



**A Missio – cultural understanding of death and death rituals of the  
Oshiwambo tribe and the response of the ministry and mission of the  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN).**

By

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## DECLARATION

As required by University regulations, I, Aina Sheetheni, hereby declare that this entire work contained in this dissertation, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, represents my original work.

I also declare that I have not otherwise submitted this dissertation in any form of any degree purpose or examination to any university.

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Aina Ndapewa Sheetheni

Date 31 July 2015

As a supervisor, I agree to the submission of this thesis

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Prof Roderick Raphael Hewitt

Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

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**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my parents: my father, Filippus Kakwiyu Sheetheni who died in April 2001 and unfortunately could not witness this achievement and Hileni Ipumbu Malakia Mweulyawo, my mother, who tried her best to make my study possible. Your strength of character and moral integrity, as my parents, successfully raised an independent and strong woman like me.

## **ABSTRACT**

The discourse on the dialectical relationship between Christianity and local African cultures has been explored in depth by many researchers, but a specific study on Oshiwambo ethnic group is yet to be explored, hence this study becomes of paramount importance. The study examines how the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN), through its ministry and mission, responded to the challenges posed by elements of the Oshiwambo death and burial rituals which are different from those of Christianity. It explores rituals of death and burial associated with both ELCIN and Oshiwambo ethnic group. The study further identifies differences and similarities and examines how ELCIN responded to the former.

The study uses a non-empirical method, whereby data is drawn from available documentary sources linked to the key terms. Since this study is limited in scope, an interpretive methodology is applied to analyse and critique published and unpublished texts by selected scholars identified in the literature review. Qualitative methodology and theological reflection are among the interpretative methods that will be used to distinguish, describe, and understand issues pertaining to the Oshiwambo people, their beliefs and their general culture.

The reviewed literature showed that the traditional practices related to the occurrence of death among the Oshiwambo are central to the life of community but the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) has consistently failed to appropriate the necessary positive cultural resources for its ministry and mission. The failure of the church is partly due to uncritical evangelisation strategies deployed by Finnish missionaries who introduced Christianity to the Owambo people.

If ELCIN wishes to offer effective care and counselling to bereave Aawambo then it has to seriously consider the pivotal role the culture of Aawambo has on the wellbeing of its Aawambo faithful. The study further argues that if the Christianity does not recognise the local culture and performances, it will remain a potted root plant with limited roots for growth.

## **ACRONYMS**

**CCN** – Council of churches in Namibia

**ELCA** – Evangelical Lutheran church in America

**ELCIN** – Evangelical Lutheran church in Namibia

**ELOC** – Evangelical Lutheran church in Owambo-Kavango

**EPI** – Engela Parish Institute

**EWB** – ELCIN Worship Book

**FELM** – Finnish Evangelical Lutheran mission

**FMS** – Finnish missionary society

**GNB** – Good News Bible

**IELA** – Evangelical Lutheran church of Angola

**LTI** – Lutheran Theological Institution

**LUCSA** – Lutheran communion in Southern Africa

**LWF** – Lutheran World Federation

**RMS** – Rhenish Missionary Society

**SRPEC** – School of Religion, Philosophy, Ethics and Classics

**UKZN** – University of KwaZulu Natal

**ULTS** – United Lutheran Theological seminary

**WWC – World Council of Churches**

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Owambo-** is the name of the area in northern Namibia where most Aawambo live.

**Oshiwambo-** is the adjective of wambo. Therefore anything associated with Aawambo is called „Oshiwambo“, for example Oshiwambo language, Oshiwambo culture, Oshiwambo house, Oshiwambo dance etc.

**Aawambo-** (plural) refers to the people who belong to the Oshiwambo ethnic.

**Omuwambo-** (singular) refers to a person who belongs to the Oshiwambo ethnic.

**Missio-cultural** – the culture of church which is working in a particular tribe must engage in the tribe’s culture and tradition.

**Death rituals** – The practices done by Aawambo, during mourning period, during funeral and after funeral.

**ELCIN** – (Evangelical Lutheran church in Namibia), the church which is serving dominantly among Aawambo and Kavangos

**Namibia** – the country in Southern Africa, sharing borders with South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Angola.

**Culture** – The totality of living of a certain people. The component of culture are: language, music, dance, rituals, social customs, and literature (oral and written) Mugambi 2013:516). Mwititi and Dueck also explain more about culture saying, “ Culture is a composite values, morals, taboos, and rules, written and unwritten, that are embedded in language , practices, childrearing and training traditions, rituals, symbols, rites of passage, clinches, proverbs, songs, dances and folk tales”(2006:35-36).

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This study examines the death rituals of the Oshiwambo ethnic group and how the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (hereafter ELCIN) has, through its ministry and mission, responded to the challenges that they pose. This chapter presents a general introduction to the research. It describes the background and motivation for the study, the research problem, questions, objectives and the theoretical framework as well as the research methodology. Chapter one concludes with a brief outline of the chapters through which the study will be presented.

#### **1.2 Background of the research problem and motivation for the study**

The study is motivated by two experiences. Firstly, the pastoral experience within the ELCIN that has exposed the researcher to tensions surrounding rituals associated with death and burial among the Oshiwambo members of ELCIN. Aawambo constitute a large Bantu ethnic group, situated in northern Namibia (southern Africa) and the ELCIN is the main denomination that is working among the people.

During periods of mourning and burial of the deceased Aawambo, the ELCIN ministry heritage and Oshiwambo culture clash because of differences in their understanding and practice of what constitutes appropriate death and burial rituals. My experience as pastor in the local parish ministering to Aawambo members has made me aware that the Aawambo ethnic group seems to be dissatisfied with the ELCIN Christian rituals that are performed during the mourning period. The Aawambo members usually agitate for that which is

culturally required by their tribe to be carried out by their chosen ethnic representatives who are expected to complete the necessary rites of passage for the deceased to be handed over to the ancestors. On the one hand, the theological and ministerial formation curriculum that is used by ELCIN to prepare pastors seems to define cultural tribal rituals as pagan customs (Loytty 2012:56). On the other hand, the Oshiwambo Christians do not regard the western biased, non-inculturated ELCIN liturgy of burying the dead as culturally adequate.

Secondly, the researcher is motivated by the need to identify additional relevant literature on Oshiwambo death ritual, because there is a significant gap in the understanding of these rituals on the part of the ELCIN clergy. According to Loytty (2012:52) and Kokonen (1993:160), the Finnish Lutheran missionaries who planted the church in Owambo misunderstood the meaning of the Oshiwambo death rituals and regarded them as paganism and therefore as against Christianity and the church's teachings. The missionaries' misunderstanding has deeply influenced the ELCIN ministry and mission among the local people.

Moreover, the Finnish missionaries who wrote about the Aawambo death rituals considered only a few rituals and were therefore limited in the depth of their understanding. However, being European with a preconceived notion of the pre-eminence of their culture this defective understanding was embraced as orthodox and used to shape ELCIN's policy towards Aawambo death ritual (Kokkonen 1993, Siiskonene and Salokoski 2010).

This study will re-examine the literature available on the subject in the light of contemporary experiences of the Aawambo death rituals to identify possible areas where a dialogue between both views of death and burial rituals could be developed that contributes to better mutual understanding. In spite of many years of ministry and mission activities among the Oshiwambo tribe, the teachings of ELCIN have not made deep inroads into the cultural

practices of the tribal community regarding the rituals associated with death and burial. Many members of the ELCIN are also members of this ethnic group and continue to practice the death rituals of their culture. They have embraced a contradictory double consciousness by living with two conflicting and competing worldviews because both ELCIN and the Aawambo cultural rites serve their needs and they are not prepared to accept the one and reject the other. They have learned to live with contradictions but at the same time this has resulted in tensions between ELCIN's understanding and practice of the Christian faith and the Aawambo traditional culture.

These tensions become most visible when ELCIN's members seek to uphold their cultural practices concerning traditional death rituals during the mourning period. ELCIN pastors are required in their ordination vows to uphold the teachings of the church and this has put them at odds with those congregants who practice traditional rites in the different stages of mourning between death and burial.

The research problem of this study examines the core issues associated with rituals of death and burial in Oshiwambo tribal culture that create tension in the ministry and mission of the ELCIN and to examine whether there are alternate ways of accommodating both Oshiwambo and Christian traditional practises.

The research is informed by the tensions that shape the pastoral environment in which ELCIN pastors relate to those church members who engage in the practice of the Oshiwambo tribal rituals regarding death and burial. Failure of ELCIN's understanding and practice of being a contextually relevant church that enculturates the traditional practices into Christianity has resulted in their pastors being unable to effectively offer culturally relevant pastoral care and counselling to the Aawambo members during their periods of mourning.

Death constitutes an important rite of passage within any community and therefore all of the community's care and counselling support systems must be available to ensure that holistic care is provided. In this study ELCIN's pastoral care ministry will be exposed as culturally inadequate in its response to the needs felt by its Aawambo members, because its pastors are not adequately equipped to offer effective pastoral care and counselling. Later in the study (pp63-64), it will be argued that only through intentional culturally specific workshops, providing extra training to pastors and other religious leaders, the problem can be addressed.

### **1.3 Location of the study**

#### **1.3.1 Aawambo**

The study is located within the Aawambo ethnic group of northern Namibia and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN). Aawambo is the largest Bantu ethnic group in northern Namibia and southern Angola (southern Africa). They are made up of eight clans in Namibia, known as Aandongwa, Aakwanyama, Aakwambi, Aangandjera, Aambalantu, Aakwaluudhi, Aakolonkadhi and Aambandja (Notkola, Tim us and Siiskonene 2010:153). They comprise approximately one million of the total of two million inhabitants of Namibia and they are predominantly situated in the north of Namibia, near the border with Angola. A small number, especially Aakwanyama, are to be found in the southern part of Angola (Notkola, Tim us and Siiskonen 2010:153). According to Malua, not only Aakwanyama are found in southern Angola, but also six tribes of Aawambo, namely Ovakwanyama/Aakwanyama, Ovambadja, Ovavale, Ovandombodola, Ovaunda and Ovakafima. These however are not the focus of this study. The Aawambo who are found in Angola belong to the Evangelical Lutheran church of Angola (IELA) (2003:3).

With increased socio-economic development, including opportunities for jobs and education, Aawambo are nowadays found all over Namibia. According to Munyika the area where

Aawambo are situated was called Ovamboland/Owamboland in the period of South-African colonial rule in Namibia. Today it is called Owambo or Far Northern. It is divided into four regions: Ohangwena, Oshikoto, Oshana and Omusati. Owambo covers more than one tenth of Namibia's total area (2004:143). According to Southern-Africa-arroukachee, approximately 97% of Aawambo are Christians ([Southern-Africa-arroukachee](#), n.d.). The majority of ELCIN members (approximately 80%) are Aawambo people (Notkola, Timus and Siiskonen 2010:154).

Christianity among the Owambo was first planted by missionaries from Finland in 1870. They were invited by the Rhenish missionary Hugo Hahn who pleaded with the Finnish mission to send him help: "In the name of God and in the name of thousands of needy heathens to whom the Lord has opened the door. I now direct myself to you with prayer, come and help us" (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:75). Aawambo were regarded as pagans and know nothing about God.

Although the missionaries considered the Aawambo as pagans that worshipped false gods they had their traditional African religion and belief system. They believed in a Supreme Being who was full of might and power and they referred to him as *Kalunga* or *Pambawiishitamwene* which literally means: „God who created him/herself“ (Munyika 2004:220 and Loytty 2012:34). Loytty (2012) argues that Aawambo were monotheists and considered the Supreme Being as the creator of everything, and the name Kalunga indicates that God has the power to control everything, including the giving and taking of life (2012:34). This was the belief of the Aawambo before the European missionaries arrived in Owambo. According to Mucherera (2001: 27) African tradition is a religious tradition and that African people traditionally believe in a Supreme Being who is identified by different names.

The Aawambo culture plays a strategic role in uniting its adherents as one people. It also serves to give the tribe direction while it provides healing resources to keep the community and its members healthy. In the mourning period following a death in the community, the cultural assets are utilised as healing resources for counselling the Aawambo and strengthening them as a group. Mwiti and Dueck argue that the culture of a particular people always becomes problematic when people originating from a different political, cultural and economic context arrive in their midst as occupiers or colonizers, presuming that their culture is superior and leading the colonized locals to accept the foreign culture at the expense of their own traditions of which they now begin to doubt the value (2006:36).

The African/Oshiwambo lifestyle, customs, and practices were considered uncivilized by Finnish missionaries, because they were different from the culture of the missionaries. Loytty makes clear that, when missionaries arrived in Owambo, they looked upon the Aawambo as undeveloped and simplistic people and saw themselves as superior beings (2012:56). The key research question and sub-questions posed in this study are dealt with by examining the available literature pertaining to Oshiwambo tradition in general and its religio-cultural nature, to death rituals practised by the Aawambo and to the viewpoints and practices of ELCIN, particularly in respect of death and mourning.

### 1.3.2 The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN)

The study focuses on Aawambo who are, as mentioned above, members of the Evangelical Lutheran church in Namibia. ELCIN was established as the result of work done by the Finnish Mission Society (FMS). Scholars, such as Awala (1973), Kokkonen (1993), Nampala and Shigwedha (2006), credit Finnish Lutheran missionaries with initiating the founding, in 1870, of the Lutheran church (ELCIN) among the Aawambo (Awala 1973:5). As a result of

efforts by missionaries, the Lutheran church was registered in 1954 as an independent church and the first local, indigenous bishop, Dr Leonard Nangolo Awala, was consecrated in 1963 (Loytty 2012:18).

The Finnish missionaries introduced the church into Owambo at the request of two Aawambo kings, namely, Shikongo shaKalulu of Ondonga and Mweshipandeka yaShaningika of Oukwanyama. In 1866 the kings asked Hugo Hahn of the Rhenish Missionary Society (RMS) to bring missionaries to Owamboland (Niitenge 2013:81).

The first congregation was started in 1870 and apart from preaching the gospel, the Finnish missionaries also offered western goods such as guns, clothes and many other items for sale or exchange. Kings, especially King Shikongo of Ondonga and King Mweshipandeka of Oukwanyama, were keen to have the missionaries in their territories hoping to get access to the wealth of western countries. They were interested in obtaining guns and other western goods and they also looked to be defended by white people as there were several conflicts between Owambo kings at the time (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:74). Hence the kings welcomed the missionaries, allowing them to work from bases adjoining, or close to their palaces. Nambala adds that the missionaries on the other hand, wanted to include Owamboland in their work area because of the region's agricultural character and the fertile soil of Owambo. In addition, there was an understanding between the Finnish mission and the colonial system (1994:118).

The missionaries started working in Ondonga and gradually covered all of Owambo, including Kavangoland. This resulted in the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Owambo-Kavango (ELOC) which later became the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:75). This study focuses on the Owambo

area where most inhabitants are members of ELCIN. According to Horn, the majority of Christians in Namibia are Lutheran, especially among the Oshiwambo people (2011:2).

Although the Aawambo knew about God as creator and saw their ancestors as mediators between God and human beings (Awala 1973:4), the European missionaries' perception of their religious views was limited by a mono-cultural bias against non-European cultures. Therefore this prevented them from engaging in a genuine process of inter-cultural learning with the Aawambo because, according to Nambala, "The Europeans felt free to treat the Africans in any way they pleased, simply because Africans were not Christians. They claimed to offer both Christianity and civilization to the Africans..." (1994:118).

The European missionaries wanted to control the Aawambo through their misconceived cultural supremacy. Nampala posits that "The secret that Europeans discovered early in their history was that culture carries rules for thinking and that if you could impose your culture on your victims you could thus limit the creativity of their vision, destroying their ability to act" (2004:115). Therefore the identity, vocation and witness of ELCIN were built on a Eurocentric cultural vision, leading to the devaluation, suppression and, in some cases, destruction of the Aawambo culture.

#### **1.4. Key research question**

The key research question that undergirds this study is: What are the religio-cultural interpretations of death, what are the key rituals associated with death and burial among the Oshiwambo tribe and how has the ministry and mission of the ELCIN responded to these?

#### **1.5 Research sub-questions**

In relation to the key research questions the following sub-questions are posed:

1. What are the rituals associated with death and burial as practised by the Oshiwambo tribe?
2. What are the rituals associated with death and burial as practised by the ELCIN?
3. What are their similarities and differences?
4. In what ways has the ELCIN responded to the challenges, posed by the adherence to traditional rituals of its members?

## **1.6 Objectives**

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify and critique the understanding of death and the practice of rituals associated with death and burial among the Oshiwambo.
- To identify and critique the understanding of death and the practice of the rituals associated with death and burial in the ELCIN.
- To determine similarities and differences between the two competing sets of rituals.
- To critique the ways in which the ELCIN has responded to the challenges posed by death and burial rituals as performed by those members of the Oshiwambo tribe who belong to ELCIN.

## **1.7 Theoretical framework**

This study is located within the academic discipline of practical theology which takes human experience in the world seriously. Human experience as a matter of fact is the starting point

of practical theology (Killen and De Beer 1994:5). Practical theology is a discipline that equips the pastor to interpret the practice of church and of the world in order to examine, understand, evaluate, and criticise the connection between what is recorded in scriptures and what is taught by peoples' cultures (Killen and De Beer 1994:5, 11). Practical theology is defined as "the critical theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with practices of the world..." (Killen and De Beer 1994:6). The academic discipline of practical theology also offers practitioners in ministerial studies the theoretical tools to engage with issues linked to contextual ministry. Therefore the theoretical framework that is utilized is based on interdisciplinary conversations between church and culture as discussed by Loytty (2012:52), Hewitt (2012:17), Reynolds (2012:25) and Lombard (1999:355). Their perspectives will inform the study's perception of the ministry-and-mission response of the ELCIN to local contextual challenges.

### ***Church and culture theory***

ELCIN's mission within its specific context is ultimately derived from its ecclesial identity and vocation that determine its witness within the culture. According to Bosch the church has no other mission than that what it is sent to be and to do. For the mission of a church to be authentic within any culture it must first be rooted in the mission of God (missio-Dei) (1991:28). According to the World Council of Churches (WCC) document, *„Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes“* (2012),

“Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love which binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation. The missionary God who sent the Son to the world calls all God's people (John 20:21), and empowers them to be a community of hope. The church is

commissioned to celebrate life and to resist and transform all life-destroying forces, in the power of the Holy Spirit” (2012:1).

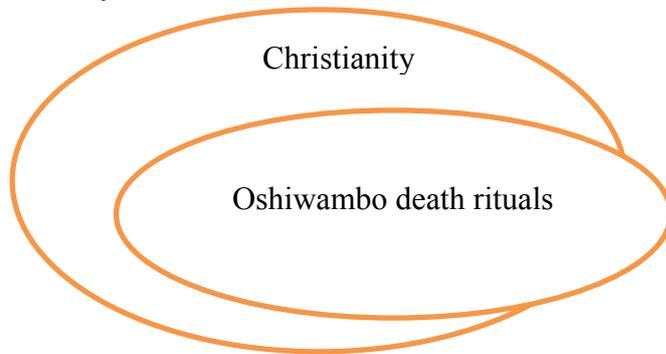
If this constitutes the missional mandate of a church that is faithful to the *missio-Dei*, then its purpose, according to the ecumenical document, is to give life or to be life-giving:

“The church is a gift of God to the world for its transformation towards the kingdom of God. Its mission is to bring new life and announce the loving presence of God in our world. We must participate in God’s mission in unity, overcoming the divisions and tensions that exist among us, so that the world may believe and all may be one (John 17:21). The church, as the communion of Christ’s disciples, must become an inclusive community and exists to bring healing and reconciliation to the world. How can the church renew herself to be missional and move forward together towards life in its fullness?” ( WCC 2012:7).

This ecumenical understanding of the missional task of the church presents the researcher with principles that can guide her in an examination of how ELCIN carries out its missional understanding and praxis in the local context. Is it a live giving mission within the local culture which is after all the environment through which the church must communicate the gospel? The church’s method of engagement will determine whether the Christian faith acquires “real roots” or remains as “potted plants” which limited by the size of the pot to grow (Smith 1984:23). Inculturated Christianity takes root and grows from within the culture of a particular people. Hewitt defines inculturation as “... the insertion of new values into one’s heritage and worldview” (2012:17). Therefore, in order to grow in Ovamboland a

Christianity that has “real roots”, it has to intimately converse with the culture of the Aawambo.

The diagram below shows the relationship between Oshiwambo death rituals and Christianity.



Harries argues that, “For a foreigner to fall in line with the culture of his or her host people is only natural, if strenuous at times. There is a desperate need for western missionaries who can be accurately persuaded to be vulnerable enough to imitate African people, so as to acquire something of their presupposition foundation and, in turn, be able to present the true gospel” (2008:4). It could be argued that the ministry and missional response of ELCIN to traditional death and burial rituals among Aawambo has to be one that involves a continuous and honest conversation with the local culture. It should embrace an in-depth inculturation of their understanding and practice of the gospel.

Inculturation refers to the way in which the Christian faith is integrated into the culture of a particular people in an effort to teach, to care for, and counsel them (Magesa 2010:74). Therefore, Christianity should not discard the culture of a people but rather develop roots in it. Magesa reasons that, if Christianity fails to take root in the culture of a people, it will remain a superficial influence without positively affecting the people it serves (2010:74). This study explores ways in which Christianity can integrate with Oshiwambo culture (inculturation) for the sake of developing a meaningful approach to ministry among the Aawambo during periods of mourning.

Reynolds also claims that the culture of local people must be engaged by Christianity because, if no proper attempts are made for such an engagement of the gospel with local culture, Christians who find themselves in crisis situations will always turn to their traditional cultures to find solutions (2012:25). It could be argued that this is what has occurred among Aawambo, because their culture has not become deeply connected with Christianity. Therefore, in periods of mourning, the Aawambo hark back to their former rituals because they are not fully satisfied with the Christian burial rites.

Mugambi emphasises that the missionaries must learn to appreciate the culture of the people among whom they are working so that their missional work can become more effective. Missionaries must therefore learn the local language; appreciate local art, dances, music, rituals, and other aspects of local cultures (2013:519).

## **1.8 Research methodology**

The qualitative construct of the research topic necessitates employing a non-empirical method of study, whereby data is drawn from available documentary sources linked to the key terms. Since this study is limited in scope, an interpretive methodology is applied to analyse and critique published and unpublished texts by selected scholars identified in the literature review. Qualitative methodology and theological reflection are among the interpretative methods that will be used to distinguish, describe, and understand issues pertaining to the Oshiwambo people, their beliefs and their general culture. Swinton and Mowat state that it is the task of the qualitative method “to describe reality in ways which enable us to understand the world differently and, in understanding differently, begin to act differently” (2006:46). The qualitative method will also help this study to “see and discover” (Swinton and Mowat 2006:31) new ways of understanding and interpreting the death rituals

practised by ELCIN and the Oshiwambo tribe and to discover ways in which they can accommodate each other.

According to Moulton, a non-empirical study such as this research can test and validate earlier analyses as well as present interpretations (2004:165). Therefore, the methodology of this study will involve methods of textual criticism that take into account selected narratives that emerge from the Oshiwambo culture and from ELCIN, using an interpretative lens. Additional relevant resources will be harnessed from UKZN libraries, the internet, journals, theses and available unpublished studies. The objective is to establish, on the basis of the available literature, how ELCIN responds to the challenges posed by death rituals of the Oshiwambo tribe to its local ministry and mission.

According to Killen and De Beer, human beings assign meanings to what “they encounter, endure, create, feel and reason”. Hence, there is no need to judge the practices of others but, rather, one should try to understand how others reflect on, and distil meaning from, experience (1994:26). Since the study is conducted within the discipline of practical theology –that is defined by Swinton and Mowat as a “critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with practices of the world...” (2006:6) - the practices of ELCIN and the Oshiwambo culture in relation to death rituals will be examined in order to understand why specific rites are performed and what they mean in the lives of Aawambo.

### **1.9 Limitation of study**

The researcher is aware that being absent from the context of the study does negatively impact on her capacity to undertake an in-depth empirical study of the subject. The data that

will be used is derived primarily from secondary sources, the UKZN library, journals, theses, non-published studies, and information accessed via internet search engines.

The study does not claim to offer an exhaustive critique of Oshiwambo death ritual, the culture of the Aawambo and the response of the ELCIN, because the researcher is limited by the time frame as well as by other factors, resulting from this being a Masters dissertation based on course work. The researcher is also aware that she may be hindered by the unavailability of certain materials that are relevant, specifically to Oshiwambo death and burial ritual, because she is absent from the local context. However, material related to other African cultures will be carefully used, in so far as they share certain characteristics with the culture of the Aawambo.

### **1.10 Outline of chapters**

The study consists of the following four chapters.

#### **Chapter one: General introduction of the research paper**

Chapter one focuses on a general overview and presents the background and motivation for the study, its location, the research questions and objectives, the theoretical framework and the research methodology. Terms are defined, the limitation of the study is indicated and its structure described.

#### **Chapter two: Death and death rituals in traditional Oshiwambo: A comparison with the Evangelical Lutheran church in Namibia (ELCIN)**

This chapter begins with an overview of the key literature exploring Christian and Oshiwambo forms of death ritual. It focuses on the terms: missio-cultural, death rituals, Oshiwambo culture, and ELCIN. The last part of the chapter examines the ritual practices of ELCIN and Aawambo during the period of mourning and burial of a deceased member of the community. Similarities and differences between Oshiwambo and ELCIN death rituals will be identified. The chapter will also reconstruct the ways in which Aawambo members of ELCIN presently deal with death.

### **Chapter three: Response of ELCIN to Oshiwambo notions of death and death rituals: The influence of the Finnish missionaries**

The third chapter critiques ways in which the ELCIN has responded (positively and negatively) to challenges posed by the death and burial rituals of church members who belong to the Oshiwambo tribe. It also examines how the Aawambo death rituals function as a form of counselling.

### **Chapter four: General conclusion of the research project**

The fourth and final chapter presents the conclusion of the project and summarizes findings. It provides suggestions and possibilities for a future engagement of the church with the local culture in respect of death rituals.

## **1.11 Conclusion**

The study is motivated by the researcher's experience of religio-cultural tensions resulting from a clash between the death rituals of the Aawambo people and ELCIN's teaching. The study is non-empirical and, in order to facilitate the research, a number of key documents on Oshiwambo death and death rituals and the teaching of ELCIN have been identified. The research questions and objectives seek to define and understand the key death rituals among Aawambo and ELCIN's response to these. The theoretical frame work of the study employs theological reflection and the research methodology of this qualitative study consists in non-empirical data gathering.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **DEATH AND DEATH RITUALS IN TRADITIONAL OSHIWAMBO: A COMPARISON WITH THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN NAMIBIA (ELCIN)**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter describes the Aawambo as the ethnic group found in northern Namibia most of whom are Lutheran. However they adhere to the traditional practices of their own culture while simultaneously embracing the Christian teachings of ELCIN. The fusion of both worldviews has resulted in hybridity and contradictory emotions among the Oshiwambo. This chapter constitutes in a review of literature that addresses death and death ritual, both in the Oshiwambo tradition and in ELCIN. It offers a critique of ELCIN's missionary identity and vocation, shaped under the influence of the Finnish missionaries who planted the ELCIN in Owambo, and reflecting their missionary perception of Oshiwambo cultural tradition. The chapter outlines and critiques Oshiwambo understanding of death as well as the rituals associated with death among Aawambo.

Finally it lists some of the similarities and differences between traditional Oshiwambo and ELCIN that could serve as signposts for finding a road towards a nurturing life-giving relationship between ELCIN and Oshiwambo cultural traditions whereby they accommodate each other, thus positively and holistically meeting the ritual needs of Aawambo church members in periods of mourning and burying loved ones. It is important to first discuss the Aawambo traditional view of death and of relevant ritual process before proceeding to examine ELCIN's concept of death, bequeathed by Finnish missionaries and uncritically imposed onto the Oshiwambo cultural context. It must be pointed out that the practices of the

Aawambo rituals refer to what happens in rural communities and not necessarily in Namibian cities which are not the focus of this study.

## 2.2 The concept of death in Oshiwambo tradition

The Aawambo accept that persons cannot stay in their physical bodies forever: they have to die. This is emphasised when they comfort each other during mourning with the following comments: “*aantu kayeshi yaMunyambala, Munyambala okweya pewa kuPamba*”, meaning “*people do not belong to Munyembala (the king) but were entrusted to Munyembala by Pamba (God)*” (my translation). Therefore, it is Pamba who has the final authority over death and life. This is confirmed by Munyika who states that Aawambo historically knew of, and believed in, a Supreme Being of might and power whom they refer to as *Kalunga* or *Pambawiishitamwene* which literally means: „God who created him/herself“ (Munyika 2004:220). Since the Aawambo are monotheists and considered the Supreme Being Kalunga as the creator of everything, the giver of life, the name, Kalunga indicates power to control everything, including the taking of life or, as it is called, *eso* (death) (Loytty 2012:34).

Salkoski, a Finish who worked among Aawambo, has offered his perspectives on how the Aawambo understand life and death. He argues that Aawambo believe that the spirit of a person is divided into three parts known as *ombepo*, *omutima* and *omwenyo* (2006:144). Salkoski translates *ombepo* as the soul which can move outside the body in the form of thoughts, fantasy, dreams and observations. *Omutima* conveys that the heart hosts the feelings and wishes of a person while *omwenyo* also means soul but refers to the inner life of a person as it influences his/her outer behaviour. After death the spirit of a person joins the ancestral world (2006:144). Salokoski is a European and not an Omuwambo and therefore there are a few errors in his/her translation. *Ombepo* should be translated as “breath or air”. It

is that which leaves the body when a person dies. It then joins other “airs” in the atmosphere. *Omutima* is translated as “heart”, symbolising that part of the human body that is claimed to control a person’s inner being (conscience). Finally, *omwenyo* is the soul that after death journeys to join the ancestors. It constitutes that part of the body that is not matter and that cannot be controlled by gravity.

In the Aawambo belief system a person ultimately does not belong to the kingdoms of this world but to an afterlife-kingdom, beyond death and the grave, to which they must return and where they live as ancestors. This is consistent with wider African belief systems that advocate that life does not end with death. There is a life after death in which a person joins the ancestral world. The deceased “live in the community and communicate with their families” (Andreson n.d.:2). This belief is also reflected in the traditional Oshiwambo expression: They have to die and go to stay somewhere in the invisible bodies. The phrase “*a fudhamo omufudho gwe gwa hugunina*” means “he/she breathes out his/her last breath”, or, “*kena we Omwenyo*”, meaning “his/her soul/spirit is no more”. These phrases are used by Aawambo to tell each other that someone has died.

Furthermore, the separation of spirit and body is called *eso* (death) and Aawambo believe that *eso* does not just happen normally but is caused by either witchcraft or by the ancestors. There must be a cause for death. Masamba ma Mpolo, a Congolese scholar, has verified that witchcraft is perceived as the main cause of illness and death among many African ethnic groups. According to Masamba, illness and also misfortune in African culture are seen as the result of witchcraft. One is bewitched or cursed because of misbehaviour, or through the envy and jealousy of others (1991:24). Munyika confirms that Aawambo fear witchcraft more than anything else because it destabilises communal wholeness and destroys life. They do not fear eternal death but they do fear physical premature death which is believed to be caused by witchcraft (2004:221).

These perceptions of life and death among Aawambo are confirmed by Munyika (2004) on the basis of his examination of Oshiwambo proverbs, riddles, folk- and other tales. According to him, the Oshiwambo believe that people and all of creation are made by God and that only God is the giver of life. Life is a great gift from God. Therefore it must be preserved. It is taboo to kill another person and it contaminates the murderer who has to go through cleansing rituals before he is accepted back into the community. Before his cleansing and restoration, the murderer is ostracised, hated and feared as endangering the wellbeing and the wholeness of the community (2004:220).

However, death, whatever the cause, is never considered as natural in Oshiwambo tradition. People always ask, even in the event of an accident or a murder, why him/her and not someone else? Death is always believed to be orchestrated by a powerful, real and tangible entity with a natural dimension such as displeased ancestors or witchcraft. This is confirmed by an Oshiwambo proverb, *okwemu undulilwa that means „witchcraft (Uulodhi) pushed a murderer to kill*. Thus, whatever urges people to do bad things is often connected with witchcraft.

According to Bockie, who writes from a Congolese standpoint, when a member of the community dies, someone in that community will be suspected of having caused the death and of being a witch (*ndoki*) (1993:40). The same happens among Aawambo. In the event of an untimely death, the Omuwambo suspects“ witchcraft (*uulodhi*) and the witch must be identified. In most cases the people who are suspected of being witches (*aalodhi/omulodhi*) are among the most powerless in the community, for example old men and women, single women and those without any relatives in the community such as refugees and strangers (*oontawuki nomapongo*). They become scapegoats.

Furthermore, the identification of strangers and refugees as witches as rooted in xenophobia, by Bronwyn Harris defined as fear and hatred of foreigners and strangers or fear of their politics and culture (Harris 2001:57). Bond affirms that xenophobia is caused by fear that migrants might appropriate resources destined for local residents who therefore engage in acts of resistance against those who do not belong (Bond n.d.:2). Those who are classified as witches suffer because they are considered a serious threat to the community's wellbeing. However, apart from accused with witchcraft, the elderly are associated with wisdom and good life therefore they can give blessings and good advice.

Masamba ma mpolo has demonstrated that witchcraft is regarded by the majority of ethnic groups in Sub-Saharan Africa perceived as the main cause of illness and death (1991:24). This understanding differs significantly from the perspectives that inform Christian tradition. Masamba mentions that, while illness and misfortune in African culture are explained as the result of witchcraft, Christianity has very different views and accepts death or illness as resulting from either natural or spiritual causes (1991:24).

According to Munyika 2004, Aawambo fear witchcraft because it is perceived as destabilising the community and as destroying life, causing premature death (Munyika 2004:221). Msafiri, writing on witchcraft among Aawambo, asserts that it is seen as a key factor and the main cause of socio-cultural problems within African societies: "Undoubtedly, witchcraft poses a serious problem which has far reaching moral and social negative implications..." (2002:95).

The Aawambo understand that a person can die from sickness, suicide or an accident. However, every event in life is linked to a cause and as such they attribute an unexplained death to witchcraft in the community. There is an Aawambo saying that, "*moombale ihamu yiwa owala*", meaning, „the suicide does not happen without a cause and that cause must be

witchcraft". Because sickness and death are perceived as resulting from the actions of witches, traditional seers are employed to identify witches so that the community can deal justly with them (Magezi 2007:157, Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:58).

In line with other African cultures, the Aawambo worldview argues that sickness and death constitute punishment by the ancestors for some provocation, for the breaking of a taboo, the neglecting of a custom, in short for an offence committed. Therefore some of the rituals, performed in the mourning period, during and after funerals, are aimed at pleasing the ancestors so that they receive the deceased peacefully, protecting him/her from witchcraft and preventing that death might affect any living family members.

It is a common belief in Africa that life does not end with death and that there is a life after death. The deceased join the ancestral world and continue to "live in the community and communicate with their families" (Andreson n.d.:8). Death is regarded as a new beginning of communication between the visible and the invisible world (Andreson n.d.:8). Aawambo culture accepts that surviving family members can communicate with the deceased and with other ancestors. They often visit the graves of their relatives to tell them about the joys or the misfortunes in their lives and to request protection from their ancestors.

In the African world death and life interrelate. Death is not seen as a single event, but as a process, "the deceased slowly being transferred from the land of the living to that of the dead" (Mary 1998:1131). In Oshiwambo tradition when a deceased comes into the environment of the dead, the ancestors decide whether he/she is qualified to join them. The deceased's future existence is determined by how well he/she behaved in earthly life. If the person's behaviour was not satisfactory, he/she will be denied the right to become an ancestor and be relegated to become a wandering ghost (Anderson n.d.:2).

### **2.3 Death rituals and ancestors (*aakwampungu*)**

The culturally correct funeral in Aawambo tradition must be carried out with approved rituals that aim to facilitate the journey of the deceased to the after world where he may join the ancestors and become one with them. If the correct burial traditions are not adhered to, the deceased will end up wandering as a ghost and his/her spirit will endanger the family as well as the wider community.

Since death is seen as the bearer of sorrow and fear, Aawambo perform different rituals that have different meanings but that share a common aim. According to Aawambo cultural scholars Nampala and Shigwedha, the purpose of rituals among Aawambo is to hand over the spirit of the deceased to the ancestors. This needs to be done in the proper manner in order to prevent the spirit of the deceased from returning home and harassing family members or the community as a whole (2006:58).

### **2.4 The Aawambo ritual process of death**

Aawambo mourning rituals are very important. Some consist in communication between the ancestors and their earthly grieving family. The rituals performed in this context are intended to help the grieving family and the community to cope with the departure of a loved one. Other rituals are aimed at pleasing the deceased.

According to Nampala and Shigwedha, death and burial rites fulfil a central need by holding communities together in periods of deep loss and pain (2006:58). The effects of such rituals are that, based on their tribal cultural understanding of death, the Aawambo have devised different ways of coping with death (Kubler-Ross 1969:2). Thus, in Oshiwambo culture, people come together to mourn and perform rituals. Shorter (1973) postulates that death

rituals provide safety nets because they help people to be restored from the extreme pain of mourning to normality (1973:122). Thus, the performance of death rituals among Aawambo offers effective coping mechanisms in a period of crisis.

#### *2.4.1 Mourning (oosa): Gathering and crying (okugongala nokulila)*

According to Haipinge, an Omuwambo scholar, on the death of a member of the community of Aawambo, a sorrow session called *oosa* starts. Those gathered in the house of the deceased engage in a loud wailing cry to express their sorrow and to inform the community about the death in their family. The crying in the melodies of *oosa* sound (with vibrations/tremors) totally different from other crying and therefore community members immediately realise that a death has occurred and that they must make time to visit the deceased's home and comfort the bereaved. They choose to be part of the mourning and to be in solidarity with the bereaved family (Haipinge n.d.:17). When community members approach the home of the deceased they cry out loudly to demonstrate their compassion with the mourners. In their wailing cries people mention how they are related to the deceased: *Meme yandje* (my mother), *Tate yandje* (my father), *okamwameme/okandenge kandje* (my sister/brother), *kuume kandje* (my friend), *omushiinda gwandje* (my neighbour) and many more (Haipinge n.d.:17, Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:54).

During the period of *oosa* in Owambo, mourners are distinguished by what they bring and how they walk to the mourning session. Aawambo men for example will bring a bow and arrow (*uuta niikuti*) or a combat stick (*ondhimbo*) to which a red pigment (*olukula*) is applied. Women may carry a calabash with traditional beer (*omalovu*) or a basket full of wheat flour (*omahangu*) or sorghum flour (*iilyawala*) (Haipinge n.d.:17). Death is regarded as enemy

therefore men have to be equipped like they are going to fight with this enemy. On the other hand, mourners have to be cared therefore women have to carry food for them.

Apart from what they contribute to the mourning session, Aawambo also adopt a special ritual way of walking on their journey to the house of the deceased. They walk in a single file, forming a long queue. The men walk in front, followed by the women, young people and children. Presenting themselves in this manner they are by the community identified as *aalilasa* (mourners).

In times of grief the Aawambo exercise communal pastoral care by staying with the bereaved family as a first step to give support. I recall my mother informing me at some stage in my childhood, when I was about thirteen years old, that it was culturally expected from members of the community to make frequent visits to those in mourning. The elders as well as the young adults in the community are required to remain with the grieving family throughout the mourning period. These communal practices confirm the Aawambo belief in the oneness of their community. It affirms the African philosophical concept of *Ubuntu*, by John Mbiti (1970) described as an awareness that “I am because we are” (1970:1). For the Aawambo the well-being of the families in the community is important because, whatever happens to a single family happens to the whole community. Community counselling is the standard model of care among the Aawambo same applies to Christianity.

The care goes beyond giving psychological comfort to offering a holistic comfort that involves spiritual, mental, and physical care such as sharing food, providing water and anything else that may meet the needs of a family in mourning. Magezi argues that in African communities “the well-being of one meant the well-being of all; when they celebrated, they did it together, and when death occurred, they grieved together” (2007:157). This appropriately describes the Aawambo mourning experience. They cry together, suffer

together and laugh together. They gather in times of joy and in times of sorrow. They sympathise with one another throughout life's struggles.

#### *2.4.2 Simple clothes (Iipaya)*

If a member of the community dies far from his/her home village, the body has to be buried where the death took place because Aawambo believe that, if a corpse is transported home over a long distance, it will bring death to the home and to the village (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:61). However, the deceased must be mourned at the family home. People at the place where the person died have to gather some simple clothes belonging to the deceased and take them to the family home. It is believed that through these simple clothes the spirit of the deceased is transferred home. The clothes are called "simple clothes" (*iipaya/iihema*), implying that the clothes or other belongings of a deceased person are no longer real things but maybe they have become: "simply things". Even the family house turns into a simple house (*oshigumbo*) when the owner dies. The simple house will only be called a house (*egumbo*) again after it has been relocated and simple clothes will be called clothes only after someone has inherited them. Similarly, the kitchen (*elugo*) becomes (*oshilugo*), a simple kitchen, a room, especially the sleeping room (*ondunda*) becomes a simple room (*oshinduda*) because the tradition dictates that all belongings of a deceased person are identified as *oshi* which means simple thing.

#### *2.4.3 Corpse and burial (Omudhimba nefumviko)*

Before the funeral ceremony happens it is preceded by preparation of the corpse for burial at the house of bereavement. When a person dies at home, the corpse has to be placed facing the wall (*tagu wangulilwa mekuma*). It stays there for some hours to make sure that death has

indeed occurred. If the person dies in the early hours of the day he has to be buried the same day. If the death takes place at night, burial is the following morning (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:64). The burial must be done within 24 hours because the corpse was a scaring and taboo stuff. Only the eldest people in the community were allowed to see, touch and bury the corpse. In addition, there were no places such as mortuary to keep the corpse.

According to Oshiwambo tradition, a corpse has to be prepared and buried within twenty-four hours from the moment of death. Nampala and Shigwedha describe how, before burial, the corpse's knees and back are broken and the body is bent into a circular pose so that it fits in the cattle hide that traditionally is used to cover the dead during the funeral and that serves as coffin (2006:64). The cattle hide was the only available and strong material can be used to cover the corpse.

Additionally, the breaking of the knees and back of the deceased is also thought to prevent the power of death from reaching out and taking other members of the family or the community. The circular, closed shape of the corpse symbolises that death is folded and has no power over the living. The corpse is put into its grave and all present throw a little sand into it as a way of saying goodbye to the deceased. The grave is then covered up and the mourners go home.

According to Gerber (n.d.), in some African ethnic groups – and these include the Aawambo - the dead are buried in their dwelling or next to it to make it easy for their spirits to return home and to animate next to their families. The Aawambo traditionally bury their deceased in, or next to, the family home or at the place where they did their daily work. The men, or house-owners, were buried in the kraal (cattle compound or *oshigunda shoongobe*), their wives were buried in or nearby the kitchen (*elugo*), girls at the *oshini* (the place where grain

is pounded) and boys in the calf kraal (*oshigunda shuutana*) (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:64).

Kubler-Ross describes death as a terrifying event and people use different ways to cope with it (1969:12). Therefore, in the Oshiwambo community, children were not allowed to observe funerals or to see a dead body. They would be sent away from the house for a while so that the funeral could take place in their absence. They were not even told where the deceased was buried. Those qualified to attend burials were elders (men and women).

#### *2.4.4 Closing entrances to the home of the bereaved and opening new entrances (Iiyelo tayi thitikwa, tapu totwa yilwe)*

When death comes to a member of an Aawambo family, the usual entrances, especially the main entrance, as well as the entrances to corridors and rooms are closed and new entrances have to be opened up. Nampala and Shigwedha state that the main entrance is closed and the mourners have to use a newly opened entrance (2006:61). However, my experience of Aawambo death rituals is that not only the main entrance of a house is closed but all entrances, even the doors to the rooms and in the corridors inside the house, and new entrances must be created. The corpse must be carried outside through these new entrances. The aim of this ritual is to prevent the spirit of the deceased to return and claim the life of another person. Aawambo culture believes that, when death comes to fetch a victim, it uses the entrance and follow the corridor until it finds who it is looking for (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:63). This ritual constitutes one of the areas of contention between Aawambo and ELCIN, causing conflicts between Aawambo Christian mourners and some of the pastors. The conflicts occur because Christianity is associating many Oshiwambo rituals with paganism therefore it is difficult for some ELCIN pastor to allow this performance

though it was supposed to be a good point of inculturation. The new entrance could symbolise the new life as believed by Christians.

#### *2.4.5 Okudhiluka (relocation of the house)*

When the owner of a house dies, especially if he is also a husband, some of the rooms in the house such as the *ondjugo* (the main room for a wife) and the *elugo* (the kitchen) are never used again. New rooms (*ondjugo* and *elugo*) have to be provided when the mourning period is over. Salokoski, during his work among Aawambo, observed that when the male house-owner dies, his sleeping room/hut is destroyed and his house becomes *oshigumbo* (simple house) and has to be relocated soon after the mourning period (2006:145).

Another ritual performed after the death of the owner of a house involves the turning (*okuwangulwa*) upside down of the chairs in the *oshinyanga* (the main hall). The chairs have to be turned upside down because the owner has died and therefore the chairs should be used in an entirely new way. This ritual is mostly performed by men from the community.

#### *2.4.6 Slaughtering cattle and other animals*

Cattle plays an important role during mourning among Aawambo, the skin providing a casket for the deceased, the meat serving as food for the mourners while the blood is thought to ward off misfortune. The first aim of the slaughtering of cattle by mourners in Owambo is to shed blood which is believed to protect the family of the deceased as well as the entire community from the misfortune of death (Gerber n.d.). Gerber confirms that in some African cultural traditions the animal has to be slaughtered before the funeral and that this is ritual

bloodletting. The blood of the animal has to flow if it is to shield the family from further misfortune. According to Berkstresser (n.d.) mourning among the Aawambo involves the slaughter of a bull that has to be cooked without oil and salt. All mourners have to eat from the meat (ibid: 4). Gerber confirms that the hide of a cow is used to cover the dead body during burial and serves as a casket (2006:4).

The Aawambo may in addition slaughter other animals if the deceased was the owner of the animals. This ritual takes place after the mourning period. According to Nampala and Shigwedha specific animals have to be slaughtered such as a cock, a bull and even dogs. It is believed that the spirit of the deceased owner may take up residence in these animals (2006:60). It could also be argued that the animals are slaughtered because they cannot be allowed to continue living and to play a role in the new house to be built after the mourning period is over. This is because they represent an era that has become past time with the deceased owner. Hence these animals are killed while the family is still staying in the old, but now “simple” house. Life in the new house has to start with everything new (Salokoski 2006:145).

#### 2.4.7 Mourning fire (*Omulilo gwoosa*)

In the period of mourning relatives of the deceased’s father make a fire that is called *omulilo gwoosa* (mourning fire). The old fire in the simple house has to be put out. According to Haipinge, where exactly the mourning fire is lit depends on the status of the deceased. When the head of the family dies, the mourning fire has to be made next to the door to his room or hut. The fire for a deceased wife is made in the kitchen while for younger people the fire is lit next to the rooms or huts where they used to sleep. For deceased children the fire is made in the kitchen. The mourners gather and sleep around the mourning fire (Haipinge n.d.:17). A

relative (male or female) of the father of the deceased lights the fire which has to be used by the family and all mourners throughout the mourning period. Anderson describes it as a source of light for the mourners while they are covered by the dark cloud of death (Encyclopaedia of Death and Dying, n.d.:4).

According to Nampala and Shigwedha, and Haipinge, the duration of mourning differs depending on the age of the deceased and on his/her position in the community. The mourning period for younger people (both boys and girls) lasts two days, for older people is four days or more, while the death of a village head may involve two weeks of mourning. There is no mourning period for new born babies (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:61; Haipinge n.d.:17).

#### *2.4.8 Shaving of the head (Okukululwa)*

During mourning all orphans, no matter how old they are, have to shave a small part of their head (epalu). According to Anderson, family members shave their heads as a symbol for the beginning of a new life after the mourning period. It is believed that hair is a seat of life therefore people have to start with a new life after the death of a parent (n.d.: 4).

#### *2.4.9 The simple Liver (Oshihuli)*

As stated above, when the male owner of the house dies, specific animals have to be slaughtered at the end of the mourning period because it is believed that they may offer a dwelling place for the spirit of the deceased (Berkstresser n.d.:4). The liver of the bull is prepared and given to the deceased's children and other kin. The liver tastes bitter because it is prepared with bitter spices and herbs such as *olukula* (a red powder that is normally used as a body lotion and pigment), *omunkunzi* (bark of a bitter tree tasting like ginger), and butter.

The bitter taste symbolises the removal of bad luck from family and community. The eating of the bull's liver constitutes a kind of farewell to the deceased (Salokoski 2006:146). After funerals many African people also clean their bodies with bitter herbs (such as aloe and more) to remove the contamination of death (Andreson n.d.:8). The use of substances that are bitter or *omunkuzi*, is by the Aawambo generally associated with the removal of bad luck.

It is relatives of the deceased who must divide the liver (*oshihuli*) among his orphans, symbolising that they will take care of them on behalf of the father. The orphans have the right to refuse accepting the liver from a specific person if he or she does not want that person to represent his/her father. Orphans also are given authority to choose who will act as their father by taking a piece of liver and handing it to a specific relative of the father. I remember that, when my father passed away in April 2001, the children had the right to determine who would represent him.

#### 2.4.10 Departure and ash (*Ehalakano nokuyuka omutoko*)

The last day of mourning is called *ehalakano*. The mourners leave the house to sit outside and discuss outstanding matters linked to the deceased. Those who are indebted to the deceased or who are owed by him or her inform the family leaders and arrangements for payment are made (Haipinge n.d.:17). In the case of my father's death, the day of *ehalakano* was used to put out the mourning fire (*okuyuka omutoko*). Water was poured on the fire and all the ash was removed from the house. This was done while the mourners were seated outside.

#### *2.4.11 Cleansing ritual (Okuyogwa olusi)*

In many Africa cultures death is thought to contaminate people and their homes and therefore, after completion of the mourning period, members of the family and the home of the deceased are subjected to a cleansing ritual. This means that any misfortune, impurities and darkness, brought on by death get removed. In the Oshiwambo community it is the custom not to cleanse the entire family and house but only widows or widowers have to be cleaned (Salokoski 2006:146). Widows and widowers have to be washed before they can produce children, lest the children might not survive (2006:146).

In fact, any widow or widower who intends to remarry or who wants to engage in sexual intercourse first has to be cleansed to prevent the contamination of death from affecting the new marriage or sexual relationship. The washing or cleansing is not only related to the possible offspring but also to the start of a new sexual relationship. Widows and widowers are not allowed to have sex before cleansing. The ritual takes place in the house of mourning. It involves the use of herbs mixed with water that have to be applied to the entire naked body. The ritual is performed by senior male or female members of the tribe.

### **2.5 The concept of death and the cause of death in ELCIN/Christian tradition**

There are differences between the ELCIN and the Oshiwambo concepts of death as well as in the nature and the role of rituals performed in the mourning period or during the funeral. Many Aawambo traditional rituals are no longer performed today because the official ELCIN order of funeral service with its socio-religious implications has gained influence among the people. However, some Oshiwambo burial traditions have survived and function alongside

the Eurocentric Christian culture of funeral services that are the norm in ELCIN. (Nampala 2004:152).

Mugambi (2013) argues that Christianity in Africa has resulted in new burial rituals as a result of different views of death. In the ELCIN burial liturgy the fundamental belief of the faith is recited, using the Creed of the Apostles that speaks of eternal life, resurrection and the communion of Saints (2013:536). This embedded theological perspective on dying and death was by the Finnish missionaries introduced to the Owambo. Mugambi also mentions that the missionaries, as part of the Christian understanding of death and the related liturgical practice, presented views of the afterlife that differed from traditional African perceptions (2013:536).

ELCIN's theology teaches that death is connected to sin and that it came into the world because of the sin of a man (Imberd n.d.:6). This doctrine is the foundation of the theology of retribution toward death and it is the cause of fear and confusion concerning death. On other hand, in classical Christian tradition death is considered a natural outcome of old age. Biblical tradition puts the average human life-span at 70 or 80 years (Psalm 90:10). In addition to old age, death can be caused naturally by sickness. According to Imberd (n.d.:6), who argues from a general Christian understanding of death, the body of a deceased person has to be buried, or put to rest through burial, and it will be resurrected. The soul also rests somewhere, far from the body and waiting for it to be resurrected so that they can reunite. After their reunion they wait for the day of judgement when God decides if the eternal life or hell awaits them (Imberg, n.d.:7). This is what makes death scary and why people have to find ways of dealing with it. As a result, in the Christian tradition, for example in the ELCIN community, the death of a Christian involves the performance of certain rituals.

## 2.6 Attitudes towards death in the Christian tradition of ELCIN

### 2.6.1 Visitation

When a member of the ELCIN community dies, the pastor will visit the home of the deceased several times during the period of mourning as well as after the funeral service. This visitation involves the offering of prayers and the Bible is read, followed by the singing of hymns and preaching. ELCIN considers the healing of and the caring for the souls of congregants as central to its ministry and its mission shepherd ministry (Mathew 28:18 – 20).

According to the 2001 ELCIN constitution not only the pastors but all members of the community are responsible for taking care of mourning families. Resolution 63:2 of the ELCIN constitution reads: *“Ovakwaneongalo pefimbo leenghali ve na okufila oshisho oonakufiwapo, ve va kwafe pamwenyo nopalutu kombinga yoku va etela oipalwifa”* (2001:70). It means that, during mourning, congregants have to look after the mourners, body and soul, by bringing them food. This pastoral care model requires members of congregations to visit bereaved families, stay with them and feed them. This is very similar to the traditional model for care of the bereaved in the Aawambo community and the inculturation is applied.

### 2.6.2 ELCIN death/burial rituals

The Finnish missionaries who planted the church (ELCIN) in Owambo arrived with their own Eurocentric view of death, mourning and burial rites. Their liturgies were informed by a cultural bias that led to a formal rather than an expressive approach. The pastor became the dominant player and the bereaved family and community were expected to do as they were told without asking questions. The pastors’ model of parting with a deceased went against the traditional Oshiwambo family and community centred culture. Membership of ELCIN

obliged members to follow the catechism, disciplines and doctrines of the church if they were to be rewarded with “going to heaven”.

However, the Oshiwambo had been born into a strong culture that itself also dictated non-negotiable rules for rites that had to be followed at key junctures in one’s life journey from birth, via marriage to death. Oshiwambo traditional burial rituals are not optional and they have to be observed to please the ancestors. Failure to do so has grave consequences for family and community. Nampala states that traditional burial rituals were changed and replaced by the church. As a result most of Oshiwambo death rituals are no longer practised. Only a few survive. Western burial services and practices have been adopted at the cost of the age-old traditions of Aawambo (2004:152).

ELCIN also observes death rituals but they are not as many as those performed by traditional Aawambo culture. On the day of the funeral the pastor, or any member of the congregation who has been given authority to do so, conducts the funeral rituals. As I have argued earlier, rituals are necessary to help mourners cope with the fearful occurrence of death in their environment. They pray for strength to deal with the reality of life without the loved one who has died.

According to the ELCIN worship book (EWB, 2008), the funeral rite begins with a hymn from the ELCIN hymnal book where after the corpse is committed for burial. The pastor or a representative stands at the western edge of the open grave reciting the Christian Trinitarian salutation: *Ekundo* (greeting), *Medhina lyaHe nolyOmwana nolyOmbepo ondjapuki* (In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit). A sermon is preached to comfort the family and to remind the gathered mourners of the promise of resurrection to all who are followers of Jesus Christ (EWB 2008:97).

The sermon is followed by the blessing of the grave (*okuyapula ombila*). The pastor and elders throw three handfuls of sand into the grave, every time repeating the words, *Nima owa zi mevi, owu na okushuna mevi, Omukulili gwetu Jesus Kristus nguka a sindi eso oteku yumudha esiku lyagunina*, meaning, *Nima* (name) is from soil, she must return into soil and our redeemer Jesus Christ who defeats death will resurrect you on the last day (EWB 2008:97). The words emphasise that the body of the deceased will naturally decompose but the spirit/soul will not die because Christians believe that there is life after death.

The blessing of the grave is followed by a prayer, chosen by the pastor or his representative out of four specific prayers. There is one general prayer that addresses the subject of death and there are other prayers for if the deceased is a child, a young or an elderly person. The prayer is said by the grave side. The pastor continues with the reading of selected biblical texts that speak about death, preparation for death and resurrection (Good News Bible (GNB)). The texts used are for example Genesis 3:19: *for you are dust and to dust you shall return*, Psalm 90:10: *the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty...*, Mark 13:35-37: *stay awake for you do not know when the master of the house will come*, John 11:25-26: *I am the resurrection and life*, John 14:2-3: *there are many rooms in my father's house*, and Hebrew 4:9-11 *So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God* (EWB 2008:98-99). It is the responsibility of the person who conducts the funeral service to read all these texts. The mourners are usually standing around the grave, or seated on chairs if available and otherwise on the ground (EWB 2008:98-99).

After the reading of the bible texts, all mourners join in reciting the Lord's Prayer where after the grave is filled in with the participation of all those present. The rite is concluded with the benediction and a song from the hymnal book. The funeral rite is no longer, as in the past, concluded with *okutula omavi mombila kaakwanezimo nookume inashi pumbiwa*, or the

throwing of handfuls of soil into the grave by relatives and friends (EWB 2008:100). This way of sending off the deceased was practised by ELCIN's predecessor, ELOC, followed an earlier version of the worship book. This practice was meaningful to the Aawambo because it made the Christian faith proclaimed by ELCIN culturally relevant to their community. It could be argued that ELCIN took, in the context of inculturation, a backward step when it banned the throwing of soil into the grave and removed the original narrative from the contemporary funeral liturgy worship book.

An uncritical acceptance of missionary teaching within ELCIN, dismissing Oshiwambo cultural practices as paganism, has produced clergy that are insensitive to traditional Owambo funeral rites. Loytty argues that Owambo Clergy have simply swallowed the missionary teachings which explain their rigid condemnation of Oshiwambo traditions as heathen. They do not accept any traditional performance (2012:56) and the missionary education is consistent in its despise as well as in its misinterpretations of Aawambo culture.

## **2.7 Re-thinking death in contemporary ELCIN: An inculturation perspective**

ELCIN has taken the missionary culture as a model for doing mission among Aawambo. As a result it is not properly helping Aawambo. Loytty (2012) blames the failings of ELCIN on its Eurocentric missionary heritage. The fact that it has not managed to inculturate the Christian gospel within the Aawambo community and its culture has resulted in a limited understanding and practice of the Christian faith on the part of Aawambo (2012:52). Some of the Oshiwambo traditional ritual performances such as *uudhano* (dance), working songs (*iiyimbo*) and ululating (*okuligola*) were not accepted in church life because they are regarded as pagan (Loytty 2012:56).

There exists deep dissatisfaction within the Aawambo community that ELCIN does not take seriously the significance of their death and funeral rituals. ELCIN's continuing failure to inculcate the gospel has created deep suspicion of Christianity as a European imposed faith that does not adequately meet Aawambo socio-religious concerns.

Lombaard (1999) emphasises that culture and faith must go together and that elements from African culture can be incorporated into Christian praxis to help restore the wholeness of the religious experience of African people (1999:353).

Mugambi (2013) has underscored that Christianity cannot be expressed or communicated without a cultural medium. It must always be attached to a particular culture as there is no Christian culture but Christianity can greatly influence cultures (2013:518). Therefore ELCIN should be much more open to an engagement with the Oshiwambo way of approaching death, willing to learn from it and to challenge it instead of rejecting it.

### *2.7.1 Differences between Oshiwambo and ELCIN death rituals*

In Oshiwambo tradition death rituals start soon after a death occurs and continue throughout the mourning period and after the funeral. In the context of ELCIN ministry, rituals are only performed during the burial service as prescribed by the worship book that has to be followed by all pastors and elders. In the Oshiwambo tribe, death itself is regarded as a carrier of misfortune. Therefore rites are essential and must be implemented soon after death to prevent further misfortune from befalling the mourning family and the community.

Within the ELCIN community, only the pastor or designated elders may perform the rituals prescribed in the worship book. In Oshiwambo culture however, relatives, friends,

neighbours and other community members may conduct death rites because Aawambo believe in the oneness of life and of the community. Problems must be solved by all together.

Therefore Aawambo feel excluded if they are not allowed to say properly good bye to the deceased. ELCIN rituals are less focused on overcoming the fear of death. They are not concerned with sending the deceased off on the journey to join the ancestors. Instead emphasis is placed on comforting the mourners and on reminding them of the hope on a future life with Christ who overcame death through his resurrection.

Many African burial rites focus on encouraging the dead to proceed on their way to the ancestors and not to return home and trouble their living relatives and other community members. These differences between ELCIN and Oshiwambo traditions have contributed to the inadequacy of the pastoral counselling provided to local families and communities in mourning. According to Malewo, pastoral counselling should help “persons to modify patterns with which they have become increasingly unhappy, and provide comradeship and wisdom to persons facing the inevitable losses and disappointments in life” (2000:47). On the basis of this understanding both ELCIN and the Oshiwambo cultural institutions are failing the people because they do not engage in a conversation and an exchange of ideas that may lead to services that advance the common good of the community.

### *2.7.2 Similarities between Oshiwambo and ELCIN death rituals*

There are not only differences but also some similarities in the ways Oshiwambo culture and ELCIN tradition look upon death and the practise of funeral rituals. The cause of death is in both traditions associated with human failure and punishment. In Christian tradition, death as punishment for human sin is meted out by God (Kubler-Ross 1969:2), similarly to

Oshiwambo tradition, death is also regarded as punishment – a punishment sent by the ancestors (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:58). As a result, people experience death in both cases as a frightening and difficult to handle reality.

Both ELCIN and Oshiwambo believe in life after death. ELCIN considers death as a passage to another world where body and soul will meet again but they will wait for last judgment for either eternal life or to hell (Cor 5:1). In the Oshiwambo worldview death is a passage to the ancestral world (Andreson n.d.:2); death is a door through which one passes to begin a journey to another life.

Another similarity consists in the visits paid by members of the community to the home of the deceased. This custom plays an important role in both traditions and functions as a communal ministry of care, comforting and supporting the mourning family. Additionally, both traditions allow the throwing of soil into the grave during funeral as a communal act of saying goodbye to a loved one and it reminds the ELCIN community of the fragility of life on earth that, in the end, returns to the earth from which we came (Genesis 3:19).

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Chapter two examined the differences between death rituals practised by ELCIN and in Oshiwambo culture during the mourning period and after burial. ELCIN permits only the pastor or an elder to lead the rituals but in Oshiwambo culture rituals may be led by relatives and friends of the deceased, or by other members of the community. Both ELCIN and Oshiwambo communities believe in life after death but they have a different understanding of the nature of the “other world” and afterlife and of who will take part in it.

However, ELCIN superiority complex that has been bequeathed by the Finnish missionaries has created an ideological barrier that prevents mutual engagement with the local traditional culture that could result in more effective life-giving, pastoral care and counselling during periods of mourning within Oshiwambo communities. The next chapter focuses on the response of ELCIN to the Oshiwambo traditional understanding of death.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESPONSE OF ELCIN TO OSHIWAMBO NOTIONS OF DEATH AND DEATH RITUALS

#### 3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter similarities and differences between ELCIN's principles as regards death and death ritual and those of Oshiwambo culture are discussed. Death is viewed as a reality to be feared because it is, in the ELCIN faith tradition, associated with wrongdoing or sin, and, within the Oshiwambo worldview, with misbehaviour. Both ELCIN and Oshiwambo traditions respond to the reality of death with the performance of rituals. These rituals are aimed at comforting the bereaved (ELCIN and Oshiwambo) and to protect them from the possibility of more deaths in their community (Oshiwambo).

Chapter three focuses on the responses of the Evangelical Lutheran church in Namibia (ELCIN) to Oshiwambo traditional practices of death rituals. It argues that the church in its theological understanding and practice was ideologically influenced by the Finnish missionaries. The chapter will also consider ELCIN's teaching on traditional death rituals.

#### 3.2 The Finnish missionaries' attitudes toward Oshiwambo traditional death rituals

##### 3.2.1 *The Oshiwambo traditional worldview: belief, religion and education*

The Eurocentric brand of Christianity that Finnish missionaries brought to Namibia took a hostile and disrespectful view of Aawambo traditional religious practices. Although they believed in one God, the Supreme Being (*Kalunga*, or Pambawiishitamwene<sup>1</sup>), the arrogance

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<sup>1</sup> Translated as: „God who created him/herself“

of the missionaries did not allow for an intercultural exchange of insights. Loytty (2012) makes this clear. He states that the Aawambo use different names for God, in accordance with their different experiences of the Supreme Being in different contexts. They named him for example *Mbangu*, “angry God” who expresses divine anger by unleashing thunderstorms (2012:35).

The different names of God serve to describe the nature of God at any particular time. This does however not mean that Aawambo believe in many gods (Munyika 2004:220). They also believe that the ancestors are mediators between human beings and God. Therefore some of the death rituals are performed to pass on the spirit of the deceased to the ancestors. Berkstresser found God to be very important in the lives of the Aawambo, especially if the existence of the community was threatened, for example by famine, when Kalunga – the same God but given a different name - would be called upon for help. Thus, the notion of God is related to one who gives and protects life. Another name for God is Nampongo or “approachable God, who could be called upon in times of danger and difficulties, and who was believed to hear prayers and come to help” (Loytty 2012:35). Nampongo is also referred to as “the graceful God who answers prayers”.

Therefore, when rain falls to give farmers a good harvest, the Aawambo praise God saying, *Iyaloo/tangi Nampongo*, or, “thank you Nampongo/God for the blessings”. Pambawiishitamwene/Pamba is another name used for God when he/she is needed to solve difficult matters and the Aawambo call out: *Mbangu tu kwatha*, *Mbangu tu dhiminapo*, the meaning of which is: “Mbangu/God help us, Mpangu/God forgive us” (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:17, Munyika 2004:220).

The European missionaries misinterpreted the use of different names for God and assumed that the Aawambo were polytheists. There is a story told among the Aawambo about a

missionary who heard the name Mbangu for the first time and asked: *Omwafa tuu muna ookalunga oyendji ndishi, Mbangu olye ishewe?* Literally translated this means: “you likely to have many gods, who is Mbangu again?” She supposed that Kalunga, Nampongo, Mbangu and Muthithi were different gods. It was a case of misunderstanding another culture and its context. Munyika accentuates that Aawambo do not worship different gods but that they believe God is acutely aware of human behaviour. People can make him into an angry or into a happy and graceful God. The names by which God is called express God’s perceived moods (Munyika 2004:220). It could be argued that it was in the interest of the Finnish missionaries to maintain the misinterpretation that the Aawambo were polytheists because it had great economic value in their appeal to the Finnish community to support their work „in saving the natives“. If a positive picture were painted of their religious life, questions would be raised about the purpose and significance of their work.

According to Loytty (2012), Kalunga or Pamba indicate the deity’s power to control everything, including the giving and taking of life (2012:26). Therefore, the Aawambo’s religious tradition is consistent with that of wider sub-Saharan Africa where people believe in a Supreme Being who was identified by different names (Mucherera 2001:27).

Furthermore, Aawambo believe in a God who has no gender specification, who lives in heaven (*megulu*) or somewhere in space (*pombanda*), but who can „come down“ to relate to his/her creatures and correct their mistakes where necessary (Loytty 2012:34). The Omuwambo’s gesture - pointing the finger up to the sky- when he or she says: *Oshili, Kalunga megulu mo* („God in heaven“) demonstrates the belief that God stays in a heavenly realm. Another acknowledgement that God acts from above is the custom of the Omuwambo, when a speck of dirt gets into his/her eyes, to look up and say: *Kalunga fugula ndje*, literally, “God take away the soil”. Prayer plays an important role in the lives of Aawambo, especially

when they are in need of rain, or for safety while travelling, for luck in hunting and in building new houses (2012:35).

Indeed, Aawambo pray for everything and, in their requests, they give thanks and praise to Kalunga. They pray to give thanks for the harvest (*oshipe*) and for their cattle (cattle ceremony or *oshidhano shoongombe*) (Berkkstresser, n.d.:4). These prayers are offered through songs, dancing, rites and celebrations.

According to Loytty (2012), “the entire religious system of Ovambo consisted of ceremonies, rituals and rites which formed the sphere of the people’s existence and were present in practices of everyday life” (2012:35). Apart from their belief in God the creator, Aawambo have their own non-Western worldview of interpreting and dealing with life. They have a system for counting and indicating time. They have their own styles of dress and they seek to educate their young people in a way relevant to their context.

Before the Finnish missionaries came to Owambo, the Aawambo knew a traditional form of education whereby parents, guardians and elders in the community taught skills and knowledge to the young. This was done in an informal manner and knowledge was passed on from one generation to another. The skills and knowledge helped Aawambo children to develop a sense of humour and identity. Rituals, including death rituals, were included in this kind of education (Nangula 2013:72).

Munyika lists as some of the activities, traditionally part of schooling such as basket making/weaving, woodcraft, beadwork, pottery, cooking, milking, and pounding millet (Munyika 2004:301). According to Nangula, the traditional education aimed to enable individuals as well as the community to live a commendable life and “In the end, they were proficient to manage their affairs” (2013:74).

This kind of education was not recognised by missionaries and even by some local people (Aawambo) themselves, as being useful (Buys and Nambala 2003:261). The missionaries did not understand the cultural practices of Aawambo because most of these were new to them and summarily dismissed as pagan activities. In 1870 the missionary Hugo Hahn wrote home, asking for more missionaries to come to Owambo: “In the name of God and in the name of thousand heathens to whom the Lord has opened the door. I now direct myself to you with a prayer „come“ and help us” (Nampala and Shigwedha 2006:75). His use of the word “heathen” reveals his assumption of the cultural and religious underdevelopment and inferior status of the people. They had no worthwhile knowledge in their culture to offer to the Europeans. Rather, they were like children who had to be taught everything.

The above argument is supported by Buys and Nambala who state that missionaries looked upon Aawambo as people who knew nothing because they were undeveloped and in need of being civilised (2003:261). Hence their practices were not recognised as being of value and importance, including those related to bereavement and mourning. Agbonkhianmeghe and Orbator (2010:6) also stipulate that, when missionaries arrived in Africa, they presumed that Africans knew little about religion and were ignorant about God. This was also the case in Owambo where the Finnish missionaries told the Aawambo to discard elements of their own culture, even if these were useful.

Many aspects of African culture are aimed at promoting wholesome living and at healing bodies and souls (care and counselling). However, the missionaries could not see this. Instead of supporting Aawambo who were in mourning by simply attending their death rituals and funeral ceremonies, ELCIN condemned these, seeking to impose its Eurocentric Christian views on grieving families. Lombaard (1999) supports this criticism, stating that the rejection of African culture by missionaries resulted in the imposition of Western culture

on Africans instead of teaching them about Christianity within the context of existing African culture (1999:356).

### *3.2.2 Missionary perspectives on death and death rituals as taught to Aawambo*

The missionary teaching on death rituals offered to the Aawambo was unenlightened and prejudicial because the missionaries failed to effectively engage with local culture and to open themselves up to a process of mutual learning. Hewitt (2012), on the basis of his Jamaican experience, states that the colonial churches founded by Reformed missionaries from Europe were dominated by a European missio-cultural ideology that weakened the inculturation process in the context of the hosting cultures (2012:36). The problem is that the European colonial authorities had no respect for, or tolerance of, local cultures which they rejected outright, along with the local people who were regarded as “savage and pagan” (2012:37). Although Hewitt’s arguments are primarily concerned with the mission in the Jamaican and the wider context of the English-speaking Caribbean, it applies equally to the ministry and mission of ELCIN as experienced by the Oshiwambo people. Most Oshiwambo cultural performances were rejected as pagan.

Loytty (2012) highlights that the Europeans missionaries failed to seriously engage with the Aawambo culture because of their Eurocentric mono-cultural policies and their view of European culture as being superior to other cultures (2012:52). Loytty was born and grew up in Owambo, Uukwambi area in ELIM parish. He is the son of a Finnish missionary who was working in Owambo. In the period from 1998 to 2010 he was employed by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM) to work in ELCIN as a music consultant. He taught music and collected indigenous music in the Owambo region (Loytty 2012:18, 25). Because he knew the language and the culture of the Oshiwambo tribe he was able to advocate for

genuine inculturation of Christianity. However, the level of his engagement with the local people was exceptional among the missionaries. Around 2001 he established an ELCIN worship service using African melodies that is still celebrated by the Aawambo (Loytty 2001: new ELCIN worship book).

Lombaard (1999) and Agbonkhianmeghe and Orbator (2010) also plead for a need to contextualise the gospel. They claim that the church should interact seriously with local cultures so that people can develop a deeper relationship with the Christian faith which would make it much more meaningful to them (1991:353. 2010:10). The church has to take into account how particular cultures understand God and seriously study how God is at work in the context of traditional worldviews, especially in relation to traditional care and counselling provision as practised during death rituals. In order to facilitate the realisation of meaningful encounters between the church and local culture, Msomi suggests a more effective theological training of the clergy that enables them to become positive agents of inculturation of the gospel within African local contexts (1991:69). This may prove to be quite a challenging enterprise because most of the texts used for theological training of church leaders are based on a curriculum designed from Western perspectives.

The inculturation process will require the input of competent leaders who can read both the theological and cultural environment and who can uncover life giving messages for the community. In addition, Luzbetak (1996) emphasizes the importance of studying the relation between cultural change and Christianity in order to develop a better insight into problems resulting from missionary activities so as to reduce mistakes and promote work that actually benefits the community (1996:352).

Finnish missionaries in Owambo did not recognise Oshiwambo traditions as an important tool to be used in the conversion of Aawambo who wanted to become Christians. Their

teaching of the Aawambo was characterised by attacks on their traditional views and by its bias in favour of Finnish practice. Nangula (2013) posits that the missionaries who came to Owambo did not differentiate between their own western culture and Christianity. They thought that western culture and Christianity was one and the same thing. The result was that Oshiwambo culture and practices were seen as unchristian and could not be integrated into the ELCIN understanding of Christianity.

Those Aawambo who converted to Christianity were forced to abandon most of Oshiwambo practices, including death rituals, and to adapt to western practices. They had to choose between Christianity and Oshiwambo lifestyles before they could become Christians (2013:76). In the process most of the traditional death rituals used by the Aawambo to offer each other comfort and counselling, were destroyed.

Nangula on the other hand praises the missionary education by emphasising that it was through Christian education, using catechism and the bible as its main materials, that Christianity was planted in Owambo. Thus, the spreading of literacy became a main missionary achievement through which Aawambo were helped to master the basics of writing and reading as well as an understanding of (western) modernity and a knowledge of the bible (2013:75). While contributing in some measure to their development, this education also destroyed part of the Aawambo culture, including the death rituals which Aawambo were not allowed to practise after they had embraced formal Christian education.

Loytty (2012) acknowledges that missionaries who worked in Owamboland were by the training they had received in their home countries not well equipped to deeply explore the traditions and culture of Oshiwambo people. In fact, they were not even interested in studying local customs, traditions and religion. They only learned Oshiwambo (language) in order to communicate with the local people (Aawambo) (2012:55).

On addition, Nangula states that the missionaries who, before coming to Owambo, received training in a mission school in Finland, were taught major subjects such as bible knowledge, the German language, and manual work, for example wagon building, tailoring and music. In Owamboland they learned Oshiwambo and, when they returned to Finland, they teach Oshiwambo in the mission school (2013:34).

The fact is that, on arriving in Owambo the missionaries experienced a culture shock because they had not been told anything substantial about Aawambo cultures such as the practices associated with mourning and many more. What they learned from the local language was usually not enough to help them to understand the Aawambo cultural context. They would start teaching and working among Aawambo with hardly any understanding of the local context and of Oshiwambo culture which, therefore, they rejected out of hand.

Not only did the missionaries misunderstand Oshiwambo customs and norms, but they did not give themselves the chance to understand them. Loytty writes: "Once something was considered by the missionaries to have a pagan connotation, it became difficult to be accepted" (2012:56). Thus, most local customs were rejected by the mission. The bible was mistaken quoted in support of their Euro centred viewpoints.

Aawambo were eager to receive teaching from the missionaries but problems arose when they were forced to abandon traditional cultural practices. Some of these were useful and fulfilled meaningful and well established roles in their communities. Death rituals for example helped Aawambo to cope with death and strengthened the identity of Aawambo communities. Loytty explains that, after some years of missionary work in Owambo, people began to convert to Christianity. The kings encouraged people to join the church and learn new things from the missionaries. However, the mood changed when converts were told to give up traditional rituals such as girls' initiation (*ohango*), boys' circumcision, and

celebrations such as the *uudhano* (dance) (2012:56). Strict rules and sanctions were applied to ensure that local Christians did not attend or take part in any traditional rituals and ceremonies. Who was accused of doing so was excommunicated or banned from church attendance (*ehandungreki*) for some months or even years. People who were penalised included those that took part in cattle ceremonies (*uudhano*) that were also regarded as pagan activities.

According to Loytty, the missionaries failed to satisfactorily fulfil their missionary task because they did not take Aawambo culture seriously. As their mission was firmly embedded in European tradition, they could not but see African culture as inferior: “The churches were built and the congregations were established on African soil, but the cultural environment of the local people was not always thoroughly explored and investigated to serve as a holistic ground for the inculturation of the gospel” (2012:52).

Loytty argues that the gospel was taught in a way, strictly limited by the missionaries’ tradition. There was an avoidance of any influence of Aawambo culture so that people became alienated from their roots and began to feel dissatisfied, for example during communal mourning.

Nambala (1994) states that, in the period of colonialism, the missionaries worked on the premise that the traditions of Christianity were more important than those of any non-European religion (1994:118). Loytty supports this perspective with his argument that the missionaries looked upon Aawambo as undeveloped, simple children of nature. The missionaries felt that the superiority of the Christian religion and their own missionary status authorised to enlighten the Aawambo with their advanced views (2012:56).

The Finnish missionary Kokkonen acknowledged that the early Finnish missionaries in Owambo focused exclusively on evangelising people so that they would become Christians

and adopt European culture (1993:160). According to Loytty “Christianity was introduced and the gospel was preached to the people who also became exposed to new cultural settings” (2012:52).

The problem lay in a failure to explore and investigate the culture of the local people that could have served “as a holistic ground for the inculturation of the gospel” (Loytty 2012:54). As the local culture of Oshiwambo people was not allowed to play a role in their understanding of the gospel, over time some cultural practices, such as the burial of people inside the house, were abandoned. Culture inevitably changes with time but it will become dominated by non-life affirming aspects when a people are subjected to a foreign, powerful, and imperial culture. When people who belong to traditional cultures become alienated from the traditional values and practices that give their life meaning, they may experience a form of social death.

### **3.3 Attitude of the Evangelical Lutheran church in Namibia (ELCIN) towards Oshiwambo death and death rituals**

#### *3.3.1 The teachings of ELCIN*

Most of Christians in Owambo are Lutheran; this is confirmed by HORN (2011:2). The teachings of ELCIN among Oshiwambo people are deeply influenced by those of the Finnish missionaries who planted the church in Owambo (Nangula 2013:76). ELCIN’s rejection of Oshiwambo notions of death of the rituals associated with death is not formally recorded in any official publication of the church. The rejection is however manifesting in the normal behaviour and practices of members of the group who belong to the church.

There is in ELCIN's constitution (*Ekotampango nomaufomangho*) and *elongo lyuukriste* not a word that refers to death rituals within the local culture. The only ELCIN book that mentions death ritual is the official worship book with its order of services and accompanying rituals. It clearly states that ELCIN members are prohibited from throwing soil into the grave during burial (EWB 2008:100) without offering any explanation why the custom is banned. One can only assume that, since the throwing of soil into the grave is a traditional cultural burial ritual of Aawambo, the church considers the custom as pagan.

The contemporary issues of ELCIN practices and teaching cannot be divorced from the teaching of missionaries who regarded all traditional customs and norms as heathen and who taught their local members to intentionally give up their traditional practices, especially those linked to death and burial rituals. Munyika states that "the attitude of missionaries towards Owambo culture and religion was on the whole negative. Many traditions, some quite useful, were thrown out of the window" (2004:334). It could therefore be argued that leaders in ELCIN have been mis-evangelised to discriminate against the practising of Oshiwambo traditions and customs. ELCIN's missio-cultural understanding and its appropriation of Christianity are rooted in a non-African worldview. Therefore to be really a Christian, a person is expected to be westernised and to know reading, to know how to wear western clothes, and to embrace western thinking.

The constitution of ELCIN (*Ekotampango nomaufomangho*) makes clear that, when somebody asks to get baptized and become Christian and an ELCIN member, the church has to make sure that he or she is ready to abandon „pagan“ lifestyles (ELCIN constitution 2001:39). To abandon „pagan“ lifestyles meant: to cease involvement in all Oshiwambo customs including death rituals.

However, it is difficult for Aawambo to abandon some practices such as death rituals, because these help them to cope with difficult situations that occur in life. Mugambi argues for an inculturative approach that combines western Christian tradition and African rituals in a response to death that is more considerate of the needs of people who are faced with the loss of a member of their family or community (2013:535). In this context one could argue that ELCIN has failed to make sincere attempts at inculturation and to offer adequate pastoral care and counselling to Aawambo Christians.

The problem is caused by the missionaries' non-contextual training that neglects to include a missio-cultural appropriation of Oshiwambo traditions especially as these relate to the offering of culturally appropriate care and counselling in times of bereavement. According to Malewo, for appropriate pastoral care and counselling in Africa "... concepts and values in African oral tradition, in African rituals and in African social instructions must be studied first by those who are involved in the care of souls" (2000:55).

ELCIN ministers leave theological institutions without an adequate knowledge of how to conduct bereavement counselling in the context of Aawambo people. The course outline for the pastoral counselling module, used by ELCIN theological training institutions such as the United Lutheran Theological Seminary (ULTS) and the Engela Parish Institute (EPI) (see appendix 1) to equip their pastors, does not include Aawambo and other African materials on death ritual and on methods of offering culturally appropriate counselling (Meteryard 2008:1). The counselling course outline of ULTS and EPI in 2014 (as well as earlier course outlines) does not address issues pertaining to church and local culture.

Msomi concludes that theological training in many African institutions is not preparing ministers sufficiently to work as African counsellors among African congregants (1991:69). In his view theological training institutes in Africa should change their approach to matters of

counselling and adopt a more African way of thinking. Therefore, the ELCIN seminary and institution should take seriously the prevailing social and cultural perceptions of death, traditional death rituals and healing in traditional society and ministers should be trained in accordance with such insights. The theological institutions in ELCIN are still hanging on to western ways of conducting care and counselling in which their lecturers have often more expertise and on which their western oriented teaching materials are based.

The real challenge is whether the ELCIN institutions will consider the inclusion of local knowledge and its appropriation within their curriculum to help pastors understand traditional practices. Kimilike claims that, in order to produce excellent African ministers, theological institutions, including their curriculum, syllabus and criteria, need to be Africanised: “on textualization of theological education can play a major role in ministerial formation” (2008:29). It is obvious that, in order to provide effective care and counselling to African congregations in the African way, ministers need relevant contextual training.

### *3.3.2 The position of African ELCIN pastors as regards Oshiwambo notions of death and burial rituals*

According to Mugambi death and funeral rituals among African people are performed to express sorrow and loss, and to maintain a peaceful and healthy relationship between the deceased and the community (2013:536). The rites promote the wellbeing of both the deceased who is joining the ancestors and the family and community who have to find the strength to cope with their loss. The rituals ensure that the deceased is not offended because that might result in misfortune and suffering of not only his family but the entire community (2013:536). The Aawambo found, and continue to find, it extremely difficult to obey the teachings of the church when it rejects such culturally meaningful rituals. Many live with the

contradiction of remaining members of ELCIN while still practising some of their traditional death rituals.

As one of the African pastors of ELCIN, I have experienced that among the black African pastors there are different attitudes as regards traditional death rituals. Some are proactive when dealing with death rituals used by Aawambo. Others however do oppose the accommodation of traditional death rituals, especially those associated with the tradition of closing of old entrances and the opening up of new ones. This custom is so rigidly adhered to that even pastors cannot use those entrances when they visit the houses of mourners. Loytty confirms that the majority of Owambo pastors have adopted the teachings of missionaries and are against most Oshiwambo traditions (2012:56). The problem is exacerbated by the lack of a contextually relevant theological education for pastors during their training at seminaries (Msomi 1991:61, Kimilike 2008:29).

Aawambo were open to Christianity in its connectedness to Europe, although they did not understand all aspects of western culture. According to Malewo many Africans uncritically received and accepted Christianity and its teaching. Their Christian faith functioned without any genuine interface with their African culture and this resulted in a contradictory state of being with two operating cultures and religions (2000:55). This is still the case in Owambo where the Oshiwambo Christians hold on to Oshiwambo culture while simultaneously embracing a Christian identity linked to a missionary western culture is a schizophrenic way. Their dual religious identities have led them to find ways of coping when they face a death in their surroundings. In such a case, despite the teachings of ELCIN, they participate in local death rituals, both during and after mourning. They do this for the sake of the healing of their souls and minds. However, they also participate in church rituals during burial. It is extremely difficult for the church to accept only those Aawambo as Christians who completely abstain from perform any Oshiwambo traditional rites. A state of hybridity and

contradiction results, shaping the manner in which Aawambo Christians seek to cope with the unaccommodating policies of ELCIN towards their death rituals.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

This chapter argues that the Finnish missionaries' view of Aawambo religion as a form of paganism had far reaching consequences for ELCIN's relationship with, and attitudes towards, traditional cultural practices. The missionaries prescribed that Aawambo must abandon their traditional practices before converting to Christianity. This unenlightened teaching continues to influence the ELCIN ministry and mission among Aawambo.

The chapter argues that the church institutions, responsible for training pastors and preparing them for work in the community, have not been pro-active and taken the initiative to inculturate and indigenize their theological formation so that meaningful pastoral counselling tools become available for the needs of Aawambo in mourning. The uncritical embracing of solely western insights severely restricts the pastors' appreciation of the life-giving resources that are present in their local context to minister to the needs of local people. It is evident that ELCIN pastors are not effectively prepared so as to be able to contextualise their work. Because of this, ELCIN pastors and their ministry among the Aawambo run the grave risk that the people will dismiss them as irrelevant to their needs in times of mourning. The reason is that the pastors have not yet found a way in which to accommodate the traditional death rituals of the Aawambo in their Eurocentric Christian perceptions.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **GENERAL CONCLUSION**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter four summarises the findings of this study on death and death rituals among the Aawambo people and the response of ELCIN. A general overview of the study was presented in chapter one, outlining the research terms, background, the research problem and questions, the research objectives, the theoretical framework, the methodology and the scope of the study.

Chapter two offered an overview of the literature that undergirds the study. It identifies and critiques the scholars of those texts that give meaning to the key concepts used in the study. It proceeds to problematize the contradictions that emerged between Oshiwambo cultural tradition and the ELCIN understanding of death and death rituals. The study identifies the similarities between ELCIN and Oshiwambo traditions on the issues of death and death rituals. The literature used in this study includes scholarly works by key authors from Africa and beyond, who have written about missio-cultural perspectives on death rituals and related issues, and on the response of the Oshiwambo tribe and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia.

The studies by Nampala and Shigwedha (2006), Loytty (2012) and Munyika (2004) whose seminal texts share some perspectives on the Aawambo and on Finnish missionary work among Aawambo, played an important role in postulating how ELCIN ministry and mission engaged with the local culture. Scholars such as Luzbetak (1996), Hewitt (2012), Killen and De Beer (1994), Stone and Duke (1996), and Bate (2002) were consulted for their discussions of theories on church and culture and for theological reflection.

Chapter three explored the missio-cultural response of ELCIN to the Oshiwambo understanding and practice of death and death rituals. It critiques the role of the Finnish missionaries who laid the foundations for a negative attitude to the Oshiwambo perceptions of death and practice of death rituals. The chapter furthermore criticises the way in which ELCIN continues this trend through its uncritical embracing of the missionary legacy. This has resulted in the development of a non-inculturative understanding and practice of the gospel within Oshiwambo communities.

The thesis concludes with chapter four offering a few missio-cultural “signposts” that could facilitate a conversation between the Aawambo people and the Evangelical Lutheran church in Namibia (ELCIN), with the aim of advancing the emergence of a missionary response to death and death rituals that takes account of the need for inculturation. The chapter concludes that inculturation as part of a life giving, honest and open conversation between ELCIN and Oshiwambo culture is necessary for the common good of the community and the church.

## **4.2 Summary**

Oshiwambo culture has interacted with Christianity from the time when the first European missionaries arrived in Owambo and throughout the ministry and mission of ELCIN. The culture has accommodated Christianity to the point where it has thrived, sometime to the detriment of the local culture. It may be argued that culture and church with their competing worldviews have found areas of mutual interest where they co-operate. But there are also areas of intense competition and disagreement. In respect to the important area of death and death rituals, culture and church have differing views. The present study has identified and discussed these. The competing insights, teaching and practices of Oshiwambo culture and

ELCIN have resulted in disunity within local rural communities. The study argues that a contextually meaningful way should be found to meet the needs felt by people when faced with loss through death, and its consequences.

The study suggests that there are clearly identifiable “signposts” that can serve to show ELCIN and Oshiwambo culture the way to establishing a dialogue that may lead to a better, and mutually beneficial, understanding of each other’s perceptions of death and death rituals.

The following perspectives point to the presence of rich and useful elements of life affirming pastoral care and counselling within both ELCIN and the local culture that do not need to be in competition and can fulfil the needs of the Aawambo in periods of mourning.

For this to become a reality though, ELCIN has to enter into a process of intercultural learning enabling it to recognise those religious resources and assets in the Aawambo tradition that can be appropriated within its ministry and mission. This will require bold ecclesial leadership that can facilitate dialogue and help its conservative faith community to cross boundaries and to appreciate an exchange of intercultural insights. For example, there is an urgent need for the church to recognise that Aawambo are a deeply religious people and that, traditionally, their prayers are performed through songs, dancing, rites and celebrations that must be appreciated by missionaries who need to find ways to include them in Christian practice (Berkstresser, n.d.:4). Hence, for ELCIN to grow in the ecumenical sense, it should take the risky missionary initiative to cross missio-cultural boundaries and to engage with Aawambo culture in order to appropriate its resources for life-giving counselling during death and funeral rituals.

### **4.3 Concept of death in Oshiwambo and ELCIN traditions**

The research affirms that both Oshiwambo culture and the ELCIN Christian tradition acknowledge the harsh reality of death within their communities, but both also believe that life does not end with death because the human spirit journeys to another world, to the realm of the ancestors and the Creator. According to Aawambo tradition, the spirit of the deceased joins the ancestors if the deceased has lived a good life. Otherwise the deceased's spirit becomes a drifting ghost.

Within the Christian tradition it is thought that, after death, the person who was a faithful follower of Jesus Christ goes to heaven to be with God, or else he or she goes to hell where Satan resides (Mugambi 2013:536). This belief makes of death a fearful event and it leads people to perform various rituals that help them to cope with their fear and loss. These rituals also prepare the deceased for the journey beyond earthly life.

The religious beliefs of the individual and the community are important because, through them, people appeal to a higher power to facilitate their need for healing, help and counsel in times of crisis. For example, the Aawambo believe that, through their death rituals, good relations between themselves and their ancestors are maintained and their wellbeing is promoted (Gerber n.d.:6).

The study has established that mourning rituals play a prominent role in Oshiwambo tradition. Communal mourning, according to Magesa, strengthens the wellbeing of all in the community (2007:157). Within the ELCIN Christian tradition church members are also required to visit community members and comfort them during mourning (Ekotampango, resolution 63.2).

The study concludes that the missionary heritage of ELCIN has had some negative effects in that it has led to the marginalizing of Oshiwambo death rituals and their replacement with western Christian funeral rituals (Nampala 2004:152, Mugambi 2013:536). The Aawambo have responded to the competing religio-cultural requirements by embracing those rituals from ELCIN and Aawambo that they deemed to be helpful during periods of mourning.

#### **4.4 Inculturation**

The missio-cultural challenge that Oshiwambo culture and ELCIN will face in the future concerns the provision of mutually beneficial life giving care and counselling to the community in periods of mourning. This requires a process of intentional inculturation whereby ELCIN should embark on a conversation with Aawambo culture. Lombaard (1999) defines such an inculturation as “the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and culture or cultures” (1999:353). This definition invites churches to appropriate cultural elements in their work areas so that people can integrate the gospel with their culture. Therefore, to build a good foundation for contextual pastoral care and counselling one has to consider the people’s traditional worldview (Msomi 2008:98). Christian care and counselling will be more effective if they can be associated with the receiver’s culture. If there is no link between the two, counselling will occur in a vacuum and remain relatively meaningless.

On the subject of culture, Bate states that culture gives meaning to the lives of human beings and strengthens their awareness of their identity (2002:23). Aawambo regard traditional death rituals as indispensable for the maintenance of their culture. They feel naked and hopeless when they are denied the right to practise the customary ceremonies, especial the rituals that still have meanings to their ways of life. The death rituals of the Oshiwambo tribe represent the specific way in which the group deals with the reality of death. These rituals

were already in existence, centuries before western missionaries introduced Christianity into the local context. Anyhow, some of the rituals have perished due to development substances such as modern houses, transports, coffins and many more but there are some rituals still on demand till today.

As the ministry and mission of ELCIN engage with the Namibian cultural context, its theological reflection must honestly and openly face up to the cultural complexities of death that empower members of the community to build resilience on the basis of their experiences (Swinton and Mowat 2006:9).

When the ministry and mission of a church within a given environment engage with the local culture, then, in the ensuing relationship, a missio-cultural dynamics will develop linking the church's missional understanding and praxis with the local culture. The founding of some churches by foreign European missionaries who did not accept that getting to know the local language and tradition is a prerequisite for inculturating the gospel in the local context, has resulted in Christian institutions that are not genuinely part of local communities, thus limiting the impact of the gospel (Reynolds 2012:25). Instead they allowed the European culture that was their own background to exercise power over many aspects of local cultures.

Nangula, discussing mistakes made by Finnish missionaries in Owambo, points out that, missionaries considered their European culture as synonymous with Christianity. As in their eyes Oshiwambo culture was pagan, its integration with Christianity could not be tolerated (2013:76). This resembles Mugambi's argument that the missionaries' work could have been more effective, had they first learnt and come to appreciate the cultures of the people they set out to evangelise (2013:519).

Mwiti and Dueck emphasise that Christianity is not associated with a specific mono culture but that it can fit into any culture, nor is it concerned with colour, race and gender because it

“is shaped by Jesus” message of the reign of God” (2006:37). It may therefore be argued that Christianity can be appropriated by any culture but that it is not to be controlled by any culture, be it western or Oshiwambo. The mistake of the missionaries was to exclusively label Christianity as part of European culture while rejecting the culture of Aawambo (Loytty 2012:56).

The research pleads for Christianity as practised by ELCIN to recognise and understand the local culture of the Aawambo in order to become relevant and meaningful to the people. Agbonkhianmeghe and Orbator affirm that Christianity has to take into account how a particular culture understands God and how it looks upon care giving in the context of its traditional worldview (2010:6). Hence, ELCIN needs to acknowledge the particular characteristics of traditional care and counselling provision for which the Aawambo culture has developed its own practices.

It will be problematic for ELCIN’s brand of Christianity to become culturally embraced if it is not fully indigenised and a part of the local culture. Christianity cannot be communicated without culture as a medium of instruction (2013:518). Therefore the local Oshiwambo culture has to inform the ministry and mission of ELCIN if it to be effective within that culture.

The research finds that missionaries’ inbuilt Euro-centric mono cultural heritage intentionally mis-educated them to impose western culture in Aawambo through Christianity, rather than using Oshiwambo culture which offers all the materials and tools that are meaningful to Aawambo (Lombaard 1999:356).

#### 4.5 Teachings and work of the Finnish missionaries in Owambo

The study has argued that the teachings of Finnish missionaries were biased against the traditional practices of Aawambo because these were thought to be pagan and pagan practices could not be connected with Christianity. The missionaries rejected Oshiwambo traditional practices because these differed from their own culture and they considered their own culture as synonymous with Christianity. Aawambo who wanted to convert to Christianity were forced to abandon many traditional rituals and customs such as polygamy (Nangula 2013:76, Munyika 2004). As a result the Aawambo find themselves caught between the contradictions of two competing traditions. Many opt for sticking to their cultural roots.

Aawambo employ their African worldview to cope with the issues of life while at the same time appropriating western religious concepts and values. Oshiwambo culture offers many resources for pastoral care and counselling during mourning that pastors could make use of to help their congregants. The Aawambo are community-conscious with a strong sense of the need to care for others. They believe in “*Ubuntu gabantu*”, meaning that a person is a person because of other persons (Mbiti 1970:1). They depend on each other.

The researcher argues that missionaries have destroyed Oshiwambo culture with their teaching, dominated by elements of western culture. ELCIN’s western influenced missionary heritage means that mis-evangelisation happened because the missionaries were not taught about Oshiwambo inherent values before they started working among Aawambo and teaching them about the Christian faith. This made the missionary activity among Aawambo highly non-inculturative (Niitenege 2013:83). Apart from their mistakes, the missionaries were men and women of that time therefore must be judged as such. Every culture has its positive and negative aspects, so Oshiwambo culture too. It could be difficult for someone from outside of Oshwambo community, to understand the aspect of chopping the knees of the corps before

burial, as well as the burying of the body/corps in the kitchen. There is a health and economy concerns in some Oshiwambo burial rituals therefore they cannot even fit into modern Owambo.

#### **4.6 Training of ELCIN pastors**

The study argues that the theological institutions of ELCIN that prepare pastors to work among Aawambo do not adequately equip them to respond with life-transforming and contextually meaningful pastoral care and counselling to the congregants in times of mourning. The inadequate training is due to the missio-cultural failure of ELCIN to embrace inculturation in the pedagogical formation of its pastors. The curriculum used in training has so far neglected the examination and appropriation of the ritual resources available in Oshiwambo traditional practices that deal with death and mourning.

Msomi (1999:69) and Reynolds (2013:39) are therefore correct in their assessment that theological training in Africa does not adequately prepare pastors for work as counsellors among the African congregants. The theological training institutions need to be radically contextualised so that pastoral leaders are able to meet the needs of their people. Reynolds states that contextualisation of theological training “helps [to] keep people in touch with their real life experience in a manner that is relevant to their context” (2013:39). Malewo supports this argument by positing that, to be able to offer pastoral care and counselling in Africa, one first has to learn the concepts and values of African people. The concepts should include oral traditions, rituals and social instructions (2000:55). Malewo’s view, if applied to pastors who work among Aawambo, implies that without prior knowledge of Oshiwambo concepts and practices the pastors cannot offer effective care to Aawambo.

It follows that, as long as ELCIN trains its pastors in Christian pastoral care and counselling but fails to include knowledge of relevant African concepts; those pastors will not be able to usefully support the Aawambo, especially in periods of mourning. ELCIN pastors will continue graduating from their training institutions without knowing how to conduct culturally meaningful counselling that responds to Oshiwambo mourning (Meteryard 2008:1).

The lack of sensitive and proper culture-specific training of ELCIN pastors has affected their response to death rituals among Aawambo. According to Loytty most Owambo clergies have adopted the missionaries' teachings that advocate against most Oshiwambo traditions. Hence, the clergies take a rigid position and reject all Oshiwambo traditional practices including rituals (2012:56). Ward posits that Christianity and traditional culture need to cultivate an understanding of each other so that conflicts will come to an end and a fertile cross-cultural relationship can develop. He suggests that Christianity should be treated as a culture so that it "can be transformed itself by other cultural dimensions of our humanity" (2001:160).

#### **4.7 Suggestions on the way forward**

The issues examined in this study can serve as a resource for ELCIN pastors, increasing their awareness of the necessity to acquire knowledge of the traditional rites and rituals practised in the Aawambo community. Through a genuine inculturative process ELCIN pastors may appropriate positive resources in Oshiwambo tradition and apply these beneficially to the care and counselling they offer to bereaved congregants. Inculturation will make the process of care giving and counselling more meaningful for the Aawambo if it is in accordance with their traditional culture. On the basis of the issues examined in this study it is suggested that ELCIN, in an endeavour to strengthen its ministry and mission response to the requirements

of the Aawambo community, specifically in periods of communal mourning, should consider the following points.

#### *4.7.1 The Oshiwambo concept of death must be taken seriously by ELCIN*

The understanding of health, illness and death among Aawambo has to be taken seriously if ELCIN aims to provide them with life-giving counselling. Niistinda agrees that, for meaningful care and counselling, counsellors must look upon the related African perceptions as valuable and relevant (2005:16). For the Christian faith to acquire deep roots among Aawambo people, it must honestly converse with the culture and engage in intercultural learning. Christian pastoral care and counselling will make more sense to Aawambo people when connected to their culture.

One of the cultural issues that requires urgent reassessment by ELCIN is the traditional view of death and the mourning rituals, practised by Aawambo but disapproved of by ELCIN. The Aawambo perform a number of rituals when one of them dies. Pastors and other church workers should move beyond their historical mistaken and biased view, dismissing a reality that they did not fully understand and that they took for paganism. Instead they need to honestly engage with Aawambo ways of healing through communal care and counselling.

#### *4.7.2 Inculturation could be an effective tool in the provision of care and counselling*

Aawambo Christians can be empowered to find a wholesome balance between African culture and western Christian culture that allows them to perform their traditional practices. Lombaard (1999:353) calls for dialogue between culture and faith, because culture and faith go together and elements from African culture can be appropriated into the Christian care

practice and help to restore the wholeness of African people in their general way of life and „culture“ (Msomi 2008:98). Agbonkhianmeghe and Orbator (2010:6) also advocate the contextualisation of theology in Africa because Christianity has to take into account how a particular culture sees God and what rituals it practises in order to promote wholesome living in local communities.

#### *4.7.3 Recognising the authenticity of Oshiwambo religion*

Western missionaries have mistakenly described and dismissed Oshiwambo religion and its traditional practices as pagan. According to Berkstresser (n.d.:4), Munyika (2004:220) and Loytty (2012:34), Aawambo are deeply religious and their prayers take the form of songs, dancing, rites and celebrations (Berkstresser 2010:6). Therefore the way forward requires the acknowledgement of wrong perspectives and an apology where after the leaders of both institutions need to adopt a position characterised by mutual respect and learning. The process has to start with a respect for things African, and with learning to drink from “African wells”, rather than embracing as orthodoxy all that emerges from external sources.

The historical error that resulted in Africans abandoning their own traditional Owambo values must be urgently addressed. This will allow presently dead, but formerly useful, elements of Aawambo culture to be restored. It is a missionary responsibility of ELCIN to be aware of, and respect, people’s religion and culture. The religion of local people has to be taken seriously so that ELCIN does not repeat the mistakes made by the Finnish missionaries in Owambo. The important objective of ELCIN’s intercultural learning process should be to enrich its powers of perception and to broaden its understanding and practice of its missionary engagement and, ultimately, to provide better care and counselling to all people.

*4.7.4 Local culture must be taken seriously for successful mission work and for affirmation of the identity of local people*

It is difficult for Christianity to develop deep and real roots in the community if it is not connected to the local culture (Smith 1984). Therefore ELCIN's ministry and mission should listen to the gospel as it is speaking to them from within the religio-cultural context of the people that ELCIN is serving. As Reynolds states: "For the people to appreciate the gospel properly, they should be allowed to understand and appropriate it in their cultural context" (2012:25).

ELCIN's mission (Kapolo 2014:3) should be careful not to repeat mistakes made by Finnish missionaries, but fully recognise the culture of Owambo and let the gospel converse with Himba people in their Himba culture. Should ELCIN facilitate a dialogue between the gospel and local cultures, the result may be a good understanding of the gospel, eventually leading to genuine cultural change through honest, open conversation (Loytty 2012:25). According to Bate culture is crucially important as it gives meaning to people's lives and strengthens their awareness of their identity (2002:23).

*4.7.5 The institution and the seminary of ELCIN need to offer contextually relevant training in pastoral care and counselling*

The study highlights the importance for ELCIN of reviewing its theological education so as to take account of the African context in which the pastors function. Curriculums, used in training and still based on the inherited Eurocentric missionary tradition, need to be comprehensively reviewed. Seminaries must especially take into account the prevailing social and cultural perceptions of death rituals and of healing practices in a traditional society

and ministers should be trained in accordance with such insights. Theological institutions in Namibia, especially ELCIN institutions, are still teaching western-biased ways of conducting care and counselling. A radical overhaul is urgently needed to make pastors aware of local cultural practices in order for pastoral activities to become culturally meaningful. The point is not to support practices which cause harm to bodies and souls, but to provide the bereaved among the Aawambo with care and counselling that create peace of mind.

#### *4.7.6 Strengthening the ELCIN community by a greater appreciation of Aawambo traditional culture*

Africans in general value their communal identity because it is a powerful cultural instrument to help one another, especially in tragic circumstances. According to Setiloane, “African nature cannot take being isolated and made to be alone” (1986:9). It is this African characteristic that fosters strong communal identities and it functions both in ELCIN and in Aawambo tradition. Both celebrate communal gatherings during bereavement. Both engage in shared prayers and in offering words of hope. Therefore, the leaders of ELCIN should be able to find ways of appropriating Aawambo death rituals and accommodating these in their care of community members. As Magezi mentions, “the African notion that an individual does not exist on her/his own, for a person is a person through and with others” (*umuntu ungumuntu gabantu*) is a valuable notion for the church (2007:167).

According to Magezi, counselling in Africa is a process that concerns all members of the community who will work together to solve crises: “The wellbeing of one meant the wellbeing of all; when they celebrated, they did it together, and when death occurred, they grieve together” (2007:157). This is also applicable to Aawambo who cry together, suffer together and laugh together. They gather in times of joy and in times of sorrow. They sympathise with

one another in life's struggles. One individual's sickness or bereavement is the concern of the whole village and the whole village will care for that person in various ways such as visiting them with messages of encouragement and hope and with words of prayer.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

Chapter four argues that the traditional practices related to the occurrence of death among the Aawambo are important in the life of community but that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) has consistently failed to appropriate the necessary positive cultural resources for its ministry and mission. The failure of the church is in part due to mis-evangelisation by Finnish missionaries who planted the church in Owambo. Therefore, if ELCIN wishes to offer effective care and counselling to bereave Aawambo, it has to reconsider the value of the culture of Aawambo and appropriate it for use in the church's practice of ministry.

## Namibia Administrative Regions 2003



**Figure 1:** The map of Namibia and its thirteen regions

**Appendix 1: The United Lutheran Theological Seminary – Paulinum 2014****The counselling course outline – United Lutheran Theological Seminary (ULTS) – Paulinum 2014**

Week

1	Introduction: The Christian understanding of healing. The church as a therapeutic community. Church healing ministry.
2	Processing feeling and dealing with crisis. Ministry in a sick society. The Pastor as a nouthetic counsellor.
3	What is the essence of mutual care? Clinebells ABCD Model
4	HIV/AIDS counselling  The emotional crisis of HIV/AIDS for both the infected and affected
5	Elizabeth-Kubler Rose model on death and dying as the last stage of growth
6	The church as the vehicle of good news. Groups and individuals  Objectives of healing through counselling.  Confidentiality in counselling

7	<p>Disease and healing in the Bible and Society. Healing and forgiveness.</p> <p>Factors influencing society. Pastoral visitations and counselling</p>
8	<p>Problems of alcohol and drug addiction. Counselling the addicts. The need for referral counselling</p>
9	<p>The study of marriage counselling (Pre-marital preparation).</p> <p>Divorce</p> <p>Counselling skills: positioning, observation and listening, attending, responding and assessing.</p>
10	<p>Grief among children.</p> <p>Working with children and adolescents</p>
11	<p>Counselling the lonely, dying and the bereaved.</p> <p>Dealing with adolescents.</p> <p>Counselling the widows, widowers, family and orphans</p>
12	<p>The bereavement journey.</p> <p>The family healing</p>
13	<p>Some guidelines for helping those who grieve.</p>

	The grief process in Africa
14	The Holy spirit and counselling. The church as the bringer of good news  How does the holy spirit work in counselling  The funeral
15	Revision
16	Examinations commence

### **Prescribed book**

H. Clinebell 1984. Basic types of Pastoral Care and counselling. Abingdon Press, Nashville.

### **Recommended books**

Jay E. Adams 1970. Competent to counsel. Grand Rapids, Michigan

C.W Brister 1977. Pastoral care in the church. San Francisco, Harper and Row publishers

R.A Kalish 1977. Caring relationships. The dying and the bereaved. New York, Baywood Publishers Company

E.K Ross 1975. Death the final stage of growth prentice hall, New Jersey

C.W Stewart 1983. The minister as marriage counsellor. Abingdon Press, Nashville

David K, Switzer 1983. The minister as crisis counsellor. Abingdon Press

Alta Van Dyk 2001. HIV/AIDS Care and Counselling. A multidisciplinary approach. CTP Book Printers, Ca

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