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Family therapy: Clearing paths in the Namibian context towards a clearer Pastoral Counselling Model

Hendrik Rudolf Tjibeba¹

The paradigm in which this paper is instituted aids in comprehending the significance of the grieving and bereavement process among the Nama. It is written out of and, to some extent, for the Namibian context, but it is placed in a wider conversation with Western approaches. Every member of the family is to some extent bereaved and each will react both as an individual and as a member of the group. To relate our foregoing discussion with perspectives of case study (the Nama), family therapy needs to be considered.

What is the understanding of family therapy?

Most families exist in some type of homeostatic balance and the loss of a significant person in that family group can unbalance this homeostasis and cause the family to feel pain and to seek help. A well-known family therapist, Murray Bowen, states that “knowledge of the total family configuration, the functioning position of the dying person in the family, and the overall level of life adaptation are important for anyone who attempts to help a family before, during and after death” (Worden, 1982, p. 97).

The concept of family therapy is based on the belief that the family is an interactional unit in which all the members influence each other. Therefore, it is not sufficient to treat each individual in relationship to the deceased and to deal with his or her grief without relating to the total family network. It is also true that families vary in their ability to express and to tolerate feelings. In discussing unresolved grief and family systems, at least three main areas need to be considered.

The first is the fractional position or role the deceased played in the family. There are various roles played by family members, such as the sickly one, the value setter, the scapegoat, the nurturer, the clan head etc. To the extent that the deceased had a significant functional position, his death is going to create a corresponding disturbance of functional equilibrium. Murray Bowen sees the family unit as having stasis and calm when each member is functioning at reasonable efficiency. But the addition or loss of a family member can result in disequilibrium. Through death, the family can be deprived of an important role and another member might be sought out to fill the role vacancy (Worden, 1982).

The functional position or the role played by the deceased is very significant. Usually the death of a father has the greatest consequences for the wife and especially the children. Not only do they lose a person who is responsible for love and daily care, but the death often leads to less stability and overturning of their daily life. If the husband was the only breadwinner in the family, it means a severe loss of income for the whole family. In most cases, it is difficult for the widow to function as a mother and simultaneously fill the vacancy of her deceased husband. She may struggle to cope with the new demanding responsibilities of looking after the children, and still be responsible for their daily care and love.

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A good counsellor could detect in time the psychological trauma the widow experienced. Usually this psychological trauma goes along with a feeling of depression. The widow feels depressed when thinking of her family, of her deceased husband. She feels depressed as she projects her thoughts into the future. She finds herself totally in a situation of helplessness. In this situation, the counsellor should work with the widow towards readjustment. It is true that the role of the breadwinner can be troublesome and time-consuming on the part of the counsellor as well as the widow. In similar context, Kalish (1977) argues:

These coping patterns are examples of some variables of internal organisation within the family that affect the way it deals with the sudden and unexpected death of one of its members. Our experience to date shows however, that the single most important factor in the reorganisation of a family as a continuing social system following a death is the role the decedent had been assigned, and which he assumed within the family system. When a member of this type of family dies, the critical period of reorganisation is not likely to be experienced as a crisis because the family already has a built-in process which allows it to reallocate the role functions of the decedent with minimal difficulty (p. 100).

Death and loss within a marriage can draw families closer together if they use the opportunity well; if they are unable to support, understand and care for each other, it can create a lasting distance between people that may be difficult to heal. Understanding one's self and one's partners, one's own patterns of grieving, one's passed unresolved losses, the meaning we give to life and death, and to communicate this to each other, as well as to being able to ask for and give support and comfort, can help people to build strong relationships within families.

In addition to the death of a breadwinner, with widespread ramifications is the death of a patriarchal clan head who has been serving the decision-making function in the family affairs for a long period. Since the African society mostly relies on oral sources, after such a death there are no written wishes of the deceased. Such death disturbs the cohesion of the clan as well as the family because it results in conflict as to who will inherit the property of the deceased and fulfil the vacancy. A well-integrated family will be better able to help each other cope with the death, even that of a significant family member, with little outside help. A less integrated family may show minimal grief reaction at the time of death but members may respond later with various physical or emotional symptoms or some type of social misbehaviour. It is important that the counsellor understand this because to invite the family to merely express feelings after death does not necessarily increase the level of emotional integration (Worden, 1982).

Contemporary Nama cultural and religious beliefs and practices regarding the burial and bereavement

The Nama people, like any other African people, view death as an evil that shatters the relationships that keep the family or clan stable. In some instances, the Nama people (/Khosin) refer to death as an enemy. It might be true that they have borrowed this term from the Christian belief that death is the last enemy to be conquered. Death is frightening and brings with it confusion and uncertainty, not only to the family but also to the community.

After death, the spirit of the deceased is considered unpredictable and dangerous. The rites that are performed by the living relatives are based on the belief that the deceased's spirit leaves the body and continues in an afterlife defined primarily in terms of the believed influence of the deceased of the community he/she has left. The rituals that are performed immediately after death are therefore precautionary, not only with the goal of purifying those directly concerned with the funeral but also to avert the troubles likely to visit them from the spirit world.

The state of the deceased spirit

It is believed that the spirit of the deceased does not join the ranks of the ancestors immediately after burial. It moves into a liminal state, somewhere between the world of the living and the world of the living dead. It hovers around the veld or finds temporary residence in some large trees. The Nama ascertain that, when the spirit is in this transitional and uncertain state, it is believed to be dangerous. Therefore, it is very important for the Nama people to give the deceased a proper and decent funeral, to show respect and honour to the deceased.

Funeral rites

The last ritual in one's life is the funeral rite, when one passes the most important milestone from this life to join the ancestry. Nowadays, there are mortuaries where the bodies are kept and, while the body is being preserved, a message is sent to all relatives of the deceased wherever they may be. After all the relatives have gathered together, they stay in mourning and none of them are expected to do any work or travel any length of distance. Everything must be done by other neighbours and friends. The gathering of all the relatives is important and every relative responds to the call because there is a strong belief that, if any of the close relatives do not come to attend the funeral, something evil will happen to that relative. In some cases, the funeral can also be postponed until such time that all relatives can come together.

The older members of the family then hold a meeting to prepare for the burial and fix the date for the funeral ceremony. Having agreed on the date, some of the elders will go to the pastor for the burial ceremony, whereas others go to select the burial site. The Nama in burying their deceased with the head facing the east, from where the sun arises. They are buried in a grave with a coffin.

Procession to the grave

The style of the procession to the grave is done with a great deal of solemnity. The people travel in slow procession until they reach the burial site. Usually the mourners will sing hymns all the way to the burial site. The Christian funeral procession will be led by the clergy, elders, family, friends and relatives.

Further, when people return from the grave to the house, everyone, except the bereaved family and their near relatives who must on no account touch water, wash their hands in the cold water; cold water is sprinkled on the place in the house where the body was lying before burial. In itself, washing of the hands with water might not be significant, especially as each person is obliged by custom to pick up handfuls of earth and throw it into the grave. One might suppose that they are merely washing the dust off but the belief is that they would get sick if they did not do so. The cold water sprinkled in the house also prevents the sickness that was there from spreading (Hoernle, 1985, p. 80).

The period after the funeral

To a certain extent, this period is very crucial in the bereavement and counselling process. The family, after the burial, also need support from the community, and particularly from the pastor. The family is still in mourning and the pastor should enable the family to cope with the ordinary life after death. It is the very moment that the pastor should bring them out of their grief and isolation. The bereaved families appreciate follow-up visits after the burial from the pastor. The visit of the pastor, especially in the African community, and particularly in my own context, would make a great difference.

The family would also seek possible advice from the pastor concerning the will of the deceased. Shortly after this, the inheritance ceremony follows. The general principle is that a man's personal belongings can be inherited by his legal wife, but his position as head of a large family group may be inherited by a younger brother. Therefore, the clan head of the /Khobesin clan are only filled with Witboois so far. Because he inherited this position, he must be fully accountable to the clan and the community at large. In normal Nama society, each person belongs to a definite stratum, as it were, and in each stratum the members have definite duties, know exactly their place in the whole and the correct manner of behaving, both towards the mates in their own stratum and to those either above or below it (Hoernle, 1985, p. 85). The inheritance ceremony is supervised by elderly women of the clan. They must see to it that everybody is satisfied with his share of the deceased state. The elderly women of the Nama clan are regarded as honest, therefore the duty of the distribution of the estate would rest on their shoulders. It is also essential that nobody refuse his share, because it could upset the deceased. The atmosphere of this ceremony must be pleasant and no squabbles or disagreements about the belongings of the deceased are tolerated.

As part of the inheritance process, goats will be slaughtered and all the participants will eat the meat, but the bones will not be thrown away. They will be collected in a separate basket after the ceremony and be buried. This is an indication that the family wholeheartedly take a final farewell from the deceased. The ceremony concludes with unveiling of a tombstone. I have realised that the unveiling of a tombstone is also a remarkable family gathering. The atmosphere here is more relaxed and there is an indication of the total acceptance of the death. When a goat or sheep is slaughtered at this ceremony, the blood is then taken to make a cross on either one's forearm or stomach. I would say it concludes the whole process of mourning.

Major problems and weaknesses confronting traditional Nama beliefs and practices regarding burial and bereavement

The discussion above shows the complexity and interrelatedness of the rites performed by the Nama people from the time an adult member dies to that time his or her spirit is inducted into the family and ancestral world. The major problem is that the Namas who are living in the bigger cities and towns do not value their traditional beliefs. If the elderly generation do not infuse the necessity of the above beliefs, they can easily disappear. It is not only the missionaries who can be blamed for calling the beliefs of the Nama people as superstition. The availability of indigenous pastors did not necessarily bring about an easy breakthrough. On the contrary, many of them found difficulty in intelligibly explaining the custom to someone who was not Nama, in spite of the fact that some of them studied the Nama way of life closely, and even worked among the Nama.

Some strengths of Nama cultural practices during burial

During burials, the Nama people support each other materially as well as spiritually. The spirit of togetherness and sharing the burden in times of sorrow is a strong force. A Nama funeral is most obligatory celebration of the theme of life, every member and all relatives are expected to attend. This is because, through the manner in which funeral rituals move their particular participants, they also express the principles and values governing the structure of the society and, at the same time, provide an opportunity for passing them on to succeeding generations. The Nama funeral rites are instructive. A funeral is a sacred event, a rite of passage that reveals not only the religious sentiment and faith of the Nama but, above all, their notion of death and the concomitant relationships established between the dead and their descendants.

The burial is not only a family affair but one that involves the whole community. The wailing and uttering of cries are some of the Nama methods in dealing with their bereavement. It is notable that, during the burial, the people may weep for hours, especially when they see how the coffin is lowered down into the grave. Sometimes, they will cry out and say, "Go well, big warrior, but don't forget us here on earth." Burial is a traumatic event for the Nama people, but they draw strength from each other. The concept of Ubuntu unfolds in the Nama funerals; as already noted, the community and its social structure plays a dominant role. In similar context, Msomi observes that "The human is a being in community. *Umuntu umgamuntu ngabantu* – a person is a person by/through other persons. In other words, a person is a person in community or in communal solidarity. The person received his/her identity and his/her responsibilities within a dynamic social matrix in which he/she lived and had his/her being from birth to death" (1994).

On the last day, which is usually held on the third day or fourth day after burial, friends and other relatives want to go back to their homes or resume their work. Usually the male mourners must shave their heads. They clean the house. Children will have been told to step into their father's shoes. The eldest is told to act and behave in home very responsibly. However, before they disperse, a day for termination of grief and the installation of the heir must be fixed. The bereaved family will wear black or purple wherever they go. That is the symbol of the bereaved who has lost an important person in their life cycle.

Attempts to re-establish the equilibrium disturbed by death

The fire is a very important symbol for the Nama people. It is the symbol of the continuous life and this fire must burn for at least five days because on it depends the life and welfare of the entire family. The people of the clan and family will sit around the fire and exchange words of condolences, and to console the bereaved. This fire must only be allowed to die out when the whole family accepts the reality of death. The constant presence of family members, friends and relatives facilitates the resignation and acceptance which is essential for the bereaved. The slaughtering of goats, sheep, which is part and parcel of this process, is always a vital and essential part of the Nama funeral ceremonies. It reveals the status of the deceased and his/her social relationship to the community. The more goats that are slaughtered at this funeral, the better it is for the deceased. From the blood of this goat, a little cross is marked on the forearm or stomach of the mourners and, usually, the old lady who conducted the ceremony asks the ancestors to protect the family and the clan from further death and misfortune. The old lady will also ask the ancestors to accompany the

deceased safely to the realm of the already departed elders. This ritual is believed to protect the survivors and remind them that the deceased soul is not in danger.

In these long and elaborate funeral rites, the Nama impress upon the living that the spirit of the deceased does not leave the physical world immediately and that joining and settling in the land of the dead is a gradual process that takes time. The belief portrays death as a rite of passage. Normally, in any social transformation, the initiate takes time to be completely incorporated in the new social status; it is never a spontaneous experience.

Way forward in crisis situation

Counselling persons in crisis is nothing new to the pastor. Throughout the history of the church, pastoral care has been provided to persons in the midst of crisis of all kinds. The pastor ministers to persons both in the normal crisis, such as marriage or the birth of a child, and in the disruptive crisis such as sickness, divorce and death.

What is meaning of crisis?

The crisis of living toward death or recovery from loss by bereavement has generally been found by Kubler-Ross to involve a series of stages or intertwining themes. Thus, death and grief ministry can be conceived in terms of shepherding a time-bound process through identifiable stages, moving either toward acceptance of death or recovery from grief. The caring response in crisis related to the death of a loved one consists in sensitive location of the person at some point in the process of dying and grief, accompanied by a supportive and accepting relationship that encourages the working through grief and anxiety (Hunter, 1990, p. 247).

It is also true that a person usually does not face a crisis alone, and therefore he is either helped or hindered in his task of maintaining himself as a person by other significant persons: family, friends, co-workers, members of the group to which he belongs, professional workers of various kinds. During a crisis, a person is more open to influence by others than he is at any other time. His emotional equilibrium is upset. The presence of significant others may well have a major effect in determining his choice of coping mechanism, which in turn influence the outcomes of the crisis. The most significant persons are those who are linked by primary bonds of the basic need for love and who fit into his particular pattern of authority and dependency needs. The closer one is to these needs of the sufferer, the closer he actually is to the crisis, the more available he is to be called upon and to have greater influence upon the person in need.

In times of crisis, especially death, the counsellor must make himself emotionally available, and the person in crisis is taken seriously as a person. Louis Paul identifies the desired qualities in the relationship as being "(1) equality of social power; (2) the professional person is to present as a human being. He should be interested, concerned, sympathetic, attentive, responsive and (3) confirmation of the other" (Switzer, 1970, p. 33). Taking into account the complexity of the Nama society, the main objective of the counsellor is to help the person complete any unfinished business with the deceased and to be able to say goodbye. There are specific issues and these correspond to the four tasks of grieving:

1. To increase the reality of the loss.
2. To help the counselee deal with both expressed and latent affect.
3. To help the counselee overcome various impediments to readjust after the loss.
4. To encourage the counselee to make a healthy emotional withdrawal from the deceased and to feel comfortable reinvesting that emotion in another relationship.

The grieving of the Nama people in a tragedy or a crisis death situation

In discussing the grieving of the Nama people in a tragedy or sudden death, I will particularly base myself on my experiences. Sudden deaths will often be dramatic for Nama people. The shock when the death becomes known is totally different from a death where there has been time for preparation. It is my observation that violent death among the Nama people is regarded as a disgrace. In particular instance, a twenty-one-year-old boy was fatally stabbed by his friend, and the family and the next of kin of the deceased were upset. Such a death is not only a loss to the family but is a painful threat to society's own existence. To the eyes of the society, such death is embarrassing. Because the unreality of the situation is greater following sudden deaths, and because fantasies can be vivid in such case, it is particularly important to see the body following such deaths.

There are, of course, situations where the bereaved should not be encouraged to view the body because of the body's condition. If they demand to see it anyway, and it is possible, they should not be prevented.

In tragic death among the Nama, it is the pastor's or counsellor's task to work towards genuine reconciliation. The pastor should stay in contact with the grieving people. Grief does not end with the funeral. There is a certain time of need between five to fourteen days after the funeral where the people will need the pastor.

Always respond in a spirit of prayer and Christian concern, but let the situation determine your use of prayer and scripture. The presence of the pastor alone is sometimes his/her greatest Christian witness.

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