



TRANSLATORS
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THE LANGUAGE OF GRIEF

**Communicating on funeral rites and bereavement
in Nande-speaking communities in eastern
Democratic Republic of Congo**

Information and communication around death and bereavement needs to be sensitive, appropriate and in a language that people understand

In public health emergencies, it is essential to communicate in language that is clear, accurate, and appropriate. Using respectful and supportive words in the right language, helps people access information they need to protect themselves and their family.

But what about tackling complicated conversations where people have already lost their loved ones? To guide that communication, this brief is based on research conducted in Beni during the 10th Ebola outbreak and ongoing conversation with linguists in the region. It advocates for a more language-sensitive approach to communicating around emotionally-charged topics. Specifically, it highlights issues to consider when communicating about death and bereavement in the Nande and Nande-speaking communities.



Communicating around death and violence in North Kivu

The Nande language, often referred to as Kinande, is one of the main languages spoken in North Kivu. The area has experienced years of violence and a high death toll from health crises, such as the 10th Ebola outbreak, that has caused considerable trauma for people. This makes it important to communicate in a way that is sensitive and appropriate, especially when discussing topics such as death and illness. Health literacy levels are low in eastern DRC, and ensuring that people have equal access to information is complicated by linguistic diversity.

Certain concepts are new to communities

Before the 10th Ebola outbreak in DRC, certain equipment and concepts were not known to the community so there were no translations for these terms in the Nande language. For example, body bags were not part of the community's experience in handling the deceased. They only became commonplace with the introduction of the concept of a "safe and dignified burial." Currently, Nande speakers use the term *eyisaho rieribikamo ekinda*, which means "the bag the remains are placed in before the coffin."

Dead bodies pose a major transmission risk and need to be prepared and buried in a specific way by specialist teams. A key pillar of the Ebola response is the safe and dignified burial of those who are confirmed or presumed to have died of Ebola. The procedure aims to respect local customs whilst also protecting the community from further transmission of the disease. Safe and dignified burial (often referred to by its French acronym, EDS) has been the source of much controversy and mistrust from the community. During our research, participants reported that the term EDS was associated with "death after mutilation" because swab tests of bodily fluids were misunderstood. The use of the English word "swab" further mystified and caused confusion around the treatment of bodies by burial teams. The fact that the family were often unable to see patients who died in the clinic before they were buried increased fear, and rumors spread about what may have happened to the bodies of their loved ones.

Certain terms have become associated with death

Since the Ebola outbreak in the area, many words around health and healing have become associated with death and dying. This is especially true when using French words to explain concepts in local languages. The word “ambulance” for example has become synonymous with death and of never returning home. The word “isolation” was understood by some as waiting for death to take them. Health workers wearing personal protective equipment also gained the name of kinyawu (“monsters”), often striking a fear of death into those they approached.



Terminology and social practices around death

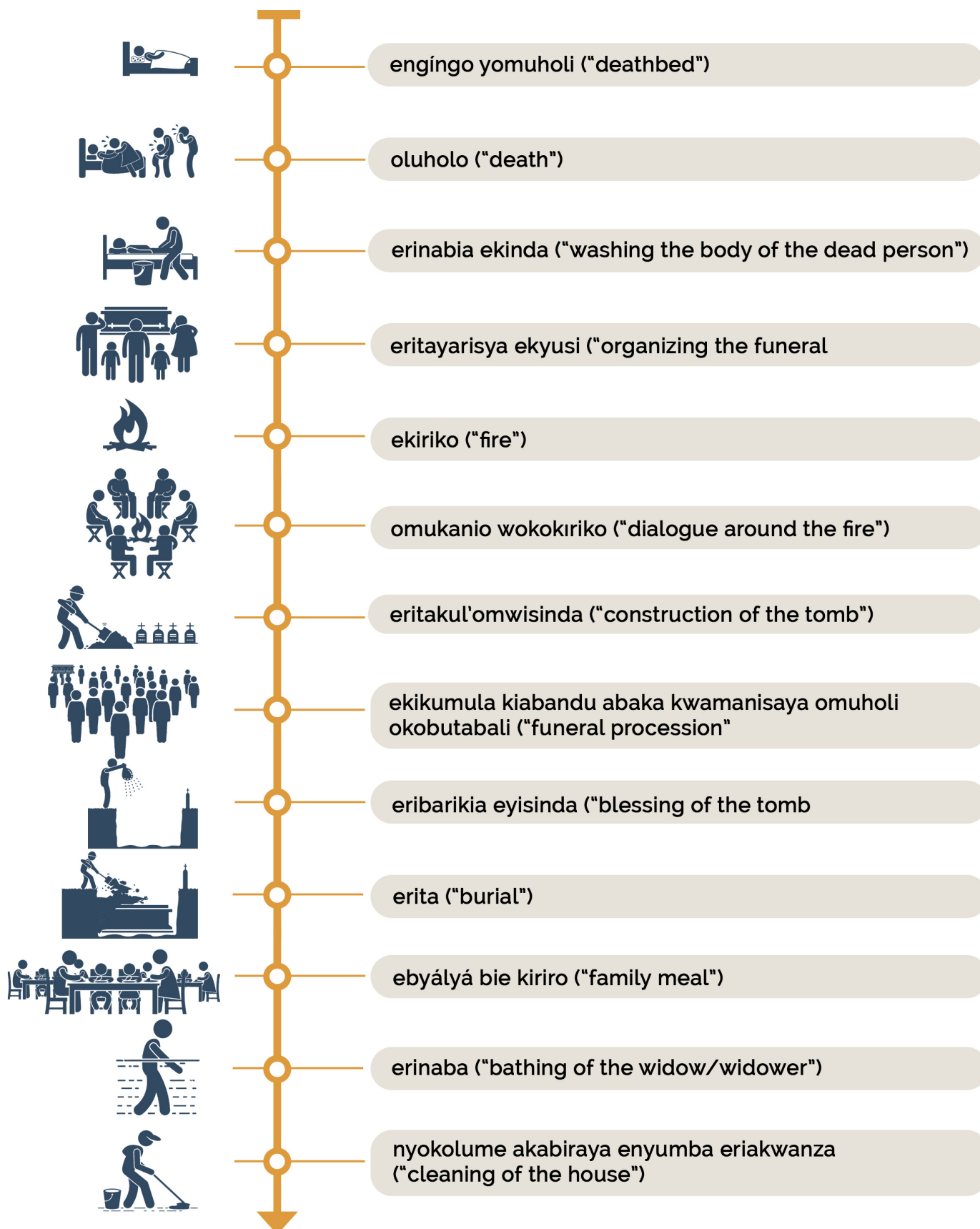
As in other parts of the world, death is a cultural and social event as well as a religious event. Many of the words and symbols around death in the community come from Christianity. These include the omusalábha (cross) and many of the emibere ye asili (rites).

It is important to understand the social function of funerals and grieving. Hundreds of people can attend funerals. Those who do not attend funerals or take part in the usual ceremonies can be perceived as having malicious intent, or even being an omùlói (sorcerer). Yet in an Ebola and COVID-19 context, safe and dignified burials can impede family and friends' observation of usual customs. The authorities limit the number of people attending a funeral to prevent “super-spreader events,” denying many people the opportunity to participate in these important rituals.

The linguistic guide below illustrates the social and participatory nature of burial and grieving. This has important implications for hygiene and safety measures around health, including safe and dignified burials.

A linguistic guide to death

Below you can find keywords around death and dying in the Nande language. These are in chronological order to aid understanding. It is important to note that different families and different Nande-speaking communities may conduct different ceremonies and engage in different practices according to their personal or communal preferences, traditions and beliefs. It is important to engage in meaningful two-way communication with families and communities to properly understand their needs and wishes.



1. **engíngo yomuholi** (“deathbed”) – family and friends may gather around the bedside to hear the last words of the dying and to say goodbye.
2. **oluholo** (“death”)
3. **erinabia ekinda** (“washing the body of the dead person”) – A close relative or close friend washes the body, and afterwards the water is thrown into a flowing river. The body is anointed with oils, perfumed and dressed in new clothes.
4. **eritayarisya ekyusi** (“organizing the funeral”) – the funeral is organized by close family members who are supported by friends and acquaintances.
5. **ekiriko** (“fire”) – a large fire is lit in the plot of a family member of the deceased. Some believe that the fire drives away evil spirits and the spirits of the deceased.
6. **omukanio wokokiriŋko** (“dialogue around the fire”) – the men spend the night outside around this fire for up to three days.
7. **eritaku’omwisinda** (“construction of the tomb”) – occurs in the cemetery under the supervision of a family member. It is usually young volunteers and neighbors who dig the place where the burial will take place.
8. **ekikumula kiabandu abaka kwamanisaya omuholi okobutabali** (“funeral procession”) – the funeral procession is made up of family, friends and neighbors.
9. **eribarikia eyisinda** (“blessing of the tomb”) – this is done according to the beliefs of the family and deceased.
10. **erita (“burial”)** – this is usually done by the men of the community and earth is thrown on top of the tomb.
11. **ebyályá bie kiriro** (“family meal”) – this is the symbolic meal that is shared after the funeral with members of the family and acquaintances in order to thank them for the compassion shown to the family for their loss.
12. **erinaba** (“bathing of the widow/widower”) – at the end of the first week of mourning, the husband or wife of the deceased is led to the river where he or she bathes while turning downstream. Their hair is usually cut and from then on they wear black mourning clothes. The day that the mourning period is over, these clothes will be removed and there is often a celebration. This bath taken at the end of the week of mourning cleanses the family of any impurity that the deceased might have left.
13. **nyokolume akabiraya enyumba eriakwanza** (“cleaning of the house”) – after the mourning period, the maternal uncle of the deceased sweeps the room where the body was laid out for people to pay their respects.

Death and bereavement terminology

Term	Congolese Swahili	Lingala	Nande
ablutions	kubarikia	kopambola	eribarikia
ancestors	mababu	bankoko	abakoko
bewitch	kuloga	ko pesa kindoki	erilógha
bewitchment	bulози	koloka	erit̥sokomyâ
blessing	baraka	mapamboli	om̥y̥i̥ṣ̥a
burial	mazishi	ko kunda	erit̥a
cemetery	makaburi	nkunda	amáhéro
coffin	sanduku	sanduku	erikereghethe
cross	msalaba	ekuluzu	omusalábha
curse	laana	kolakela	ekit̥s̥ú̥mi
customs	mila	bonkoko	emíbere
dead	kufa	a kufi	i̥ṣ̥i̥gha
death announcement	tangazo ya kifo	nsango ya liwa	eritulwa ly'oluholo
dig the grave	kuchimba kaburi	ko timola libulu	eritakul'eyisinda
family committee	baraza ya jamaa	lisanga ya libota	abimaniri bomo kihanda
funeral	mazishi	matanga	eky̥ṣ̥i̥
funeral procession	kundi ya watu wenyi wanaenda ku mazishi	maye matali mokundi moweyi	ekikumula kiabandu abaka kwamanisaya omuholi okobutabali
god	mungu	nzambe	nyamuhanga,
head of the family	mkubwa wa jamaa	likonzi ya libota	omwimaniri we kihanda
inheritance	urizi	biloko etiki moweyi	ómwandu
maintenance of grave	usafi wa kaburi	kokata matiti na lilita.	erilimir'akaburi
mourning	kilio	matanga	ekiro
rites	ibada	nsalela	emibere ye asili
safe and dignified burial	mazishi yenye usalama na heshima	bokundami ya malamau	eritabalya omobuholo ne ryo busike
sheet	shuka	ezipelo	enzwikano
sorcerer	muchawi	ndoki	omuloyi
terminally ill	mu hali ya mwisho	ekomi pene ya liwa	okokalemekeryo
to die	kukufa	ko kufa	erihóla
tomb	kaburi	nkunda	eyisinda
tradition	asili	bonkoko	emitambire
widow/widower	mujane (mwenye alikufisha bibi/ bwana)	mokufeli	om̥kwirwa, om̥kwalume

Source: excerpt from TWB's DRC health glossary



What we have learned from the 10th Ebola outbreak

People don't understand key medical concepts and seemingly simple terms in French and standard Swahili. In Beni, vulnerable populations, including women and older people, need information in localized Nande.

Some death-related terms are socially and culturally unacceptable. People consider those words harsh and offensive. Health communicators replace these words with their own euphemistic explanations. These alternatives can be inconsistent and vague, potentially leading to misunderstandings.

People want complex and transparent information in a language and style that is familiar to them. They want in-depth explanations that relate to the latest developments. Yet health communicators, including those who participate in safe and dignified burials, often lack communication tools and training adapted to these developments, and struggle to provide clear and consistent answers. The resulting misunderstandings and contradictions confuse people, and the lack of detailed explanations creates further doubt and frustration.

People place more trust in information they receive through face-to-face communication. This gives them an opportunity to ask questions. Our research suggests women in particular prefer to receive information from someone they know and trust. Local health communicators who are aware of cultural sensitivities can relay information more effectively.

Language affects whether a message and the messenger are trusted and believed. In crisis-affected eastern DRC, risk communication in a language that is not accurately understood prompts immediate distrust and fear. This is especially true when talking about sensitive topics such as death and dying.

What this means for future Ebola responses

Organizations involved in responding to crises can increase their impact and reduce harm with three practical actions:

Base risk communication on language data. TWB has produced [language maps](#) for DRC, North Kivu, and Equateur covering more than 30 languages. To identify the most effective languages, formats, and channels for communicating on difficult concepts such as bereavement and death, organizations should include [four language questions](#) in needs assessments and surveys.

Provide information in languages and formats people understand and prefer. TWB has a network of linguists in DRC languages and provides language services including written and audio translation, transcription, plain language editing, and pictorial communication and information design.

Use glossaries to ensure consistent and accurate communication. TWB has developed a [DRC health glossary](#). It includes more than 400 terms related to Ebola, COVID-19, and bereavement in Congolese Swahili, Nande, Lingala, French, and English. We regularly update the glossary and add further languages.

Build the capacity of local staff to communicate complex concepts in local languages. TWB provides training and workshops for health communicators and humanitarian responders in language, communication, and terminology.

For further information on the importance of language in the DRC response to health crises visit our [webpage](#).

TWB draws on the findings of language and communication assessments to build multilingual communication capacity across the Ebola and COVID-19 responses. This includes developing practical guidance on reducing misunderstanding and miscommunication, terminology tools and targeted workshops for frontline workers, and training in multilingual communication.

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