

Case study: indigenous practice and Christianity in Namibia (extended)

Dr Helen John researches how the culture in which someone lives affects their Christian belief and practice, and how they interpret biblical text. She uses methods of social anthropology, doing fieldwork in the Ondonga region of northern Namibia. She spends time living in the community, observing everyday life and talking with members of the community about their beliefs and practices. This helps her to understand the Ndonga culture but also to reflect on her own culture and worldview.

Research findings (extended): body and person

Dr John writes:

My understanding of bodies, people and community was also challenged by discussion groups in Ondonga. I wanted to know how Ndonga people might define a 'person' and whether it might be different from my view of a person. Indeed, it was. When we discussed biblical texts about the haemorrhaging woman being healed by touching Jesus' cloak (Mark 5:21-43), the groups explained to me that in Ndonga culture the person is much more than just their physical body, contained within their skin. In describing what makes up a person, Ndonga culture would also include their clothes and their shadow.

If I wanted to hurt you, I could stamp on your shadow or rip your clothing, both of which would be considered very rude and aggressive things to do. Added to the list of what the body includes would be bodily fluids and parts, even when outside or no longer attached to the body. Here we could think of spilled blood or urine, for example, and nail and hair cuttings. This made me think about how limited my own idea of the person was, as I only think of the living individual, with the skin as the boundary.

Perhaps more recognisable was the Ndonga idea that a person also exists beyond their actual lifetime. As I said earlier, spirits of the deceased are a prominent feature of Ndonga worldviews: people continue after death as members of the community, sometimes needing to be calmed and sent on their way. They also watch over the living community, with the ancestors able to bring good fortune or misfortune according to how the community behaves.

This showed me that the Ndonga idea of community is much bigger than my own – it is the sum of the living, the recently deceased (restless spirits), the long-deceased (ancestors), nature spirits and the living landscape.

Christian living in Ondonga

Most Owambo Christians attend church on a Sunday and sometimes more often (for example, there are multiple services during Holy Week). Weddings usually take place as joint ceremonies, with two or more couples sharing a single wedding ceremony. This service takes place in among homestead-based marriage traditions and celebrations. For example, on the Thursday prior to the wedding there is a celebration of song (including hymn-singing) at the groom's homestead, while the couple will attend celebrations at the woman's family homestead, to which the man's family deliver a cow. The church wedding ceremony would take place in the home village of the woman, and then the couple would proceed to the man's home village, where they would be processed into the homestead and there is a huge celebration, which most of the village will attend.

There is a homestead-based naming ceremony on the birth of a child, with the father of the child coming to the woman's house to deliver the baby's formal name, after which baptism will take place in church.

Church is pretty formal, with a formal hymn book, and fixed (Lutheran) liturgical calendar. A service follows a similar pattern that you might expect elsewhere, with hymns, Bible readings, sermon, prayers, and so on. But Sunday church is also an opportunity for the community to come together for general communication, and the service will meld into a community meeting by the end, with elders delivering important community messages.

Bible study groups do exist, although not in the community in which I live. We did Bible study together at my initiation.

A significant number attend the regular confirmation classes, and there is prayer and hymn-singing at morning assembly at school.

In our homestead, the grandfather regularly brings out his hymn book or Bible around the fire at night, particularly on Sundays or when we are all gathered for birthdays or relatives arriving from or departing for periods of time away. On other occasions, traditional song and dance will feature in our homestead life.

