Christianization, the New Testament and COVID-19 in Owambo, Namibia

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Abstract
This article explores religious and cultural responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Namibia, focusing particularly on the northern region of Owambo. Since the 1870s, Owambo has experienced a rapid and widespread process of Christianization. Today, the vast majority of the population (both in Owambo and in wider Namibia) identify as Christian. In this context, the supremacy of the Bible and Christianity was established, in no small part, through the instigation of cultural crisis – the upending of social norms and the demonization of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and local cultural practice. From foodstuffs to family structure, from initiation to forms of dress and adornment – the overtly ‘traditional’ became taboo. And yet, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate the endurance of ATR and demonstrate that the cultural ‘text’ is at least as significant as the biblical text in the current crisis, whether as sphere of impact or source of resilience. This article therefore reflects on responses to the current COVID-19 crisis in light of the historical cultural crisis, exploring how Christianity and ATR are perceived to be affected by COVID-19, and how communities are drawing on Christianity/the Bible and ATR as sources of resilience.

Keywords
African Traditional Religion, Christianity, COVID-19, Namibia, New Testament, Owambo

Introduction
Having arrived in Namibia in mid-March 2020, I watched as the Government of the Republic of Namibia acted swiftly and decisively in its response to a
relatively low number of initial cases of COVID-19 (seemingly, all imported). We went into a national lockdown from 27 March 2020 with eight cases reported. Seven weeks later, with travel within the borders unrestricted, I left the capital, Windhoek, and travelled to my fieldwork location in the north of the country. Rising to an initial peak of 16 cases (5 April), Namibia appeared for some time to have contained the virus, with no community transmission and no new cases announced for a period of 45 days (5 April – 20 May). However, at the time of writing (September 2020), the situation is vastly different, with community transmission indisputable, the capital in lockdown, a national night-time curfew, and case-numbers rising exponentially. As of 6 September, Namibia’s (known) case-load has risen to 8685, and 89 people have lost their lives.1

The following discussion explores religio-cultural responses to the arrival, progression and impact of the pandemic in Namibia. The responses are contextualized against the backdrop of a complex historical (and, therefore, contemporary) relationship between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Namibia. I focus particularly on the northern Owambo region, which has been my fieldwork location for the last nine years and where I am currently based (May 2020 to June 2021). Ordinarily, I would have been conducting contextual interpretations of New Testament texts with groups of community members in this setting, and my writing would have had an exegetical bent. However, modifications due to the constraints of the pandemic mean that I have drawn here instead on individual (by-proxy) interviews with local community members in Owambo and the well of print and online media in wider Namibia. This article therefore considers the introduction and impact of Christianity and the New Testament on Owambo communities and local expressions of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and reflects on the polarization of Christianity and ATR that the missionaries instigated. Using this polarization as a lens, I trace evidence of the historical impacts of Christianity and the New Testament in the contemporary crisis and I consider the extent to which religious and cultural responses to COVID-19 are reflective of the reshaping by the missionaries of the religio-cultural landscape of Owambo as a region, and Namibia as a whole.

Christianization and Cultural Crisis in Owambo

Namibia (formerly South West Africa) is notable for the high level of religiosity of its population; in the vast majority (97%),2 people identify as Christian and around 50% belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN).

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1. Case numbers according to https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/namibia/. Accessed 7 September 2020.
2. 2016 country population: 2,324,388 (Namibia Statistics Agency 2017: 13), of which approximately 97% identify as Christian (United States Department of State 2019: 1).
Now independent of official missionary influence (since 1954), the church was inherited from the Finnish Missionary Society (FMS; now the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission), which had chosen as its first destination outside Finland (after its establishment in 1859) the Ondonga kingdom in northern Namibia. The Ondonga kingdom forms part of the Owambo region – also known as ‘the North’, by contemporary administrative district names, or as ‘Owamboland’, its colonial name as a ‘Native Reserve’ under the Apartheid regime. The FMS arrived in Ondonga in 1870 and were met with a mixed reception from Aandonga ([the] Ndonga people). At times appreciated for their practical skills and as trading partners, the missionaries also faced periods of extreme hostility and the sense from traditional authorities that they were “‘poisoning the culture’” (McKittrick 2002: 95). However, following the baptism of the Ondonga king in 1912, the fortunes of the incipient mission changed for the better, and rates of baptism and conversion climbed.

After a shaky start, the FMS focused its attention positively on educating the young at mission stations, translating the Bible (New Testament: 1903; Hebrew Bible: translated by 1920, printed, 1954) into the vernacular (Oshindonga), and introducing the population to the tenets and benefits of Christianity (Oshindonga: uukristi). A small degree of their attention was directed toward finding points of coherence with local belief systems, such as finding commonality between the Christian God and Owambo Supreme Being, Kalunga, whose name was adopted for use in the Oshindonga Bible. This was despite their reported fear of syncretism (Miettinen 2005: 131). However, the majority of missionary efforts focused on eliminating the ‘traditional’ beliefs and practices of African Traditional Religion in the region. Missionary antipathy for autochthonous (that is, localized, indigenous, pre-Christian) worldviews and life-ways was targeted at diverse aspects of what is now referred to as ‘Ndonga culture’ (omuthigululwakalo gwAandonga, literally meaning ‘the inheritance of the Aandonga’). The missionaries forbade visits to traditional healers (oonganga), whose practices they aligned with witchcraft and sorcery. They imposed Western dress and challenged local initiation and wedding practices. Polygamy was not allowed for those aspiring to conversion, with permission to convert being in the hands of the missionaries (McKittrick 2002: 8).

Throughout this process, the role of missionaries was a complex one – they were at once ‘pawns’ of the colonial powers, ‘mediators’ between colonial powers and local authority figures (kings, headmen) and figures of opposition against those same traditional authorities, as and when they saw contextual realities compromising Christian values or European cultural norms (Löytty 2012: 55). They provided refuge for ordinary Aandonga/Aawambo (Ndonga/Wambo

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3. Kingdom: Ondonga; language: Oshindonga; people: Aandonga; adjectival form: Ndonga. Region: Owambo; language: Oshiwambo; people: Aawambo; adjectival form: Wambo.
people) at mission stations in times of crisis and encouraged (particularly, young) Aandonga/Aawambo to leave their homes and reside at missions, thereby disrupting community organization and upending systems of authority (McKittrick 2002: 90-129). They also introduced European/Western systems of education and medical care, with the first hospital and teacher-training institution being established in 1911 and 1913, respectively (Löytty 2012: 54). To this day, Christianity and hospitals are strongly associated with each other (John 2019b: 103). That the process of missionization created a parallel system remains in evidence, not least in local naming conventions, with public use of European or biblical ‘school’ or ‘formal’ names and private use of Oshindonga ‘home’ names (John 2019b: 223). As one of my neighbours explains:

We lost our traditional names because when Christianity came, they denied our traditional names, like Hailulu. Instead they gave me Herman. But now, according to current understanding, our traditional names still exist. We still have them. (Tatekulu Herman Iiyambo)

That the transmission of the Gospel in Ondonga (and wider Owambo), including its translation, involved the systematic disruption, devaluation and destruction of Oshindonga (Oshiwambo) culture is widely reported. For the most part, missionaries did not distinguish between their own European culture(s) and Christianity (Sheetheni 2015: 51) and thus found little salvageable in Ndonga contexts with which they could inculturate Christianity. The New Testament was introduced as a text supposedly superior to the Ndonga cultural (oral) text (despite the appropriation and mis-appropriation of Oshindonga terminology [John 2019b: 6-7, 126-30, 194, 229-30]), and the missionaries thus focused their attentions on changing and eradicating aspects of indigenous belief and practice, irrespective of whether there existed biblical textual materials to merit so doing (Löytty 2012: 56). The missionaries focused their attentions on imparting religious authority to the young, thereby disrupting local gerontocratic structures (McKittrick 2002). Local matrilineal kin and inheritance structures were disrupted by encouraging patriarchal narratives and notions of the ideal, male-headed household (Yamakawa 2009: 120). Missionaries forbade visits to local healers (John 2019b: 102-103), imposed European dress codes (Shigwedha 2006), and labelled as deviant traditional rituals, whether connected to initiation and weddings (Tuupainen 1970) or to mourning and burial (Sheetheni 2015; see also Nampala 2006). Misunderstanding of local cultural beliefs surrounding witchcraft and witchcraft-prevention meant that traditional healers, witches and sorcerers were subsumed under the single category of ‘witchcraft’ (John 2019b: 7). In a failure to utilize local musical traditions and generate inculturated worship – Oshiwambo dance, work songs and ululation were rejected (uudhano, iiyimbo and okuligola, respectively) – hymns were imported from Europe (Löytty
Indeed, the alignment of Owambo traditions with ‘paganism’ is still in evidence in the 2001 ELCIN constitution that requires clergy to ascertain that converts will definitely commit to the abandonment of a ‘pagan’ lifestyle before they allow conversion and baptism (Sheetheni 2015: 55).

Such profound shifts in belief and practice certainly proved easier to advance amongst the young, who were particularly drawn to what Meredith McKittrick calls the ‘new matrix of goods, ideas, relationships, and magic that accompanied missionaries into the floodplain’ (2002: 4). It was the youth who initiated the Epapudhuko (‘Awakening’) revival movement in 1952 after concerns surfaced amongst some Aandonga that converts had not fully shed their association with uupagani (‘paganism’). During the Epapudhuko, demonstrations of Christian piety included the rejection of local forms of wealth and custom: ‘many people burned oonyoka – expensive necklaces made of delicate shell beads – and rare, costly shell and ivory pendants’ and ‘gave up omalovu (sorghum beer) and tobacco’ (McKittrick 2002: 250). Such expressions of dedication to Christianity, including a polarizing distinction from ‘paganism’, were common as the revival and conversion movement swept the region from East to West, having originated in Ondonga (McKittrick 2002: 249). The efficacy with which this polarization was introduced (in Owambo, as well as in Namibia as a whole) can be seen today in the statistics for religious affiliation: according to the ‘International Religious Freedom Report 2019: Namibia’ (United States Department of State 2019: 1), whilst Christianity accounts for around 97% of the population’s affiliation, traditional or ‘folk’ religion is amongst several accounting for the remaining 3%. The missionary instigation of ‘cultural crisis’, by those metrics, was a success.

**African Traditional Religion and Cultural Resilience in Owambo**

Against the backdrop of a concerted and sustained effort to eliminate ‘traditional’ worldviews, as well as the apparent successes reflected in contemporary levels of Christian affiliation and religiosity, scholarly claims that Christianity has usurped autochthonous (indigenous, localized) beliefs and practices in Owambo communities are perhaps unsurprising. And yet, conflicts and contradictions would necessarily arise in a context within which the missionaries established a polarizing narrative of Christianity versus ATR and cultural norms (even where they had nothing to do with religious belief). As McKittrick has amply demonstrated, it was uukristi versus uupagani (2002: 13). However, she also points to ‘struggles’, ‘fluidity’, ‘mass “reversion” to indigenous practices’ (2002: 15, 212), which led to the revival movement in the 1950s. Throughout the period of missionization, she suggests, there was a ‘blurring’ and ‘constant exchange of symbols, ideas, and knowledge’ (McKittrick 2002: 8, 116) between indigenous worldviews and Christianity. This is surely to be expected. As Klaus Nürnberger notes, ‘African
spirituality’ endures – one would not expect autochthonous beliefs and practices to have vanished, because ‘the basic assumptions of the original African view of reality are not left behind when people convert to Christianity or join the churches for other reasons’ (Nürnberger 2007: 16). And, as he recommends, considerations of cultural crisis and the resistance and persistence of ATR need to take place at a particular, local level:

In the current spatial situation you find a diverse spectrum of combinations, interactions, inter-penetrations, adjustments, new developments, deconstructions and simple decay. Local and detailed analyses would be necessary to know exactly what happens at grass roots level in specific communities. (Nürnberger 2007: 20)

What, then, was the result of the constant exchange of ideas, of the battles and blurrings between ATR and Christianity in Ondonga/Owambo? What can we learn about the interactions and interpenetrations between the two in times of crisis, such as that within which we now find ourselves? Certainly, contemporary studies of illness, healthcare and aetiology (Koppe 1995, de Jongh 1998), clothing and ritual (Nampala 2006; Shigwedha 2006), spirit beliefs (Groop 2010), weddings (Tuupainen 1970; Yamakawa 2009; Fairweather 2003) and death and burial rituals (Sheetheni 2015) all index enduring cultural resistance in Owambo. These studies illustrate that it is through the sustained agency of Owambo communities that such resistance is exercised and that ‘cultural resilience’ is enacted and rehearsed (Brasche 2009). The effect of missionary attempts at cultural vandalism is thereby mitigated and moderated.

Building upon the findings above, and specifically focusing on the Ondonga kingdom, my own investigation of the interactions between ATR and Christianity (John 2019b) contests the claims that (a) knowledge of ATR in the Owambo is all-but-lost, and that the few who have it will not share their knowledge with outsiders (Aarni 1982), (b) witchcraft and sorcery, good and bad magic have been displaced (Hiltunen 1986, 1993) and (c) ‘virtually all indigenous religious practice, from male initiation to rainmaking to offering sacrifices to ancestors, [has] vanished’ (McKittrick 2002: 1). In summary, I concluded that the claims immediately above advance the oversimplified conclusion that – in what is now only 150 years (1870–2020) – Owambo has experienced a neat cleavage with its ‘traditional’ or (ATR-based) ‘religious’ past.

Over the course of that study, and drawing upon African Biblical Studies, I developed ‘Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation Groups’ (CCBIGs; a form of contextual Bible study with an added emphasis on the ethnographic-anthropological context). These grassroots discussion groups were designed to both gather Owambo interpretations of a selection of New Testament texts and explore the complex relationship between Christianity and ATR discussed above. This approach explicitly employs ATR in the interpretation of biblical texts (John
2017, 2019a, 2019b). In a setting wherein there is a pronounced sense that at least certain aspects of the ‘traditional’ are shameful, and where Christian religiosity is high and the Bible is held in very high esteem, the use of the Bible as a means to explore text and context (biblical and cultural) provided a more comfortable forum in which participants could reflect upon the particularities of their experience and interpretations. Thus, whilst the introduction of the biblical text bears considerable responsibility for instigating a cultural crisis in this context, it might also act as a tool to deconstruct the crisis and as a means to bring ATR, or ‘local culture’, to the fore. Biblical interpretation discussions were thus prefaced with questions focusing on the cultural context, and participants were actively encouraged to relate their interpretations of biblical texts to their understandings and experiences of their cultural context. Furthermore, results of the discussions were contextualized using ethnographic literature and extended participant-observation fieldwork on my part.

Participants in discussion groups variously positioned ATR, framed as Ndonga culture, as a sibling, partner or support to Christianity, suggesting parallel and equally significant influences (John 2019b: 225-33). This chimes with Lovisa T. Nampala’s suggestion that ‘traditional beliefs and Christianity were actually perceived as different branches of the same religion’ (2006: 25). However, discussions of Christianity as the ultimate arbiter of what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, of what could be legitimately ‘kept’ and what must be ‘thrown out’ from the cultural side (John 2019b: 102-103), relate the clear power-imbalance in the relationship. Perhaps because of the marginalization of things ‘cultural’, the sense that the ‘traditional’ is ‘taboo’, ATR would appear to have been demoted to the contextual setting upon which Christianity sits. Culture is more closely aligned with homestead-based activities, whereas Christianity is more closely aligned with outward expressions of faith and with the church building (John 2019b: 231). In my estimation, then, the maintenance of traditional beliefs and practices (ATR) by members of a Christian community has involved ATR being reconceptualized as – or relegated to the status of – ‘tradition’ or ‘local culture’ (omuthigululwakalo). This enables the accommodation of Christianity (uukristi) as formal ‘religion’ or ‘belief’ whilst maintaining the legitimacy and survival of ATR, and acts as a means to manage the conflicts and contradictions that arise between the two (by no means monolithic) spheres. The question now arises as to whether those results bear out in the current moment of crisis.

**Christian and Biblical Responses to COVID-19 in Owambo**

In the midst of a contagious pandemic, of course, it would not be appropriate to convene CCBIG discussion sessions – a previously unforeseen methodological
limitation of this on-the-ground, dialogical approach. On this occasion, therefore, I have looked elsewhere to investigate (a) the significance of ATR and the Bible/Christianity at this time, including arenas in which ATR remains prominent, and (b) the impact of the current crisis on beliefs and practices connected to both the Bible/Christianity and ATR. In something of a substitution for CCBIGs in my fieldwork location in Ondonga, Owambo, I have looked to interviews with village elders in my locality (the Iihongo district, including the villages of Iihongo, Ombuma and Onakandi) as a means to assess community perspectives on COVID-19, Christianity and ATR/Ndonga culture whilst observing social distancing measures. The interview results are contextualized using instances in which ATR and the Bible (or African Christianities) have appeared in recent media in Namibia in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The series of interviews was conducted by two members of the homestead in which I live who are undergraduates at the University of Namibia (not in Arts and Humanities, it should be noted). At the point of data collection, community members are understandably cautious about having unnecessary visitors to their homes in the midst of a frightening pandemic, so we limited the pool of participants to kin, as well as proximate homesteads with which we have the closest ties, in order to eliminate visits that would not otherwise be made. As an outsider, I felt that it was inappropriate for me to visit other homesteads as I would normally do, or to visit homesteads that I had not previously visited. And so, between 20 and 31 July 2020, 10 elders across four households in the Iihongo district were asked three interview questions to determine how they felt about ‘Coronavirus’ (COVID-19) and what they saw to be the effects on local culture and Christianity, as well as how aspects of local culture, Christianity and/or biblical texts might assist the community in the current moment of crisis. The questions were as follows (with further questions added on an ad hoc basis to gain further detail and examples):

1. How do you feel about the Coronavirus pandemic? How has it affected you?
2. How has local culture been affected at this time? How can local culture help with the Coronavirus pandemic?
3. How has Christianity been affected at this time? How can Christianity and/or the Bible help with the Coronavirus pandemic?

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Mr Sem Imatuka and Mr Titus Iyambo for their work in gathering and translating the interviews.

Most interviewees had participated in my previous study. Their contributions are attributed rather than anonymous, as they specifically requested, and as is the general preference in this context. The interviews had one considerable limitation, which was that I was not present to put forward reactive, follow-up questions.
Most interviewees reported that they felt ‘bad’ (nayi: bad, uncomfortable, uneasy) about the virus or, more specifically, that they ‘fear’ (tila) for themselves, friends, family and Namibia as a whole. Concerns were raised in many cases about loss of employment, precarious economic situations and the effect on children’s education. Most made a clear statement that members of the community must follow government advice, be that to wear masks, maintain social distancing, stay at home or to avoid gatherings.

In terms of ways in which the pandemic has affected Christian belief and practice, the majority of the interviewees cited as a major concern that they could no longer attend church. Specific issues mentioned included the inability to hear the gospel in person (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo: ‘I do miss going to church to see my friends and hear the Word of God’; Tataekulu Laban Iyambo: ‘[Christians] need to hear God’s gospel but they can’t anymore’), to participate in the church choir (Tatekulu Theophelus Iiyambo) or to conduct baptisms (Memekulu Martha Iiyambo). In addition, most respondents noted the impact of reduced collections on church finances and, specifically, the salaries of the pastor and church secretary, with a real threat that ‘communities might lose their pastors’ (Memekulu Martha Iiyambo), who are financially supported directly from the collection.

By way of response to the virus, every respondent mentioned the need for prayer, and eight out of ten recommended reading the Bible. For one of the elders, at least, there was the feeling that ‘only God can end the pandemic’ (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo). In some cases, respondents made general reference to the Bible as a source of encouragement, resilience and assistance. For example, Memekulu Martha Theophelus stated that ‘we can only pray that the situation gets better, and people should read the Bible for encouragement’, while Memekulu Mbundu Amakali commented, ‘the Bible can help if we read it’. Memekulu Fani Iiyambo stressed the need for Christians to ‘stay at home, pray, and teach our children about God’. Still others offered specific passages that might be of assistance. Given that they are few in number, the instances wherein participants mentioned biblical material (and any explanation thereof) are given in full here (using the Good News Translation, which is the only version available in Oshindonga):

The Bible can help if people are interested in it, instead of being interested in alcohol. God might help if we all pray and read the Bible. There is one event in the Bible where Moses told the Israelites to kill the lambs and they obeyed him. They put the lambs’ blood on their doors and the Egyptians didn’t listen to this so the following morning their first born were dead, so maybe people should read the Bible and trust in God. (Tatekulu Theophelus Iiyambo)

I encourage people to read Matthew 24:7 which reads: ‘Countries will fight each other; kingdoms will attack one another. There will be famines and earthquakes
everywhere’. Maybe if they read this then they can humble themselves and read the Bible more often because this is serious. The world that we live in is full of temptations and evil, so people should read the Bible. (Memekulu Martha Iiyambo)

The Bible can help if we believe in it. We should also pray in our houses. God is the only person who can help in times like these. I encourage people to read the Bible. Psalm 23 reads: ‘The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need … He guides me in the right paths, as he has promised’. (Meme Beatha Mbinga)

In the Bible, there are stories that tell us that there were diseases before, so we can read about it and it will encourage us not to be afraid. (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo)

You can read in Johannes or Lukas that Jesus said that disease, drought, and famine will come. (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo)

We should read Matthew 25, verse 31 to 46 [The Final Judgment], which begins ‘“When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne”’. (Memekulu Maria Kondo)

Certain respondents also suggested that Christianity and/or the Bible might offer a clue as to why the pandemic was in process at all:

This may be a sign from God that we must repent and believe in Him. It could be punishment from God. People don’t go to church and most of them are at the uundingosho [bars] drinking alcohol from the morning until the evening, which is a pity because if you have no direction and don’t believe in God, God can punish you. I feel like the sound of trumpets [cf. Rev. 8–11] is close by and the people should kneel down and repent. (Memekulu Martha Iiyambo)

God is now looking for us to repent from evil because most of our people are still doing bad things like going to the uundingosho in the mornings, leaving work in the house, not even helping the elders. Some are killing and raping people, so I believe should repent because the virus might be a punishment from God. (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo)

Reflections on biblical texts and Christian practice by the respondents in the interviews are complemented by popular responses to the virus on social media in Namibia as a whole. An example relating to my home (British) context will serve as an example. Having fallen seriously ill with COVID-19, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, praised the National Health Service (NHS) and offered his thanks to the medical staff who had cared for him during his stay in intensive care: ‘I owe them my life’, he stated (BBC News 2020). On 12 April, The Namibian newspaper replicated the news piece, and ordinary Namibians on social media were quick to chide Johnson for attributing his survival to mere
mortals. A few of the responding Facebook comments will suffice to convey popular sentiment (all 12 April):

Thank God … God saved you. He [Johnson] is healthy and still blind.

But my dear friend of another country, continent[,] it is God’s will that you [are] better. Rather thank him.

Give the praise to God, he gave you a second chance. Not to praise the human[s], thank them but not to owe them your life, sir.

The staff are nothing without GOD, you owe your life to him!

Wow, PM … please [tell] him to give all the praise to the Lord Almighty[y] God first and then to the human being … God [has given] him 2nd chance [so] he must repent and give his life to Jesus.

These comments are contextualized by the religious tone of political discourse surrounding COVID-19 since the pandemic arose and, particularly, since cases were identified in Namibia. Rising to an initial peak of 16 cases, and following a swift, national lockdown from late March 2020, no new cases arose for around two months. Phase 2 of the lockdown came into effect in mid-May and, whilst international borders remained closed, unrestricted domestic travel resumed. When the comments above were made (mid-April), there was, at least as far as was officially confirmed, only imported cases of COVID-19 and no community transmission.

At around the same time, the Namibian president, Hage Geingob, scheduled a national day of prayer (8 April), stating that ‘all Namibians who wish to participate must in faith, humble themselves and lift their voices to pray for the protection and welfare of our country’. Regionally, Geingob is not alone in having done so – the presidents of Tanzania (John Magufuli) and Malawi (Lazarus Chakwera) have since encouraged similar events (17–19 April and 16–19 July, respectively). And, while there were few local cases, social media discussion also revolved around faith in God and the need for prayer to get the country (and world) through the crisis:

God is greater than Covid-19. (18 April)

We shall overcome by God’s grace. (18 April)

Let’s have faith in God to heal our land … 2 Chronicles 7:14. (20 April)

Here is your word for today: Verse: 2 Chronicles 20:19 ‘They stood up and praised the LORD, with a very loud voice’. (21 April)
Above all Jesus has healed us long ago[,] believe and you will be saved Roman[s] 10:9-10. (27 April)⁶

There was, further, the suggestion that God was sheltering Namibia from the global crisis, as evidenced by a low case-load: ‘We are the chosen ones. Thank you heavenly father for your favour upon our land. We are grateful!!’ (26 April).

Print media, meanwhile, took care to highlight the particular difficulties that many ordinary Namibians would face during a pandemic and lockdown. The Namibian on 20 April conveyed the fears and desperation of those living in informal settlements, wherein shack constructions lack electricity and sanitation, and regulations aimed at social distancing and good hygiene present insurmountable hurdles: ‘Only God will save us here’, stated the anonymous ‘SMS of the Day’. Only three months later, cumulative case numbers had risen to over 1700, and there was a severe outbreak in Walvis Bay, Erongo region. With the region in isolation, the fears of those in informal settlements came to pass in a tragic fire on 26 July. A baby died when the blaze tore through the Twaloloka settlement, razing 4 hectares of shack dwellings in the COVID-19 hotspot of Walvis Bay. On 27 July, following the devastation, ‘religious leaders at Walvis Bay … urged the community and political leaders to acknowledge God in crisis situations’ (The Namibian, 27 July 2020; Niilenge 2020), holding a prayer meeting in the town, attended by a visiting government delegation. In the ensuing days, it was announced that an unused plot of land would be developed into a new peri-urban settlement to rehouse the displaced. The residents of the razed Twaloloka (‘we are weary’) would be rehomed in a new settlement, to be named Otweya (‘we are on our way’).

As I write now (September 2020), the situation in Namibia has changed again. Namibia has gone from a country spared the worst of the initial wave of infections felt across the globe (including that experienced by its neighbour, South Africa) to a country with confirmed community transmission across the regions and without the healthcare infrastructure to deal with the (presumed) wave that is to come. The rise from 16 cases and no deaths to 8685 confirmed cases and 89 COVID-19-related deaths has been steep. And, with limited levels of surveillance and testing, these figures most probably under-represent the situation. The nature of the appeals to the Bible and Christianity as sources of explanation and/or resilience seems to have shifted, too. More frequent have become – albeit

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⁶. 2 Chron. 7.14 reads, ‘if they pray to me and repent and turn away from the evil they have been doing, then I will hear them in heaven, forgive their sins, and make their land prosperous again’; 2 Chron. 20.19 reads, ‘The members of the Levite clans of Kohath and Korah stood up and with a loud shout praised the Lord, the God of Israel’; Rom. 10.9-10 reads, ‘If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from death, you will be saved. For it is by our faith that we are put right with God; it is by our confession that we are saved’ (Good News Translation).
drawing upon an unavoidably limited and subjective impression – pleas for calm (‘we must not panic all shall be well in Jesus name’ [3 May]), references to COVID-19 as divine punishment (‘we must be humble and understand that this is the punishment that we got from God’ [26 June]), requests for divine intervention in the crisis (‘God hear our prayer’ [30 June]), and mercy (‘Lord God have Mercy upon us in the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth Amen’ [6 September]).

Local Culture and COVID-19 in Owambo

Running alongside the Christian-biblical reception of the pandemic in the interviews is an alternative ‘cultural’ narrative, at times mirroring the tension between Christianity and ATR precipitated by approaches to missionization. ATR, now reframed as ‘local culture’, was depicted at times as impotent in the face of the pandemic, whilst also seemingly representing the arena of greatest concern or the arena in which interview respondents perceived greatest impact (or, at least, concrete impacts most readily identified). Local culture did not, however, appear to offer any explanatory causes for such a situation in which we find ourselves. There was no mention, for example, of local cosmology, such as spirits, forces or fractured relationships with the land or ancestors. In fact, one respondent noted that COVID-19 was seen by some, at least initially, as an affliction related to ‘others’:

I feel bad about the virus because we thought it was far away and people also started saying that the virus was only affecting white people, not black people. (Meme Beatha Mbinga)

In addition, multiple respondents specifically noted that there was little Ndonga culture (omuthigululwakalo gwAandonga) could do to influence the existence and/or progress of the pandemic. And, indeed, it was in response to a question about the effect of the virus on Christianity and how Christianity/the Bible might help at this time that one respondent connected Christianity to medical sciences: ‘We can only pray that God helps the scientists to come up with the cure for this virus or that He makes the virus disappear’ (Memekulu Martha Iiyambo). By contrast, common was the refrain that ‘local culture can’t help’ the situation, having ‘no doctors’ (Memekulu Martha Iiyambo) and ‘no medicine’ (Meme Saimi Kolota). Some participants noted that Ndonga medicine would not be effective on such a virus, whilst others noted the relevance of local medicines (here, two leaf varieties) to treat related symptoms:

Our traditional healers can only heal local viruses like flu and back pain, maybe with local medicine like omafot gomungatalipi, where you pound the leaves and put them in hot water and then you drink the water. It helps with flu and cough. So, our traditional
methods can’t do anything about Coronavirus because the scientists can’t do anything about it. (Memekulu Fani Iiyambo)

We can use omaho giizimba leaves, which help with headaches. You smash them in a small pot and mix them with water and you put a small drop of the mixture in your ears. (Memekulu Mbundu Amakali)

Alongside local remedies for relief from flu-like symptoms, there was discussion of hot water (mentioned by six participants) and elephant dung (mentioned by four participants), both of which have been used previously for other ailments and which (I was later informed) were mentioned in a vernacular radio broadcast (on Kati FM) in the week(s) running up to the interviews:7

People are trying to use elephant dung and it is used by putting it in a clay pot. It is the smoke that helps, after putting it in a clay pot with small coals to light it. Some people try using hot water in a basin and cover themselves with a blanket and some use omaho giizimba, too. (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo)

We can’t do anything about this virus. We can only drink hot water with some lemon in it, and also use elephant dung – that also helps. (Memekulu Maria Kondo)

People should just drink hot water … It is an Ndonga thing: we take hot water too when we have flu or a cough [as] it helps weaken the flu. Elephant dung can also be used. What we do with the elephant dung is we take it and put it in a small clay pot and then put on some hot coals so that it smokes, and then we move close to the smoke with a blanket over our head. It also weakens the flu. (Memekulu Marta Thephelus)

Relative to the effects of the pandemic on the church and Christian practice, discussions of the effects of COVID-19 on ‘local culture’ yielded more numerous results and a greater level of detail in their discussion. The most prominent themes all involved the prohibition of gatherings, which has major impact on the social, ritual and economic life of the community. Of concern was the inability to visit neighbours, friends and family, or to share traditional drinks, thereby limiting the maintenance of social ties.

Important in this regard have been restrictions on gathering at uundingosho (plural; singular, okandingosho) – shebeens, which operate simultaneously as

7. Arlana Shikongo reported on 18 August in The Namibian that ‘Elephant dung [had] become the newest craze speculated to “cure” the novel coronavirus after rumours started circulating on social media over the weekend of the jumbo droppings’ healing properties. Elephant dung is commonly used as a traditional medicine to ward off evil spirits and treat ailments such as nose bleeds, headaches, toothaches and other types of pains. It is also said to clear sinuses.’ The Health Minister, Dr Kalumbi Shangula, publicly ‘dismissed the rumours’ (A. Shikongo 2020).
bars and purveyors of basic goods and services – to socialize with friends and buy necessities. The impact is even more significant (particularly for those without routine access to a vehicle) when uundingosho are the only shops and services in a village 3.5km off the tar road, 5km from the nearest formal shop, and 25km from the nearest significantly sized town. For those who run an okandingosho, the economic impact is of obvious significance:

Local culture has been affected badly because we can’t gather as before … And going to the okandingosho with friends [is now limited]. And omalovu giilya [sorghum beer], we can’t go and drink that with our neighbours anymore because we don’t know where they have been or who they have been interacting with. I feel bad because the virus has shut down everything like the schools and gatherings, too. It has affected me badly because I own an okandigosho and I had to lock it up because of the virus and this is how I survive financially. And I also sold fat-cakes and fried fish there but now there are no customers and, because of the regulations, I had to close everything. (Memekulu Mdundu Amakali)

In particular, it is women’s participation in the informal economy (such as trade in clay pots [iiyuma] and basketry [oontungwa]) that is particularly affected by an inability to gather, as their artisanal endeavours often involve cooperative forms of working:

[Local culture] has been affected because we can’t help each other out as we used to before because that would be a gathering. We used to make iiyuma with friends or people who would come to help you get clay soil from the dam with a donkey cart but at the moment we can’t do anything. We make a living out of clay pots by selling them and even when we go to a wedding or a good event we take them as presents. Now even the events are postponed. (Meme Saimi Kolota)

I can no longer go and collect clay soil to make iiyuma because I won’t have customers to buy them and the events aren’t happening anymore to which we would take them as gifts for the bride and groom. (Memekulu Maria Kondo)

Even if we make our iiyuma or oontungwa, we have no way to sell them. (Memekulu Martha liyambo)

Two participants (notably, both male) also commented on the effect of the pandemic on events relating to traditional authorities and politicians:

It has affected us badly and has pushed us backwards. When people want traditional land, they now need to wait a bit longer because of the Coronavirus. The headman can’t judge villagers who commit crimes like cattle theft, fighting, and breaking in to shebeens anymore. This is because of the gathering regulations, so cases have been postponed. The headman is a judge in the village court, which takes place at his house
or a community hall. He is assisted by some elders when making the decisions and ruling on people’s behaviour. The village court consists of the judge and his assistants, the suspect and witnesses. Everyone is welcome to go and see the case being judged. If the suspect is guilty then he is fined money and/or cattle. The money goes to the person to whom he did wrong and some of the money goes to the headman. (Tatekulu Theophilus Iiyambo)

Local culture has been affected as people don’t do local events anymore. Previously, we would get important visitors like ministers coming to the school and we would have a traditional dance for them and have traditional drinks to give them like *omalovu giilya* [sorghum beer] but this is not happening anymore. (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo)

However, by far the most common issues arising (again, relating to gathering restrictions) were the inability to conduct weddings and funerals (both of which have a church element, measurable in minutes, and a homestead-based event, sometimes lasting several days) under the pandemic restrictions. Notably, weddings and funerals were not mentioned in answers about how Christianity had been affected. Instead, they were discussed in answers about how ‘local culture’ had been affected and were referred to as ‘cultural events’ (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo) and ‘local events’ (Tatekulu Laban Iyambo). The inability to proceed with weddings and funerals was noted to have various social impacts:

Most cultural events are postponed, like weddings, and some have limited people attending – 50 or less – like funerals. We are not excited to attend like we were before and we can’t gather like before. Everyone is afraid, even when few people attend. No one is comfortable like before. At events, we are all afraid. Weddings are important to us because they don’t happen often. I might go to five weddings in a year. We meet with families who we will only see at events like this and funerals and we enjoy ourselves with friends and family. (Memekulu Frieda Namugongo)

We go to a wedding to gather with our friends and families to enjoy ourselves and sit and drink traditional drinks like *omalovu giilya* [sorghum beer] and eat traditional food like *oshimbombo* [millet porridge] with *ekaka* [wild spinach] and some good *ondjuhwa* [local chicken], too. At times we go to gather with the deceased’s family to show our support and pay our last respects, too. (Memekulu Martha Theophilus)

Weddings are important because … we meet relatives whom our children didn’t know beforehand. They get to meet and get to know each other. Funerals are important – gathering in large numbers shows respect to the deceased and shows love for the family and friends. (Meme Beatha Mbinga)

It is important for the youth to witness how Ndonga weddings are done and at events like these are where we gather with the family and community to celebrate the wedding, and at funerals people have to gather to pay their respects and to comfort the family. (Memekulu Martha Iiyambo)
A funeral gives friends and relatives an opportunity to express the love and respect that they feel for someone who was important to them. Often, just seeing how much others care can help a family adjust to their loss and [so] people come in large numbers. (Memekulu Mbundu Amakali)

That ATR is simultaneously marginalized and yet endures is also visible in broader Namibian responses to our current crisis situation. A crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic presents challenges to traditional African beliefs and practice, as well as to Christian belief and practice, whether or not the two intertwine. As is noted by Paul John Isaak in an opinion piece for The Namibian newspaper (Isaak 2020), limitations on gathering at funerals challenge notions of appropriate burials, for the ‘mere fact of being absent from a funeral causes a faith crisis in the African Christianity context’. ‘Befitting African burials’ are impossible when limited numbers prevent what should be a ‘public event’ and regulations therefore necessarily limit the outpouring of emotion. Explicit in Isaak’s discussion is the defence of the traditional against charges of superstition:

Remember the African proverb: ‘It takes the whole village to raise a child’. It means an entire community is responsible to raise a child and the entire community is also responsible to bury that child! If all are not at the funeral, those absent are left with feelings of guilt. There is something in their consciousness that such absence means there was no proper and complete closure to such a death. If absent, some fear that the dead may visit them after the funeral in the form of a bad spirit (ghost). That is typical of us all as African Christians. It is not superstition but a faith matter.

Isaak’s apologetic tone perhaps speaks to the contemporary ‘clash’ that Aina Sheetheni describes as existing between ELCIN and Owambo communities over understandings of appropriate death and mourning rituals (Sheetheni 2015: 1). Sheetheni attributes this clash to the missionary heritage of the church and the training of pastors – directly resulting from missionary perspectives, with their ‘mono-cultural bias’ (Awala 1973: 4, cited in Sheetheni 2015: 8) – to see indigenous rituals as ‘pagan’ (McKittrick 2002). For their part, ‘Oshiwambo Christians do not regard the western biased, non-inculturated ELCIN liturgy of burying the dead as culturally adequate’ (Sheetheni 2015: 2). Sheetheni describes the resulting crisis:

[Owambo Christians] 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. (Sheetheni 2015: 3)

Isaak’s piece also points to enduring notions of corpse-contagion (cf. John 2019b: 144-45), as an inability to attend engenders a situation where the wider
community would gather, mourn, wash their hands having left the gravesite, thereby washing away the death-contagion and preventing it from being transported back to their homes. The function of the gravesite as a point of separation between life and death, as well as one of coming together with ancestral spirits and, therefore, the realms of the living and departed, is defeated if not everyone in the community is permitted to attend. The prevention of appropriate ‘African practices’ in these moments of crisis, contends Isaak, act as guilt-inducing ‘intrusions’ to the practice of African Christianities.

Narratives of stigma and contagion have pervaded responses to COVID-19 across Namibia. With the first COVID-19 deaths in July 2020 arose the question of where the deceased would be buried. With the cluster of cases largely confined to the coastal town of Walvis Bay, the first victim was buried in an area on the fringe of town, an area identified as a future (but as-yet-unused) cemetery. Reaction from the community was swift, with nearby residents concerned about the possibility of contagion from the deceased, and others concerned about a lack of consultation, respect and the apparently covert manner in which the deceased was interred under the cover of darkness in what was effectively wasteland. As reported by Ogone Tlhage in the Namibian Sun, the local community formed a human barrier to prevent the transportation of the second victim to the burial site, and the government was forced to rethink its strategy. After a community meeting, the authorities agreed to exhume the first victim’s body for reburial further away from residential areas (20 July 2020). Eventually, an existing cemetery was agreed upon as a suitable burial site.

Further emphasis on ATR is apparent in discussions of the health of the earth, with Reverend Jan Scholtz authoring an opinion piece on ‘Multi-dimensional health’ in the New Era newspaper (30 April 2020). Noting that ‘the health of a person’ is related to relationships in the homestead, the village, the nation and with the ancestors and the earth, he suggests that fractures at any of these levels ‘can lead to misfortune, discomfort and diseases’. Crucially, suggests Scholtz, in traditional religion it is the earth wherein the ancestors reside, and it is the ancestors who oversee all other relationships. Thus, care for the earth is central to securing a positive relationship with the ancestors, who ‘contribute to health and healing’. Whilst Scholtz notes the importance of the medical care in combating COVID-19, traditional wisdom clearly also has much to offer in a pandemic arising from human exploitation of the natural environment.

The embedded-ness of individuals in relationships (including with the earth and ancestors), is further emphasized through the African philosophical notion of ubuntu, which is the sense that ‘I am because we are’. As Justina Shikongo notes, writing about ‘Covid-19, Ubuntu and the Namibian Community’ (J. Shikongo 2020), ‘we are not complete or self-sufficient without others’, with traditional wisdom encouraging individual reflection on community and common humanity. ‘We need the driving force of ubuntu to deal with obstacles like
pandemics’, Shikongo contends, not least through mutual education and the exercise of personal responsibility. Demonstrations of solidarity with those most affected by (and/or during the time of) COVID-19 in Namibia (notably, after the Twaloloka fire) offer tangible expressions of *ubuntu* in action. *Ubuntu* can therefore act as a source of resilience in crisis, as well as a resource for the reinvigoration of community cohesion. In Shikongo’s framing, Christian charity is one form of expression of the ‘umbrella concept’ of *ubuntu* – church efforts are put forward as *but one* of many examples of a guiding *African* principle.

**Conclusions**

The marginalization of the local cultural text in Ondonga (and wider Owambo) has led to the reframing – or, perhaps more accurately, relegation – of autochthonous ATR into ‘local [Ndonga] culture’ (*omuthigululwakalo gwAandonga*). Some participants in my previous study saw ‘local culture’ as existing in a sibling-like relationship with Christian ‘religion’ (and/or medicine) and as mutually supportive, whilst others pointed out sites of conflict (John 2019b: 101-103, 232-34, 230). Perhaps this tension is unsurprising, for, as Sheetheni (herself an ELCIN pastor) has argued, ‘the Aawambo found, and continue to find, it extremely difficult to obey the teachings of the church when it rejects such culturally meaningful rituals’, leading to the ‘contradiction of remaining members of ELCIN while still practising some of their traditional death rituals’ (2015: 57).

And so, whilst reference to Jesus, God and the need for prayer and salvation are prevalent in responses to the crisis by politicians, journalists and by individual Namibians on social media, references to individual New Testament texts are few and far between. This is perhaps indicative of a failure to inculcate (immigrant) Christianity adequately, which can lead to a ‘superficial’ level of influence and the supremacy of indigenous tradition at moments of crisis (Reynolds 2012: 25, cited in Sheetheni 2015: 13) and an underlying ‘suspicion of Christianity as a European imposed faith’ (Sheetheni 2015: 40). Indeed, the prominence of concerns about the inability to perform and attend ATR (reframed as ‘cultural’) rituals is striking for its emphasis on the enduring significance of traditional religion despite missionary concerns to eliminate all things ‘pagan’. Whilst Christianity and the medical arena are deemed to be the avenues in which pursuit of a remedy for COVID-19/Coronavirus (whether medical or divine) is most appropriate, it is in the ‘cultural’ or ‘traditional’ arenas in which the current crisis is felt most keenly in the Owambo context. COVID-19 has had a destabilizing effect on community relations and has, at least at points, been viewed as an ‘outsider’ and/or ‘invading’ force.

Thus, despite the wholesale Christianization of the Owambo context, it is the effect of the pandemic on ‘traditional’ or ‘cultural’ activities (ATR) with which interviewees seemed most concerned. Particularly disruptive to community life
has been the limitation on social gathering, be that in relation to the performance of traditional rituals and events, the maintenance of ties between neighbours, the cooperation of traditional artisans or the workings of the traditional authorities. Perhaps precisely because the virus is perceived as an ‘outside’ matter – a result of divine punishment, from foreigners, or a medical/scientific issue – there is little that ‘local culture’ can offer in terms of practical measures. And this may well be expected in a context wherein ATR has been marginalized and a sense of either/or prevails – one is or does, and things exist, ‘in culture’ or ‘in Christianity’ (John 2019b: 164-92). The appropriate responses most commonly mentioned in interviews were, perhaps predictably, the need for prayer and repentance in the face of divine wrath, and the need to follow government/medical advice in order to stall transmission. Nonetheless, the pandemic has highlighted ‘how connected we are and how a connected humanity can make a difference’ (J. Shikongo 2020). In that regard, ATR has much to offer as a source of resilience to a pandemic (and other crises), encouraging healthy relationships with community, ancestors and the earth. And, whilst it was not interviewees who mentioned pandemic responses linked to ATR, it is perhaps an indicator of cultural resurgence and rehabilitation that ATR was relatively prominent in media discourse surrounding the current crisis.

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