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Analysing discourse of death rationalisation/legitimation, closure and continuity among the Meru

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Abstract
This study sought to analyse the discourse of death rationalisation/legitimation, closure and continuity among the Meru. The study adopted mainly an auto-ethnographic descriptive research design guided by Silverman's language of grief model underpinned by four modes of expression and four strands of language and Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Data were generated from a purposive sample of 48 Informants and 24 burial occasions drawn from Meru's Tigania, Imenti and Tharaka regions. The main instruments of data collection were face-to-face interviews, participant observations, and diary notes. This study found that Meru rationalises death in various ways. These ways do not follow any specific pattern but are common and include disbelief, acceptance, cleansing ceremony, burning/casting away items of the deceased, renaming/remarrying and seeking/accepting support. The findings of the study are expected to benefit scholars in Applied Linguistics with respect to bereavement and grief discourse, policymakers with respect to the language of dealing with public burial rites and the general public with respect to appreciating how the Meru deal with death, bereavement and grief. The study recommends that professionals advise the males also to express the feeling of loss freely so that they do not experience negative psychological effects for restraining themselves due to cultural norms.

Key terms: Applied Linguistics, bereavement, cultural beliefs, death, rationalisation.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally the mourning started after the family buried their loved one. Family members were prohibited from engaging in communal affairs until the extended family members or clan elders conducted a cleansing ceremony called 'kuthiria mugiro' (to rid of the effect of blemish). The ceremony involved shaving the family member who had pulled the deceased into the graveyard. In the case of a married couple, the shaving was preceded by demolishing the hut if the deceased died at home. The death of children in a house did not require its demolition since, as minors, they were considered to have no blots that needed to be removed.

Burying a bachelor or a spinster was different as they were highly ostracised members of society who were regarded as "mbura tuu" (stubborn delinquents). Such people were buried by "mwenji" (a hired undertaker). Also buried in this manner was a person who had committed suicide, which was equated to inviting a curse.

Silverman (2007) proposed that the language used by the bereaved to communicate grief captures the fundamental elements of grief using a content analysis process. The Silverman Grief Language model includes four modes of speech, four types of language, and three contagious variables. This sad language provides a framework for understanding grief on a personal level. This method does not count public mourning. The current study aimed to assess whether the model was functional in the community rather than at the individual level. The results of the study affirmed that the model was applicable to a group but in a slightly different way. The phenomenon of death, its understanding within cultures and its socio-cultural reaction to it has intrigued scholars for a long time. There are as many different ways in which people understand death as there are different ways of reacting to death. There is no one universal way of understanding death, just as there is no single way of reacting to death.

In many societies, death is conceptualised, experienced and grieved in several ways; a majority of people experience grief and a sense of loss in one way or another upon the death of a person in their community. However, the ways in which people experience and express feelings of grief differ across cultures. Among the Meru, death is a phenomenon that is understood and grieved within a cultural infusion of language, beliefs, values, behaviours, traditions and rituals. The grief process is accompanied by linguistic expressions that have not attracted much scholarly attention. This study has demonstrated that these linguistic expressions are unique in their own way and have offered an opportunity to perceive death and grief from a new perspective. The conceptualisation of death and grief processes that accompany death among the Meru can help provide other people with an alternative way of coping with death.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bereavement refers to the emotional state of loss. It includes the abduction of someone we care about and the unwillingness to care for, the unfair and harmful deprivation of something important, and the theft of something important. Grief is a psychological, moral, social, mental, spiritual and physical reaction to the loss, often caused by the death of a loved one (Rando, 1993).

Setsiba (2012) conducted an amazing study of the mourning rituals in modern South African townships, aiming to better understand the psychological functions of the "after-tears party" as a modern post-burial tradition in South African urban dwellers. He discovered that these rituals played an important role in the healing process of the bereaved.

Fulton and Metress (1995) investigate how people express and resolve grief, concluding that grief is affected not only by individual attitudes and circumstances associated with loss but also by the social and cultural environment through established traditions, beliefs, and family traditions. They believe that social conditions are a barrier to grief. It affects how we see and react to loss. The death of even a distant relative can be deeply felt in a society that places great importance on a large family, as do many African societies. Such deaths may not be considered a direct loss in Western society, controlled by the

nuclear family unless there is a special relationship with a given person. The Fulton and Metress study was interested in the effects of grief and did not address the issues of death conceptualisation, closure and continuity examined in this study as included in this paper.

According to Rando (1993), grief is a function of emotion. It is not necessary for the bereaved to be publicly recognised or reassured by the individual in order to grieve, but it usually works best when possible, especially when behavioural patterns are established in the community as acceptable or unacceptable. According to them, unusual grief is determined by society. Their research focused on behavioural patterns of grief and not on death assumptions, as discussed in the third objective of the current study.

Bereavement was researched by Neimeyer (2001) as loss, suffering, and trauma. He says the bereaved are rare; they are sick and in pain. They must stop being attached to the deceased and move on with their lives in order to return to 'normal' behaviour and heal their grief. Neimeyer was yearning for a normal life for the bereaved and for his behaviour and did not look at the language of bereavement. This study, in contrast to that conducted by Neimeyer (2001), explored strategies for expressing the wisdom of death, closure and continuity.

There is quite substantial documented and undocumented information about Meru and death-related issues. It is believed that the attitude to an individual's death among the Meru depended on how the deceased behaved while alive, the cause of death and the social status. The character of an individual determines what they become after death. If the death was of a good man who died in old age per the customs, then the person was viewed as sleeping (Kumama), and a child born in the family after the departed reincarnates him by being named Muriuki (resurrected). This meant that the person is still living and cannot be forgotten. On the contrary, if the deceased had been wicked and evil, then the Meru would say that the person "would keep wandering". In such a circumstance, the deceased was believed to enter the world of the dead and was separated from the living and never became an ancestor. Such a person was never named, and the cycle of life was discontinued. Mbiti's (1969) study was about the character of the deceased and what they would become in the next world. More in-depth studies are needed not only to examine the linguistic details of these claims and observations but also to assess what lessons we can learn from the Meru practices. This was achieved by the current study, which examined the strategies of death legitimation, closure and continuity among the Meru of Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher chose informants who were well versed with the Meru traditions, especially those who were old enough to have experienced and witnessed happenings and changes in society and were willing and available for the interview. The researcher used a stratified method to divide the population into three group strata comprising Imenti, Tharaka and Tigania regions and then further categorised them into 8 males and 8 females to avoid any biasness. This means that informants neither came from the same region nor belonged to the same sex. Information in locating the informants was sought from administrative offices, local Church data, and local hospitals and among village elders. Such informants were usually opinion leaders in each of the three regions. In that order, data were collected from 48 informants from the 3 major regions of Meru: Tigania, Imenti and Tharaka. In each region, the researcher visited 16 informants from these areas, where 8 were females and 8 were males. The researcher collected the data from the informants using three methods: Interviews, research diaries and observations. The main instruments of data collection were face-to-face interviews, participant observations, and diary notes.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The Discourse of Death Rationalisation/Legitimation and Closure

The Meru rationalise death in various ways. These ways do not follow any specific pattern but are common. They include disbelief, acceptance, cleansing ceremony, burning/casting away items of the

deceased, renaming/remarrying and seeking/accepting support as shown below;

Disbelief

The announcement of death is received with disbelief by many people in Meru. This was reported by 47 Informants in the 3 regions of Meru. Data collected indicate that immediately after death occurs, the Meru go through some moments of disbelief in which they utter words such as:

…' ni urongo' (it is a lie), 'wui Mwathani' (oh God), 'ii buriku bubu' (what is this), 'arii itu' (no please), 'aari gwe' (not true), 'ukauga uu' (don't say), 'gwee kira' (keep quiet), others become speechless, and others faint on the spot.

These utterances are accompanied by non-verbal communication, which includes crying, wailing, rolling on the ground and sometimes walking aimlessly. All 48 Informants in the three regions of Meru reported similar expressions and behaviour. The intensity of the shock depends on the age of the deceased, the circumstances surrounding death and gender. In the case of the death of a young person, the expressions are more grieved, while for an old person, the expressions are few and inclined to acceptance to God's will. Death of a child had fewer expressions in Tigania, with 4 Informants (all females above 50 years) lamenting metaphorically.

'kajuga gakwa kaangi gakaajwa' (when calabash breaks another one is made).

This is a polite way of saying that another child will be born. Similar sentiments were witnessed in Imenti, Tharaka and Tigania. This indicates that women informants have a feeling that a mother can always get another baby after one dies. This perception seemed to change with informants lamenting 'guti mwana uringanua na ungi' (no child can be replaced). Data show that the disbelief can last for days or months, but this will vary with individuals and their relationship with the deceased.

Acceptance

After the death of a loved one, data from the 48 Informants and observations made by the researcher on the 24 burial occasions show that the Meru take their time to grieve and afterwards resolute to accept. In the past, the bereaved family was left alone (isolated) for one plant season to mourn, grieve, and come to acceptance. Similarly, data show that the Meru take time to accept the death, and after they accept, they lament:

'guti butonwa' (there is nothing that has never been seen/ experienced, or they can say), 'Murungu niwe wiji' (it is God who knows), or 'mantu jonthe ni jaa ngai' (everything is in the hands of God), other times they say 'uuria uri iguru niwe wiji' (the one up there knows). 'Murugu aejanaga na onowe ujukagia' (God is the one who gives and He takes away).

The language Meru uses to rationalise death is symbolic, which aligns with Silverman's (2007) Language of Grief model. This metaphoric language is understood by members who share similar attributes and cultural beliefs. The time taken to accept varies from one person to another. Data show that the relationship the deceased had with the family members and friends determined how long they took to accept death and move on with life. Data from all 48 Informants show that the age, gender and circumstances surrounding death determine the length of time the bereaved members of the family take to accept death.

Cleansing Ceremony

Data from all the 48 Informants indicate that the Meru carry out a cleansing ceremony after death.

This cleansing was done concerning the person who had died and the cause of the death. The death of a child and a young person required intensive cleansing because the Meru believed that its cause was also very strong. This is done on the deceased family because the Meru believe that the family has a 'rukuo' (crack) which, unless removed, would spread to other members of the community.

Data show that when a woman lost her husband in the distant past, she was supposed to remove ornaments on her left side, and the right side was left. Whenever she went out to fetch water, everybody else, including the animals, would leave the water point, and she would fetch alone. If she met with animals on the way,

she would stand and face the other direction until all the animals passed, and she would continue her journey. The fire was never lit during the day. She only lit it at night. After a whole plant season, a man called 'mutheria' would be called to come and cleanse her by having sex with her. Another man (a widower) would be sought, and she would be married again. The dowry would be paid to the parents of the dead man. In case she did not want to be married, she remained at her husband's homestead and sired children with the close relatives of the deceased.

In the past, the cleansing ceremony was done by elders who slaughtered a goat (without blemish), and the blood was sprinkled on the members of the family and the homestead as they chanted 'words' to chase away the evil spirit, words like 'twika mugiro' (let the curse be broken). Data indicate that the meat from the goat was burnt into ashes, and the same ash was poured into the homestead, especially the entrance 'mwirigo'. The Meru believed that a child could not just die, but there must be a cause of the death, which they associated with witchcraft, curses or evil spirits. So the mother of that deceased was regarded to have a 'mugiro' curse. She was isolated by the community, and even her husband never went near her for fear of contamination. She was supposed to carry the body to the forest by herself. She was not supposed to attend any social activities. She only fetched water in the evening when there was nobody else at the river. She remained alone until her monthly period was about a month. Then a 'mutheria' was called to come and cleanse her by sleeping with her. After that, her hair would be shaved and then burnt. A goat would be slaughtered, and the blood would be sprinkled on her and the homestead to cleanse the family. The meat was burnt, and any piece of material belonged to the deceased child.

All these rituals were symbolic and significant. The shaving of the hair meant that the old life was gone and that a new life starts with the growth of new hair. The burning of the clothes symbolised the insignificance or the meaninglessness of material things. The Meru value the moyo (soul), which joined the creator Murungu (God) or the ancestors. The elders performed the rituals, who were believed to be the custodians of the traditions. After the rituals, normalcy resumed.

I remember when I lost my child at a very tender age. I went through hell. I was isolated. I became a loner. Nobody could greet me or eat my food. It was a bad experience.

Death of a young person was a big blow to the community, and the bereaved family wailed for hours. They lamented about how bad death was and cursed the evil person who was behind the death. The body was not removed through the gate, but a new gate was created behind the homestead, and the body was removed legs first. Then it was taken to the forest and left there for the animals to feed on it. After this, the hut was burnt down with all the possessions of the deceased. The family members remained isolated for about a season, after which the members' hair was put together and burnt. This is a linguistic expression in line with Silverman's (2007) Language of Grief, which are grief rituals symbolising cleansing and acceptance to the community. Data indicate the same cleansing ceremony is done today among the Meru only that the goat is not slaughtered and that instead of the blood, the holy water is sprinkled on the deceased family and the house of the deceased. There are special prayers offered to cleanse the bereaved family and deliver them from the evil spirit of death. Religious leaders visit the bereaved family and conduct prayers and mass to cast away the evil spirit of death.

Burning/Casting Away Items

Data from the majority of the 48 Informants indicate that in the distant past, the Meru burned the huts of the deceased after the body was disposed of.

Long ago, the skin clothes were burnt alongside the house of the deceased and all the items, which do not have life.

All the material things were also burnt. These included clothes, working tools like jembes, knives and axe. These rituals symbolised that the physical life was over and that the dead did not require any material things in the spiritual realm. The use of symbolism is in line with Silverman's (2007) Language of Grief, where the

use of symbolism is a linguistic expression to analyse death. Burning all the items belonging to the deceased was a way of expressing grief. The Meru did not value inheriting items such as clothing. To them, these items were a constant reminder of the deceased, and they were discarded after death. There were also special cases in which were treated as outcasts, especially if a person was a murderer or a witch. They were burnt inside their huts, and sometimes a 'gatiru' (undertaker) was called to come and drag the body to the forest. Their houses were also burnt down. The same process of cleansing took place. In most cases, these people were loners even before their deaths, so they were treated like loners with no family member wanting to be associated with them.

Data show that today the deceased's clothes are sorted; some are burnt while others are donated to the less fortunate members of the community. Some families also share the clothes among themselves. There are families who throw the clothes away even today.

Renaming and Remarrying

Data from all the 48 Informants indicate that after the death of a loved one, the Meru rename the children born after the dead.

They named their children depending on how the person whom they were named after lived on earth. For example, the character of the namesake like 'Kimathi' (if the person loved throwing parties), Kirimi (if the person was a farmer), 'Kinyua' (if the person loved drinking beer), 'Murithi' (if the person loved keeping domestic animals) and 'Muriuki' (to show the person had resurrected). For women they were remembered by their characters like; 'Gakii' (a person who loves grinding), 'Karimi' (a person who loves digging), 'Wanja' (a person who loves staying at home…).

In case of the death of a father, the son gives his son (who is the namesake to the dead) a name like 'Muriuki'. The Meru believe in living with the departed by naming their children after the dead or even the living so that when they die, they are not forgotten. Data show that the Meru have a strict naming system that is strictly followed to avoid any community member being forgotten. Data show that the outcasts are not renamed. These include murderers, thieves and witches.

The Meru believe when people die, they transform into another form and live as ancestors. These ancestors commune with the living in different ways. So the living remembers them in various ways, like the names they give to the children when they are born.

The Meru believe that a person can be born again, and sometimes a person can be born more than once. To be born again (incarnation) among the Meru does not mean that one has to die first to be born again. A person can be born even when they are alive so that they are remembered through their namesake when they die.

When a young man gets married and sires children, the firstborn son is named after his father, while the second son is named after his wife's father (muthoni). The same case happens to the daughters. After both parents are named, the same process is extended to a young man's and his wife's brothers and sisters. Naming is a way of closure and continuity of life. Naming depicts the character of the deceased or a way of 'reborn'. Names like Mutuma, Kimathi. Mutwiri, Mugambi. Kirimi (male) and Karimi, Gatwiri, Kiende, Nkirote, Gakii (female). When a person dies, and a son is born in the family by the son of the deceased and the deceased had not yet been born by the same son, then the newborn is called 'Muriuki'. This is similar to Bondi's (2015) perception of the African customs on the conception of death. Gielen and Baker (1997) has a similar argument about the concept of rebirth, which seems to provide a context in which death is perceived as a continuation of life. Although the deceased will not be seen in the same physical form, they still continue to exist in a new and different spiritual form.

Data indicate that Meru remarry after the death of a spouse. In the past, the widow or the widower removed all the ornaments on one side of the body (men on the right and women on the left). After they remarried, they wore them again. Today, spouses remove the wedding ring, and when they remarry, they wear it. Data indicate that the community helps

the widow and the widower to get new spouses. This is a way of closure and the start of a new life.

They also remember the dead by calling their names, especially when in distress, like 'ooii mwano M'Inoti' (ooii a child of M'Inoti…) or when swearing that they will or will not do something like 'njaa ya M'Inoti iti sokagwa' (the family of M'Inoti is never provoked). These phrases were also used in the past and are common today. The Meru also refer to each other as a son of so and so … as in the case 'muntu wa M'Matiri' (son of M'Matiri). Women are referred to as 'cio M'Marete', meaning the daughter of so and so… This was practised in the past and is practised even today. The Meru also remember the dead as a reference while speaking, as in statements like 'ikethirwa ti M'Marete wa M' Rintaungu sukuru ya Ntemwene itingi gwakwa' (if it were not for M'Marete son of M'Rintaugu Ntemwene school would not have been built…). The same form of remembrance is also witnessed.

The dead are also remembered through signage when the Meru are giving directions, where they use names of people, 'wakinya gwa Kiraikubu, uiname aninii' (when you get to Kiraikubu's place. Go down a bit) or 'ubike kwa Munyua' (you drop me at Munyua's place) (matatu language). The dead are also remembered when the Meru are eating or drinking, for they usually pour a little on the ground, and they lament 'rumeni biu kana kundeni biu nkoma cia bajuju' (eat this or drink this, our ancestors). This was practised in the past and is still practised today, especially by the older generation.

Accepting Support

Data from 47 out of the 48 Informants indicate that the bereaved families seek support from spiritual leaders to help them move on. This is seen by the prayer meetings done during and even after mourning in the homes of the bereaved. Data show that during the loss of a loved one, each member of the community stands to be counted, and they give overwhelming support to the bereaved family, which includes monetary, emotional, and material. The Meru lament 'guti muntu withikaa' (no person buries himself or herself).

On the day of the burial, people come in large numbers to give the dead the last respect and to stand with the bereaved family as the Meru say 'guti muntu waithika' (nobody buries himself).

The bereaved family seeks to belong, and the community accepts them back and supports them. Presently, they react towards death by sending condolences to the bereaved family, paying them a visit to condole with them, and giving financial and spiritual support. They also help the bereaved family out in their daily duties, such as domestic chores. People also come to the home to keep the home 'warm' and throw away loneliness. On the burial day, mourners come in large numbers to support the bereaved family to give the deceased a befitting send-off.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: It can further be concluded that verbal and nonverbal reactions during grief have a certain cathartic effect on the bereaved as a coping mechanism.

Recommendations: Given the nature of the experience that the bereaved go through and how they express the pain of loss, it is recommended that professionals advise the males also to express the feeling of loss freely so that they do not experience negative psychological effects for restraining themselves due to cultural norms. Research is recommended on the effects of the language of bereavement for people to appreciate why verbal and nonverbal expressions are necessary during the loss of loved ones.

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