



# Linguistic and Cultural Re-Orientation in the Face of Pandemics: Lessons from the COVID-19 Discourses among the Bukusu of Kenya

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## Abstract

The linguistic and cultural diversity in the seemingly interconnected world underscores the contextualisation of information for effective communication. This paper examines the host language and culture in the COVID-19 discourses on the one hand and, on the other, their re-orientation based on the Bukusu environment, with the hope of drawing lessons from the findings for future better handling of pandemics. An exploratory survey design was adopted, where primary data were collected using in-depth face-to-face interviews with 12 participants, observation, video recording and note-taking in a funeral, wedding and a traditional brew drinking context in Kanduyi and Webuye, Bungoma County. Secondary data were drawn from government documents, Community-based Organization (CBO) champions' documentation, and the Mulembe FM Radio station. Analysis was based on two theories: the re-definition of situations, which explains how values are redefined about situations for adaptation to occur, and the diffusion of innovations, articulating how an idea spreads through a population while disregarding compatibility with the local culture and language. Findings show that linguistic and cultural re-orientation could have triggered better results in the fight against the pandemic. The study findings are relevant to policy makers and implementers, specifically, the Ministry of Health (MOH), Kenya, charged with disseminating relevant information concerning health pandemics.

## Introduction

When global pandemics occur, nations worldwide try to counter them; they devise mitigating strategies to handle the challenge. Whereas some of the strategies effectively work, others fail and negatively impact the masses, who are the recipients. This paper looks at the then COVID-19 discourses among the Bukusu of Western Kenya and- based on the findings- suggests a linguistic and cultural re-orientation in addressing future pandemics.

The COVID-19 pandemic was first reported in Wuhan, China, on 31<sup>st</sup>, and since then, the disease spread far and wide through human mobility and contact. Consequently, lives were disturbed, society destabilised, economies interfered with, and many lives were lost. In response to the challenge, governments worldwide developed mitigation strategies, one of them being communication, the most



efficient management tool. In the COVID-19 discourses, language was central in the dissemination of information, ideas and thoughts; it was used to educate the public to create awareness; it served to warn the public of impending consequences in case of contravention of the set protocols, and finally, it was used to give suggestions on what needed to be done in the then prevailing situation. Being an important element of one's cultural identity, the *type* of language used and *how* it is used determines the success of the communication- since every communication triggers action, either in favour or against the communicator's expectation (Argyris & Schön, 1996). In the current study context, effective communication entails lacking linguistic and/ or cultural barriers and achieving the communication objective through relevant feedback.

Besides language, culture is central to communication. The two, language and culture, influence each other in the sense that whereas language is part of the culture of a people, the culture of a people is embodied in their language. Consequently, changes that occur in society are registered in its language. Given the bidirectional relationship, effective communication calls for due consideration of the recipients' culture. Furthermore, whereas culture can be a barrier to knowledge sharing and development (De Long & Fahey, 2000), knowledge construction is influenced by the people's culture (Weedon, 2004). This being the case, considering the cultures involved in intercultural communication contexts is very important.

This study looks at COVID-19 discourses and the place of language and culture in conveying information on the pandemic- which began in a different cultural and linguistic context- to people who subscribed to a different language and culture, in this case, the Bukusu. The paper examines how linguistic and cultural re-orientation was done to mitigate the communicative gap. Finally, the paper draws lessons from the COVID-19 discourses among the Bukusu for better future mitigation of pandemics.

Although the disease was contained, it took a long time, with adverse socio-economic impact. This study demystifies pandemics as distant, requiring novel strategies external to the target culture's context; it speaks to policymakers and implementers involved in pandemic discourses, underscoring the socio-pragmatic knowledge of the target group.

Scholars have acknowledged the relevance of cultural context in communication (Bouwen & Taillieu, 2004; Kothari, 2001; Mutebi, 2004; Purba, 2011; Samovar et al., 1981; Weedon, 2004 & Welch, 2008); however, culture can as well be a hindrance in intercultural communication, if overlooked (De Long & Fahey, 2000; Langer, 1989; Pyle, 2018).

Despite the existing works on the role of language and culture in intercultural communication, few studies on communication in crises- such as the COVID-19 pandemic exist, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Kenya and the rest of Africa (Declercq & Federici, 2020). The current study explores ways in which response to pandemics could be enhanced through cultural and linguistic re-orientation, focusing on COVID-19 discourses as a Case study that provides the basis for future mitigation of pandemics.

Two theories are used to guide our argument: the redefinition of the situation by Thomas & Thomas (1928), which argues that values are redefined about situations for adaptation to occur. The theory articulates the need for communicators on pandemics to redefine the language and culture that come with pandemics- in this case, COVID-19- based on the recipients' linguistic and cultural context for better mitigation. It also explains how the Bukusu tried to re-orient both linguistically and culturally to fit into the then shifting spaces. The Diffusion of innovations theory by Rodgers (2006) explains how an idea gains momentum and spreads through a specific population or social system while disregarding compatibility with the local culture and language. The theory explains how the COVID-



19 discourses among the Bukusu largely ignored the recipients' linguistic and cultural situation, which is key in the consumption of/ and response towards new information.

### **Methodology**

The study used an exploratory survey design. Primary data were collected from Webuye and Kanduyi through face-to-face in-depth interviews with 12 participants, 6 of either gender, aged 60 years and above. The 12 were purposively sampled using 2 gate keepers. The sample possessed appropriate linguistic and cultural competence required in providing data that informed the study, and in line with the study's theoretical approach. Likewise, data on Bukusu cultural norms and practices- as observed in funeral, wedding and traditional brew drinking contexts- were collected using observation, video recording and note taking. Secondary data were drawn from government documents through the MOH, CBO champions' documentation and, from the Mulembe FM station, which broadcasts in various Luhya dialects. The units of analysis were lexical items, phrases and discourses around COVID-19. The analysis was done based on the theory of re-definition of situation (Thomas & Thomas, 1928) and the Diffusion of innovations (Rodgers, 2006), in line with the study objectives.

For ethical purposes, approval was sought from the Bungoma County commissioner; participants' signed consent was sought, and for confidentiality, all the data were de-identified using codes.

### **Findings and discussion**

The study sought to achieve three objectives: examine the role of language and culture in the COVID-19 discourses, determine the extent to which linguistic and cultural re-orientation was done among the Bukusu for effective response towards the pandemic, and draw lessons from the COVID-19 discourses among the Bukusu for better future mitigation of pandemics. We analyse data using the theory of re-definition of situation and the Diffusion of innovations, in line with the study objectives.

#### ***COVID-19 discourses among the Bukusu of Bungoma County***

Communicating in a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can be challenging (Lundberg & Asplund, 2011), especially in multilingual and multicultural environments such as Kenya, more so when conveying foreign knowledge and in an unfamiliar language to the target group (Kijko, 2016). Cultures' perceptions of various diseases and sicknesses differ (Workneh et al., 2018). Therefore, in mitigation, considering the recipients' linguistic and cultural worldview is important in providing a lasting solution. In the COVID-19 discourses, this was disregarded, as observed in the narrative below, where a health Officer at Chebukube was appealing to residents to observe health protocols:

#### **Excerpt 1**

01: *Take personal responsibility to protect yourself and your loved ones. The statistics are painting a very grim picture. If we don't take precautions, this pandemic might hit us hard.*

In excerpt 1, the message was being communicated in a rural setting to elderly people, who hardly understood English. For a positive response, the redefinition of the situation (Thomas & Thomas, 1928) is important in communication.

Emphasising the need to observe protocol, a health Officer at Kimilili market said:

#### **Excerpt 2**

01: ...*wakati wowote watu wavae mask siyo tu wakiona askari*

.... people should put on masks all the time not when they see security officers.

This message is relevant but too abstract, with the assumption that everybody knew *what* a mask was and *why* it had to be worn. Rodgers' (2006) theory of diffusion of innovations explains this better- a



particular way of conveying information became a norm in the entire nation. Disregarding the people's lived experiences worked against the set objectives; hence, making the process costlier in terms of time, resources and lives- disturbed and/ or lost.

The communicative strategy used in the COVID-19 discourses- both at the National and County level- to a greater extent, ignored the key role that language and culture plays in relaying new information from a different linguistic and cultural context. This worked against the containment and management of the pandemic, as few people could relate to it.

Other citizens blamed the government, both National and County, for not doing enough to educate the public about the same. A participant is heard saying:

Excerpt 3

01: *Hakuna mtu amechukua jukumu kutueleza uko inje ni mbaya.*

Nobody has told us that things are bad out there.

02: *Hii COVID-19 itachapa watu hapa Bungoma, na mi naulisa serikali iko wapi?*

This pandemic will finish people in Bungoma, my question is, where is the government?

Such blame arose from the existing gap between the 'owners' of the COVID-19 information and the target recipients. We argue that linguistic and cultural reorientation in pandemic discourses would have filled such gaps.

In the same breath, some understood the shift in the environment and took it upon themselves to advise others as narrated below:

Excerpt 4

01: *"nadhani hatuko tayari kupambana na korona...hapa Bungoma,*

I think we are not ready to deal with the pandemic here in Bungoma,

02: *hakuna mtu anavaa mask, kwa watu mia, ni mtu mmoja,*

people don't put on masks, only one out of one hundred does.

03: *...hawakai mbali na wengine, wanakaa tu in groups... naambia watu, korona iko wajiadhari"*

...they don't keep social distance... I tell people that Corona is with us, we must take precaution.

Excerpt 4 clarifies the fact that COVID-19 discourses didn't effectively achieve the expected objective, mainly because of disregarding the existing socio-pragmatic context of communication, which acted as a barrier. This was compounded by the uncertainty and the fear of unforeseen risks- on the part of the recipients- to the existing Bukusu social structure.

### ***COVID-19 containment and management strategies***

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, effort was made at the National and the County level to mitigate the then prevailing situation in Kenya. One of the strategies used by the Kenyan government was the community health strategy (CHS), which focuses on taking services closer to individuals for increased participation; hence, it is more effective (MOH, 2019). This strategy has always proven effective, and it would have been more effective if only it were entrenched in the cultural and linguistic context of the recipients.

On the same note, CBOs are better placed in the fight against pandemics because they are community-based (Kenya Alliance of Residence Association (KARA), 2020). This notwithstanding, their disregard for the linguistic and cultural context acted as a barrier; this is observed in the address by one of the CBO champions on the Kanduyi market:



Excerpt 5

01: *Balebe khwichunge nende birusi bya korono,*

Please let's all take precaution against the COVID-19

02: *khufware chimasiki bulayi lundi khusabe ne khusanitaisa kamakhono*

let us put on the masks well, wash hands and sanitise

03: *nebusa fvesi khulawela muaisolation namwe mukwarentaini*

otherwise, we shall all be in self-isolation or quarantine).

In excerpt 5, the speaker uses nativised phrases such as *birusi* 'virus', *korono* 'COVID-19', *chimasiki* 'masks', *khusanitaisa* 'sanitise', *muaisolation* 'isolation', *mukwarentaini* 'quarantine', to communicate and yet there are Lubukusu lexical items, phrases or paraphrases, which would have triggered better feedback, given the communicative context.

Besides, FM radio stations were better placed, with "82% of Kenyans receiving information on COVID-19 via radio..." (KNBS, 2020: 11). The fact that FM radio stations largely broadcast in the Kenyan native languages means that they stood a better chance of creating awareness; more so, if the information was contextualised based on the recipients' cultural and linguistic environment. This would have enhanced timely and appropriate response. As observed below through one of the Mulembe FM news presenters, this was disregarded:

Excerpt 6

01: *...babandu benyekhana khulonda kamalako ka serikali nebusa balaba mutoto lockdown...*

...people should observe health protocol, otherwise they will be in total lock down...

The nativised noun phrase 'total lockdown' is unfamiliar to most of the Bukusu. This message could have been communicated more effectively by contextualising the same based on the recipients' linguistic and cultural environment for better consumption.

Yet in another incident, while announcing about those travelling from Overseas to Bungoma County, one of the Mulembe FM news presenter said:

Excerpt 7

01: *Serikali yekaunti ya Bungoma elomile eli babandu bosi*

Bungoma County government has announced that all people

02: *babamile engelekha bache muselfu kwarentaini*

who have come into the country from abroad should quarantine themselves

Although human transformation is always assimilative (Kim, 2005), positive assimilation thrives where context is considered. In excerpt 7, the presenter had the choice of repackaging the information based on the recipients' linguistic and cultural context for better results, given that he's a community member. Ignoring the people's context worked against the set objectives.

In the following section, we examine the linguistic and cultural re-orientation in the context of COVID-19 as articulated by the Lubukusu speakers.

***linguistic and cultural re-orientation***

Linguistic and cultural re-orientation in multilingual and multicultural contexts is important in crisis communication, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For adaptation to occur, values must be redefined about situations (Thomas & Thomas 1928). We argue that for the Bukusu to have effectively conceptualised the novel disease and appropriately responded, there was a need to redefine the





COVID-19 information based on their context, where redefinition means communicating from their (Bukusu) worldview. This is discussed below.

#### *linguistic re-orientation*

Human beings understand things better when communicated to them in a familiar language, and each time there's societal change, language also changes to meet the communicative demands that come with the shifting spaces, including that of the COVID-19 pandemic. As earlier observed, the COVID-19 discourses among the Bukusu disregarded the existing linguistic environment. However, evidence from data show that Lubukusu has rich linguistic resources that would have been used to appropriately communicate the same information, with better results, as captured below:

**Table 1**

|     | <b>English</b>                  | <b>Lubukusu</b>   |
|-----|---------------------------------|---|
| 1.  | Corona Virus                    | <i>Khaukha khachililila</i>   |
| 2.  | Self-isolation                  | <i>Khukhweyaula mu sipupu/mwituli lie babandu (sibacho)</i>                       |
| 3.  | Self-quarantine                 | <i>Khuhweyikalila mungo mwoo/khukhwifunikhila</i>                                 |
| 4.  | Stay at home                    | <i>Sikala mungo mwoo</i>  |
| 5.  | Total lock down                 | <i>Khukwikalila elala</i>   |
| 6.  | Social distancing               | <i>Khukhwikhala sinao no omundu okundi</i>  |
| 7.  | No handshake                    | <i>Lekha khukhesiana mukhono</i>  |
| 8.  | No hugging                      | <i>Khulekha khukhwichana khubifuba</i>  |
| 9.  | Sanitise                        | <i>Khukhwesibilisia kamasuswa</i>   |
| 10. | Frequently wash hands           | <i>Khusaaba buli khase kamakhono</i>  |
| 11. | Cover your mouth when coughing  | <i>khubimba emunwa no okholola</i>  |
| 12. | Wear/ put on masks              | <i>Funikha sikamata emolu nende emunwa</i>  |
| 13. | No sharing                      | <i>Khukabana embao</i>  |
| 14. | Work from home                  | <i>Kholela kimilimo engo woo</i>  |
| 15. | No crowding                     | <i>Khulekha khukhwebusia alala</i>  |
| 16. | COVID-19 screening              | <i>Khumenielesia omanyem omundu nali ne khaukha</i>                               |
| 17. | COVID-19 suspects               | <i>Balolekhana khuba ne khaukha khachililila</i>                                  |
| 18. | COVID-19 victims                | <i>Babanyola khaukha khachililila</i>   |
| 19. | Wuhan Virus                     | <i>Khaukha kha Wuhan, China</i>   |
| 20. | COVID-19 cases                  | <i>Kumulaasi kwe babandu banyolile khaukha khachililila (khe likhumi na tisa)</i> |
| 21. | Transmitting/spreading COVID-19 | <i>Khusalania khaukha khachililila (khe likhumi na tisa)</i>                      |
| 22. | COVID-19 is a plaque            | <i>Khaukha khachililila (khe likhumi na tisa) khali sieli</i>                     |
| 23. | Pandemic                        | <i>Sieli</i>  |

**Data Source: Webuye and Kanduyi**

From table 1, it is clear that alien- to Lubukusu- linguistic items could have been comfortably redefined based on the recipients' linguistic context, which could have triggered faster and appropriate response, as it has always been with other pandemics in the past. With proper understanding of the pandemic, it is possible for the community to come up with home-grown strategies of managing- which triggers instinctive behavioural change that works, regardless of the gravity.

#### *Cultural re-orientation*

Cultures' discourses around diseases and sicknesses differ (Workneh et al., 2018). Consequently, understanding the cultural perception of the target group on a disease is important as it determines



*what to do and how.* In this regard, we agree with Bâlc (2018: 259), who says, “...no action is possible ... outside the knowledge of cultural conditioning of behaviours, values and people's attitudes”.

COVID-19 wasn't so unique from other contagious viral infections, such as polio, chicken pox, HIV/AIDS, etc., that had previously hit the Babukusu. Though contagious, these diseases have always been managed using home-grown strategies. Such strategies could have been applied in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of using strategies that do not align with the people's values and norms.

In the wake of COVID-19 in Kenya, several health guidelines were issued in an attempt to contain the pandemic. However, most of them were incompatible with the Bukusu cultural practices. One such practice was the Bukusu circumcision. In Bungoma County, a government official gave the following directive: “We want to strictly adhere to the MOH guidelines of containing the disease ... anyone found circumcising young boys will be prosecuted” (The Standard, 2020). This directive was never complied with as boys went around villages singing, dancing, and informing the public (*khulanga*) that they were to face the cut (*khukhebwa*). Non-adherence may have resulted from *how* the directive was issued, without regard to whether the target group had alternative ways of doing the same (see Excerpt 8) without endangering their health.

Excerpt 8

01: ...sekhwaminyia tazwe, babana bakona mumatore mala asibui

...we didn't celebrate at night, instead the boys slept in the banana plantation and in the morning

02: ...sikhebo nende khukwalukha khubukule chinyinga chingali khukhaba ne babandu bakali tawe

...the ceremony needs to spread for more days than normal in order to avoid crowds

03: balebe babenyekhana khubao, ne babandu benyekhana bakhine lukali nye luluya lubeo

family members and close relatives to participate and they should dance to generate a lot of heat

04: khubela Khaukha khachililila sekhenyanga luluya ta...

COVID-19 doesn't spread much where there is heat

04: bakhebi besibilisie kamechi ke kamakonge, pilili ne chindimu khukwira khaukha khachililila”

circumcisers should sanitise using sisal fibre, pepper and lemon to avoid the spread of COVID-19.

Human beings are adaptive (Kim, 2005) and can redefine the prevailing situation at any given time without compromising what defines them; in this case, both the practice and health protocol are observed.

At the height of the pandemic, Bungoma County came under lockdown. As per the MOH guidelines, weddings were to be attended by a maximum of 30 people, which goes against the Bukusu practice, where weddings are attended by anybody who cares to attend, not just family and friends. However, to mitigate and manage the then crises, and in observance of health protocols, adjustments were made:

Excerpt 9

01: ...siselelo syabombile; babebusi, basenge, bakhocha, basakhulu ne balosi

... weddings have reduced and only parents, aunties, uncles and a few elders (male and female)

02: bakambila ekholo bong'ene babamo... mala bakhola kimisango kiosi kikyenyekhana

Those who counsel the clan are involved, and they observe/ carry out all the wedding cultural norms.

Excerpt 9 illustrates cultural re-orientation, where the people's cultural practices are upheld but in a redefined way- without endangering their health. We argue that communication should have been done from the people's cultural knowledge instead of making general pronouncements.



The Bukusu way of mourning the dead involves family, friends, neighbours, and anybody interested, hence attracting crowds; feasting goes on for days and weeks, various norms are observed- the body is kept in the house for three days before burial (for the elderly), cows are slaughtered, burial is done in the afternoon, and after the burial, relatives stay on for days and even weeks, mourning. Consequently, asking them to bury the dead on the day one dies or the very day the body arrives from the morgue is going against their practice. However, during the pandemic, they had to re-orient in this social space:

Excerpt 10

01: ...lelo khurera kumubili ekoloba musakumi, kukone munju yakhaba esiku ndala

...currently, the body is brought home at 4 pm, it stays in the house at least overnight

02: ata nekhalo chisiku chitaru ta, mala khusikhe esiku erakho...balebe bong'ene nibo babecha

even if not for three days, then we bury the following day...only relatives attend

03: Nekhumala khusikha, bandu sebekhala lukali nge khale ta; kakhaba kario khusiikhala kimikoye

...the moment we finish, they leave, unlike before; nonetheless, we must observe our traditions.

Excerpt 10 makes explicit the people's *understanding* and *value* of their culture- they *know*, and they *have ways of re-defining* their culture to fit into the shifting spaces. Such knowledge is important for those charged with the mitigation process.

Among the Bukusu, one way of socialising is by sharing local brew. This is where people meet at drinking spots (homes), sit and drink from the same pot, sharing two or three drinking straws (*chisekhe*) and tins (*chikorokoro*). During COVID-19, there was a directive that all bars be closed (MOH, 2020). In this directive, the MOH did not consider cultures such as the Bukusu's, where one doesn't have to go to the bar to consume liquor. To effectively communicate this, the people's culture should have been considered. Nonetheless, to fit into the shifting spaces, the Bukusu comfortably adjusted without compromising their culture or health:

Excerpt 11

01: ...lelo buli omundu echa nende lusekhe lwewe, mbao orumikhila lwo owasie ta

...nowadays, everybody comes with their own siphon/ straw, there's no sharing

02: ... omundu asuta ekorokoro yewe...enyungu esili endala ... bakiimisia mumechi kamabile

... individuals carry their own tins, although the pot is shared...the pot is placed in hot water

03: kamakwa kakhaba kamanyifu ta...khukhwira khaukha khachililila

to keep the brew warm, this way, the virus can't spread

Excerpt 11 shows *how*- in their way- the Bukusu *knew how* to re-invent without compromising their identity. Such cultural knowledge is relevant for effective communication in pandemics. Wearing masks and keeping distance were requirements during the COVID-19 season. This wasn't new among the Bukusu (Chikati, 2016). However, conversations around COVID-19 were disconnected from the community to the extent that the disease appeared new and mysterious, as observed below:

Excerpt 12

01: Efwe, bibintu bino bibechangao...omundu naalwala lukali mala kamenya khusisielo

these things are there in our community, when one has a chronic disease

02: nali ne sikhoololo, chingoso, maunda, namwe chifubu, khumwaula namwe khumwikalila

infectious cough, scabies, chicken pox or epilepsy we isolate or quarantine them

03: akhaambisya babandi ta...babandu nge abo sokhesia, sokona, namwe wesenda niyebali ta...





you even don't greet, sleep with or move closer to such people, they are left on their own.

With such rich cultural knowledge of handling patients with contagious diseases, it becomes easy to manage *any related new situation* if only discourses around the novel pandemic are done from the recipients' cultural understanding and not from some other culture's worldview that is disconnected from the prevailing cultural reality.

Africans are religious (Kwame, 1996), and asking them to avoid worship is acting against their belief system. The MOH guidelines on worship that included the closure of worship places, limiting the number of attendees, social distancing, sanitising, fumigation, and time limit were opposed to the Bukusu worldview on worship, whether traditional, Abrahamic or a blend. This notwithstanding, the Bukusu had ways of redefining worship to fit into the changing spaces, as illustrated below:

Excerpt 13

01: *babukusu khwasima khukhupa ching'oma, khukhina lukali ne khuruka paka bandu nebakwasi,*  
us Bukusu like beating drums, dancing vigorously, jumping until people fall

02: *nekhukukula lukali ...bandu nebakhola bario, kumusambwa kubengilamwo, ne saa hiyo*  
we cry loudly, this we do when the spirit comes upon us, when this happens...

03: *bebilila protoko; lelo khubela khuli nende khauxha khachililila, sekhukhola khurio ta*  
they forget protocol; with the pandemic, we no longer do that

04: *babelwachi babakontrola kimisambwa kikhabatila ta... ching'oma sechipwa lukali ta*  
preachers control worshippers not to be overtaken by the spirit... drumming is less

05: *khukwibmba ne khuruka khutiti, kamalinda nimwo kimisambwa kibechange active mbao*  
singing and jumping is less, there are no overnight prayers, where is spirits are very active

Bukusu speech community *knows what* to do, *when* and *how* in worship during pandemics. Consequently, conveying information to them from the *others'* cultural perspective does not achieve much in the fight against pandemics.

Hand shaking in greeting is the norm among the Bukusu; it indicates friendship, solidarity, respect, acknowledgement, recognition, and is a gateway to social engagement; the longer it takes, the intensity of the grip and the accompanying words communicate a lot. Consequently, restriction on this is synonymous with denying one's identity. However, though 'distant' and 'foreign', the Bukusu re-invented to conform to MOH requirements:

Excerpt 14

01: *Babukusu sekhukhesiananga ne bakhwe mumikhono ta ne sekhwikhala alala ta*  
as Bukusu, don't shake hands with in-laws (father and mother in-law), neither do we sit close

02: *nge bulwale buno bwechile, buli omundu abonaokundi nge omukhwe mala wisende*  
with the pandemic, we see each other as in-laws and keep distance

03: *somukhesia ta, efwe khulakholanga khurio, butinyu lakini khekhukhaka mala khulanala*  
you don't greet, this is what we are doing, it is difficult, but we try, we hope to manage.

Using the analogy of taboos in greeting among the Babukusu- where in-laws don't shake hands- the Bukusu redefined the situation using the *known* to deal with the *unknown*. Instead of the MOH giving directives, approaching the same from the people's worldview would have been easier, cheaper, and more effective.



At some point, hand sanitising was found to have been flouted by residents in Webuye (MOH, 2020). Speaking to a participant, it was clear that the community understood *how* hand sanitising was/ is traditionally done; a method that was familiar, less expensive and effective, as captured below:

**Excerpt 15**

01: *Babukusu khwarumikhilanga kamechi ke kamakonge, kamechi kakama mupilipili*  
us Bukusu use of sap from the sisal fibre, pepper liquid  
*nende kamechi ke chindimu Khukhwesibilisia khukhwira khaukha*  
and lemon juice to rub on the body, this sanitises; it kills all the viruses.

Indigenous knowledge on dealing with viruses is important, and if built upon, it can enhance the fight against any pandemic; this is as opposed to products that are unfamiliar and costly to a majority. This knowledge should have been used in the COVID-19 discourses to avoid cultural disconnect.

Traditional herbal medicines are important in disease management (African Union, 2020). This is the case with the Bukusu, who have always managed diseases and pandemics using herbal medicines (Chikati, 2016), so COVID-19 wouldn't have been an exception. This is captured below:

**Excerpt 16**

01: “...*bulwale bulachililila khubela bandu sebenya khunywa kamalesi kefwе ke sibukusu ta*  
the disease will continue affecting many because people don't use our Bukusu herbal medicines  
02: *bali benya kebasungu. Efwе khuli nende kamalesi kefwе niko khutubanisya bisala bikali,*  
they prefer Western medicine. We have our own herbal medicines, from a mixture of plants  
03: *khuchemusya ne khusingila chimbiko ne kamachukhu; khaukha khachililila sekhakhutula ta*  
the mixture is boiled and used to clean the kidney and the liver, then no COVID-19 can affect you.

From the above, it is certain that Bukusu herbal medicines could have cured the COVID-19, just as it previously did with other pandemics. Retracing and making use of the people's indigenous knowledge on herbal medicines can help fight pandemics, regardless of the type or magnitude. In any case, the available vaccines then were all on trial- that is why the public was sceptical- and so, trying out the indigenous Bukusu herbal medicines in the attempt to treat COVID-19 wouldn't have been any worse.

**Conclusion**

The paper examined the linguistic and cultural re-orientation in COVID-19 discourses- among the Bukusu- hoping to draw lessons for future containment and management of pandemics. Findings show that in the COVID-19 discourses among the Bukusu, little effort was made to contextualise information, and instead, communication was made generally, hence taking too long to achieve the set objectives, with more casualties recorded. It is observed that contextualising COVID-19 discourses through cultural and linguistic re-orientation could have demystified the disease as the target group could have easily identified with it and appropriately responded from an informed position. This could have been more productive, less costly (monetary, human resource, disturbed/ and lost lives), and without compromising their language, culture or health.

Findings from this study provide the basis for future engagement with pandemics- by policymakers and implementers- that as a multilingual and multicultural nation, besides other strategies, linguistic and cultural re-orientation ought to be prioritised in pandemic discourses; this makes the process more effective and less costly as people understand and respond better when they relate with the situation from their world view.



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