

## **Influence of Social and Cultural Contexts on the Conceptualization of Emotion Metaphors in EkeGusii**

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### **Abstract**

Emotions constitute some of the most abstract dimensions of human experience, yet they are central to social interaction and cultural meaning-making. However, emotion metaphors are not universal; rather, they are shaped by specific social, cultural, and ecological contexts. This study examines how social and cultural factors influence the conceptualization of emotion metaphors in EkeGusii, a Bantu language classified under zone E42. Anchored in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which views metaphor as fundamental to human cognition, the study explores how embodied experience interacts with culturally shared knowledge in shaping emotional meaning. An Interpretive Phenomenological Research (IPR) design was employed to capture participants' lived experiences and interpretations of metaphorical emotional expression in everyday social interaction. The findings demonstrate that the conceptualization of emotion metaphors in EkeGusii is strongly shaped by social and cultural contexts, confirming that metaphor functions as a culturally preferred and socially regulated mode of emotional expression. Emotion metaphors vary systematically across communal settings, encoding culturally sanctioned meanings and moral expectations. In wedding contexts, love and happiness are conceptualized through agrarian and material metaphors emphasizing fidelity, sweetness, and relational commitment. Political discourse foregrounds metaphors of anger, fear, and power grounded in embodied experiences such as

heat and pressure, enabling the expression of intense affect while maintaining social decorum. Metaphors associated with childbirth frame happiness as renewal and communal obligation, while burial contexts employ metaphors of return, humility, and loss to articulate collective grief and respect for the dead. Overall, emotion metaphors in EkeGusii operate as culturally embedded cognitive and communicative resources through which shared values, social norms, and collective lived experience are negotiated.

**Keywords:** Metaphors, emotions, culture, context, social, conceptualization, EkeGusii.

### Introduction

Across languages, metaphor functions as a primary cognitive and linguistic resource through which emotions are conceptualized, structured, and communicated (Kövecses, 2000, pp. 3–7; Zhou et al., 2021, pp. 112–118). By mapping intangible emotional experiences onto concrete, embodied, and culturally familiar domains, metaphor enables speakers to render subjective feelings intelligible within shared systems of meaning. Emotion metaphors, therefore, offer a critical lens for examining the intersection of language, cognition, and culture.

Crucially, the metaphorical conceptualization of emotion is not universal. While emotional experience is grounded in shared human embodiment, the interpretation, evaluation, and expression of emotions vary significantly across sociocultural contexts (Kövecses, 2003, pp. 25–29). Cultural norms, social organization, ecological conditions, and collective histories influence which source domains are selected, how emotions are morally framed, and how emotional expression is regulated within a community. Consequently, emotion metaphors encode culturally specific values, relational expectations, and lived realities, revealing how communities make sense of affective life in socially meaningful ways.

This paper examines the influence of social and cultural context on the conceptualization of emotion metaphors in EkeGusii, a Bantu language spoken primarily in southwestern Kenya. The Abagusii share historical and cultural affinities with neighboring communities such as the Agikuyu, Ameru, Baganda, Kuria, and certain Abaluhya sub-groups, relationships that have shaped linguistic exchange and shared conceptual repertoires (Mariera, 2021). These interconnections provide a fertile sociocultural environment for exploring how emotion metaphors emerge from collective experience.

Notably, EkeGusii does not possess a single lexical equivalent of the English term “emotion.” Instead, emotional experience is commonly expressed through the verb *igwa* ‘to feel’, in its infinitive form *okoigwa*, which encompasses both positive and negative affective states. Emotional intensity is frequently conceptualized through metaphors of fullness, containment, or saturation, as reflected in expressions such as *ichoru* ‘filled’. Core emotional concepts in EkeGusii include *okogechigu* (anger), *obwanchani* (love), *obwoba* (fear), *omoichana* (sadness), and *omogoko* (happiness). These emotions are not construed in isolation but evaluated in relation to their social consequences, moral implications, and effects on communal harmony. Emotional expression is therefore embedded in social responsibility and collective well-being rather than individual self-expression alone.

Cross-linguistic research demonstrates that emotion metaphors arise from an interaction between embodied experience and culturally specific meaning systems. While metaphors such as SADNESS IS DOWN or ANGER IS HEAT recur across languages, their elaboration, salience, and social significance differ markedly across cultures (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 15–17; Kövecses, 2005, pp. 68–72). Studies in Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, and African languages illustrate how religious beliefs, ecological conditions, social structures, and cultural values shape metaphorical choices. For instance, happiness in Chinese is often conceptualized through growth and flourishing, whereas sadness is framed as heart pain,

reflecting cultural models that locate emotion in the heart (Yu, 1998, pp. 45–52). In Arabic, sadness is frequently associated with darkness and night, and anger with fire or storms, metaphors grounded in environmental experience and collectivist social orientation (Berrada, 2007; Ryding, 2014). Japanese emotion metaphors emphasize restraint and indirectness, mirroring cultural values of harmony and emotional moderation (Matsuki, 1995).

Within the Kenyan context, similar patterns are evident. Studies on Swahili and Kamba show that emotion metaphors are closely tied to environmental realities, subsistence farming practices, and social values. Anger is commonly associated with heat, fire, or possession, while sadness is conceptualized through water, darkness, or overwhelming forces (Githiora, 2002; Kiambaa, 2018). These metaphors reflect lived experiences of climate, agriculture, and communal interdependence, underscoring the role of sociocultural context in shaping emotional meaning.

Situating EkeGusii within this broader cross-linguistic landscape allows for a deeper understanding of how the Abagusii conceptualize emotional life. As an agrarian community with strong communal values, the Abagusii draw heavily on agricultural imagery and collective experience in metaphorizing emotion. For example, happiness is commonly expressed as *rigeso rinene* ‘a bountiful harvest’, directly linking emotional fulfillment to productivity, survival, and communal prosperity. Such metaphors demonstrate that emotional experience in EkeGusii is inseparable from social roles, economic activity, and shared cultural knowledge.

To capture these culturally grounded meanings, the study adopted an Interpretive Phenomenological Research (IPR) design. IPR is a qualitative approach rooted in phenomenological philosophy and is particularly suited to examining how individuals make sense of lived experience within specific sociocultural contexts (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Rather than seeking to measure or generalize emotional experience, IPR foregrounds depth,

meaning, and interpretation, making it especially appropriate for exploring metaphorical constructions of emotion that are embedded in everyday social interaction.

The epistemological foundations of Interpretative Phenomenological Research (IPR) draw on the phenomenological traditions of Husserl and their later hermeneutic elaboration by Heidegger, which emphasize subjective experience and interpretive understanding. Within this framework, experience is not treated as an objective phenomenon but as something actively constituted through personal histories, cultural norms, and social relations. IPR is therefore concerned with understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within these contexts. As Larkin, Smith, and Flowers (2009, p. 3) note, IPR involves a double hermeneutic process, in which participants seek to make sense of their experiences while the researcher simultaneously interprets these sense-making processes. This approach foregrounds the intersubjective negotiation of meaning, highlighting the centrality of both participant perspective and researcher interpretation in qualitative inquiry. This orientation aligns closely with the study's objective of understanding emotion metaphors in EkeGusii as products of shared cultural experience rather than reflections of individual psychological states alone.

A central feature of the IPR approach is its emphasis on contextualized meaning-making. In the Gusii cultural setting, emotional expression is deeply embedded in communal life and frequently articulated in public and semi-public domains such as political gatherings, weddings, funerals, and other collective events. These interactional contexts provide rich environments for metaphorical language. Accordingly, the study focused on naturally occurring metaphorical expressions of emotion within such culturally salient settings, allowing for an authentic, situated analysis.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who are recognized custodians of EkeGusii, possessing extensive linguistic competence and cultural authority

acquired through long-standing participation in communal life. The participants comprised elders and senior community members, both men and women, who play a central role in preserving, transmitting, and legitimizing culturally appropriate language use in public and ritual discourse. A total of ten participants were selected to ensure analytical depth while capturing culturally grounded perspectives. Data were generated through five series of audio-recorded conversational interactions drawn from socially and ritually significant contexts, including political meetings, wedding ceremonies, and funeral gatherings. These settings were deliberately chosen for their emotional intensity and their function as sites for the reproduction of culturally sanctioned modes of emotional expression.

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews with recordings of naturally occurring conversational discourse, with particular emphasis placed on participants' narratives, evaluations, and enactments of emotional experience. Rather than eliciting abstract or decontextualized definitions of emotion, participants were encouraged to reflect on lived experiences and communicative practices through which emotions are metaphorically expressed in everyday interaction. This approach ensured that the data captured authentic language use and culturally embedded processes of meaning-making.

The audio-recorded data were transcribed and analyzed thematically, focusing on metaphorical expressions associated with five core emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, love, and fear. Metaphors were identified, categorized, and interpreted with reference to their source and target domains and the sociocultural contexts in which they occurred. Through this interpretive process, the study demonstrates that emotion metaphors in EkeGusii function as culturally embedded cognitive resources that encode shared values, social norms, and collective lived realities.

### **Conceptual Metaphor Theory**

This study is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999). The theory emerged from three foundational observations: the fundamentally metaphorical nature of abstract thought, the largely unconscious operation of cognitive processes, and the embodied grounding of human cognition. CMT posits that human conceptual systems are not disembodied or purely symbolic; rather, they are shaped by bodily experience, perceptual and motor systems, and recurrent interaction with the physical and social environment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 16–18).

A central claim of CMT is that abstract reasoning relies on systematic metaphorical mappings between a more concrete source domain and a more abstract target domain. These mappings allow speakers to conceptualize intangible experiences by projecting familiar structures from embodied experience onto abstract domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 5–7). Emotional concepts, for instance, are often structured through source domains such as physical containment, temperature, pressure, movement, or spatial orientation. In this sense, conceptual metaphors function as cognitive tools that ground abstract emotional experience in sensorimotor reality.

The origins of conceptual metaphors have been widely debated. However, a dominant view within CMT holds that source–target mappings arise through repeated co-activation of experiential domains during development (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 45–48). Grady (1997, as cited in Lakoff & Johnson (1999)), argues that such recurrent co-activation leads to stable neural associations between domains, resulting in entrenched conceptual metaphors. Once established, these mappings operate automatically and unconsciously, guiding thought and language use without deliberate awareness. Importantly, CMT maintains that it is the embodied mappings themselves, rather than conventional linguistic expressions, that give rise to metaphorical language (Gibbs, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 57–60). Linguistic metaphors are therefore surface realizations of deeper conceptual structures.

Another key tenet of CMT is the pervasiveness of metaphor in everyday cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 3–6). Abstract concepts such as time, emotion, causation, and morality are routinely understood through metaphorical reasoning. For example, the conceptual metaphor KNOWLEDGE IS POWER frames knowledge as a resource that enables control, influence, and agency (Van Dijk, 2015). Such metaphors are typically conventionalized and stored as part of the speaker’s mental lexicon, reflecting patterns of polysemy rather than novel figurative usage. As a result, speakers often employ metaphorical language habitually, without conscious recognition of its metaphorical nature (Gibbs, 2009).

In the context of this study, Conceptual Metaphor Theory provides a robust analytical framework for examining how emotion metaphors in EkeGusii are shaped by embodied experience and culturally specific knowledge systems. By focusing on source–target mappings and their grounding in social and cultural contexts, CMT allows for an exploration of how the Abagusii conceptualize emotional experience in ways that reflect communal values, ecological realities, and shared modes of life.

### **Social and Cultural Factors that Influence the Conceptualization of Metaphors**

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is particularly well-suited to investigating the influence of social and cultural contexts on the conceptualization of emotion metaphors in EkeGusii. According to Kövecses (2020), metaphors structure emotional experience through systematic correspondences between a source domain grounded in embodied or culturally salient experience and a more abstract target domain. A commonly cited illustration is the conceptual metaphor ANGER IS FIRE, which demonstrates how mappings operate to structure emotional reasoning. The following set of correspondences can be proposed:

1. Anger is fire
  - the cause of fire → the cause of anger
  - causing the fire → causing the anger
  - the thing on fire → the angry person
  - the fire → the anger
  - the intensity of fire → the intensity of anger

This set of mappings is systematic in the sense that it captures a coherent view of the fire that is mapped onto anger: there is something that is not burning, an event happens (cause of fire) that causes the fire to come into existence, and now the fire is burning. The fire can burn at various degrees of intensity. Similar to anger: there is a person who is not feeling angry, something occurs that makes the individual feel angry, the person is now in a state of anger, and the intensity of anger varies depending on the cause of it (Kövecses, 2020).

A similar example in EkeGusii is OBWANCHANI NO'MORERO 'LOVE IS FIRE' shows how correspondences work.

2. *O-bwanchani*      *bwabo*      *no-morero*  
 CL6-love              CL6-POSS      is-fire  
 'Their love is fire.'

Heat/Warmth → Passion/Emotion  
 Light → Clarity/Insight  
 Fuel Consumption → Effort/Sacrifice  
 Intensity/Flames → Intensity/Desire  
 Ignition/Spark → Initiation/Attraction  
 Transformation → Change/Impact

These mappings demonstrate the principle of systematic correspondence, whereby a structured set of features from the source domain is consistently aligned with aspects of the target domain (Kövecses, 2020, pp. 44–47). Love is thus understood through the experiential logic of fire. Warmth mirrors the emotional closeness associated with love, while light symbolizes how love can bring meaning, direction, and emotional insight into one's life. Just as fire requires fuel to continue burning, love demands sustained effort, intentionality, and sacrifice. The variability of flame intensity reflects fluctuations in desire and emotional closeness, while ignition captures the initial attraction that brings a relationship into existence. Finally, fire's capacity to transform material substances parallels the way love reshapes thoughts, behaviors, priorities, and self-understanding.

This metaphorical structuring is comparable to the English conceptual metaphor ANGER IS FIRE, where emotional escalation is understood through heat, pressure, and

combustion. In both cases, knowledge about the source domain allows speakers to draw further inferences about the target domain. Kövecses (2000, pp. 79–83) refers to this process as metaphorical entailment or metaphorical inference, whereby additional source-domain knowledge is recruited to reason about emotional experience. For example, if anger is conceptualized as fire, expressions such as *He cooled down* or *That quenched his anger* become meaningful. Similarly, if love is fire, sustaining it requires “feeding” it, while neglect leads to extinction. These inferences illustrate how metaphor enables complex emotional reasoning through familiar experiential structures.

Beyond cognitive structuring, emotion metaphors are deeply shaped by cultural context. As Kövecses (2000, pp. 145–147; 2005, pp. 231–234) argues, while some metaphors are widespread due to shared bodily experience, others are culture-specific, reflecting distinct values, environments, and social practices. Metaphors such as ANGER IS HEAT recur cross-linguistically because anger is accompanied by physiological arousal, including increased body temperature. This embodied basis explains parallel expressions such as *boiling with rage* in English, *caliente* in Spanish, *être furieux comme une chaudière* in French, and *okoberoroka* ‘to boil angrily’ in EkeGusii. These metaphors arise from shared physiological experience rather than shared linguistic tradition.

In contrast, other emotion metaphors are culturally selective and may not translate easily across languages. The metaphor THE HEART IS THE SEAT OF EMOTION, which is prominent in English expressions such as *broken heart* or *wearing one’s heart on one’s sleeve*, is not central in EkeGusii emotional conceptualization. While this metaphor reflects Western cultural models that locate emotional life in the heart (Kövecses, 2005), it does not carry the same salience in Gusii culture.

Cross-cultural comparison further illustrates this variability. In many East Asian traditions, particularly within Chinese philosophy and traditional medicine, emotional

processes are associated with different organs. Anger, for instance, is linked to the liver and the flow of *qi* (vital energy), rather than the heart. Expressions such as *huǒ dà* ('big fire') conceptualize anger as fire originating in the liver rather than the heart (Yu, 1998). These metaphors reflect culturally specific understandings of the body, health, and emotional regulation.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that emotion metaphors operate at the intersection of embodiment and culture. While shared physiological experience provides an experiential foundation for metaphor formation, culturally specific models determine which bodily experiences are foregrounded, how emotions are morally evaluated, and how emotional expression is socially regulated. In EkeGusii, metaphors such as OBWANCHANI NO'MORERO 'LOVE IS FIRE' illustrate how emotional life is conceptualized through culturally salient domains such as fire, effort, endurance, and transformation. These metaphors are not merely ornamental linguistic expressions; rather, they constitute culturally grounded cognitive structures through which the Abagusii conceptualize love, relational responsibility, emotional intensity, and social commitment.

Among the ten participants involved in the focused group discussions, several explicitly affirmed that metaphorical language occupies a central and indispensable role in emotional discourse in EkeGusii. One participant noted that *speaking directly and plainly in EkeGusii may not give the actual feeling as compared to when applying a metaphor*, stressing on the view that metaphor enables speakers to convey emotional nuance and intensity more effectively than literal language. These reflections reinforce the argument that metaphor functions not merely as a stylistic preference, but as a culturally embedded communicative resource through which emotional authenticity is negotiated, emotions are rendered socially intelligible, and culturally appropriate modes of expression are maintained within the Gusii community.

More broadly, the participants' responses suggest that metaphorical expression is closely tied to culturally sanctioned ways of speaking about emotion. Emotional experiences are rarely articulated in isolation; instead, they are embedded in social relationships, moral expectations, and communal values. Metaphors enable speakers to negotiate emotional meaning in a manner that aligns with cultural norms of respect, restraint, and collective responsibility. Through metaphor, speakers are able to convey intense affect while maintaining social harmony and cultural coherence.

This next section therefore examines how specific social and cultural contexts condition the use of emotion metaphors in EkeGusii, with particular attention to ritualized communal events such as weddings, political gatherings, childbirth, and burial ceremonies. These contexts provide socially structured environments in which metaphorical language is both expected and meaningful, offering rich insight into how emotional experience is linguistically conceptualized and culturally framed among the Abagusii.

### **Weddings**

Weddings emerged as a prominent social setting in which metaphors of love and happiness are extensively employed. In the Gusii cultural context, weddings are not merely private celebrations but communal events that symbolize union, continuity of lineage, and social cohesion. Participants noted that both traditional and modern wedding ceremonies provide rich contexts for the use of metaphorical language, reflecting and reinforcing shared cultural values.

In traditional Gusii weddings, metaphors play a central role in expressing affection, joy, and communal blessing. Love is frequently conceptualized through imagery drawn from agriculture, fertility, and fire, emphasizing growth, warmth, and continuity. Happiness, in turn, is often expressed through metaphors of abundance, prosperity, and collective success, reflecting the community's agrarian heritage and communal orientation. These metaphors

reaffirm the cultural significance of marriage as a social institution and convey broader moral and social expectations.

Even in contemporary wedding practices, metaphorical expressions remain salient, particularly in formal speeches, blessings, and ceremonial songs. These ritualized forms of discourse preserve traditional metaphorical frameworks, ensuring continuity of cultural knowledge and collective emotional expression. These findings indicate that weddings function as culturally privileged spaces for metaphorical expression in EkeGusii. Emotion metaphors in these settings not only capture individual feelings of love and happiness but also encode communal values, relational responsibilities, and aspirations for prosperity and harmony. Through these metaphors, the Abagusii articulate emotional experience in ways that are simultaneously personal, social, and culturally resonant.

Some illustrative metaphors employed in wedding contexts include:

3.  
*Omo-iseke o-muya a-chore ege-kamago eke-mo a-menye*  
 CL1-girl CL1-good CL13SG-choose CL7-hole CL7-one CL13SG-live  
 “A good girl should choose one hole and live.”  
 (A good girl should be faithful in marriage)

This metaphor is used in wedding contexts to instruct and caution the bride about the moral and social expectations of marital fidelity. It draws on the culturally resonant image of a planting hole, where only the seed that is intended to grow within it is expected to flourish. In this way, the metaphor links marital faithfulness to agricultural practice, a central element of Gusii life, emphasizing care, patience, and attention to proper placement. Just as a seed cannot thrive outside its designated hole, a marriage cannot prosper if a partner strays from the socially and morally sanctioned path.

Beyond its literal meaning, the metaphor reflects broader social and cultural imperatives. It reinforces communal norms regarding marital responsibility, the continuity of lineage, and the stability of family structures, values that are central to Gusii society.

Weddings, as communal events, provide an opportunity to transmit these norms publicly, highlighting the bride's role in sustaining familial honor and social cohesion. By embedding moral instruction within a vivid, culturally grounded image, the metaphor functions not only as guidance for individual behavior but also as a mechanism for maintaining social order and transmitting shared cultural knowledge across generations.

Another example here is:

4. *Mary*      *nya-boke*      *one*  
     *Mary*      *owner-honey*      *mine*  
     “*Mary is the owner of my honey*”  
     *Mary is sweet*

This metaphor constitutes a culturally resonant expression of affection and love in EkeGusii. By referring to Mary as the “owner” of his honey, the speaker metaphorically associates his wife with honey, a substance that signifies sweetness, nourishment, and high value within Gusii culture. Honey is traditionally regarded as both desirable and precious, often linked to natural purity and sustained effort in its production.

Through this metaphor, love is conceptualized as a tangible and valuable possession, emphasizing emotional closeness and relational commitment. The designation of Mary as the possessor of “my honey” suggests that she holds something of profound personal worth, namely the speaker's affection, care, and emotional investment. The metaphor thus frames love not as an abstract sentiment but as a concrete resource that is cherished and protected.

Moreover, the cultural significance of honey in EkeGusii strengthens the metaphor's expressive power. Just as honey is carefully produced and preserved, love is presented as something nurtured over time and sustained through intentional effort. This metaphor therefore exemplifies how emotional expression in EkeGusii is grounded in culturally meaningful objects, illustrating the intimate connection between language, culture, and the conceptualization of love.

### **Political Settings**

Political gatherings in EkeGusii society are highly charged social spaces where power, influence, negotiation, and conflict are prominently displayed. In these settings, metaphorical language plays a crucial role in conveying complex emotional states such as anger, fear, and loyalty, as well as signaling social hierarchies and the distribution of authority. Metaphors allow speakers to express strong emotions in ways that are culturally intelligible, socially appropriate, and rhetorically effective. Through these metaphorical expressions, participants in political gatherings navigate complex social dynamics, manage interpersonal tensions, and assert moral or ethical positions within culturally sanctioned norms. The use of metaphor in these contexts demonstrates how emotion, power, and social structure are intricately intertwined in EkeGusii political discourse. Some of the metaphors used to express anger in this context include:

5. *Omo-twe o-ye nigo oko-bera*  
 CL1-head CL1-his ASS INF-boil  
 “His head is boiling.”  
 He is very angry

This metaphor is commonly used in political gatherings to express intense anger or frustration directed toward a rival or opponent. It draws on the embodied experience of heat, mapping the abstract emotion of anger onto a familiar physical sensation, which makes the emotion more vivid, relatable, and socially intelligible. In the Gusii cultural context, such metaphors do more than describe personal feelings, they signal social judgment, moral evaluation, and the stakes of leadership.

The metaphor also reflects the communal significance of political power and the responsibilities attached to it. Anger in this context is not purely individual; it is a socially meaningful response to perceived injustice, incompetence, or betrayal, and expressing it metaphorically allows participants to communicate their stance while adhering to cultural norms of indirectness and respect. By framing anger as “boiling,” speakers convey both the

intensity of the emotion and its potential impact on social and political dynamics, illustrating how metaphors in EkeGusii political discourse integrate bodily experience, moral evaluation, and communal awareness. Another example that is used in a political setting is:

6. *Ti-gan-a noyu, n'eri-saera irongo*  
 NEG-regard DEMON diarrheas ceiling  
 Lit: “disregard that man, he diarrheas for himself on the ceiling”  
 ‘He was too scared, he lost control out of fear.’

This metaphor is EkeGusii culture-specific metaphor. The expression used is conceptualized in EkeGusii indicating someone who is a coward and even soils himself with diarrhea. The “ceiling” *irongo* here is used in EkeGusii as a store where farm products are stored. Since the metaphor is understood by EkeGusii speakers, it is difficult to get an equivalent in English though metaphors like “scared stiff” or “scared out of their wits” could have a similar conceptualization in English. In the context of the political setting, the emotion metaphor is used to show that the one scared does not deserve any votes because he is not confident enough to take care of the people who have elected him to do projects for them.

### **Birth of a Child**

The birth of a child represents a central social and cultural event in EkeGusii society, shaping the way emotions, particularly happiness, are conceptualized and expressed through metaphor. In this context, emotional metaphors emphasize growth, renewal, continuity, and the well-being of both the family and the wider community. The arrival of a child is seen not merely as an individual or familial joy, but as a communal milestone that reinforces social bonds, lineage continuity, and collective prosperity.

Metaphors associated with childbirth often draw on culturally familiar domains such as strength, future security, and abundance. For example, a child may be described as “my strength” or “the one who opens the door”, linking personal happiness with social responsibility and hope for the community’s future. These metaphors reflect the Gusii cultural understanding that emotional experience is inseparable from social context: joy is

shared, and the significance of the event is amplified by its moral, relational, and communal dimensions. In this way, the birth of a child provides a culturally meaningful lens through which happiness is linguistically structured and socially celebrated. An example of a metaphor that calls for a celebration of the birth of a child is:

7. *Ek-io-mo-goko, o-mwana nere eke-igorero*  
 CL7-DEMON-CL1-mean CL1-child is CL7-open.door  
 'A mean person is only able to call for a celebration when a child is born.'

*Omogoko* is a metaphor in EkeGusii that denotes a person who is extremely mean and unwilling to share with others, particularly when it comes to inviting people to their homes. However, in the cultural context of childbirth, even such a person is compelled by social expectations to open their home for celebrations. The birth of a child, being an important cultural milestone, forces this otherwise reserved individual to invite others to join in the joyous celebration. This metaphor highlights how certain significant events like the birth of a child can supersede personal affinities for the sake of cultural and social responsibilities. In this sense, the child becomes the catalyst for celebration, representing a rare occasion when the "*omogoko*" is compelled to engage in communal sharing. The concept captures the pressure between personal character and societal expectations, where even the most solitary individuals must conform to social norms during critical life events. Another metaphor for this social celebration is:

8. *O-mwana ne chi-nguru chi-ane*  
 CL1-child is CL10-strenght CL10-mine  
 Lit: A child is my strength.  
 'A child is my future strength.'

In EkeGusii, the birth of a child is seen as a symbol of hope and continuity for the entire community. The child represents a fresh start, offering new beginnings not only for the family but also for the wider community. In this cultural context, the birth of a child is considered a profoundly positive and transformative event, one that brings a renewed sense of purpose and vitality to the lives of those involved.

Children are also seen as a source of power and strength for their parents, especially in the later stages of life when their physical abilities begin to decline. The metaphor reflects the belief that children will provide support and care as their parents age, ensuring the continuity of family lineage and strength. This view emphasizes the cultural significance placed on children in EkeGusii society, where children are regarded as the pillars of a family's future and well-being. As such, the birth of a child is celebrated as a key event, reinforcing values of hope, renewal, and generational support within the community.

### **Burial Settings**

In EkeGusii culture, burial settings are socially and emotionally charged contexts where feelings of sadness, grief, and occasionally anger dominate the atmosphere. Metaphors used in these settings are deeply rooted in cultural understandings of loss, finality, and the void left by the deceased. Sadness, for instance, is frequently expressed through terms such as *omoichano* or *obororo* ‘pain or sadness’ which convey the profound emotional burden, anguish, and heaviness associated with mourning.

These metaphors do more than describe personal grief; they articulate culturally shared experiences of bereavement and provide a socially recognized language for expressing emotions that might otherwise be difficult to convey. By linking emotional pain to familiar and tangible concepts, such as emptiness, brokenness, or barrenness, these expressions make the abstract intensity of loss more comprehensible and socially resonant. In this way, the metaphors used in burial settings reflect the community's moral, social, and relational frameworks, highlighting respect for the deceased, empathy for the bereaved, and the collective acknowledgment of life's transience. A good example of metaphor used during burial is:

9. *Abaya na-ba-inse*  
 Good are.of-CL1-soil  
 ‘The good ones are of the soil.’

This metaphor highlights the cultural belief that once someone passes away, they are seen as good, despite their actions while alive. Even if the deceased had committed offenses or crimes, death changes them into a “good” person in the eyes of the living. This shift in perception arises from the fear that speaking ill of the dead might provoke their spirit to return and haunt the living. The metaphor highlights the cultural respect for the dead, where death pardons individuals of their human mistakes, and they are remembered with respect and caution. This belief ensures that the deceased are spoken of in a positive manner, maintaining their dignity and protecting the living from potential spiritual revenge. Another metaphor that is commonly used in these settings is:

10. *Bo-roro mbwa-mo-nyene ko e-amate e-chana*  
 CL14-pain is of-CL1-owner but CL9-neighbor CL9-pretend  
*Bosa igo*  
 just ASS  
 ‘Pain belongs to the owner; neighbors just come to pretend.’

The metaphor reflects a culturally grounded understanding of emotional experience in EkeGusii that foregrounds ownership and asymmetry of feeling. Linguistically, the metaphor contrasts *the owner*, the person who directly experiences pain, with *neighbors*, who are positioned as external observers whose emotional involvement is necessarily limited. This contrast encodes the idea that pain is personal, internal, and ultimately inaccessible to others, regardless of social proximity.

Within this framing, emotional suffering is represented as something that must be borne and processed individually, rather than fully shared or alleviated through communal participation. It is this metaphorical emphasis on personal ownership that licenses further interpretations of pain as a site of self-reflection and internal reckoning. Because neighbors can only “pretend,” responsibility for meaning-making and emotional adjustment rests with the sufferer. In this sense, the metaphor presents pain not as a condition that leads to collapse

or social dependency, but as an experience that demands personal engagement and introspection.

Building on this metaphorical structure, pain may be understood as a catalyst for heightened self-awareness and future-oriented reflection. However, such outcomes are not explicitly stated in the metaphor itself; rather, they emerge from the metaphor's underlying logic of emotional ownership and limited external access. The metaphor therefore constrains interpretation by emphasizing endurance and personal responsibility, while allowing for culturally informed readings in which suffering becomes a potential source of insight and transformation.

Within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, such metaphors function as cognitive tools that structure how emotional experience is understood and evaluated, allowing suffering to be reframed as meaningful rather than purely debilitating (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 3–6). This metaphorical reframing aligns with research on meaning-making and post-traumatic growth, which shows that emotional distress often initiates cognitive processing and reassessment of life priorities, leading to resilience, personal growth, and adaptive change (Park, 2010, pp. 259–263; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, pp. 5–7). Through this lens, pain is not merely endured but symbolically transformed into a potential source of blessing or reward.

Thus, the metaphor points out the value of enduring and learning from emotional challenges. It serves as a reminder that difficult emotions, while uncomfortable, can be powerful mechanisms for improvement and positive change. The cultural perspective rooted in this metaphor highlights the EkeGusii community's belief in the potential for transformation through adversity, viewing emotional hardship as a path to greater achievements and blessings. Another example is:

|                   |                           |           |                 |
|-------------------|---------------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| <i>11. Bororo</i> | <i>nkamati</i>            | <i>ya</i> | <i>maseko</i>   |
| <i>Pain</i>       | <i>relative/neighbour</i> | <i>of</i> | <i>laughter</i> |

‘Bitterness/pain is close to laughter.’

This emotion metaphor reveals the complex interplay between sadness and happiness within social contexts in EkeGusii culture. In this metaphor, the term *relative* does not denote familial relation but rather closeness or proximity, expressing the idea that pain and laughter are emotionally adjacent and can occur in close temporal succession. It captures the experience of moving from crying in one moment to laughing in the next, particularly within shared social settings.

The metaphor is typically invoked during moments of collective sadness, such as funerals or other somber events, where a light-hearted remark or unexpected joke may suddenly spark laughter, temporarily easing the emotional heaviness of the situation. Its underlying message is that emotional experiences are fluid rather than fixed, and that moments of joy can surface even amid deep sorrow. As such, sadness is not conceptualized as an all-consuming emotional state; instead, happiness is understood as capable of coexisting with, and even following, emotional pain.

This cultural understanding promotes emotional balance by reminding individuals and communities not to become entirely overwhelmed by grief. Although laughter in sorrowful contexts may initially appear out of place, it is nonetheless regarded as a natural and necessary response, one that provides temporary emotional relief and offers hope for eventual recovery. This cultural framing normalizes the occurrence of laughter during periods of grief, allowing moments of joy to emerge even within sorrowful contexts. As one participant explained during an interview, “*Even when we are mourning, laughter comes naturally; it reminds us that life has not ended*” (Participant 4). Such reflections highlight the resilience of the human spirit and the shared belief that happiness can surface despite profound sadness. In EkeGusii cultural understanding, emotions are not perceived as fixed or mutually exclusive;

rather, the movement from pain to laughter is viewed as a natural and socially accepted part of life. Other examples of the metaphors used in burial settings include:

12. *Omo-gomba*  
*CL2-barren field*  
 'A barren field.'

13. *Ege-tega gi-atek-ire*  
*CL7-pot CL7-broke-PRFV*  
 'A pot has broken.'

The metaphors are meant to convey the profound sense of loss and finality that accompany death. They connect abstract feelings of melancholy and mourning to familiar everyday experiences within the community, such as farming and household activities. A shattered pot denotes something that can no longer serve its purpose, paralleling the death of a loved one, while a barren field represents loss, emptiness, and the disappearance of productivity and hope. Through these images, emotion metaphors link sadness to culturally shared beliefs about death, continuity, and the afterlife.

The study found that social settings such as weddings, political gatherings, childbirth celebrations, and funerals have a significant influence on how emotions are metaphorically conceptualized in EkeGusii. Happiness is predominantly associated with festive and life-affirming contexts such as weddings, the birth of a child, and harvests, whereas sadness is closely tied to grief, loss, and barrenness, particularly in burial contexts. Political settings foreground metaphors of anger, fear, and power, reflecting heightened emotional intensity and social tension. Overall, these patterns demonstrate that the metaphorical conceptualization of emotion in EkeGusii is systematically shaped by social context, reinforcing the central role of culturally embedded experience in emotional meaning-making.

The findings align with previous research that shows how metaphors are shaped by cultural practices (Kövecses, 2000). In the Gusii context, where different social settings play an important role, various metaphors of emotions are used. This illustrates the close

relationship between language, culture, and emotional experience. These findings highlight the significance of considering cultural context when studying emotion metaphors.

The research findings and illustrative examples show how social contexts, including marriages, political gatherings, childbirth, and funeral rites, greatly influence the metaphorical expression of emotions in EkeGusii. These metaphors serve as both linguistic aids and cultural representations of the community's values and beliefs. Researchers can learn more about how cultural practices affect how people conceptualize emotions by looking at the metaphors employed in various contexts. This can help them understand the cognitive and social processes that underlie metaphorical language.

To fully appreciate the complex interplay of Gusii cultural life, one must grasp how social situations shape emotion metaphors. Important communal events that influence the language of emotion and represent the common values and beliefs of the community are weddings, births, political meetings, and funerals. To illustrate the importance of hard work and perseverance in achieving success, consider the political proverb: *momincho rimi tang'ani mosaraibu* “The one who catches the dew is not like the one who warms himself at the fireplace” which contrasts the latter with the laziness of those who wait for comfort before acting. These metaphors highlight the values that are essential to the Gusii way of life: success, perseverance, and dedication.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study provides valuable insights into how social and cultural settings shape the conceptualization of emotion metaphors in EkeGusii. The analysis demonstrates that metaphors are not merely linguistic expressions but culturally grounded cognitive tools that reflect the community's values, moral norms, and social practices. Across social contexts, such as weddings, political gatherings, childbirth, and burial ceremonies, emotion metaphors

were found to encode shared cultural knowledge, linking abstract feelings to tangible, culturally meaningful experiences.

The findings highlight the centrality of communal life and agrarian practices in the Gusii conceptualization of emotions. Happiness is frequently expressed through metaphors of abundance, growth, and prosperity, reflecting agricultural success and collective well-being. Sadness is often conceptualized through imagery of loss, barrenness, or brokenness, while anger, fear, and love are articulated in ways that resonate with embodied experiences and socially understood relational expectations. These metaphors demonstrate how emotions are intertwined with social responsibilities, communal cohesion, and moral evaluation.

By situating emotion metaphors within specific social events, the study underscores the central role of context in shaping emotional expression. Weddings, births, political assemblies, and funerals function as socially and culturally sanctioned contexts in which metaphorical language is both expected and symbolically meaningful. These events provide authoritative spaces for the public articulation of emotions, reinforcing shared social norms, moral values, and collective identity. Metaphors used in such contexts not only communicate individual emotional experiences but also encode the broader cultural logic through which the Abagusii conceptualize, evaluate, and regulate emotional life.

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