Cultural Perspectives on Disability in Namibia:
Terminology and Traditional Wisdom in Owambo

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My work focuses on contextual biblical interpretation, on aspects of landscape, gender and embodiment, and on Owambo culture. This presentation will be a summary of the findings of my recent work on attitudes to disability in Owambo. When co-writing with my Exeter and UNAM project colleagues, we were very influenced by Dr Haihambo's 2010 article (with Elizabeth Lightfoot) on disability in Southern Africa and, in many ways, this presentation responds to that article, so I am grateful for the opportunity to be in a session with Dr Haihambo. Haihambo and Lightfoot referred the fact that there was a 'narrative of uselessness' apparent in attitudes to people with disabilities. I wanted to explore the extent to which disability was associated with 'uselessness' in the Owambo community in which I live, and I will summarise my findings here.

As has been noted elsewhere, research on disability in Namibia is lacking. This is particularly true in relation to religio-cultural attitudes and the underlying 'discriminatory social norms' that the UNFPA has identified and which contribute to disability marginalisation and an enduring relationship between disability and poverty. As far as we as a project team could identify, only 3 research articles exist on this topic in relation to the Owambo region of northern Namibia (Haihambo and Lightfoot, 2010; Bartholomew, 2017; Tobias and Mukhopadhyay, 2017). Further research is therefore merited concerning both religious and cultural responses to disability in Namibia and is recommended by the Government of the Republic of Namibia's 'Disability Mainstreaming Plan', with a view to conducting sensitisation campaigns to serve the Government's *Society for All* inclusivity agenda. Acknowledging, investigating, and drawing on the positives of unique cultural perspectives on disability is a crucial part of tackling prejudice and discrimination.

So, I decided to conduct two surveys, each with 42 *Oshindonga* speakers in the village where I am based. The first asked participants to list any terms that they knew of to do with disability and/or people with disabilities. The second asked them to tell me any *Oshindonga* proverbs on the same theme.

A striking feature of the results of Survey 1 was the number of negative terms returned. As Haihambo and Lightfoot also found, the use of 'derogatory names' for

people with disabilities is common, and terms which 'symbolize uselessness and/or inhumanity'. Sometimes, they report, people with disabilities are 'not addressed by, or even known by, their names, but rather were referred to by the disability'.

This trend was also apparent in the *Oshindonga* terminological survey: overall, 21 out of 32 terms defined people by their disabilities. With 30, 30, and 20 mentions, respectively, the three terms most frequently referred to across Survey 1 all concern sensory loss and directly define people with disabilities according to a perceived deficiency: *omuposi* (blind person), *ombolo* (deaf person) and *omupupulu* (speechless person). Much less frequent were terms aligning with the UN recommended terms for disability and specific disabilities. However, amongst the younger respondents, there was more frequent reference to having a disability, rather than 'being' a disability.

I would also highlight the fact that many of the terms offered in the surveys are innately pejorative because of the structure of the words themselves. In *Oshindonga*, words beginning with *oshi-* (such as *Oshindonga* language) or the letter *e-* (etama, tomato), are usually used to refer to things. People, by contrast, would more commonly be referred to in the singular as *omu-* or, in the plural, *aa-*. For example, *Omundonga* means Ndonga person and *Aandonga*, Ndonga people. Thus, when used to refer to a person, an *oshi-*or *e-* word can indicate a derogatory or diminutive meaning. *Oshilema* (a term particularly prevalent in the proverbs and used to refer to disability or a person who has a disability) may therefore be deemed equivalent to the pejorative term 'cripple' or 'the state of being crippled' in English. Overall, 10 of the 32 terms reported used a pejorative prefix.

Certain terms combine pejorative word structure with pejorative connotations or associations. *Ethithi* was one such term (mentioned by nine out of 42 respondents, it was the fifth most reported term). It uses the *e-* prefix usually reserved for objects and refers to people with albinism as 'white monsters', whose existence is sometimes deemed to be the result of a woman 'having sex with a white man or a ghost'. Albinism is thus associated with the threatening behaviours of the colonisers ('the whites [plural *omathithi*] who live in brick houses'). Other terms used for people with albinism were *nambalakata* (a derivative of a word meaning wild gourds) and *ekishi* (monster), both of which were noted to be highly offensive. Together, the use of these three terms made albinism the 5th most prominent disability to which participants referred. Whether because of word structure, a tendency to define people according to their disability, the active use of slurs, or negative connotations, the survey results indicate that disability-appropriate terminology is not widely in use in the area. But what of the proverbs?

Patrick J. Devlieger explains the value of proverbs in providing 'culturally sensitive material' that both reveals community attitudes as well as well as offering the potential for 'applied use'. People with disabilities may, he suggests, find empowerment in

harnessing positive aspects of this form of wisdom and, conversely, might find in proverbs a helpful site of 'resistance' in efforts to combat negative community attitudes toward disability. And, Devlieger suggests, 'cultural knowledge is an important ground on which interventions could be based.' Scholars of African proverbs have noted the duality of messaging with which disability is represented in proverbial wisdom. Certainly, negative stereotypes are prevalent and there is considerable emphasis on (dis-)'function' and 'deviation'. Conversely, however, proverbs are also notable for their messages of 'normalisation and integration' and 'respect', with negative perceptions discouraged. Additionally, they may depict disability as a source of 'unexpected capacity'.

The above duality of representation aligns with African Traditional Religion (ATR) more generally, which is 'ambivalent' about disability, states Hebron Ndlovu. For, whilst ATR aligns disability with 'affliction', 'abnormality', 'diminished life-force', victimhood, or 'moral indiscretion', it also puts forward the overarching principle of *ubuntu*, which emphasises the interconnectedness of all people, and 'the dignity of the Other'. So, moving beyond terminology and into traditional wisdom in Owambo, may give a more accurate and complex insight into how disability and people with disabilities are viewed. The most commonly mentioned proverb was:

'Disability is better than the grave'

Notably, this was deemed to apply more to the family of a person with a disability rather than the person themselves, in order to comfort the family that the person with a disability is of more use than no person at all. Devlieger describes the Swahili equivalent 'Better disabled than dead' as 'illustrative of hope', but I think it possibly serves here more modestly as a means to encourage acceptance of disability.

Other proverbs certainly appear to support the ableist equation of disability with 'deficit', therefore sustaining the 'narrative of uselessness' discussed by Haihambo and Lightfoot. The saying 'A lazy person is a cripple' directly references a perceived deficiency of contribution to the household. The saying 'If God gives you a tail, pull it behind you' images people with disabilities as a weight to be carried or a burden to be pulled along, while 'You cannot stay with your mother's blindness' positions blindness as a limitation that has the potential to hold people around those with disabilities back from progress and success. Still others depict people with disabilities as beyond hope: for example, 'Even if you beat a fool, their idiocy will not cease'.

The concern to hide away people with disabilities points to the prevalence of shame surrounding disability. Notable here was the proverb 'Villainy does not need to be grilled'. The metaphor is a sinister one: people with disabilities are presented as villainy itself, as rotten meat. Whereas the community will know you have (good) meat once they smell the sweet odour of meat grilling, villainy needs no such

treatment because it already smells – it is rotten. Hiding people with disabilities away from the community is therefore pointless – like rotten meat, like criminality, the community will work out that they are there despite any efforts to hide them.

In several of the proverbs returned, people with disabilities act as the negative example in proverbs recommending good behaviour. In one case, bad behaviour is viewed as contagious: 'To walk with a cripple is to become a cripple', or 'If you walk with a cripple, you will limp'. Whether meant literally or not, these two versions of one proverb suggest that disability is contagious, as have murder and starvation been viewed in the past. In another, people with disabilities are represented as less-than-people: 'What you do to a dog, a person on two feet will do to you'.

A further link between disability with deviance is made in reference to colonialism. I noted that terms used for people with albinism suggested a threatening nature: *ekishi* ('monster') and *ethithi* ('white monster'). Both of these terms use the pejorative e-prefix; it is worth noting that the same is true of the commonly-used term for a white person, *oshilumbu* (using the pejorative *oshi-* prefix), meaning 'greedy thing', 'thing which intermingles' or 'thing which stays for a long time'. This threatening interpretation of albinism – and its relation to colonial greed – is also reported in the proverbs: one reads 'Don't offer an albino warmth because once they are warm, they will eat you up'. Ruusa Ntinda notes the 'stigmatisation and discrimination that persons with albinism experience' in Namibia, which does not consider albinism to be a disability and which has been the location for 'ritual killing' of people with albinism. Such experiences are not unique to Namibia but draw our attention to albinism in the current project.

I do also want to note, however, that whilst there is a clear thread of deficiency and deviance, some proverbs given by the participants appear to challenge the 'narrative of uselessness' that Haihambo and Lightfoot report on but are not entirely successful because they seem to challenge it but at the same time participate in negative depictions. For example, whilst the claim that 'Disability is better than the grave' is intended to challenge negative perceptions of having a disabled person in the household, it also reinforces the idea that a person with a disability is of *less value* than a person without a disability. Amongst the collection of proverbs gathered are those that acknowledge (and sometimes sustain) depictions of people with disabilities as limited, marginalised, or despised but at the same time affirm their capacity to be useful. Comparing people with disabilities to the shards of broken clay pots, one proverb suggests that what or whom you despise might come to your assistance someday, as the pottery shards do to slough off rough skin on the feet, for example. The understanding that 'the left side must learn while the right side is there' suggests that people with disabilities should not be marginalised but rather have their learning and development facilitated by attentive teachers. Likewise, the proverbs 'A fool saw war' and 'An idiot can take you there' suggest that disability does not stand in the way

of offering positive contribution to the community, but is devalued by its use of a slur to describe a person with a mental or cognitive disability and the sense that ‘even’ such a person can be useful.

Whilst the above examples retain problematic elements and would require interrogation on the ground, selected proverbs advance a more fully-formed counternarrative to the deficient-deviant trope. In fact, some amongst them appear to advance a *narrative of usefulness*, which could be harnessed and used in efforts to sensitise. Here, the findings echo Devlieger’s conclusion that proverbs may also depict ‘the person with the disability as a source of integrity, unexpected capacity, and family connectedness’. For example, the positive valuation of people with disabilities is encouraged by the following: ‘A blind person can look after the mahangu flour’. Still others counter the negative associations implied by other proverbs or etymology. For example, the notion that blindness might be associated with ignorance, stupidity or gullibility is categorically countered by the sayings ‘A blind person cannot be falsely promised eyes’ and ‘To ask is not stupidity, to touch doesn’t mean that you cannot see’.

And it is on this point that I would like to finish. Given the pressing need to tackle cultural issues but the inherent challenges in doing so, the use of cultural texts such as these provide an already-embedded, resonant resource, rather than one which is imposed from above or imported from outside. However, when trying to draw on positive cultural resources, one needs to take into account the totality of the context. With regard to Owambo traditional wisdom (whether proverbs, or ATR, more generally) that means recognising and acknowledging the prevalence of Christianity in the region (and country) and the historical context of missionisation, which involved the marginalisation and demonisation of traditional religions as ‘paganism’. For, as Hebron Ndlovu argues, the duality of the religious landscape must be considered alongside the duality of message from Christianity and African Traditional Religion in respect of disability:

Ndlovu states that:

> There is a need to rethink all religious doctrines, ethics, and attitudes (emanating from both African Religions and Christianity) that militate against the full participation of persons with disabilities in the mainline activities of any given society. This should be done simultaneously with retaining those positive beliefs and values that foster the creation of inclusive societies.
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> Ndlovu, 2016: 36

Only then will the ableist narratives and trends in these now-enmeshed traditions be acknowledged and the affirming possibilities of both be realised.

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