circuitry between the two groups of nodes will correspond to the mappings, or correspondences. In primary metaphors, one group of nodes represents a sensorimotor experience in the brain, while the other represents an abstract, subjective experience. This makes it possible for the Meru to understand the metaphors of death.

## Death as Going Home ‘kwaana’

Data from all the 48 informants expressed death as 'going home' (kuaana). The place where dead go to is equated to the concrete domain of home where the atmosphere is conducive and comfortable and is mapped with the abstract domain of death. The data show that the Meru use the following metaphoric language to euphemise death as:

.... 'ngania akuaana' (so and so has gone home), 'naraanire' (went home) 'naraumiririe njaa' (took home) and 'naracokere njaa' (went back home), kumiria (take home).

The Meru believe that when a person visits another one, they usually go home after the visit. Metaphorically, the Meru regard earthly life as alien and that people will eventually go back home to their maker (God) which is their home where they belong. Death is thus conceptualised as the target domain as according to CMT tenets. The concrete domain which is primary is 'home' and which is regarded a comfortable place. The Meru saying 'ukamena kaganda kaitha utalala' (never despise a person's house which you have not slept) literally means a home is a special place for the owner and should never be despised by an outsider. People are more comfortable when at home that is why when a person pays a visit to place they are usually told to 'feel at home'. The Meru regard death euphemistically as going home which make the experience bearable and easy to accept. The Meru metaphorically regard death as going home as indicated by the above utterances. The Meru believe that when a person gathers food from the fields, they take them home which is 'kumiria'. This is equated with death where the



dead is metaphorically regarded as one who has taken the harvest home after being in the field for some time. The harvest in the case is the concrete source domain which is compared to the abstract domain of death which is the target domain as stated in the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The Meru believe that when a person visits another one, they usually go home after the visit. Metaphorically, the Meru regard earthly life as alien and that people will eventually go back home to their maker (God) which is their home where they belong. People are more comfortable when at home that is why when you pay a visit to places they usually say 'feel at home'. The Meru regard death euphemistically as going home which make the experience bearable and easy to accept. The Meru metaphorically regard death as going home as indicated by the above utterances.

## Death as to Refuse Food (gikuu ni kurega irio)

Data from the 48 informants regard death as refusal to eat food. This metaphor is symbolic and it means that a person who is dead does not eat. In an attempt to evade mentioning the word death, the Meru instead say that a person has refused food. The Meru regard food as an important requirement for survival and that they usually have a lot of food which they harvest from the farms. As

such they believe that a person must eat to live and that when a person refuses food then they are dead. They have a saying that 'mwana ii kau' (a child is the stomach) meaning that a person can lack everything else but they must never lack food. Whenever the Meru have occasions, they usually cook a lot of food to welcome and feed the guests. It is a tradition that when visitors come to a homestead, they must eat something in the homestead otherwise it is an abomination to leave before eating. In addition, the visitor must also be given something to carry home and this is usually in form of food stuff. This is how important the Meru regard food. The use of symbolism is in line with Silverman (2007) Language of grief model which covers use of symbolic language to express grief. Death has refusal to eat food is also euphemistic which is expressed metaphorically according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory. In the CMT, the daily aspects of life are compared to the target domain of death where the Meru equate death to refusal to eat food an art which they cherish so much. The knowledge which the Meru have about food is used when reasoning about death. This makes it easy for the Meru to understand the metaphor and communicate effectively to each other.

**Table 3: Death Expressions from 3 Regions of Meru (Imenti, Tigania and Tharaka)**

Kimeruversion Verbal expressions	English translation	Number of informants			Percentages
		total			
Kwaria/ gutumiria (gutithongi, tikwega, kugutuka, gukuthuka)	<b>Word of mouth (it is not good, it is dark, it is bad)</b>	48			98%
NON VERBAL EXPRESSIONS					
Kuga mbuu	<b>Wailing/screaming</b>	48			82%
Kurira na inya	<b>crying</b>	48			78%
Kurira kaoora	<b>sobbing</b>	48			88%
Guitugutania	<b>throwing themselves down</b>	48			52%
Guta into	<b>Throwing away objects</b>	48			43%
Gukira kii	<b>Silence</b>	48			41%
Kwinika mutwe nthii	<b>Bowed heads</b>	48			
Kurega gwakia mwanki	<b>Cessation of fire in the homestead</b>	48			68%
Gwikira nguo iinjiru/ na	<b>Wearing black</b>	48			

mitame imituune	clothes/red ribbons	48			62%
					56%
					48%

## Verbal Expressions

Verbal responses characterise verbalised reactions upon the occurrence of death. All the 48 Informants reported some form of verbalisation or another in all the incidences reported. The severity of the verbalisations ranged from open wailing and screaming to silence depending on the age, status, and circumstances of the death. This is what “understanding one domain in terms of another” means. Another term that is frequently used in the literature for “correspondence” is “mapping”. This is because certain elements and the relations between them are said to be mapped from one domain, the “source domain”, onto the other domain, the “target.” In this case the source domain is the expression of crying and wailing which is primary and death is mapped as the target domain which is abstract.

According to CMT, metaphor resides not only in language but also in thought. We use metaphors not only to speak about certain aspects of the world but also to think about them. CMT makes a distinction between linguistic metaphors, i.e., linguistic expressions used metaphorically, and conceptual metaphors, i.e., certain conceptual patterns we rely on in our daily living, to think about aspects of the world. Verbal expressions such as crying, wailing and screaming are linguistic expressions used metaphorically where the domain of these expressions is understood in terms of another. As most deaths occur in hospital environments death is usually reported to those at home but in few cases where death occurs at home settings, verbal reactions are immediate and spontaneous. Even when the bereaved understand English and Kiswahili most verbalisations are in Kimeru. Data indicate that women do more verbalisations than men, with children getting the cue on how to react from the adults.

## Word of Mouth/Announcement

Data from all the 48 Informants indicate that the Meru expressed death by saying that someone had died. The word ‘death’ is never mentioned but it is euphemistically stated where words that denote death are used which includes ‘agwitwa, (has gone) akwaana, (has gone home)

akumama (has slept), akunogoka (has rested) and agwitia (has gone up), akunyara (has withered).

The Meru use different expressions to communicate death which are sometimes verbal for example, ‘mantu jatibui’ (things are not good), ‘gania akwaana’ (so and so has gone home), ‘agututiga’ (so and so has left us), ‘akujukua’ (so and so has been taken), ‘Murungu naramujukirie’ (God took him/her), ‘Murungu naramwendire’ (God loved him/her)....

This was done through word of mouth where the information was passed from one person to the other. Data from the observation done during the 24 burial occasions the researcher attended show that alongside using word of mouth there was also the verbal announcements done during ‘baraza’, social gatherings, and church services. Before the coming of the new technology in the communication sector, the Meru sent messengers to their relatives to inform them of the death of their loved ones. The messengers were in most cases accompanied by relatives back home after delivering the message. To the Meru death and subsequent burial is a social activity where every member of the community participates.

*The Meru feared death so they never mentioned the word ‘death’. So when a person died they use/different phrases to communicate like; to communicate death of a child (anybody not circumcised), they said the mother ‘akurigwa’ (has been hit). When people heard that they knew that the mother has lost a child. For grown up people, they said/say ‘agwita’ (has gone), ‘agututiga’ (has left us), ‘akwaana’ (has gone home), ‘agwitwa’ (has been called), akunyara (has withered). For the old people they say/said; ‘kamami’ (is sleeping), ‘akunogoka’ (has rested), ‘akuthiria ngugi yawe’ (has finished the work). ‘akumama kuraa’ (has slept where there is plenty of rain). Presently, I hear other phrases have come up like ‘rest in peace, gone too soon, gone to heaven, dance with the angels...*

This shows that the Meru use euphemistic language to talk about death. They believe the mentioning the name death can attract its wrath. It was a taboo to mention the

word death. When the euphemistic words or phrases are used, they diluted the impact of death and this enabled them to come out of grief. The Meru fear death and would avoid anything connected to it. Not even a mention of its name. This is in line with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) which states that people use metaphors to talk about issues which they fear to mention by name. Metaphors use the domain of the social images that are familiar to them to relate with what they fear mentioning. This means that they have the source domain and the target domain. The use of the phrases and words are known to the Meru so it is not difficult for them to understand each other during conversation.

## Nonverbal Expressions

The Meru respond to death nonverbally in nine ways: *wailing / screaming, throwing themselves down, casting away objects and muted silence.*

## Wailing/Screaming

Data from all the 48 Informants indicate that wailing/screaming was the first response towards announcement of death. All the Informants further stated that wailing was done by women and children. Data from all the 3 regions indicate that mature men (all circumcised men) did not wail. Wailing was common in the homestead of the deceased and this happened on the first day of the loss.

Data show that when a person dies people start wailing and crying but this wailing will depend on the age of the person who has died, the sex, whether the death was sudden or it was anticipated and also the social status of the deceased. If the death is sudden like an accident, people are more affected and they wail more and cry more than when the person has been sick for a long time and has been in and out of hospital. Or in the traditional perception and the past has been treated by the medicine man for a long time. The wailing following a death of a young person (circumcised) takes a longer time. The same is witnessed when people come to the home to console the bereaved family and also on the burial data.

This shows that the Meru communicated the occurrence of death through crying and wailing. When a person heard the cries and the wails from a homestead, they knew a person had died. Since the human body and the brain are predominantly universal, the metaphorical structures that are based on them will also be

predominantly universal. This explains why many language expression metaphors, such as crying and wailing, can be found in a large number of genetically unrelated languages. This does not mean, however, that *all* conceptual metaphors that are based on primary metaphors will be the same from language/culture to language/culture. It is clear that the particular culture in which a metaphor develops is just as significant in shaping the form of the conceptual metaphors in different languages/cultures as the universal bodily experiences themselves (see, e.g., Taylor and MacLaury 1995; Yu 1998, 2002; Musolff 2004). Furthermore, several researchers pointed out that variation in metaphor can also be found within the same language/culture. Apart from communicating verbally, the Meru also used nonverbal communication / physical responses like sobbing and weeping, bowed heads, looking down to express loss. There are also physical activities that show a family has been bereaved. Such activities as holding meetings at the home of the bereaved, putting tents, planting banana plants at the gate of the deceased, splitting firewood, fetching water, cooking and slaughtering animals.

Immediately a person died the Meru went into mourning. Data show that the crying marked the beginning of the mourning session. The crying and wailing varies from one situation to another depending on the cause of death, the age, the sex and the social status of the deceased. Data indicate that the period of wailing is not universal and that some family members took minutes while others took hours. Data indicate that those close to the deceased wailed more. It was also clear that the circumstances of death determined the way people wailed. Data show that the death of an old person had only 10 per cent of wailing from the grandchildren. In Imenti the wailing following the death of an old person was about 5 per cent while Tharaka and Tigania registered 10 per cent each. This variation can be attributed to the effect of modernity where people have a notion that crying is archaic and the notion that people should not mourn like non-believers is conceptualised by many Christians. Wailing was intense following a sudden death in all the three regions. Tharaka took the lead with 80 per cent, Tigania 75 per cent and Imenti 68 per cent. Death of a child received less wailing compared to death of a youth. Data show that in the death of a child, the mother and the aunts wailed more than the other members of the family. This can be attributed to the fact that when children are growing up in Meru, they

spend much of their childhood life with their mothers and aunts and less time with their fathers. Therefore, women were the ones who received 'kurigwa' (to be hit) and so they cried more to express the pain of loss. Death of an evil person like a witch and a murderer did not attract much attention and so there was little wailing.

## Crying

Data from all the 48 Informants indicate that crying was rampant upon the announcement of death. 80 per cent of the bereaved families cried upon the loss of their loved ones. Women again took the lead with 90 per cent of all the Informants reporting that women cried after the announcement of loss of a loved one. The children too cried in the 3 regions of Meru. Data show that circumcised men did not cry upon the loss of their loved ones. Just as in the wailing, data show that crying was dependent on the relationship the deceased had with the person crying. In the cases where there was intimate relationship, the crying was intense. In most of the instances, the announcement of death is welcomed by wailing and crying. The duration of wailing will depend on whether the death was expected or not and also how close the person wailing is to the deceased. This is because the relationship between the deceased and the people wailing is key in the duration of wailing. Family members take longer time while wailing than the other members of the community. The age and the circumstances surrounding death also determined the length of the crying. Data from all the 48 Informants show that wives who lost their husbands cried more than other members of their families. Data further indicate that mothers who lost their children cried more and for a longer time.

News about death is always welcomed by wailing, sobbing and weeping which goes on for a while depending on what was indicated earlier, when a child dies (depending on the cause of death), the mother starts wailing and this is taken up by the other members of the family who are there. Some people may not wail but they sob and weep. When the neighbors hear the wails, they come to see what has happened and on receiving the news, they also join in the wailing and crying loudly.

Crying is a non-verbal expression of the pain the bereaved are going through due to the loss of their loved ones. Sometimes, the crying is spontaneous as observed in IOB1, IOB3, TOB3, and TOB4 among others where

one member of the family started crying and the other members followed and within a short time everybody was crying....

*My husband died after 8 years of marriage. I was still a young girl then. I cried and cried. I was isolated by my in-laws and the entire community. What hit me most was that my husband committed suicide. He hugged himself one day outside our hut. Up to today, I have never known what may have pushed him to do that. I was in great shock and in disbelief. I was guilty, I blamed myself, I was confused, I became numb and I lost my appetite; this turned to intense feeling of separation and pain in the months that followed. The environs and the home were full of painful reminders. Grief breaks over the bereaved in waves of distress. There was intense yearning, pining and longing for my husband...*

The data from the 3 main regions of Meru show that grief is painful, and people go through a lot as they mourn their loved ones. The reaction to death can have far reaching effect which can take months and even years. This is similar to what Elizabeth Kubler (1986) has discussed in the phases of mourning. Silverman's (2007) model of bereavement and grief identifies narration as a type of language for expressing grief as is narrated by informant I1FTH above

The informant explained that it took her several years to come to terms with the loss. She argues that when her husband committed suicide, among other things, she was not allowed to put on any ornaments, which she says demoralised her; she could not visit anyone and her children were very young then. She spent days weeping and agonising over the whole situation. She was not allowed to go to the river to fetch water during the daytime. She only fetched water late in the evening. She could not light the fire during the day but only at night. In case neighbours wished to assist her with any food, they could place it at the 'mwiigiro' (gate), and then she could go for it. Her children did not play with any child unless among themselves because they were seen to be having 'mugiro' curse. Today, when a person commits suicide, people assume it as any other death and they do not isolate the family like it was done in the past. Burial preparations are done and people come to console the bereaved family. The body is buried behind the homestead, but the clergy do not participate in the



ceremony.

## **Sobbing**

Data from all the 48 Informants show that sobbing was a common response to death in Meru. Sobbing, unlike wailing and crying, was done by both men and women. However, data indicate that women sobbed more compared to men in all the three regions. In Imenti, 30 per cent of men who experienced the loss of their loved ones sobbed compared to 80 per cent of women in the same region. In Tharaka and Tigania only 20 per cent men sobbed upon death of their loved ones. Sobbing took longer time to end compared to wailing and crying. Data indicate that sobbing took years for some people while others took only a few days. The data indicates that the remembrance of the deceased made family members sob even after several years after the loss. In Imenti, 3 female Informants (I1FI, I2FI, I4FI) sobbed during the interview when they remembered their loved ones who had died some years back. Data indicated that sobbing took place everywhere in the house, outside the house, in the church, in the garden, while cooking, and while walking to work in a matatu.

## **Throwing themselves Down**

Data indicate that the respond to death by throwing themselves down. This happens immediately after the announcement of death. All the 48 Informants reported scenarios were women threw themselves down while wailing or crying on learning about the death of their loved ones. The data indicate that only women acted this way, and men did not do so. In Tharaka, data indicate that 70 per cent of the women who lost their loved ones threw themselves on the ground, while in Tigania, 65 per cent threw themselves down, and in Imenti, 60 per cent of the women who lost their loved ones threw themselves down. This act of throwing oneself down is a nonverbal way of expressing the pain experienced by the bereaved. The pain is so intense that the bereaved express their emotions this way.

## **Casting away Objects**

Casting away objects is a nonverbal response that is common among the Meru. Data from the 48 Informants and the observation schedule in the 24 incidences of death indicate that more women than men reacted by throwing away objects upon learning about the death of their loved ones. Sometimes these objects are a threat to the safety of the other members of the family. Imenti area

recorded the highest number of women and men who casted away objects with 40 per cent women and 20 per cent men while Tigania had 20 per cent women and 12 per cent men and lastly Tharaka had 18 per cent women and 10 per cent men. Data indicate that young aged between 40- 55years were prone to casting out objects. Casting objects show the meaninglessness of life. The above observation indicates several mourners and especially women threw objects and especially food and drinks. Some were seen throwing away their own clothing like sweaters and jackets heads cafes. This is analyses in line with Silverman (2007) Language of Grief model which covers the non-verbal expression which is a linguistic way of expressing death.

## **Silence**

Data from all the 48 Informants indicate that more men than women expressed the loss of a loved one by muted silence. In all the 3 regions of Meru, Men seem too remained silent, with Tharaka men taking a lead with 86 per cent followed by Tigania with 75 per cent and lastly, the Imenti reporting 68 per cent. Data indicate that only a few women remained silent, and these were the women aged 75 years and above. Data indicate that children aged between 15 and 23 years also remained silent. Remaining silent is a way of indicating the meaninglessness of life. The bereaved, as well as the mourners, found no need to engage in talking. It is also a way of expressing pain of loss through remaining mute just as the dead is mute. Live at such a time has no meaning, and with this perception, there is no need to talk. People talk when they are happy, and in moments of loss and subsequent sadness, they find no need to talk.

## **Bowed Heads**

Data from all the 48 Informants indicate that when a person dies the neighbors, relatives and friends walk to the deceased home with bowed heads. This is what was done in the past and it is the same way it is done with a slight change of some mourners driving to the compound. Data show that all mourners bow their heads and especially during burial day when they show their final respect by bowing before the casket as they carry on with the burial service. Data from the 24 burial occasions observed show that 80 per cent of the adults walked with bowed head to the home of the deceased and also during the day of burial. The bereaved family especially remained with their heads bowed throughout the burial ceremony. In the past it was only the old people who

went to the home of the bereaved to arrange on how the body was to be disposed. The bowing of the head symbolises that death had humbled the bereaved family and that it was a sign of mourning one of their own. It was also a way of avoiding any destruction as they concentrated on the loss and mourning. By bowing their head, they had time to meditate about the departed soul.

## **Cessation of Fire in the Homestead**

Data collected from the 48 Informants show that in the past the Meru did not light fire in a deceased home. This action was symbolic and was a sign of mourning. The Meru value food and they were happy whenever they ate. They also believe in social sharing of what each has. By refusing to cook food meant that they were limiting their food consumption and so a way of starving as a sign of mourning. There other reason was that they never engaged in any form of physical activity while mourning and cooking would call for such activities. The only food they ate was from the neighbors who placed it by the entrance of the homestead of the deceased and the deceased family was expected to pick and eat. So, fire was never lit. Long ago the skin clothes were burnt alongside the house of the deceased and all the items which do not have life. The rest of the family members remained with their skin clothes.

Burning all the items belonging to the deceased was a way of expressing grief. The Meru did not value inheriting items such as clothing's. To them, these items were a constant reminder of the deceased and they were discarded after death. However, data indicate that the Meru are now lighting fire in the home of the deceased to cook food for the mourners as well as for the bereaved family. Data indicate that the presence of much fire/smoke is a sign that someone has died. The fire is maintained throughout the mourning period while in the past fire was not lit until the mourning period was over. The clothes are not discarded any more.

## **Black Dress /Red Ribbons**

Data from all the 24 burial occasions observed by the researcher and from the 48 Informants show that the bereaved families are wearing black clothes as a sign of mourning. Data indicate that even those who do not have black clothes buy during the burial ceremony. These are won by the bereaved family and those people who are very close to the bereaved family. In case of families that are not able to buy black clothes, they tie a red or white

ribbon on the left hand above the elbow. The data indicate that the vehicles that escort the casket from the mortuary for burial are also marked with red ribbons. The body is dressed in new clothes or the best clothes which the deceased loved wearing when they were alive. The close family members also dress in black or they can tie a white ribbon on their left hand. The vehicles are also put a red ribbon on the side mirror. The dressing on its own communicated and expressed grief. The dressing is symbolic, which is in line with Silverman's (2007) language of grief. When mourners attend the burial, they are able to identify the bereaved family by their dressing code. The dressing is a borrowed culture from the western culture which is a sign of grief and mourning. The black is a symbol of mourning and also shows that the family is in its darkest moment. The red ribbon is a sign of danger, which means that the bereaved family is in danger. Observation from the 24 burial occasions shows that some families are mounting tents for the mourners to sit on. These tents are also decorated with red ribbons and other colours of choice.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Conclusion:** In Meru culture, death conceptualisation and its attendant effects revolve around what happens to moyo, the essence of life upon somebody's demise. Death is signalled by moyo vacating the human body under different circumstances. It is this vacation that results in death. All these different conceptions have a noticeable influence on people's lifestyles, their world views, and their readiness to die or otherwise, the degree to which they fear death and the way they come to terms with the causes of death, their expressions of grief and mourning, and the nature of their funeral rituals. Any reasonably broad conceptualisation of death in the wider context would necessarily have to incorporate these Meru experiences. Further, it can be concluded that the verbal and nonverbal reactions during grief have a certain cathartic effect on the bereaved as a coping mechanism. In addition, the euphemisms of death help to lessen the severity of the impact of death on the bereaved.

**Recommendations:** The study only examined the language of bereavement and grief among the Meru of Kenya that informed people about the communicative effect. It is important for people to understand the pain the bereaved are subjected to. Research is recommended for other communities of the world to carry out similar research in their communities for

people to understand each other better and appreciate | their cultures.

## REFERENCES

- Bondi, C. (2015). Death and burial in the Africa context: A case study on Kenyan customs and Kenya customary law in *Hitchhiker's Guide to Law*, 2015.
- Catlin, G. (1992). Facing tragic decisions with parents in the neonatal intensive care unit: clinical perspectives. *Pediatrics*, 89(1), 119-122.
- Catlin, G. (1993). The role of culture in grief. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 133(2), 173-184.
- Catlin, G. (2001). The role of culture in grief. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 133 (2) 173-184.
- Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological bulletin*, 98(2), 310.
- English Standard Version Bible. (2001). *ESV Online*. <https://esv.literalword.com/>
- Ibui, A. K. (2014). Wild plants use behaviour in Meru, Kenya. In *Journal of Us- China medica Science*, 11. (1), 37-41.
- Ibui, A. K. (2019). *Indigenous Knowledge, Belief and Practise of Wild Plants in Meru: Past and Present Human Plant-Relations in East Africa*, VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. Macmillan.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1989). The four pillars of healing. *Healers on Healing*, 127-130.
- Kubler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005). *On Grief and Grieving*. Simon & Schuster.
- Kubler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005). *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*. Scribner.
- Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. Routledge.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). The death of dead metaphor. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 2(2), 143-147.
- Lakoff, G. (1993). How metaphor structures dreams: The theory of conceptual metaphor applied to dream analysis. *Dreaming*, 3(2), 77.
- Lakoff, G. (2008). *Metaphors we Live by*. University of Chicago press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). The metaphorical structure of the human conceptual system. *Cognitive Science*, 4(2), 195-208.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1989). Philosophical Speculation and Cognitive Science. *Philosophical Psychology*, 2, 1.
- Magesa, L. (1987). *The Priority of Justice over Charity*. African Ecclesiastical Review.
- Magesa, L. (1998). Some Critical Theological and Pastoral Issues Facing the Church in East Africa Today. *African Christian Studies*, 4(4), 43-60.
- Mbiti, John S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann.
- Mukaria, E. (2019). The traditional understanding of grief among Ameru in Kenya. *A diakonia Perspective*: 2, 130.1
- Musolff, A. (2004). Metaphor and conceptual evolution. *Metaphorik. de*, 7(2004), 55-75.
- Nthamburi, Z., J. (1982). *A History of the Methodist Church in Kenya*. Uzima.
- Pang, B., & Chang, Y. (2002). *Integration of the Traditions of Folk-Instrumental Art into the Works of Chinese Composers of the 20th and 21st Centuries Hon-Lun Yang*, Michael Saffle · 2017, University of Michigan press.
- Pang, W. W., & Chang, C. H. (2002). Metoclopramide decreases emesis but increases sedation in tramadol patient-controlled analgesia. *Canadian Journal of Anesthesia*, 49(10), 1029-1033.
- Rando, T. A. (1985). Bereaved parents: Particular difficulties, unique factors, and treatment issues. *Social Work*, 30(1), 19-23.
- Rando, T. A. (1993). *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*. Research Press.
- Selepe, M. C., & Edwards, S. D. (2008). Grief counselling in African indigenous churches: A case of the Zion Apostolic Church in Venda: Socio-cultural life. *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 7(1), 1-6.

## Journal of Languages and Linguistics

- Silverman, P. R. (2007). *Resilience and Bereavement*. In: Monroe B., Oliviere D., editors. Resilience in palliative care: Achievement in adversity. Oxford University Press.
- Taylor & Robert E. M. (eds.) (1995). Language and the cognitive construal of the world (Trends in Linguistics. *Studies and Monographs* 82, 231–275. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Taylor, A. C. (1993). Remembering to forget: Identity, mourning, and memory among the Jivaro, *Man*, 28(4), 653-678.