

# Euphemism Use as a Mirror of the People's Worldview: The Case of the Abagusii Dirges of Kenya

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## Abstract

This paper is about the results of a 2013 study on euphemisms of the traditional dirges of the Abagusii of Kenya. The specific objectives of this study were first to collect, identify and select some of Abagusii traditional dirges; secondly to identify and describe the euphemisms in selected Abagusii traditional dirges, and thirdly, to establish and explain the linguistic and social significance of the euphemisms in Abagusii traditional dirges. The argument in this paper is that the euphemisms used in dirges reflect the ideologies and general worldview of the Abagusii people. The study is qualitative in nature and the data was collected through five in-depth interviews with elderly men and women of the community in Kisii County, Kenya. The study is based on the Brown and Levinson politeness theory and the Goffman face theory. The findings show that people resort to using euphemistic expressions and words as a linguistic strategy in order to talk of death, compliment the departed and address those left alive. The data shows that culture, customs and the oral education concerning social cultural practices are propagated through euphemisms, the difference in social roles between women and men, and the value of children in the community's future wellbeing is brought out. The researchers recommends that studies of a similar nature be carried out in other languages to determine how far euphemisms are used in other cultures to reflect a people's worldview.

**Key words:** Avoidance, Circumlocution, Euphemism, Face, Politeness, Taboo word.

## Introduction

This paper examines the euphemisms used in selected Bagusii dirges and how they reflect the ideologies and the general worldview of the community. The Bagusii are a Bantu speaking ethnic group, that is part of the Western Kenya region found in the Nyanza region. The culture of the Bagusii is characterized by a domestic model of social order and its concept of avoidance (Levine, Dixon, Richman, Leiderman, Keefer, and Brazelton, 1994: 60). Avoidance here is used to mean the intentional act of refraining from doing or saying something and it is taken seriously in this community.

The ethical principle which governs the conduct of family members and society at large is known as *nsoni*. *Nsoni* exists between generations once removed from each other and it is worth noting that this still exists even today. Within each generation, however, there is no restriction of what can be said. People in the same generation do not have matters of *nsoni*.

Autonomous homesteads known as *emechie* (homes) represent the domestic unit. Daily tasks within this home was determined by sex and age of the person. Traditionally, the women were primarily responsible for food cultivation and processing, cooking, brewing, fetching water and firewood, and cleaning of the house and the homestead. The community to date still regards women and mothers as the home-makers (Maoncha, 2015). Men were tasked with providing protection and security, building houses and fencing, clearing new fields and herding. Though women performed most of the cultivation, men participated too. Herding was undertaken by boys and young unmarried men in the cattle village. Initiated daughters assisted in cultivation (Levine, 1962). Concerning socialization, mothers have the ultimate responsibility for the care and socialization of their children, but they delegate a great deal of caretaking and training to other children.

Ekegusii songs have been part of oral literature and have been used to comment on various aspects in the society, both traditional and even current. A dirge is a sombre song or lament expressing mourning or grief. It is a song especially intended to accompany a funeral or provide a memorial to the deceased. The dirges told the story and history of the deceased, therefore educated the mourners about the deceased and they expressed the community's worldview on the issue of death.

Death is a taboo for human beings and an inevitable social norm. In all societies and almost all languages, death is the most sensitive and fearful subject people try to avoid mentioning. As a result of this, people have traditionally felt reluctant to deal with the topic of death using straightforward expressions. They prefer not to speak freely about death. However, there are communication situations in which one cannot evade the notion of death. In this case, language users try to soften the effect of what they wish to communicate.

Euphemisms are expressions which are often used to avoid those words that are considered taboo. That is, they are used to avoid unpleasant, hateful or sad words and expressions. They serve as a veil, and they substitute these expressions and words with more pleasant, less shocking ones according to necessity. For one's own sake as well as that of hearers, a speaker constantly resorts to euphemisms in order to disguise an unpleasant truth or veil an offence.

Rawson (1981:1) believes that euphemisms are powerful linguistic tools that “are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them.” For Allan and Burridge (1991:14), euphemisms are “alternatives to dispreferred expressions (expressions likely to draw embarrassment because they refer to taboo concepts such as bodily effluvia, reproductive processes and the associated parts - may also include religious terms) and are used in order to avoid possible loss of face”. Face here is used to mean “that image of self, that is, self-respect or dignity that a person effectively claims for oneself during the course of conversational interaction” Goffman 1959: 208-12.

As happens in other languages, euphemism is used to facilitate communication in Ekegusii. Euphemism as a form of language is profoundly influenced by culture. The culture of a people has an effect on the people’s way of avoiding taboo words and their choices of euphemism. The Bagusii as any other speech community have a way of mentioning taboo words. As a result, Ekegusii speakers use special terms to communicate some ideas that are often considered difficult to express because either appropriate words are lacking or the ideas are too embarrassing to mention publicly. For instance, in mentioning the dead, the Bagusii call them euphemistically as *Nyagosira* meaning *the one who has gone missing*, instead of *Nyagokwa* meaning *the one who has died*.

Nyakoe (2012) in her thesis has explored the conceptualization of “death as a Journey” and “death as rest” within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor theory. Findings from her work reveal that Ekegusii euphemism has several conceptual metaphors for death and as a result one could reason about the dead, the dying or death using knowledge of something else. She mainly focused on the two metaphors found in everyday speech at such occasions. Further, she has explored this death metaphor used in the Bagusii everyday speech when talking about death. She looks at the metaphor of (death as a rest) and her research discusses the Bagusii view of death as a rest. Her study was mainly focused on the two metaphors found in everyday speech at such occasions. This paper sets out to establish how the euphemisms used in dirges purpose to mirror the Bagusii’s worldview.

## **Methodology and Theoretical Orientation**

This study was conducted in Kisii County. Five in-depth interview respondents were drawn from Mogonga sub-location and Nyabisia sub-location of Gucha sub-county. One Focus group discussion was formulated and respondents for this focus group were drawn from Mogonga and Magena sub-locations of the wider Bombaba East location. The sample consisted of men and women aged between 60 years and 95 years. The decision on the choice of the elderly aged 60-95 years was informed by the fact that this is the group that was most conversant with the funeral practices in the traditional society because the younger generation was found to have little knowledge since the practice is dying out and is being replaced with the Christian ones (Maoncha,2015).

Purposive sampling, a non-probability approach was used to identify the elderly men and women to participate in the in-depth interviews. The researchers successfully conducted five in-depth interviews with the elderly men and women selected through the snowball – sampling strategy. These interviews were solely guided by the interview schedule developed for this purpose. The interview schedule was prepared in line with the objectives of the study. The interview schedule discusses the knowledge of dirges, the singing of the actual songs, who sings them, for whom and social cultural limitations in their performance, alongside their meanings and usage.

A qualitative method of research was adapted for this study. This study was also designed as a case study with the advantage of enabling an understanding of the euphemisms used in the dirges as understood and interpreted by the very people who use them. The descriptive research design was selected for this study because it enabled the researchers to determine and report the way things are; the descriptive research design helped the researchers to describe the possible behaviour and attitudes of the respondents (Mugenda and Mugenda, 1999). Under this design, the interview method was used as a data collection instrument which involved a face to face interaction with respondents.

Through in-depth interviews with the old men and women, data on the funeral songs and explanations as regards to meaning and usage was collected. Through focus group interviews and discussions with the sampled group, the study was able to get the euphemisms that were in the songs, their meanings and usage and get more that could be used as substitutes for the same that were not present in the songs.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data collected was analyzed qualitatively. Qualitative methods of research enabled the researchers to analyze and explain his research findings more deeply and exhaustively (Mugenda and Mugenda, 1999). Besides, qualitative research methods of data analysis helped the researchers to better understand the subjective perspectives of the participants by collecting data (verbatim responses), that enabled us develop a descriptive, rich understanding and insight into their attitudes, shared beliefs, aspirations and culture that define their view of the world.

The paper utilizes traditional theories of Politeness as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978/1987). These theories of Politeness emphasize an individual's rationality and face as they use language in communication. These theories also hold it that different cultures agree on what to them politeness is. Politeness is closely related to Face Theory, proposed by Goffman (1953/1959). The fundamental idea underlying face-work theory is that people living in a society do their best to save their face and not to lose it. According to Brown and Levinson (1978:66), face is "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interactions." In their view, face is divided into two categories: positive face and negative face. As discussed by Mills (2003: 6), politeness is the speaker's intention to reduce the face threats of the Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) toward another.

Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain their self-esteem, and be respected. In their model (Brown and Levinson, 1978), politeness is defined as redressive action taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect of FTAs. In their theory, communication is seen as potentially dangerous and antagonistic. It is not always convenient to express some opinions or facts directly. By using ambiguous notions in the euphemistic expressions, people attempt to minimize the Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). Based on Locher (2004), speakers attempt to avoid making a situation embarrassing or making the addressee feel uncomfortable. Thus, politeness strategies are used to save the hearer's face. Moreover, speakers are also concerned about their own face more than the addressee's face due to the fact that the speakers do not wish to damage their own face. Consequently, people resort to employing euphemisms so that the threats to both the speaker's and hearer's face are minimized.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 1) hold that politeness has a socially basic role: It can control potential conflicts among the communicators. They claim that their theory is a universal feature of all languages. However, the politeness of an utterance is evaluated by norms and values which are culture-bound and vary from culture to culture, that is, which actions threaten "face" or which politeness strategy is taken in what context will differ across different cultures. Hence this theory also plays a pivotal role in our paper as the analysis of euphemism in the songs depended on the norms set in the Abagusii community. Politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTAs.

Traditionally, it has been considered that a language user resorts to euphemism with the purpose of mitigating the potential dangers of certain taboo words or expressions, considered too blunt or offensive for a given social situation. Euphemism is a general phenomenon that participants in communicative exchanges employ with the purpose of softening the effect of what they really wish to communicate, avoiding, as much as possible, offence and conflict. From this perspective, any linguistic unit or verbal strategy which tries to avoid conflict in interpersonal communication can be said to be euphemistic. Thus, the study used Politeness and Face-work theories as the basis for analysis of euphemism usage in the Bagusii traditional dirges. Their occurrences were interpreted as either an attempt of being polite or an act of saving face and being respectful depending on the situation (Maoncha, 2015).

## **Discussion of Findings**

Ekegusii euphemisms in dirges that the researchers collected revealed an interesting phenomenon, in that they point out to the general worldviews that the Bagusii people hold, that are ingrained in their traditions and culture. Such worldviews relate to their perceptions on death, the dead, and the place of children, women and men in the society. This is discussed under two sections below. The first section deals with those euphemisms used in place of death and the dead, while the second deals with the ones used to refer to the bereaved.

## Euphemisms used to talk about Death and the Dead

Talking about death and the dead involves circumventing and death was never mentioned directly but was brought out through reference to something else or equating it to another thing.

### Death is a Transition; a Journey That Everyone is Going Through

When talking about death and the dead, the euphemism words used point out to the concept of motion, transit and journey. This is illustrated below.

**Table 1. Euphemisms on how people talk about Death and the Dead.**

Euphemism	meaning	avoided word
<i>Gosira</i>	To be lost	<i>Gokwa</i> (to die)
<i>Kogenda</i>	To go	<i>Gokwa</i> (to die)
<i>Gotimoka</i>	To rest	<i>Gokwa</i> (to die)
<i>Gochia</i>	To be gone	<i>Gokwa</i> (to die)
<i>Nyagosira</i>	The one lost- polite	<i>Egetondo</i> -the dead
<i>Ochire</i>	Has gone	<i>Okure</i> – has died
<i>Nyakoeningwa</i>	The one put aside – polite. Conjures up the image of a pleasant place. The concept of the transit from this world to the other world.	<i>Nyagotugutwa</i> - the one thrown- the concept of unpleasant place Or <i>nyagotindekwa</i> - the one buried.

Source: field notes and interviews

In table 1. above, we have seven euphemisms on how people can discuss death without mentioning it. The words in fact have become stock phrases and words in Ekegusii and everybody even children will automatically understand what they mean when used.

Okpewho (1983) in his work explores some of the stock words and phrases used in some dirges, particularly in the Akan funeral dirges in Ghana. From, my point of view, such stock phrases in dirges form the basis of euphemisms. The word *gosira* (to be lost) is commonly used in the dirges and in everyday speech to avoid mentioning *gokwa* (to die). This word is a to-infinitive form of the verb and from which other variants like *osirire* and *omosireire* (has been lost) are realized. In stanza 3 of the song “*Orire eira ogochora*” (has vowed)

*Ee bono omosireire*  
*Arire eira x2 ogochora*  
*Otigaire omoboranka*  
*Arire eira x2 ogochora*

Yes now she has been lost from him  
 It has vowed x2 to choose.  
 He has been left a widower  
 It has vowed x2 to choose

The use of the word has the effect that, though one is missing in this place, he/she must be somewhere so death has not put an end to the life of a person entirely. When something is lost, it is not found in this place but it must be somewhere. Even in normal speech, people do not easily mention *gokwa* (to die) but use *gosira* (to be lost) or *kogenda* (to go) as noted below:

**Text 1:**

**SIR-1:** *Aa yaa! Abana ba rero timomanyeti ekegusii. Inkai abanto bagochia ekeru basirire? Igo inare goteba buna batwekiremo.*

**Researchers:** *Iga oganeti goteba buna bakure bonsi?*

**SIR-1:** *Ee nabo igo. Batotang'aneire ekiagera noo naintwe twensi torochie. Buna inche enseye, imbwanko indagende.*

**SIR-1:** *Aha yaa! Children of today don't know Ekegusii! Where do people go when they die? I am saying they have died.*

**Researchers:** *So you are saying that they have all died?*

**SIR-1:** *Yes that is so. They have gone before us because that is where all of us are headed. Like me, I don't have many days in this world. Soon I will go.*

The word *kogenda* (to go) brings out the issue that one is in transit. The implication is that life is a journey and everyone is in transit, so the dead is said to have just crossed over to the other side where everybody else must go. Therefore, what is brought out is that the earth is not our world; everyone is on the move. In fact, it is normal to hear people referring to a deceased as *nyarogendo* (the one on a journey). *Gotimoka* (to rest) is a word commonly used as a euphemism and the impact is that when one is alive, there is a lot to do but when you 'cross over' (you die), you have just gone to rest. This has the effect that the dead were very useful in life and that they have accomplished whatever was their mission on earth, so it is their right time to take a rest. This usage reminds the living about the usefulness of the dead while they were alive and mind twist the living to focus on what the dead person had done and achieved in this life.

These findings correspond with Nyakoe's (2012) whose findings indicate that Ekegusii euphemism has several conceptual metaphors for death and as a result one could reason about the dead, the dying or death using knowledge of something else.

This concept of death being regarded as a journey or taken as being on transit is what comes out clearly from the euphemized words and expressions that are used in the dirges. The word *Gochia* (to go) has the same effect like that of *kogenda* (to go). *Nyakoeningwa*, meaning the one put aside is a polite way of saying to be buried (*gotindekwa*). *Koenigwa* is to be relocated safely from one point to another- a more pleasant place. This brings out the concept of transition from this world to the other world- which is equally better.

As much as possible, the Bagusii try their best to refrain from mentioning the name of the dead one and when they do, it is in praise. Consequently, they revert to referring to them euphemistically according to their current state. The most common name – almost a stock word used is *nyagosira*, (the one lost). It is used instead of  *egetondo* (the dead) for the simple reason that *nyagosira* is more vague and honourable than  *egetondo* which is impolite. Among relatives and friends, if you call the dead as so –  *egetondo*- you are sure to earn rebuke and hatred and the next thing accusing fingers will be pointing at you that you may know what caused the death or you are behind it. So, one must always be honourable in referring to the dead so as to avoid causing embarrassment to oneself and the listeners. *Ochire* that means *has gone* points to the fact that life is a journey.

### Death as a rest after a long Journey in Life

Sometimes in the discourse of death, death is brought out as a final destination and those who have accomplished the long journey get to rest or sleep. This is illustrated by the following words in table 2

**Table 2**

Euphemism	Literal translation/ Euphemistic meaning	Avoided word and meaning
<i>Korara</i>	To sleep	<i>Gokwa</i> - to die
<i>Otimokire</i>	Has rested	<i>Okure</i> – has died
<i>Orarire</i>	Has slept	<i>Okure</i> – has died

Source: field notes, and interview data.

*Korara* (to sleep)-Death was regarded as one long deep sleep and subconsciously brought a consolation to the bereaved members that one day their kin will wake up and they will be joined together. *Otimokire* (has rested) similarly as observed in the other section above implies that the victim here has accomplished their tasks in the world and now has rested. *Orarire* (has slept) points out that one is in deep sleep and that one day he/she will be awake. So this lessens the impact of death and makes it be understood as a rest.

It should be noted that the use of all these words is an effort to be polite and to save face especially since they are used in referring to the dead in the presence of the friends, relatives and other mourners. Failure to use them may result to one causing offence and hence becoming impolite. At this point, the impoliteness easily triggers embarrassment to the mourners, listeners or the speaker or all, leading to loss of face of the speaker and listeners. These findings seem to agree with the concept of avoidance – a practice found to be common among the Bagusii in a study conducted by Levine et al (1994) and Maoncha (2015).

### **Death as unwelcome intruder, disruptive, pain inflictor and tiring**

Death being such a painful loss to the living and obviously an enemy to humanity leaves an emotional drain in the lives of the bereaved when it has struck. This is shown by the kind of referents used by the people in a bid to avoid calling it by its name. The table below illustrates this.

**Table 3. Euphemisms on How People Refer to Death**

<b>Euphemism</b>	<b>Gloss</b>	<b>Avoided Word</b>
<i>Mokungu siomasiomi</i>	A footloose wanderer woman	<i>Amakweri</i> (death)
<i>Mokungu oisiko moino</i>	Woman of the neighbourhood	<i>Amakweri</i> (death)
<i>Orogendo</i>	A journey	<i>Amakweri</i> (death)
<i>Mokenene</i>	The thorn bush tree	<i>Amakweri</i> (death)
<i>Egetiro</i>	A hill – symbolize hardship	<i>Amakweri</i> (death)

Source: field notes, interviews and songs data.

*Mokungu siomasiomi* (A footloose wanderer woman) is used instead of *amakweri* (death) for the simple reason mentioned earlier of avoiding mentioning the dreaded. Indirectness is encouraged in The Bagusii dirges. This is what Brown and Levinson (1978) term as the off-record strategy where speakers use more indirect ways of communication. For instance in the song where *mokungu siomasiomi* (A footloose wanderer woman), the listeners have to take time to interpret the song within its current context because the message is not direct. In such a case, face is not threatened directly because the song requires the hearer to interpret what the singer is saying. *Mokungu oisiko moino* (Woman of the neighbourhood) shows that death is unwelcome and does not belong to the community. The implication is that death takes and doesn't return.

Death is feared and people fear mentioning it because they believe that will be like drawing its attention to you. So people resort to baptizing it and referring to it in other terms whose social meaning almost equals to that of death. This view of death brings out the the Bagusii worldview of death as an unwelcome and intrusive.

*Orogendo* has the implication that death is a journey and as discussed above brings out the issue of common destiny: everyone is on transit and the same fate awaits everybody. It is only that the living has not reached the destination and those dead have. *Mokenene* (the thorn bush tree) as used in the song conjures up the image of a tormentor. Death is here equated to a thorny tree, and brings out its effect of causing pain – to the living and the dead. Thus death is viewed by the Bagusii as disruptive and a constant source of pain.

### Euphemisms referring to the Bereaved

Grief is a painful and emotional moment and this is the time when people are not on their guard especially if the bereaved might be aware of those who caused the death and who might be around. In addition, the tense and charged moments make mourners not to know how they will address or relate with one another for fear of Face Threatening Acts but the people are constrained by societal norms to produce language that communicates without infringing on the face of the others and cause embarrassment, shame, anger or even hatred. From the songs collected, the researchers found that most of the wordings were an indirect way of referring to the bereaved and the dead in such a way that the parties involved could not pick offence or feel shame or so empathized with. This indirect reference is a politeness strategy that was found useful. The following table shows the euphemisms used to refer to the directly affected member/ bereaved relations of the dead.

**Table 4. Euphemism on how people refer to the bereaved members/ relatives (husband, wife, and children)**

Euphemism	Literal translation/ Euphemistic meaning	Avoided words and meaning
<i>Entakana</i>	Refers to the child left. The euphemism means ‘one who cannot refuse – is at everyone’s call and use’	Used instead of “ <i>otabwati baibori</i> ’ which means one without parents.
<i>Omotakanwa</i>	Refers to the bereaved woman. Loosely means ‘one who cannot be refused’	<i>Okwereirwe na omogaka oye</i> (one whose husband has died)
<i>Omoboranka</i>	One without a home. Refers to the man	<i>Okwereirwe na omokungu oye</i> (one whose wife has died)

Source: field notes, interviews and songs data.

The table above illustrates the euphemisms that make a reference to the various categories of the bereaved members. The following discussion summarizes the worldviews that these euphemisms bring out.

## The Importance of Children as Assurance of Family and Societal Continuity

Children are very important among the Bagusii. The purpose of marriage among the Bagusii is for procreation and this marriage will be incomplete without them. Some of the reasons why children are treasured in the community is the fact that they undertake such tasks as fetching water, firewood and carrying out simple tasks that grown-ups may find worthless. Thus the use of the euphemism, *Entakana*, meaning ‘one who cannot refuse – is at everyone’s call and use’ as indicated in the table above has the implication that children are there to be of use to everybody in the community not only their biological parents. Everybody can utilize the services of the bereaved child and the child is obligated not to refuse since everyone assumes the responsibility of a parent to such children whose biological parent(s) have/has died. Losing a child in the Bagusii therefore means losing a helper. The future of a community depends on its children. Families exchange their energies struggling to bring up their children and rear them well so as to assure their future as illustrated in the following stanza from one of the dirges:

<p><i>Mokungu siomasiomi inkai akomanya bwarugeirwe gose mboke gose mbwa’mwana x2 Ee mbwa’mwana ee baba Ee gose mboke gose mbwa’mwana ae baba- Gose mboke gose mbwa’mwana</i></p>	<p>A footloose wandering woman where does she know it has been cooked if it’s little or it’s the baby’s? x2 Ee it’s for the baby ee mother Ee if it’s little or for the baby ee mother- If it’s little or for the baby.</p>
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Source: song “mokungu sioma siomi”(Maoncha,2015)

The above point is brought out clearly. That the family must especially cook for a child and feed him/her well even when the rest of the adult members have no food. That is why the “*Mokungu Sioma siomi* (footloose wandering woman) is being criticized for always going into houses to take that which even belongs to the child. The above song is mournful for the fact that death does not choose who to kill, whether a lowly person or simply a child. This is why the mourner cries, for that which is very important is taken.

## Euphemisms reflecting importance of Mothers/Wives

The role of a woman in the home is clearly brought out in the Bagusii dirges through the euphemisms used. First, women are regarded fully as homemakers. This very important role of a woman is brought out in the way a widower is referred to euphemistically as *omoboranka* in one of the songs collected stanza 3:

*Ee bono omosireire*  
*Arire eirax2 ogochora*  
*Otigaire omoboranka*  
*Arire eirax2 ogochora*

Yes now she has been lost from him  
It has vowed x2 to choose.  
He has been left a widower  
It has vowed x2 to choose

Source: researchers' field songs collection- song *Arire Eira* (Maoncha 2015)

Previously it has been pointed out that the word *Omosireire* is euphemism for 'Died' and *Omoboranka* is euphemism for a widowed man. The use of *Omoboranka* literally means "one without a home". So the husband is clearly referred to as one without a home because in the Abagusii community, women are regarded as homemakers.

As a homemaker, the woman is tasked with ensuring that everything runs smoothly in the home and her tasks range from the simple everyday issues like preparing foods, ensuring that home supplies especially in the kitchen are available, general advising and upbringing of children, providing for the husband, weeping and mourning and even stepping into the shoes of the man of the house when he dies.

*Aye okwerwera roche*  
*Arire eira x2 ogochora*  
*Oyio ere agwetenyere*  
*Arire eira x2 ogochora*

You fetch water for yourself from the stream  
It has vowed x2 to choose.  
He collects his own firewood  
It has vowed x2 to choose.

The stanza above from the song '*Arire Eira Ogochora*' (Maoncha, 2015) shows the effect that the death of a wife has on the husband. That the bereaved husband in the dirge is said to be fetching water from the stream as well as collecting firewood; all these because the one responsible - the woman, is dead. This data supports Levine's (1962) findings that the Bagusii women were primarily responsible for food cultivation and processing, cooking, brewing, fetching water and firewood, and cleaning of the house and the homestead. On the issue of upbringing, the following data too illustrates the fact that it too was a mother's responsibility.

*Genda roche Nyaboke one genda roche,*  
*Genda roche Nyaboke one genda roche*  
*Obuche amaya amakenonoku*  
*Obuche amaya amakenonoku,*  
*Genda roche Nyaboke one genda roche x2*

Go to the river My Nyaboke, go to the river,  
Go to the river My Nyaboke, go to the river,  
You fetch the clear one,  
You fetch the clear one,  
Go to the river my Nyaboke go to the river x2

*Tira ng'ora Nyaboke one tira ng'ora,*  
*Tira ng'ora Nyaboke one tira ng'ora,*  
*Emerande inchera nemekorekanu*  
*Emerande inchera nemekorekanu*  
*Tira ng'ora Nyaboke one tira ng'ora x2*

Ascend slowly my Nyaboke ascend slowly  
Ascend slowly my Nyaboke ascend slowly  
Tendrils on the way are tangled and  
intertwinedx2  
Ascend slowly my Nyaboke ascend slowly

In the above song, the woman is the one advising the children, especially on sexuality and relationships. It should be noted that this is done in the strictness of maintaining the societal code). Concerning socialization, mothers have the ultimate responsibility for the care and socialization of their children. Her role as an advisor and instiller of basic knowledge and societal codes are illustrated in the song above (Levine, 1962).

The song, which is for mourning is strictly sung by women in the event of the death of a young person, whose cause of the death is attributed to sexual engagements. Sometimes also it was sung to mourn the death of young adults who died because of scuffles emanating from relationship and love issues. Interestingly, even the task of mourning and wailing public performance was relegated to woman. In the last stanza of the song: those who refused to mourn are despised and discouraged. In the song, women were expected to remove headscarves, wear clothes inside-out and shave hair (a practise known as “*gokobania*) and if one refused, she was the subject of ridicule. Songs sung at such times were aimed to deter any woman from misbehaving and also ensure she conducts herself as expected (Maoncha, 2015)

Among the Bagusii, only women were allowed to wail and have such a show of emotion in public. So, the women in that effort to show grief touched every part of their bodies including their buttocks which conveniently have been euphemistically referred to as “*Omokera*” instead of “*Enyuma/chinyuma*” or *Enyonga* for face saving (Maoncha, 2015). This is in observance of the ethical principle that governs Omogusii conduct (*nsoni*). One cannot afford to talk about anything without restriction. *Nsoni* exists between generations once removed from each other (Hakansson and Levine 1997), and this is the context of a funeral where everybody; young and old are present.

The emotional drain and effect on a man who is in grief must be controlled because they are not expected to have such display in public. In fact, a man who publicly displayed such emotions of grief (cry or wail) was not regarded as a man and the elders always imparted this strict code to the youth early enough during circumcision. Of course there are moments when grief overcomes the men (as seen in their song “*Arire eira*” sung by men), but the careful choice of words/ diction shows that men had no duty to cry. The euphemism word “*bwerumirie*” (mourn) in stanza 5, clearly indicates the efforts by the men to hide the fact that they are overcome by emotions but still by manipulating language, the euphemism has still delivered the message. It is in secrecy “*bwerumire nyomba mwaye*” (mourned inside his house) and not in public as women should (Maoncha,2015).

The above corresponds to the politeness theory that is the guiding principle of this study. The politeness concept has been analyzed from different perspectives but the most common approach to verbal politeness, the one that the researchers followed in this present study, claims that linguistic indirectness through the use of euphemisms in Ekegusii dirges contributes to preserving the conventions of social tact and respect. This approach, as remarked on earlier, has been defended by Brown and Levinson (1987). These authors take the notion of *face* to claim that a polite behaviour in communication greatly helps to minimize the threat to the speaker’s own social image or that of the interlocutor.

This is why a man in Ekegusii dirge is said to be in ‘*Okwerumia*’ (a silent state of mourning-crying inwardly but with well-guarded emotional release) instead of ‘*Korera*’ (crying – an outward uncontrolled and overwhelmed release of emotions during mourning which is attributed to weakness and so is a preserve of women in the community). Therefore, by this usage of the euphemism, the image of the male mourner is not threatened. To this end, euphemism stands out as a useful linguistic tool in indirect verbal strategies.

The last point clearly to show the importance of a woman, mother and wife is in the use of the euphemism “*okomeirwe*” *Gokomera*, a verb in Ekegusii means (*to sow/plant*). So *okomeirwe* literally means “*has been planted*” used in the event of burial. This usage is used instead of what people consider crude and rude “*gotindeka or gotuguta* loosely translated as *to bury*, and *to throw* respectively. I previously indicated from the data gathered that when people close to you wanted to state the fact that you are buried, they used this euphemism of *gokomera* to refer to the act of burying to give importance and usefulness to the dead, that after all, they are not useless, for when something is planted it is always beneficial so a reminder that the dead always will be looking and guarding the living from the spirit world.

Nevertheless, as much as we see that women in society are very useful, it is also clear from the dirges that the woman is overwhelmed with responsibilities hence the society comes out as patriarchal. Many of the social responsibilities are heaped on women and they are depicted as helpless without a man. For instance in the song *Omokungu Omotakanwa*: the woman is brought out as a dependent character, such that in the event the man of the house is dead, she surely cannot fit into his role, though she must try. The worst of it all is brought out in the way she is referred to euphemistically. The term “*Omotakanwa*” is an accepted polite term (euphemism) to refer to a widowed woman instead of “*Oyokwereirwe nomosacha*” or “*Oyotabwati Omosacha*” meaning one *without a husband* which can be ambiguous (maybe she has never married, lack of man because of reckless living). That term, loosely translated as “*One who cannot be refused anything*” surely brings out women as vulnerable and very dependent beings who cannot get anything for themselves and now since they have no man of their own, they must depend on the good will of anyone for survival (brought out as beggars).

The role of women in general is not well appreciated and efforts have been made to paint her negatively. This negative portrayal of a woman is climaxed by the use of a woman referent term to euphemistically refer to death when avoiding the mention of death. The euphemistic expression “*Mokungu Siomasiomi*” (a footloose wandering woman) a song, which literally refers to a woman with the tendency of frequenting other people’s houses, considered a negative habit. The expression is a euphemistic way of referring to death and the metaphorical usage here is in a bid to avoid mentioning the word “*Amakweri*” for death.

As argued above, the woman occupies a central position in most families in Kisii community although men may not acknowledge these facts. It is only when death occurs, that the full value and role of woman is established and we see that the woman is in control. The following table summarizes the euphemisms used in the songs collected to show this and that I have already discussed in this section.

**Table 5: Euphemisms showing importance of women**

EUPHEMISM	MEANING
<i>Omorugi</i>	One who cooks i.e. the wife
<i>Omoboranka</i>	One without a home i.e. The man
<i>Oboboranka</i>	To be without a home i.e. the condition

### **Euphemisms showing the Role of the Father/Men**

The role of male beings in the family and society is also brought out through the euphemistic words and expressions used in the songs. The case of song B is a clear case where the man's role is brought out clearly, in the form of the suffering that the wife goes through in his absence after death. It shows that men have a role to play in the family especially in accomplishing big tasks. It is also clear that there are specific male chores and female chores and the lament is now on who will fill the gap left. The woman in the song is driving the cattle to the market for marking lagging behind the men. It is apparent that this task proves too big for her as the cattle get scattered to different directions cause of her lack of skill or maybe the cows despise her and guess who comes to her help? It is young men who must come and try to follow and return the cattle back, not girls.

The euphemistic use of the word "*Omotakanwa*" to mean loosely- *one who cannot be refused anything*, as earlier outlined, portrays the woman as a dependent and helpless person who needs every help and provision from everyone. This is unlike the man who in the song *Arire Eira*, we saw referred to as *Omoboranka* meaning - one without a home but surely goes ahead to do women tasks and does not solicit for any help. Nkumbo (2013) explored the use of taboo words and euphemisms in the communication in the Kimeru language and sought to show how these linguistic items portray gender. His findings show that there are different euphemistic expressions used for different genders. He found that most male gender euphemisms portrayed the male sex as strong and rough while for the female counterparts the euphemisms depict a weaker sex. The findings of the present study largely support Nkumbo's findings.

In Ekegusii euphemism, the woman is brought out as weak and dependent while the man is portrayed as strong. Even in the manner of their emotional reaction, he must of necessity remain strong and publicly abstain from shedding tears- that even in private, his tears should go 'inside' but not outside. This is clear from the euphemistic word "*bwerumirie*". This euphemism means being emotionally overwhelmed but can't cry outwardly and so can only produce painful sounds because inwardly you are crying (Maoncha, 2015). This shows that the man must remain strong and appear unmoved. The term "*Okwerumia*" means agonized crying or weeping (as a way of mourning). An outright term in Ekegusii for it is - *Korera* and/or *Gokura*, but to save face/embarrassment, immediate or later for the affected you can't say that he cries or weeps though that is the fact. In the society as already indicated earlier, it is unmanly and absurd for a man to cry, weep, wail and/or shed tears whether in public or private/seclusion.

So in case this happened, in order not to depict the man as unmanly and thus attract shame to him later, the euphemism “*Kwerumia*” was used. *Kwerumia* is that sound which is made by the owl. In the use of such a euphemism, the effect is that the man can be seen as extremely affected and it is understood that he is emotionally down as a result of the death of his wife but still keeps the image of a man as a strong being who cannot break down and shed tears unlike a woman.

## Conclusions

From the euphemisms identified and analyzed, it was noted that there is a general tendency in the songs and even in the interviews for avoiding mentioning death and euphemizing it in terms of the living. This is a denial of the ultimate fact and the euphemisms instead depict the person as being somewhere or in another place resting, sleeping or looking for a way back. This is a way of reducing the impact of death on the bereaved to a mere temporary separation effect that will soon end and this gives consolation and hope to the living. So the bereaved are believed not to suffer much because of the loss.

The dead are also taken as important and through the euphemisms we learn that people are not ready to accept the fact that they have departed from us and from this world. Through the euphemisms identified, various themes and issues reflecting the culture and worldview of the Bagusii emerged. Women were referred to euphemistically using soft terms and terms reflecting their dependency state, their homely chores and their vulnerability. Others reflect on their troublesome nature and a source of evil (where death is even likened to *mokungu sioma siomi* (a footloose wondering woman)). The men are supposed to be a source of security and protection hence expected to be strong and independent. In addition value of children in the community’s future wellbeing was noted through the euphemism used. Thus, the euphemisms used in the dirges, help in the propagation of Omogusii culture, customs and the oral education concerning the social-cultural practices. The researchers recommend that studies of a similar nature be carried out in other languages to determine how far euphemisms are used in other cultures to reflect the people’s worldview.

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