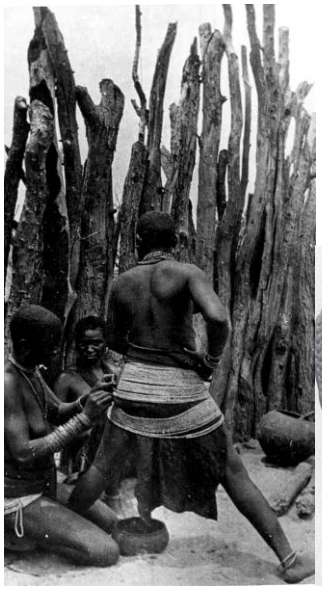
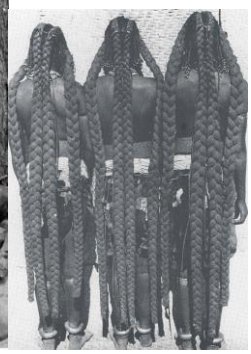
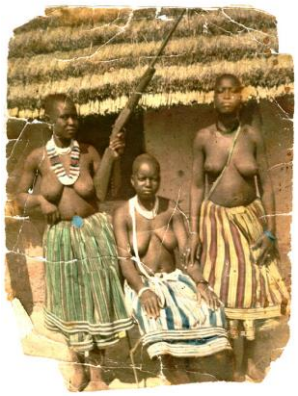
The Pre-Colonial Costumes of the Aawambo





Significant Changes under Colonialism



and the Construction of Post-Colonial Identity

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ABSTRACT

Pre-colonial Oshiwambo costumes played a significant role in ensuring the continuity of the socio-cultural and ethico-moral principles of the Aawambo. This study aims to record, document, describe and analyse the circumstances that caused aspects of Aawambo traditional heritage to disappear.

The thesis analyses the meaning of traditional costumes before European influence and the impact that the change from traditional costumes to European fashion has left on the community today. It is strongly argued that Christianity and colonialism should be held accountable for influencing the community to abandon its traditional costumes.

The thesis examines the following central questions; what was the impact of cultural imperialism on the material culture of the northern kingdoms? In what ways did material culture change during the initial period of contact and subsequent conquest by colonial forces? Why did new forms of material culture so rapidly displace traditional items? To answer these central questions the thesis is divided into four main chapters with an introduction (Chapter One) and conclusion (Chapter Six).

Chapter two examines traditional fashion and identity among the Aawambo. This chapter exhibits a number of photographs that compliment the text and argues that these traditional costumes reflected the value systems of the society that produced it and significantly contributed to the construction of the identity of that society.

Chapter three examines the significant influences that led to changes in traditional costumes, the new fashions and the initial community response to these introduced changes. This chapter argues that changes in material culture in the seven kingdoms of northern Namibia were strategically urged by the direct intervention of missionaries and colonialists to get rid of Aawambo traditional costumes and stigmatise them as `primitive' and `barbaric'.

Chapter four examines contemporary 'traditional costumes' and the discourse of 'culture and tradition' from the perspective of the community. It argues that the new 'traditional costumes' demonstrate prominent features of pre-colonial leather costumes, demonstrating that the community is still inspired by their ancestors'traditions.

Chapter five examines general public opinion and concerns on the implications of western dress in the community today. It goes further to suggest ways and examine efforts that have been made to preserve our unique cultural heritage and identity. The thesis suggests that the display of costumes and other objects of material culture from the northern kingdoms must be done in more sophisticated ways in Namibian museums and most importantly integrated more into the educational system.

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Most importantly, this work could not have been completed without the financial support of the Ford Foundation and by the University of Namibia northern Campus, which for the past four years employed me to carry out research on the cultural heritage and traditions of the north central regions under the auspices of the History Research Project. I would also like to thank the Carl Schlettwein Foundation for awarding me a bursary to assist me with my studies. Lastly but not least, I am grateful to my industrious supervisor, Dr. Jeremy Silvester of the History Department, University of Namibia, for his constant encouragement, support, advice and comment on my work. *Kulupeni Nomeho yakwetu.*

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all my interviewees in the North Central Regions of Namibia for their generous contribution of knowledgeable information and traditional objects that made the compilation and production of this study about the pre-colonial costumes of the Aawambo successful and inspiring for the younger generations to even carry it on in more depth. I am also dedicating this work in particular, to Mrs. Ndekume Mwaetako, Pastor Michael Nengola and Mrs. Telesia Fiitiliha Akwenye who passed away during the process of compiling this study. And last but not least to all those members of the community who have to this day preserved items of our ancestors' cultural heritage in their homes.

DECLARATIONS:

(a) "I declare that thesis is all my own work and has not been submitted for a degree in any other institution of higher learning."

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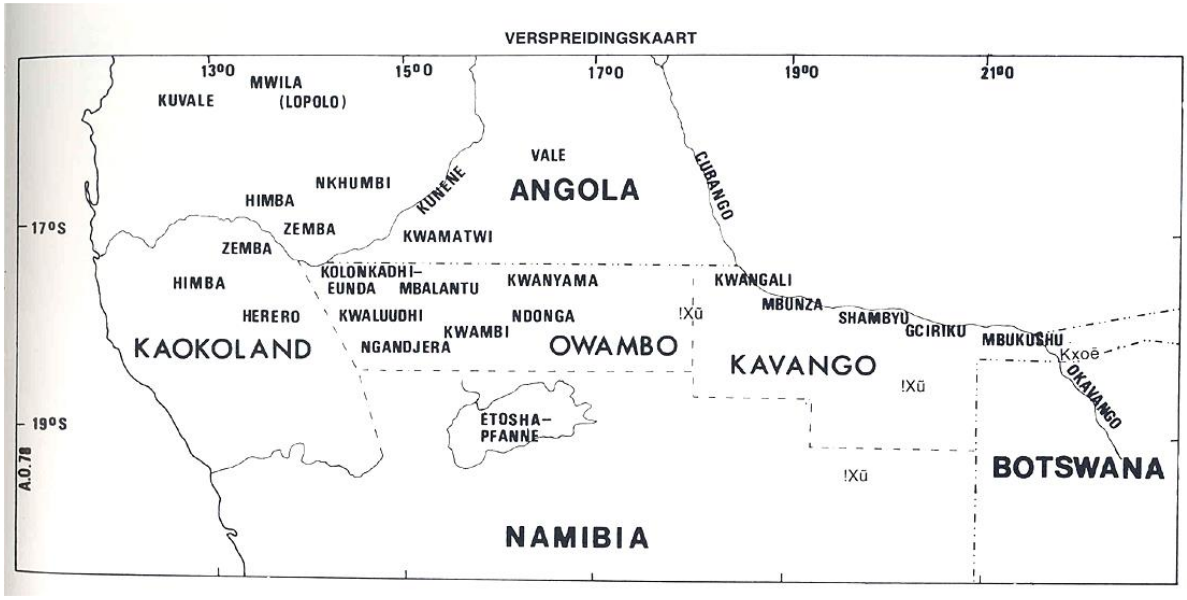
Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis will describe traditional clothing in the pre-colonial Owamboland, explore the concept of 'tradition' and analyse ways in which fashion has changed over time and the reasons for more and significant changes in the colonial period. The study will mainly focus on the traditional costumes of the Aawambo in northern Namibia, excluding the Oshikwanyama speaking Aawambo in Southern Angola, citing the reason that although the two belong to the same cultural and traditional entity, they are nevertheless separated from each other by colonial boundaries but in essence, they share similar cultural values with the rest of the Aawambo population groups. This study covers the period between 1870 and 1989. This period is essential in understanding and analysing historic events that gave momentum to significant transformations and changes that influenced and altered cultural values and the significance of traditional costumes and other objects of cultural potency in pre-colonial Owamboland.

The *Aawambo* population group belongs to the Bantu race. According to Williams *"several scholarly studies have classified Owambo peoples by linguistic evidence and ethnic identity as belonging to the south-west Bantu Group"* (1991: 51). This group of the Bantus [Aawambo] is believed to have settled in what is today referred to as Owamboland, an area between the Kunene and the Okavango rivers in about 1550. According to written sources, it took some 300 years before the first whites passed through Ovamboland. *"The first visitors to Ovamboland came in 1851: Charles Anderson, a Swede, and Francis Galton, an Englishman … Six years later the men of the*

Rhenish Mission: Hugo Hann and Johannes Rath and an Englishman Frederich Green visited the Ovambo, Ondonga" (Hiltunen, 1986:11). However, Vedder wrote that the earliest [spontaneous] written records on *Owamboland* go back to the 1590s when Andrew Batels, a British national who had previously been captured by the Portuguese in Brazil and deported to Angola, gave an account of the African territories and polities through which he wandered after escaping from his Angolan captivity. These territories included Owamboland, or Amboland as he called it (Hangula 1998: 164; Vedder 1985: 14).



Map: Northern Namibia, indicating location of the seven kingdoms. Source: ***Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981: 11.***

Aawambo could be subtly divided into eight sub-ethnic groups which, according to Hangula, formed the pre-colonial kingdoms of *Evale, Ombandja, Ombalanhu, Ondonga, Ongandjera, Oukwanyama, Uukwambi* and *Uukwaluudhi* (Hangula 164; Eirola 1992: 31), as well as the autonomous territories of *Eunda, Okafima, Ondobovola* and *Uukolonkadhi* (Hangula 1998:164; Hasheela 1986: Preface). The later independent

territories ('autonomous territories') differ in essence from the earlier, the pre-colonial kingdoms that were under the rule of a king or queen as this was not applicable to autonomous territories. Hangula adds that, the various *Aawambo* groups showed strong physical affinities and had many similarities in language, socio-political structure, and religion, but they never unified into a central state (Hangula 164; Pelissier 1977: 464). In the middle of the 19th century European traders reached *Owamboland* from Mossamedes in the north and Walvis Bay in the South.

The Finnish missionaries, however, were the first to settle permanently in Owamboland, in 1870. Apart from spreading new European material culture, such as clothes, etc. missionaries violated the community's fundamental socio-cultural principles by suppressing, modifying and even destroying the social systems that they found in practice. This condemnation *". . . appeared most clearly in the religion [christianity] principles and teachings. It meant, among other things, the abandonment of many traditional customs. The tradition of healing the sick for instance was regarded as sorcery and substituted with European medical science. In the same way the traditional educational system was replaced with missionary schools. ...so the opening of doors to western thinking and conceptions…"* (Eirola 1983:50). In this regard, it appears that missionaries intentions in the community was not necessarily to spread Christianity but in particular, they were more interested in marketing and promoting European values among Africans and encouraging the community to discard and reject continuity and the preservation of their cultural heritage, despite the fact that some of the African traditions were practically vital and useful to the community.

As early as 1870 strategies for Christian education were put in place in Owamboland by the Finnish Mission, and *"after World War 1, Roman Catholic and Anglican Missionary activities were introduced"* (Malan 1995: 17). *"Upon arrival in Owamboland the Finnish missionaries observed that Portuguese traders clearly dominated trade everywhere there…even in Ondonga most of the firearms owned by the king were procured from the Mossamedez traders. A clear division of labour arose between the Mossamedes and Walvis Bay traders in the 1870s. The Walvis Bay traders concentrated on exchanging arms and ammunition, horses, riding oxen, ox-wagons, clothes, tobacco beads and a variety of trinkets for which they obtained cattle, slaves and ivory. The Mossamedes traders were inclined to concentrate on the alcohol trade because it did not, in comparison to the arms business, require much capital"*(1990: 131, 133). In this regard, it is worth arguing that missionaries were indeed not only agents of spreading the gospel but, were also indeed interested in securing a place and a population to support trade interests of their governments. This is indeed one reason why missionaries were not happy with traders penetrating the community from different corners of their proclaimed Christian territory.

Europeans of different nationalities and agents started coming to Namibia increasingly at the end of the 19th century. The Germans stormed into Namibia in the late years of the nineteenth century following German's official take over and control of the territory in response to the 1884 mandate of the Berlin Conference. By the time of their arrival, various Namibian communities had established systems of well defined modes of

sociocultural and economic organisation. For example they had unique costumes, products of the local environment and skills that classified individuals according to age, sex, social, economic status and clan affiliation. Europeans interfered directly with local politics, misappropriated land ie. the basic means of production and distribution of cultural resources. As such, Africans were prohibited to dignify and initiate skills to promote, develop and encourage the preservation of local traditional values. As Europeans reserved no respect for local material culture in Owamboland, most of the cultural wealth vanished between 1870 and before Namibia's independence in 1989.

In the pre-colonial period the term '*Owamboland'*, the land of the '*Aawambo'* was not popularly used within the *Aawambo* themselves, instead, there were small independent kingdoms as pointed out by Hangula above. Each polity constituting a sub-tribe with an absolute ruler who, in most cases, was a king. There were distinctive artificial boundaries between kingdoms. According to Timoteus Negumbo, sometimes, "a fence of thorn bushes separated boundaries of some polities in the north west Owamboland between *Ongandjera, Ombalantu, Uukwambi* and *Uukwaluudhi* kingdoms". I have not gathered similar stories of physical demarcations between *Uukwanyama, Ondonga, Uukolonkadhi* and *Ombandja* kingdoms. Physical demarcations, fences between kingdoms were largely attributed to cattle raids between the kingdoms.

There is clear historic evidence that before colonialism the eight groups did not resort to a unifying social entity '*Aawambo,'* rather neighbouring kingdoms co-existed as separate and different heterogeneous groups or even as 'nations' like *Oshilongo shOndonga*\ the *Ondonga* nation or *Omukwaniilwa gwaNdonga*\ the king of *Ondonga* or *Aandonga ya*

Nangolo dhaAmutenya\ the Aandonga of Nangolo dhAmutenya and so on. Therefore, individuals in each kingdom associated their identity with the kingdoms to which they belonged like *Omukwambi, Omumbalantu, Omukwanyama, Omukwaluudhi, Omungandjera, Omukolonkadhi* or *Omundonga* woman, but not an *Omuwambo* woman. There had also never been a unifying *Oshiwambo* language, but, there had been eight separate dialects of the Oshiwambo language; *Oshindonga, Oshikwanyama, Oshikwambi, Oshimbalantu, Oshikwaluudhi, Oshikolonkadhi, Oshimbandja* and *Oshingandjera.* The first two, *Oshindonga* and *Oshikwanyama* were as a result of missionary education prioritised as mediums of instruction in missionary schools.

The *Oshindonga* was used, mainly, in the Finnish schools while *Oshikwanyama* was mainly used by the Anglicans in *Uukwanyama.* However, it should be noted that despite a person's sub-tribal affiliation and the nature of classifications with regard to what kingdom he belonged, there was a strong inter-ethical relationship accorded in the individual's clan affiliation. The tribes were all organised along maternal patterns. Therefore, regardless of what kingdom a person belonged, he still maintained a strong family tie with members of his clans not only within his kingdom but in other kingdoms. Individuals belonging to the same clan were expected to conform to required clan socio-cultural norms and standard costumes. In this regard clans did not only promote but also integrated and conserved the Aawambo material culture, socio-cultural unity, and their common historical background as belonging to the same ancestry.

However, despite their common ancestry, the concept '*Owamboland'* [the land of the *Aawambo*] or '*Aawambo'* as a unifying tribal entity inclusive of all the seven (nowadays eight, the eigth one being *Okalongo*) sub-ethnic population groups are arguably a colonial creation. Although there had been theories associated with the origin of the name *Aawambo* like *Ambo, Ompo* and *Aayamba,* it was seemingly other tribes in Namibia that popularised and grouped the eight population groups under a common name "Aawambo" perhaps on similarities of their dialectical expressions, geographical area and the perceived common ancestry. Although *Aawambo* do share a common historical background, cultural heritage, traditions, language and objects of potent cultural value, it can be argued that similarities in the language, *'Oshiwambo'* (the language spoken by the Aawambo) and other socio-economic set up did not unify them into a homogeneous political system, but each kingdom had a centralised socio-political system, until the implementation of the Odendaal commission of 1963 that according to Cohen "aimed to extend the establishment of South Africa's policy of 'homelands' to SWA."(1994: 106).

As elements of dialectical differences could be recognized in dialectical expressions of the eight groups of the *Aawambo,* so, it was with the pre-colonial costumes and codes of dressing traditionally. In this regard, the subject of traditional costumes, the essence of their meaning in the pre-colonial '*Owamboland'* and changes enforced due to the influence of modern fashions, 'western civilization' will be discussed and analysed in broader perspective, inclusive of the *Oshiwambo* [the language spoken by the *Aawambo*] speaking community as a distinctively heterogeneous political entity. Socio-political power lay in separate sovereign kingdoms but there were homogeneously shared unique

similarities in traditional ethics with regard to the socio-economic organization, environment, religion, clans and a common language "*Oshiwambo*"; although it is of distinctive dialectical variations in response to locational gaps. This homogeneity is as one could argue rooted in the common ancestry and the clans to which all the eight groups of the *Aawambo* belong.

Although rulers of the eight separate maternal kingdoms (the seventh entity *Uukolonkadhi* had been under the direct rule of the *Uukwaluudhi* kingdom as most of the people who first settled there were descendants of *Uukwaluudhi,* who left the community in search for abundant water, farming and grazing areas) belonged to different clans (like the *Aakwanekamba* \ hyena for the *Aandonga, Aakwanime* \ lion for the *Aakwanyama, Aakwanambwa* \ dog for the *Aakwaluudhi, Aangandjera* and *Aakwambi,* and *Aakwanghuyu*\ for the *Aambalantu),* they nevertheless belong to a common royal clan \ *ezimo lyaakwaniilwa* believed to have originated from Nkumbi in southern Angola.

Although, initially, traders introduced exotic goods that were bartered with local commodities such as ivory, ostrich feathers and elephant tusks; it was however, the period at the end of the nineteenth century that marked an increased contact between *Aawambo,* European missionaries and government commissioners, who smeared and advocated changes to the 'primitive traditions of the natives'. In this regard some kings and other influential community leaders, the custodians of traditional norms could not escape the temptation of European goods as they presumably appeared extraordinary special in attributing unique features and defined esteemed economic status to the wearer.

In the *Ondonga* kingdom the Finnish missionaries, had been exceptionally successful during the early contact. The missionaries *aatumwa\aahongi* were given permission to settle by king Shikongo shaKalulu in 1870. It was also in Ondonga that the first king in *Owambo*, the young King Kambonde kaNgula (1909 – 1912) was, according to Tirronen, baptised as Eino Johannes on 8 August 1912 and died the same day from liver sickness (1977: 126). However, as the last lines suggest it is obvious that the king's baptism was done without his prior arrangement and consent as it appears that he was critically ill and not conscious of the new faith.

Literature Review

In this thesis, it will be argued that during the pre-colonial period costumes were important symbols that identified the socio-cultural position, status and relationships between individuals and people in the various *Oshiwambo*-speaking communities of northern Namibia. Since traditional clothes and other costumes are credited and admired for the preservation of the *Aawambo* cultural heritage and identity, an analysis of the existing literature about tradition, fashion and identity in the pre-colonial *Owamboland* and the factors that led it to change was carried out. Whilst a large number of books have been consulted, as the bibliography will show, this literature review will only cover the most useful books consulted and will be divided into six sections.

Firstly, it will cover books that were written by people who lived or traveled in northern Namibia and described `Ovambo tradition'. Secondly, it will consider books that deal with the history of Namibia and the other factors that might have influenced changes in

clothing in northern Namibia. Thirdly it will look at the work of anthropologists on traditions and rituals in northern Namibia. After this it will consider some of the more theoretical work on the significance of clothing in the construction of identity. It will then consider work that provides comparative descriptions of the impact of Christianity on culture in Africa. Finally, as this thesis uses a considerable amount of material drawn from oral history, it will consider a couple of the books on the practice of conducting oral history which influenced the way in which the oral history collected was analysed.

Contemporary writers.

The history of changes in fashion in northern Namibia could be analyzed in view of the existing literature that contains contemporary accounts by people who wrote about the history and cultural heritage of northern Namibia communities. Contemporary accounts about northern Namibia's material culture and traditional heritage include that of Charles Anderson (1856), a Swedish trader, who visited king Nangolo dhAmutenya of *Ondonga* in 1851. Anderson who was on a trade expedition has left little information about the history and cultural practices of the people he contacted as his visit was motivated by the desire to get permission from the king to travel through his kingdom to Angola. However, his visit describes the first recorded attempt to offer European clothes to the community. King Nangolo was in this regard offered a European head wear, a crown, by Anderson. It also provides the earliest evidence of opposition to European dress as the king refused to accept the offer.

Another contemporary writer, Herman Tonjes (1996) of the Rhenish Missionary Society spent a lot of time in *Owamboland* as he also married a daughter of Martin Rautanen a Finnish Missionary who worked and settled in *Owamboland* for forty years. Tonjes, in his capacity as a missionary, wrote about aspects of northern Namibia's material culture like costumes and objects. His original book was written and published in German in 1911, but it is one of the very few early works that were written in German or Finnish that has been translated into English. However, there are limitations and weaknesses about his work as most of what he has covered is clearly influenced by his own perspective as a missionary and he did not conduct any interviews with the community about the items that he has written about.

The history of northern Namibia.

Patricia Hayes has written extensively about the Aawambo in the period 1880 – 1935. In her PhD thesis she examines social developments and cultural changes over a period of fifty-five years and how such changes influenced significant changes in the socio-political dispensation of traditional authorities that as a result weakened and destroyed some of them. She has also dwelt on the trade that developed between local communities and European traders and how such relationships contributed to weakening local trading networks and eliminated many of the local products in the market, as well as on the impact of contract labour, especially among the youths. In this regard the local community were also denied access to the traditional means of production and distribution like the mines in southern Angola and those at Otavi and Tsumeb. However,

Hayes's work concentrates mainly on the Uukwanyama kingdom and says less on the other six kingdoms in Owamboland.

Hellberg (1997) has given a general account about the role of the church in Namibia over the period 1840 to 1966 and, as his title suggests, its contribution to the liberation struggle in Namibia. However, there is no mention about the cultural impact of Christianity and its direct interference with local traditional customs that ultimately ruined and declared items of Namibian cultural heritage primitive and unacceptable.

Harry Siiskonen (1990), writing about the early influence of trade in northern Namibia in the period 1850 – 1906, focuses on `long distance trade' and especially the trade coordinated by European traders who in most cases were not on good terms with European missionaries. However, although missionaries were, apparently, relatively unpopular with traders, Hellberg and Siiskonen are not critical of the consequences that trade had on the cultural production of local goods and indeed do not point out the concern that such penetrations did not only pose a threat to the weakening of the existence of local costumes and products but also opened ways into Namibia to colonialism and other people with different interests whose presence in the country was to jeopardize the social and cultural structures of the indigenous people.

Patricia Hayes Jeremy Silvester, Wolfram Hartmann Wolfram and Marion Wallace (1998) have dwelt on the themes of 'Mobility and Containment under South African rule in Namibia'. Their literature provide useful in that it suggested clues as to the reasons

why those who went to work under the contract labour system changed some of their cultural values and practices like the wearing of European clothes. However, one the weaknesses in this regard is that their literature did not provide accounts from interviews carried out with those who worked under the contract labour system and who were directly affected by the system

The ethnography of the Aawambo

Maija Hiltunen (1993) has dwelt on magic and sorcery and objects used by witches in sorcery practices in *Owamboland.* Hiltunen's point of view ostracizes and undermines the meaning and concept of traditional customs in such a way that her judgments seem to represent missionary efforts to campaign against local traditions, as they intended to destroy and disown the community of its vitally important and meaningful material culture and religious values. Her description of aspects of traditional religion as `witchcraft' and `magic' illustrate this point. Carol Esthermann (1976) presented the ethnography of the Ambo ethnic group but covered more on the ethnography of south-western Angola. Her study dwells much on aspects of cultural heritage, but focusing more about the *Kwanyama* group of the *Aawambo* and ignoring the other population groups that constituted the former seven kingdoms of the *Oshiwambo*-speaking population groups. Hiltunen's literature serves to divide rather than encourage unity among the people who emerged from the same cultural and historical backgrounds.

Comparative Literature about Clothing and identity

Most of the works consulted in this category dwell on the impact of Christianity and colonialism in influencing different African communities to change from practicing and attaching values to their traditions. Langner (1991) has dwelled generally on the concept and importance of wearing clothes. He stresses the importance and influence of the local environment in determining what and how people should wear, and argues that it is the host community that should decide and judge what is socially acceptable or not in terms of structures, designs and types of materials being used. Hildi Hendrickson (1996) has written about the `long dress' and the construction of the Herero identity. In her arguments she is of the opinion that the long dresses, like the Herero men's uniforms that today form part of Herero–German post-war identity are integrated as part of the Herero identity to celebrate their outstanding courage against their enemy. This literature review fits in my argument that the Aawambo dress *oohema dhoontula* that are popular among many elderly women are indeed `traditional', despite the fact that the earlier styles were introduced to the community by the Finnish missionaries.

However, since then such dresses have been modified and altered to suit the cultural taste and demands of the local environment. Other writers consulted on this theme include John Eicher (1992), who argues that clothes are significantly important as objects that classify individuals according to their gender and an individual's role in society. In this regard, Eicher's analysis is accommodative of my arguments that clothes in the context of the *Aawambo* material culture had very important social interpretations relating to death, birth, and the sexual identity of a person. However, Eicher did not comment or point out

and illustrate how and whether, clothes were also indicative of an individual's economic position and social obligations in society.

Burke (1996) has written about another European item that had an early and remarkable influence on traditional products in Zimbabwe - soap. His case study suggests similarities with the case of European products like clothes and other products that found their way into the community through men who went to work under the contract labour system in Namibia. In Zimbabwe, the conditions that perpetuated Africans demands for Europeans goods were very similar. In the case of Zimbabwe soap and other detergents became popular, especially among women. In this regard soap like other western products, in particular clothes, were interpreted as a metaphor for cleanliness and modernity. Like in the context of northern Namibia during the early years of contract labour, black men in Zimbabwe were also encouraged and motivated to go and work for Europeans to earn payments and buy the fashionable commodities. This was especially true of those who intended to marry soon.

The influence of Christianity

The spread of Christianity in northern Namibia was largely responsible for the washing away and diminishing of local traditional values. However, this reality has been ignored Missionaries work and documents about *Aawambo* and their cultural traditions are therefore, written in such a way that the reader develops a misconception that our forefathers were cultureless and unethical. This is the view presented by Matti Peltola (2002) whose literature is based on the autobiography of Martin Luther Nakambale (1870

– 1946) whom he praises as an icon for social evolution and civilization in *Owamboland*. Peltola's comments about African objects of potent value appear to be intentionally deceptive and this view is applicable to most of the other recorded perceptions of missionaries who worked and commented about the cultural heritage and history of northern Namibia. These views are also not analytical as they are written presumably to encourage criticism and undermine our ancestors' superior values and quality of objects that they produced and to assist fundraising in Europe.

Meredith McKittrick has written about the impact of Christianity in northern Namibia and her work, unlike that of most other writers, is based on the Ovambo kingdoms of the north-west, particularly Uukwaluudhi, Ongandjera and Ombalantu. Her work looks at the impact of Christianity and Colonialism on existing social structures and particularly develops the idea that they provided a new dimension to existing conflicts between people of different ages or generations. Her work was useful to this study as it suggested the reasons why particular individuals might have been willing to abandon their traditional clothing and wear the new fashion.

Oral history accounts

Most of my work is based on the oral accounts of interviews conducted in communities in the seven communities that constituted the former seven kingdoms of the Aawambo. Paul Thompson (1988) in his famous work on oral history deals with British examples. However, he made the important point that the assessment of the value of an oral history interview should not be fixed on worrying whether the facts given are correct or incorrect

as *". . . the diversity of oral history lies in the fact that `untrue' statements are still psychologically `true', and that these previous `errors' sometimes reveal more than factually accurate accounts"* (1988: 139) Elizabeth Tonkin (1992) has illustrated a weakness of oral history accounts, in the sense that such interpretations may be carry the personal prejudices of the interviewees and may be subjected to the bias and subjectivity of an individual. She argues that the verbal accounts given by speakers are a `performance' given to the person doing the interview and, so, are influenced by who that person is. However, one could argue that whilst oral interviews should be treated with care, they should not be rejected, as the findings are subjected to the interpretation of existing written literature and additional accounts from other oral sources.

Methodology

In the past, colonisers and missionaries encouraged our people to neglect the culture of writing, documenting and preserving its past without losing it. After Namibia's independence in 1989, it has been emerging that oral history is essentially important to rediscover, incorporate, reclaim, rewrite and document the history, cultural values and traditions that were perceived 'worthless' for documentation, preservation or conservation during colonialism.

Three years ago, an oral history project was initiated and established at the University of Namibia northern campus in *Oshakati,* to record, document and preserve northern Namibia's cultural heritage, traditions and history. Since its inception a substantial number of oral history interviews and a few objects of material culture have been

collected and continue to be collected. Under the auspices of the University of Namibia's northern campus, the Ford Foundation allocated most of the funds to the project. The study about the pre-colonial costumes of the *Aawambo* and their significant changes was seen as an important contribution to our efforts to record, document, describe and analyse the circumstances that caused aspects of our traditional heritage to lose value and disappear from the mother community.

Most of the contributions made to this thesis come from narratives of oral interviews conducted in communities of the four northern political regions of Namibia thus *Omusati, Ohangwena, Oshana* and *Oshikoto* between 2000 and 2003. These regions are predominantly inhabited by the *Aawambo* population groups, since the first group of the Aawambo settled in the area about the 16th century. Several written materials particularly by traders, missionaries and other sources were also consulted and provided comprehensive analysis to the study.

However, oral tradition is at present the main source of informing the community about its history and traditions, as such this study relies heavily on oral evidence of the elderly people who are arguably the repositories of knowledge and skills of the ancestors customs. This research is qualitative in approach. Several elderly people were interviewed and provided most of the information that this study has assembled and analysed. An open ended questionnaire was used in conducting the interviews. Despite a substantial number of interviews that were, generally, conducted by the project, about twenty-five people were interviewed on the subject of this research, roughly three to four

people from each of the seven former independent kingdoms were interviewed. What I did not cover much in this study is the *Ombandja*, but instead dwelled on the dresses of the kingdom of *Ombalantu* and *Okalongo* that share a geographical position with Ombandja and have close similarities in language and traditional costumes. The interviewees were selected on the basis of recommendations by tribal authorities, village heads, church representatives, and individuals.

Most of the people who were interviewed were born in the 1920s and earlier. The oldest interviewee, Kuku Ndekume Mwaetako, now deceased, was born at the end of the nineteenth century. A few others were born in the 1930s and 40s and the early 50s. The fact that all of the interviewees were born in the colonial period, and at the time when Christianity and its influence was already present might raise some concern about the authenticity of the information provided. Against this background, I would, however, argue that human beings remember vividly the events of their childhood experiences more than at any other point in life. My argument (based on the interviewees accounts) is that when most of them were children and during their youthful ages, traditional costumes were still common in the community, however, at that time European costumes and other materials were finding their ways in the community. Most of the interviewees have told me that they wore traditional clothes as children and as youths. Women in particular, those I have interviewed have all, with the exception of a few married traditionally, and owned traditional wedding costumes and a few of them still possess them.

The question of whether the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries costumes were traditionally "authentic" as compared to those of the earlier centuries is valid. In this regard most of my interviewees were of the opinion that despite the changes that might have been accumulated over the years, the pace and trajectory in categories of costumes were relatively low and monitored by family and clan elders without interference of the outsiders. In this regard, I should argue that even if changes were there the flow of practical values and norms embodied in costumes continued up to the period of European occupation of the community.

The evidence given by my informers is most reliable as most of them had been part of the old socio-cultural dispensation as well as of the new socio-economic transformations and changes introduced by European colonialists and religious institutions and a few pieces of evidence from available written literature have also been used to provide evidence about oral historic accounts. The fact that man is fallible and selective by nature; subjecting oral traditions to distortions delivered by self-centred esteem and a zeal for special recognition cannot be ruled out. I came to realise, during interviews that some responses by some of the interviewees were subjective, negated by influences of age, socio-economic status, religion and political affiliation. This might alert us on the fear and scepticism about the authenticity of oral history. Some historians have doubts about oral history on the grounds that such testimony is often *". . . tainted by subjectivity (where one tends to select only those views acceptable to yourself and omit negative aspects)…[as such] historians generally remained reluctant to accept oral history as a legitimate source for history"* (Botha, November 2003: National Archives, Windhoek). However, against this

background, I am confident that the findings of this study should be seen as reliable as most of the information that they provided was analysed in respect of the similarities and uniformity of ideas that informers provided and also through the accounts found in available written materials. Archival photographs of the *Oshiwambo* ethnological interpretations have also added another element of evidence to the oral source. In addition, the collection of a few cultural objects that survived Christianity and colonial cultural imperialism also provided additional material to supplement the oral stories.

A major challenge to this study was, however the language barrier. Most of the early written literature accounts on the traditional ethics and customs of the *Aawambo* were written either in German, Portuguese and Finnish by traders, hunters, explorers and missionaries. Another weakness is that there has never previously been a written academic research on *Aawambo* pre-colonial costumes and how they were changed during the colonial period and how such changes have weakened and destroyed aspect of the community cultural identity. This has been one of the reasons why this thesis relies more on oral sources for its data gathering and analysis.

Chapter Two: Fashion and Identity in Pre-colonial Owambo Kingdoms.

I have indicated in the introduction that, prior to Namibia's colonization and Christianisation, Namibian indigenous communities engaged freely in active trade with other communities and within themselves. This is an indication that the *Aawambo* in particular were engaged in the production of valuable material culture. Trade was an important means that supplied raw materials for some of the earlier traditional costumes, ornaments and adornments. Such items formed important assets that formalized and informed traditional heritage and customs among the eight population groups of the *Aawambo* before European colonialists and missionaries campaigned to disinherit local traditions. Martha Salokoski has argued that *"with respect to technology, people seem to have been fairly self sufficient. Housebuilding, toolmaking, basketry and the production of clothes were all carried out locally. Iron hoes, spearheads, arrowheads were manufactured by the Ukwanyama, who excavated, smelted and forged iron from the Mupa mountain in the north"* (1986: In Morner and Svensson [eds.], 1991: 220). This piece of information indicates that the *Aawambo* were indeed skilful and artistic. They also worked creatively and initiated skills that altered the environment to suit their economic and social demands. Clothing was therefore, one of the items that the *Aawambo* invented in response to socio-cultural values of concealing nakedness and also to encode non-verbal messages about the wearer. These were the important moral ethics, ideals that shaped the community's cultural heritage and social values all along before European cultural domination.

It is therefore, evident that in the pre-colonial period, one factor that defined the *Aawambo* identity was visible in their clothes; ornaments and costumes that were produced using skills and materials from the local environment. Although, there were significant varieties in material designs, utility and meaning there had been a common interpretation with regard to varieties of costumes that the pre-colonial communities of the *Aawambo* invented. The tanned cattle hide (*Oonguwo*), ironsmith ornaments, iron beads, and ivory buttons(*ekipa lyondjamba)*, were just a few of the ornaments and costumes that formed an important component that defined the social background of the *Aawambo* and shaped their remarkable identity before Europeans conquered their community.

The concept of "*Oshiwambo* traditional costumes" as a symbolic expression of cultural identity among the Aawambo, especially at the end of the nineteenth century should be seen as highly contentious, when put into the context of the dynamic socio-economic developments that took place in the community at that time. The introduction of long distance trade meant that the kingdoms were increasingly exposed to materials and goods from other cultures. It has been noted that *"in the course of six decades, between 1850 and 1910, Ovambo societies were opened up to European merchant capital, to missionary influence and colonialism. The first European trader, Charles John Anderson, entered the area in 1851…"*(Morner and Svensson [eds.], 1991: 217). Harri Siiskonen has further argued that the *"activation of the colonial powers' domination in the middle of the first decade of the 1900s signified a striking political and socioeconomic turning point in the history of the Owambo communities…"* (1990: 23). In this regard, I will

argue that European influence facilitated major changes to the pre-colonial adornments and traditions that arguably, did not only alter traditional costumes, but also drew the community closer to European fashions, customs and beliefs. Africans came to value and implement not only western dress and adornments but, also adopted some of their attitudes. Since then, European fashions have had a major influence in the community. This chapter will, therefore, dwell on issues of pre-colonial costumes and identity. How and what costumes interpreted and shaped group and individual identities before Europeans? Why was it important to initiate and implement similar adapted versions of traditional costumes, hairdresses and ornaments?

The Socio-cultural interpretation of pre-colonial Aawambo costumes.

When I interviewed Mathew Kapolo on the concept and meaning of traditional costumes, his views reflected a general consensus expressed by most of the people I interviewed, mostly elderly, that: *"... Aawambo costumes refer to ornaments and other body attires ... produced from local materials such as hide, barks, roots, copper ... and ... processed by local skills that defines and interprets our cultural and natural heritage"(Kapolo, 2002: UNAM, Oshakati).* Kapolo's concept of costumes is important in understanding the meaning and significance of wearing clothes in communities that constituted the *Aawambo* kingdoms. Kapolo's understanding of traditional costumes stresses the value, meaning and significance of using the immediate cultural environment to produce traditional fashions and objects acceptable and useful to those who culturally inhabit a given socio-natural environment which in essence was fundamental in determining the

cultural identity of an individual and groups of people as they interact with nature. Most of my field informers echoed Kapolo's words, although they had no clue as to when and what clothes were first invented.

Headmen Shilongo Uukule of *Uukwanambwa* noted that, as in other tribes of the *Aawambo,* there were clan rules regulating what costumes the members of each clan should wear as symbols of their clan's totems and identity *"I heard that there were some clans that did not use goats skin for dress, but I cannot tell you what clan it is. What I have observed is that such clans did not exist where I grew up, but I believe they could be found somewhere in Ondonga* (2002: *Uukwanambwa, Ondonga*). Uukule further told me that *"women's dresses were mainly taken from cattle, as a girl grew older, new sizes were made to suit the proportion of the body, but the same materials were used. In the essence of our custom our women were expected to dress up properly in front with little pieces of cloth that they could afford. However, a woman could have her buttocks uncovered. This was acceptable: Look at the photo on the back cover of the booklet* (refering to the back cover of the booklet: "Keep Our Fire Burning! The Traditional Homestead"), *it shows a woman standing, leaning against the granary, her buttocks is not covered, but it is just fine for her. That is how our ancestors dressed, it was morally and environmentally compatible, it was also economical. However, after a wedding, the buttocks and hips of a circumcised woman had to be covered with a piece of leather apron called an Oshithelelo. The front was covered by an apron tanned from the cattle stomach called Oshiteta, but if a woman were poor she would still wear aprons on both sides that had been given to her by those who owned cattle. Only experienced and very*

skilful people could tan the Oshiteta, since it was delicate to handle. These people were called aapeli.(Uukule, 2002: Uukwanambwa, Ondonga). Shilongo like Kapolo outlines, explains and recognizes the significance of the local environment in determining the essence of Oshiwambo traditional fashions. While emphasising on the essence and ideal of tiny skirts that were only worn in front by mature women, he nevertheless, highlights an important stage in the development of the pre-colonial clothing in northern Namibia. In this regard, it can be, presumably, interpreted that the initial clothes of the Aawambo in particular of the women were basically pieces of tiny leather from cattle that was meant only to cover and conceal genital parts. However, this early civilization, presumably changed slowly overtime resulting in the invention of other fashions like the ostrich egg shells called *Oshilanda* or *Omwaanga* and also the modification of large cow skirts called *Oonguwo* popular among the *Ovakwanyama* women. These changes were significantly observed among richer women who did not only resort to using longer and larger leather skirts from cattle, the traditional supplier of dress but also invented new fashions from wild animals like the giraffe. One would argue that, it was during this period that the development of an elite class was becoming distinctively clear and dominant.

Shilongo explained that a maximum of three different aprons (*iiteta)* can be obtained from a single cow's stomach, depending on the skills applied. To make the leather cloth\ *oshiteta,* most attractive and beautiful, a local bush called *Omutulu* was used to dye the leather and convert it to a desired colour, usually to a light brown colour. This process was called *okusindika.* To achieve the desired colour, the leaves of the *omutulu* are rolled

inside the fresh membrane of the animal's stomach for five or more days until the desired colour was obtained. Different colours could be obtained since these bushes differed slightly in colour, but the commonest colour was mainly light brown - this was a favourite colour for the *Aawambo* as it matches the *olukula*, the main lotion for the body and clothes. To make sure that leather clothes were always soft and smooth, women, regularly applied *olukula* and *oombeke* oil that was kept inside gourd containers. The *oombeke/eemheke* could also be chewed and applied/*okumelako* on the *oongondo* anklets to obtain a greenish sulphur called *endhilo.* To obtain this substance the *oongondo* were buried in what is called *okufinda* and regularly moisturised with urine. This substance was mixed with *olukula* and when pounded it produced a dark brown colour called *endhilo.* The *eemono* were also added to the *olukula* and sulphur/*endhilo* at pounding – *eemono tadi tulwa ko ngele edhilo lili popepi nokufuluka.* This was to add flavour and darker colour.

Shilongo stated further that, one would interpret that costumes were, as such, meaningful to the community in which they were produced. They communicated messages about marriage, sex, clan and age classification. In this regard the community placed less significance on its utilitarian value. As new inventions were made on clothes, they did not only began to play a significant role in categorizing people into classes, but also created a socio–cultural hierarchy between the rich and the poor, and denied underprivileged individuals the right to freely and equally benefit from the built environment, naturally and culturally. This in turn gave a low socio-economic reputation to the poor who were deprived of the right to some of the materials that were reserved to be worn by the rich

and privileged class. As the king's subjects were expected to observe a standard way of dressing, the king, his wives and some prominent *omalenga* wore exceptional outfits.

Other oral informants were more precise in raising this concern. Lucas Shinedima told me that the *Eteta* [cattle stomach membrane mentioned earlier] for example, was distinctively classified into two categories to show status. Two of these categories were *Ekopa* and *Nambwa.* The earlier was very large and of high quality and reserved for wealthy members of the community called *iipuna* or *Eengundja*. The poor and less superior men in the community wore aprons called *oonambwa* which were relatively tiny, less attractive and of lower quality. This apron was structured in such a way that it barely covered the buttocks while that of rich men covered almost the entire hips, back and front. Apart from their royal ritual costumes, kings had a variety of quality dresses, which ordinary people were not allowed to wear. For example if his men on a hunting expedition killed a giraffe they would take the skin to the king who would use it for his clothes or trade it. To keep his clothes valuable *Olukula* from *Omuuva* tree roots and cow fat were always used as a lubricant to soften and maintain the quality of these genuine leather products. Poor men's leather clothes were not as soft or as attractive as those of rich people, as they could not afford to apply the required amount of lotion to make the skin soft, attractive and lasting.

Uukule was born aound 1918 in *Ondonga.* He reiterated that the clothes of the aristocrats were distinguished differently from those worn by the poor, most of whom wore the skins of goats, the standard dress for the poor. Materials for the king and queen's clothes were

rich in texture, quality and quantity and were designed with special care, they also had a variety of choices over what to wear from a variety of stylish and attractive fashions. Women who were married to rich people wore front aprons obtained from wild animals. Some of the wildlife used for costumes included the African Buffalo and the giraffe. The giraffe was significant for the wives of dignified persons like Shivute shaNdjongolo, queens and sisters to the king in Ondonga. There was a distinctive difference between dresses made from the skins of cattle and those made from wild animals and those who wore them were considered to be dressed more attractively and received more respect.

Shoes were also a means of determining social classification. Basically, there were two types of shoes. "The *Oikayata* [kw*]* were mainly made for ordinary people and basically for work related activities such as protecting the wearer against thorns, most importantly, when men and young boys went to graze cattle. The *oikayata* were therefore not skilfully designed, and little time was spent putting them together. The second type of shoes were called *Ooghaku daongolwa* [kw]. They were very famous and specifically meant for prominent members of the community such as kings and chiefs. Leopards and giraffes were to some extent used to make these types of shoes hence ordinary people could 'not afford them" (Kakonda, 2001: Omalyata \ Ohangwena).

A man's belt was another important item of his dress. Basically two types of belts were commonly used. The much larger and thicker belt was used to keep a man steady and give him strength and stamina to withstand hunger or thirst, especially when he was away from home at a cattle post or at war. That belt was called *Epaya*. The other belt was

called *ekwamo* and was worn to serve other purposes such as to fasten down leather dresses such as *Onkuntuwa* and *Ombend*e. Cattle herders (*aanahambo)* distinctively wore *Obede* by passing the cloth between the legs and hooking it into the belt at the rear and front. It should be firmly fastened to the body in such a way that it ensured the wearer protection from thorn bushes and would not easily fall down when they were running or be hooked by thorn bushes. Hunting objects like *Odhimbo* and *Omukonda* (double edge knives) were tucked into the belt when hunting or simply herding cattle. It was a violation of *Oshiwambo* customs for a man to go out bare handed, without defensive objects such as a double edged dagger, *Omukonda,* and *Ondhimbo (knobkerrie)* which were partly used as protective devices for unexpected attacks.

The cultural bond between the *Ondhimbo* and the child began when a baby boy was born. At birth the father's cousin went into the bush to cut a *knobkerrie*. He was expected to take along the *Ondhimbo* on his first visit to the baby, a week after the birth, when the mother was allowed access to the public, from the maternity confinement hut called *Oshalwa*. He also carried dry firewood, *olukuni.* These objects were of significant cultural value to the child. Other objects worn along with the belt, and forming part of the mens' costumes, included *Ofenya* (the snuff holder), *Oshidhiga shomulilo gOshilongo* (sticks from a local tree called *omukanga* or *omumbolongonga,* which were ancient tools for making fire). He also carried a leather bag for tobacco and a pipe for smoking tobacco. Men could also wear a few strings of ornaments and amulets around their ankles, wrists or around their waists.

The *ondhimbo* was a protective mechanism symbolizing bravery, defensive power and masculinity. A man was never allowed to go about his daily activities with bare hands like a woman. As a child the mother must always carry her son's *knobkerrie* wherever she goes. Should she leave it behind she would be questioned about it by whoever met him. The firewood symbolized the sacred fire that must always be lit and must be kept alive at the meeting place *oshoto*, signifying prosperity, life, protection, continuity and the perseverance of traditions. By so doing the baby was commissioned into the passage to manhood and responsible parenthood when he grew up.

Young boys, as they grew up, were always oriented on the importance and principles of taking along *Ondhimbo* especially when looking after cattle. The *Odhimbo* was a totem for cattle strength and fertility. Looking after cattle with bare hands was conceptually a taboo, a bad omen for the cattle and could provoke the anger of the head of the cattle who was a man in most cases. Women, though they also owned cattle traditionally, their cattle were not called by their names. Their cattle were either under the disguise of her husband's name or that of a brother, uncle or aunt. *Ondhimbo* was also an important tool that a man had to carry along when he went to pay condolences to a bereaved family.

There was value attached to what each sex wore and when they wore it. For example, it was prohibited for women to wear men's dress as they do these days. It was only at the death of the husband that the wife wore her husband's clothes. Eliakim Uutoni *(Iita ya Kadha)* from *Elim* in *Uukwambi,* indicated that this norm has been largely violated today. He continued to tell me that like in all other communities of the *Aawambo,* the common

standard dress for most women in *Uukwambi* was to wear aprons made from the intestine of an animal stomach called *eteta.* The selected material was skilfully processed, using traditional skills to modify and make the material attractive and more beautiful. A substance called *omutulu,* bark dug from the bird plum tree, was instrumental in refining women's dress in *Uukwambi.* The bark was used as a dye to change the material's colour. Bark from other local trees like *omukanga* and Marula trees were also used to make dye (Uutoni, 2002: Elim / omusati). The *omutulu* was put in hot water for about three minutes. It was then taken out and put under the sun to dry. Another costume called *eyegonda* was also worn.

There was a product known as *Onziku,* that was applied on the belly, the inside of the skin called *Onguwo,* while it was still fresh, to soften it. The *Onziku,* which, metaphorically, means to sprout entirely, was also ceremonially occasioned at every new planting season. It was mixed with the seeds as a ritual to offer sacrifices to the gods in the belief that no seed would ever fail to germinate. The head of the household, who was in most cases a man, was culturally entitled to plant the first seeds. Everybody was expected to move out of the homestead to the field. As the head of the homestead led them into the field, he carried a *knobkerrie* and bows and arrows. These were associated with the symbolic provision of family security. The wives carried baskets containing a variety of seeds of sorghum *omahangu*, beans, maize, watermelons and so on. Everybody started planting, after the head of the homestead had planted the first plants and had ceremonially communicated with the ancestors.

In Uukwanyama, *Omupolo* was one of the important cattle leather fashions popular among women. *Omupolo*, as the name suggests, means the forehead, as it was tanned from the cow's forehead. This costume was a fairly long front dress covering other sets worn. The omupolo was, however, not a regular dress except when a woman was breast feeding, it protected other costumes from getting stained when the baby excreted urine and stools. In other words it served as nappies. The fact that *Omupolo* was taken from the forehead of a slaughtered cow is actually of ritual importance, a symbolic metaphor to wish the baby fortune in life, in accordance with a popular *Oshiwambo* adage, *'Shikukutu mooha shinenguni mOmupolo'* (bad fortunes may step aside and let good fortune step in the face of an individual). This adage was particularly important to men leaving their homes for cattle posts, war, salt and hunting expeditions and also, later, during journeys to join the migrant labour system.

Another significant leather costume popular among *Ovakawanyama* women was the *Elambakwa*, also worn in front of the *Onguwo* like an apron. Every *Kwanyama* woman who was a mother, was obliged to wear *Elambakwa* especially during the first six months after giving birth. It was ritually a symbol of protection to her children against all evils, mainly, death and diseases, these dresses were nicely designed and decorated with beads of nickel called *uuputu* to be attractive and fashionable. *Elambakwa* was also an important costume worn by the mother in recognition of her daughter's marriage ceremony. A mother who failed to wear it during her daughter's or her sister's daughter wedding ceremony might signal that she did not approve nor recognise the wedding.

An *Onghanda,* was an important traditional costume used as a ceremonial dress and also as a baby carrier. Though not a regular carrier every baby was required, at least, to be carried, even once, in it for ritual purposes. An infant calf was purposefully slaughtered to make the *Onghanda*. After the *efundula* the bride owned an *Onghanda* given by the bridegroom's paternal family to indicate that she was circumcised. The bride had to carry with her the *Onghanda* hanging on either of her arms as a symbol of maturity and readiness to start her own family. Ritually, it was believed that only the skin of a calf that had uttered a sound at birth could be processed for this important baby carrier. A calf that did not bellow at birth was not worth slaughtering, as it was thought to bring misfortunes to the baby - such as premature death of the baby or other misfortunes in life. When a woman conceived her first pregnancy, an *Onghanda* was prepared and given to her at childbirth, but not before the child was born, as it involved some ritual connotations or she could give birth to a still baby. Other costumes given to the new mother at the birth of the child included *Omupolo, elambakwa,* the leather baby carrier and *Onguwo*. All these costumes were the symbols of maturity, hardship, motherhood, endurance, love and tenderness.

The *Oghanda* also had other important functional uses. When a mother was having her daughter participating in *efundula* it was always a custom that she put on two skins of *Ooghanda,* in front and at the back to demonstrate her pride, and a gesture of happiness to her daughter for not bringing shame to her clan and not falling victim to pre-marital pregnancy. The mother of the daughter to be married would also wear the *Oghanda* at the wedding of her daughter as the symbol of wishing her daughter fertility and prosperity in

the prospective marriage ahead. Not wearing this object at her daughter's wedding was not acceptable. One of these clothes was used for wiping off sweat from the face of the bride as she danced arduously, but gorgeously, in response to the miraculous sounds of drumming and ululations from the mothers and well–wishers in marking her transition from girlhood to adulthood. This was a part at which every parent expected her daughter to perform the best as dancers were rewarded, and, that famous reputation could remain with them for life. Commenting on a newspaper article on *Efundula,* Pinehas Aluteni shed the light that "good dancers, ululators and those good at relating to and praising their clans distinguished themselves from the rest of the crowd … as the girls compete to make good impressions. Actually, skilful girls will occupy the minds of their peers for the rest of their lives. You might have come across an elderly woman relating that she knows whom or whom because they had shared the same dancing platform (*otwu uhala poshana shimwe shuudhano – oomakula makwetu nenge aanene aakwetu*) , and how who and who is skilful at that" (Aluteni,17\01\ 2001: Comments to an article, 'Returning to *Efundula'*).

According to Julia Shikesho, in *Uukwanyama,* mothers also used *elemba* called *omethi* \ *omefi* in other local dialects. These were very important materials that in the olden days were used as nappies\ *omilambo* The *Elemba* was made from roots of *Omigolo* trees called *omughafi*. To process it, roots were dug out, women pealed off the bark to get the inside white fibre. Several of these fibres were arranged and tightened together, *okupyatula,* with palm tree leaves at either end. After boiling the fibres with water to make an o*shityakela* lotion - a mixture of o*lukula* powder, cow fat and *endhilo* - a sulphur-like substance obtained from nickel ornaments called *oongondo* was applied to

soften the material. Traditionally, the *elemba \ omethi* material was never washed with water, but it was the *olukula* lotion together with other lubricants of nice smelling traditional herbs called *Okanakamuma* or the fine powder of pounded *Omuhu* tree barks that were used to give a nice smelling scent of natural herbs. Leather clothes were not washed with water as it dried, wrinkled and reduced the quality of the material and would also remove the desired colour. Baby nappies were carried in a leather or woven handbag also called *Omethi \ Ehahi***.** The *omethi* did not depart with the breast feeding mother. She always carried it whenever she was tending a baby. It did not only contain nappies and lubricants but also protective ornaments depending on clan affiliation. It was unethical should the mother depart with this bag when breast feeding, as it signified bad luck and misfortunes for the baby (Shikesho, 2002: *Ohangwena*). In this regard it is perhaps worth noting that in the pre-colonial community of the *Aawambo,* rituals were important components of the community customs that together with clothing constituted uncompromised taboos that were feared and commonly respected among the *Aawambo.* However, it is important to recognize that there were rituals which all communities in *Owamboland* were expected to observe and adhere. In addition to these there were also fundamental rituals that were only applicable to members of certain or individual clans. For example there were conditions limiting some clans about what costumes their members should wear and what they should not wear. The *Aakwashitha / Aakwaanime* for example were forbidden to wear ostrich egg shells as necklesses or as *oshinyenye/ Ondiwi* for the new born babies. These ideals nourished a sense of common identity and consolidated unity among clan members.

Apart from a few differences in names the *Aambalantu* and *Aambandja* communities of western *Owamboland* wore costumes very similar to the rest of the other *Aawambo* ethnic groups. At birth, baby girls wore *Oyiwele* around their wrists, anklets and around the neck. *Oyiwele* were black or white beads made from ostrich eggshells. Some clans wore beads of oyster shells called *Onyoka.* They also wore black beads called *Omakwendjenge* made from nickel and manufactured locally, using traditional billows. They were given to the child at the birth ceremony called *epititho.* A woman from the family of the father of the child called *omupitithi* was ceremoniously obliged to be the first person to dress his brother's child. This was done at a special ceremony called *ezaleko liiteta.* When the child was growing up and beginning to walk, a belt was made for a boy and a tiny skin of a goat could be tanned, especially for the girls. It was more sensitive for a girl to go naked than a boy. However, attention was only paid in covering up the front, but, not the buttocks. According to Akwenye *"Konale uunona o tawu ndunjuna owala, omatako geli polwaela",(*In the olden days children walked freely, their buttocks were not covered) (2000: Ombandjele, Ombalantu)".

Akwenye continued telling me that the front apron was called *Okakanda\Olupela.*

Skins of cattle and sheep were the main materials, but what determined what a person wore was the clan affiliation. "I belong to the *Aakwanamatsi \ Aakwanahungi* (the clan of those who have listened and learned their community tales) clan, therefore, my children can only wear sheep or cattle skins. Their baby carriers also come from sheep or steenbok. Their neckwear is *Onyoka,* or the black nickel beads and beads of tiny nickel called *eemuma"* (Akwenye, 2000: Ombanjele, Ombalantu). I was told that, if a child was

given costumes not related to his father's mother clan, he would become sick or even die. As a girl grew up she began to wear a piece of skin from a cow's belly called *ehani*. This was worn in front. She could also wear *okakanda* to cover the buttocks. Children also wore e*hani* but these were relatively smaller and of poor quality, they were called *edakwa*. Youthful girls wore *omapushu*\aprons covering the buttocks like the *Ngandjeras* and the *Kwaluudhis*.

As noted earlier, the *Oshiwambo*-speaking community is entirely maternal, hence every person at birth qualifies to join the father's mother's clan and must adhere to its code of dressing and categories of costumes prescribed by the clan. The maternal \ matriarchal relationship is also applicable to kingly succession to power by only those who were related to the king by his mother's clan, for example, it were only the king's nephews who could ascend to power when the king died or was deposed from power. Material possession and the inheritance of property, mainly costumes and cattle, were also in line with clan affiliation. This might explain why some men, culturally, tended to neglect and isolate their wives and children to strengthen ties with their immediate clan members.

In *Ombalantu,* at birth a baby boy was given a ceremonial dress made from a skin of striped polecat, locally called *Nghandanga.* Culturally, this animal is metaphorically associated with masculinity for its fierce natural behaviours when provoked and it can also smell bad by excreting liquid from glands in the anus in defence against its enemies. Baby girls also wore the skins of animals, but unlike the boys they were ceremonially given those of ground squirrels, locally called *Alunti,* for their feminist characteristic

behaviours. Like the ground squirrels girls are perceived culturally to be smart, peaceful, unprovocative, courageous, industrious and always strive to keep their homes not only tidy but also in order. Naturally women have also been observed to be of outstanding stamina in facing difficult situations. It was a normal practice for older men to date girls at birth for prospective wives. Where this was practicable, a ceremony called *eyaleko* was convened where the prospective husband would dress the baby under the oath that he would one day marry her. This oath was binding to the prospective husband and his clan. He was expected to provide `material' support in terms of clothing as the girl grew and matured. If the man died before marrying her, his clan would pass the responsibility to one of the deceased brothers, preferably the eldest brother to become the prospective husband.

The commonest and most popular dress for the men was, as Moller puts it, "a couple of thin, stiff leather antennae, curved like a pair of ox horns and sticking up from the leather girdle. This serves as a kind of ornament but also as a sign of distinction, the more important a man, the bigger the antennae: the biggest of these which I observed was worn by the chief of the Ondonga tribe for which this decoration is also characteristic**."** **(**Moller, 1996:116). This indication serves to explain further by emphasising that it was not only the type and quality of clothing, but also the size of costumes that were significant indicators of wealth and popularity of the wearer.

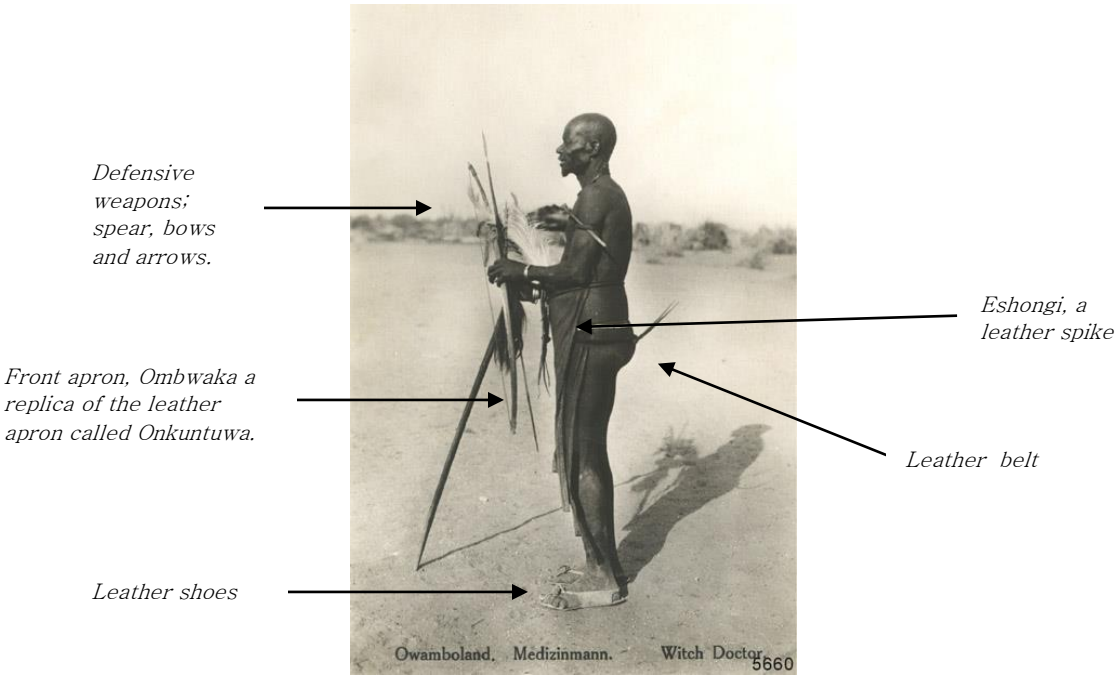


Photo 1: An Ovambo man in early 20th century fashion and with his weapons. The front apron is not the *onkuntuwa* described above but characterized men's invented fashion as more and more clothes were obtained from Europeans traders, missionaries and the state agents. Note that the man is described on this German postcard as a `Witchdoctor'.

What Moller describes above, ‘a thin, stiff leather antenna’ is the *Onkutuwa*, a leather apron tanned from animal skin. This little piece of tanned cattle skin was worn at the back but it did not necessarily covered the buttocks but it was popular and uniformly used by all circumcised *Aawambo* men. Only circumcised and married men could wear it, and were authorized to partake in important decisions and counselling at the level of the community law institutions on at matters affecting their clan. Lucas Shinedima told me that only married men to whom a ritual ceremony called *endwangulo loifonono* [the traditional way of legalizing and recognizing marriage to a man] had taken place could wear this apron. A man, despite the number of children or wives that he might have was not recognized as a `married man’ unless the ceremony indicated above was conducted for him. As a sign that they was still not yet married, men in *Uukwanyama* wore an upright ‘leather spike’ called *Eshongi*, standing upright at the back from the belt to indicate that he was still not mature.

As noted above, clothing related norms did exist among all the pre-colonial *Aawambo* kingdoms. Some of them are still prevalent and respected today. In every community, if a man divorces his wife while she is pregnant or is impregnated outside marriage she is obliged not to dress the child without notifying the real father and seeking his approval to dress the child. Any trespasses in this regard can provoke social evils that will haunt the child in a swarm of hostile spirits. Costumes therefore, were ritually significant, the means of enforcing discipline and valued habitual mannerisms within a group that shared common customary norms and beliefs. It is not surprising to note that obedience is emphasised on the side of the mother and child while the father appears to be exclusively

independent. Arguably, it appears that customary taboos like this one were enforced to regulate and strengthen the obedience and servitude of women to men, perpetuated by a woman's fear of losing the life of a dear one. Traditionally, each woman was duly expected to be faithful to her husbands, although most men were polygamists, and not to cheat on them sexually. This was born out of the fear and suspicion emanating from a situation where a substantial number of women were married to a single man. Since men could marry an unlimited number of wives, they often neglected them. So, desperate and isolated, a woman could be tempted to cheat on her husband, hence such taboos seem to have developed to scare them from leaving their husbands or cheating on them.

Other important norms and rituals regulating the essence and meaning of traditional costumes which were, and still are, prevalent include a ritual ceremony called *Ezaleko lyondiwi or lyoshinyenye* which is conducted a few weeks or months after the birth of the baby. This was a symbolic occasion during which neckwear was given to a new baby by the father's clan. *Oshinyenye\ Ondiwi* is recognizable as two types, the *omwaanga* made from ostrich egg shells and *Onyoka* made from oyster shells collected from rivers in Southern Angola such as the Kunene, Kwando Cubango, Kumbi, etc. It was a taboo should a child receives an *oshinyenye* that did not belong to the baby's biological father as there was always fear that the child would go blind or become handicapped one way or the other.

Ndjene Mbandi pointed out that parents were particularly careful not to cause misfortune to the life of the innocent child, *"when your wife informs you that she is pregnant, you*

have to contact your sister who is familiar with your clan costumes, Oondiwu, and other customary implications related to what a person from each clan should wear. This occasion, when the husband informs his sister or any other female person from his father's family clan was called egonyeno. Your sister, as such, bears the responsibility to advice you on what Ondiwu your child should wear, what other objects should accompany it and who should preside at the ceremony. The person to preside at the ceremony should be a respectable and dignified member of the family, with the belief that his integrity would be instilled in the child" (Mbandi, 2003: Ontanda, Uukwaluudhi).

Contextualizing the above paragraph, it appears that women as mothers and educators were better informed about clan values than men, as such they were at the forefront of preserving traditional values. It were also women and not men who were active in taking initiatives and they paid particular attention to orienting and educating the girls about respective clan costumes and related ethics; the don'ts and dos of the family, clan and community at large. Girls were also given preference in training related to the concepts of hygiene and women's dignity. For example, they were compelled to sit in a polite sitting position that denied anybody to see the 'nakedness' between their legs. The front apron was always taken care of whenever she sat or when standing up. Women, but not men, were prohibited from standing or sitting without holding their front apron firmly against their skirt. Girls were often commanded; '*Ikwata kiiteta*' meaning `hold tight your skirt', a pedagogic command to young girls, to be conscious of not exposing their nakedness.

Why women were privileged and committed to cultural preservation could be explained in the light of the fact that the ideal of clan affiliation was maternal. I would assume that they therefore became more interested in memorising clan geneaologies and related ethics than their male folks who were, traditionally, stigmatised and alienated by not being part of the same lineage and sharing a common clan with his children and wife. Many communities in Owambo still, practically, believe that a man is an outsider in the company of his wife and children, an odd person who belongs to a different clan family – '*omulumentu kena ezimo'*. A woman who has only given birth to boys was never satisfied, it puts her clan existence at risk by jeopardizing the continuity of her clan's lineage, as her grandchildren's children would be affiliated to the clan of her sons' wives. This concept might explain why, traditionally, most men tend to neglect their wives and children in terms of supplying them with adequate basic needs like clothes and food. Men also became stingy (which I suspect is not a natural tendency, but shaped by the community's customs, gender and clan relationships), for example in slaughtering cattle for his wives' and children's consumption. Often, even when his own daughter was getting married or one of his children was asked to pay for a wrongdoing, it was not the father who was expected to slaughter cattle for the wedding or pay ransom for the detained child, but it was left to his uncles and other close family members in his wife's clan lineage.

The unique hair fashions

The *Aawambo* costumes, particularly those of women, cannot be discussed in isolation from hairstyles that formed an important component of the body attire. Like clothes hair styles were a significantly important medium of non-verbal communication, 'bodily vocabulary', that interpreted customary norms and marked social affiliation with regard to gender, class, and age gaps. A baby was shaved of its hair a few months after birth. This was the first ever initiation that accorded and transcended the child from the natural world into the cultural environment, guaranteeing the child's passage into the living world with blessings and preserving the integrity of the clan. The normality of shaving the head clean was only peculiar to circumstances of this nature, for a new born baby. In other circumstances, if a child or an adult was seen with a peculiar haircut, it could mean misfortunes or an indication that the bearer had transgressed customary laws. Meredith McKittrick and Fanuel Shingenge indicated that *"…boys who impregnated girls had their heads shaved as a sign of shame…"* (McKittrick, 2002: 209). This indication implies that haircuts other than that for an infant, as described above, was not a normal practice among the youth in *Owamboland.* Traditionally, a youth did not just cut his hair as he wished, the style of the hair cut had to have meaning, in accordance with their clan, age and social status. However, circumcised men *ovanyuumbo* could shave their heads. The head was smeared with *Onyanha* lotion to indicate and make a distinction from that of an offender.

In other instances haircuts conveyed important meanings about a given clan or noted misfortunes in a family. Among some clans, if a child died at an early age, the siblings' heads were shaved in certain styles. One common style was to shave one side of the head, above the ear. This was called *egumba,* a general practice in most clans in *Uukwaluudhi.* When the hair grew back on the shaved area the other side that had been left unshaved was shaved. This rotation continued until the child was six years old. Different clans also invented hair-cuts that were peculiar to their clan. Ndjene Ambandi explained. *"I belong to the birds clan, Aakwadhila clan, and my father used to cut us that style imitating the head of the grey lourie Oghwalukwa/Nankwe bird, the totem for my father's clan.* (Mbandi, 2002: Ontanda)*"* This simply reveal that he belonged to that clan.

In the 1930s and probably earlier, young men returning from work in central parts of Namibia introduced different hairstyles and designs that were seemingly popular in the south, or they simply copied the hair styles of their `masters' or of other people from different cultural groups with whom the young *Aawambo* contract workers mixed with. An *Emheke* hairstyle was for example famous in the 1930s. This style is done by shaving most of the hair on the head, but leaving the front hair intact. *S*ometimes this style, ran down the back of the head. It was also common to divide the long stripe into ridges called *omaanda.* In the 1940s there were other styles like the famous English style very similar to what is called the 'paga' style today. The two sides and the back were shaved clean while leaving the rest of the head with a reasonable size of trimmed hair. The introduction of the new hair styles in the community became a popular fashion that inspired many youths to pose challenges to existing cultural norms of dress and hair cut.

Although this was a serious challenge, that acted in conflict with the meaning and significant interpretation of traditional hairstyles, the authorities were reluctant to bring the practice to a halt. One reason was that parents as well as custodians of the community customary laws like the chiefs and kings appear to have liked European commodities that young people brought back for them. It has been a customary obligation that a man should always offer gifts in kind to his father from the little wealth that he had first accumulated independently of his own labour, for blessings by the father, this was called *omutenge* or *oku pa ho omutenge*. The recipient of the *omutenge* was expected, in return to express gratitude by giving usually a young cow to the young man . McKittrick has also picked up notes on this point by referring to the gift in kind as *Omutenge,* a system whereby a young man would perform some sort of labour for his father or other male relatives. She states that "it should be noted that the *omutenge* was not supposed to be given by a woman as it was believed that it was a man's masculine nature that would invest strength and wealth for the young man, on the other hand a woman's feminine nature, it was believed, would weaken the young mens' progress to accumulate wealth." (McKittrick, 1998: 251).

Although young people also appeared different in what they wore and socially devalued traditional dress, no action was taken against them. It is obvious that those in authority, parents as well, were aware of the imminent threat to their customs, but ignored such circumstances, possibly due to their fear of losing access to 'superior' European products. Contentiously, the elderly community was drawn into temptations that shook their beliefs

and their firm stand on traditional fashions because of their thirst for European commodities. It is interesting to understand and explain why inspiring traditional values that the community had accumulated and taken care of for many centuries had to disappear so suddenly. Since hairstyles were significantly different in styles and interpreted differently in each of the seven population groups that constituted the former seven kingdoms it would be more logical to discuss components of hairstyles in each kingdom separately.

Under normal circumstances girls did not cut their hair as they grew into adulthood. At the age of six, young girls in the three monolingual polities of *Uukwaluudhi, Ongandjera and Uukolonkadhi* would begin to plait their styles. This was an initial process that would prepare them for initiation, starting with puberty age. The early plaits were called *Onyiki*, an indication that she was entering a new stage in preparation for adulthood**.** The plaits were decorated with seeds of local plum trees called *iiti yoombe*. The pins of thorn bushes, *Omakwega*, were used to stitch and fasten the hair inside the seeds to prevent loosening and falling out of the hair.

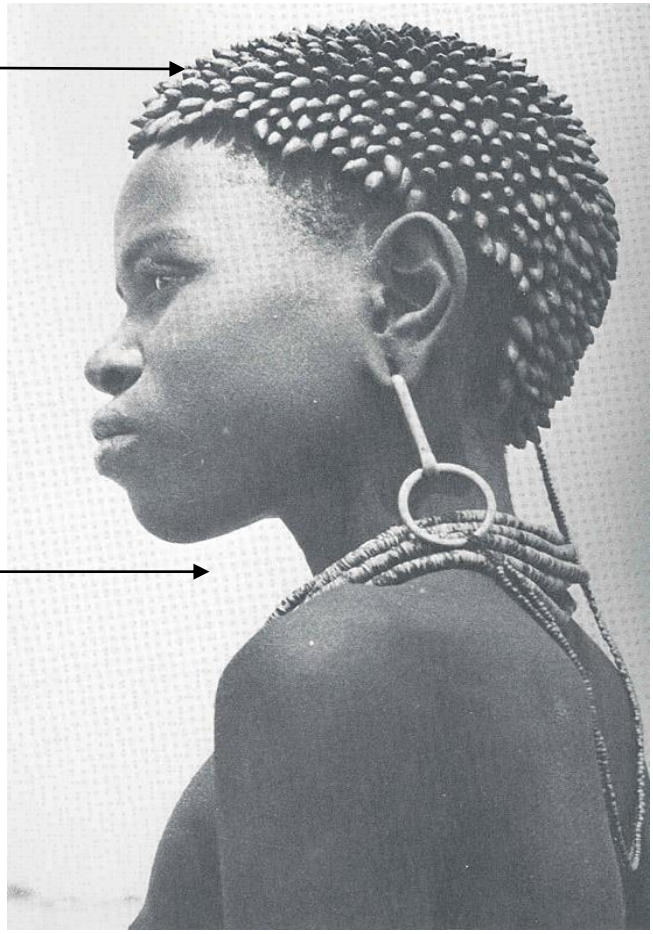
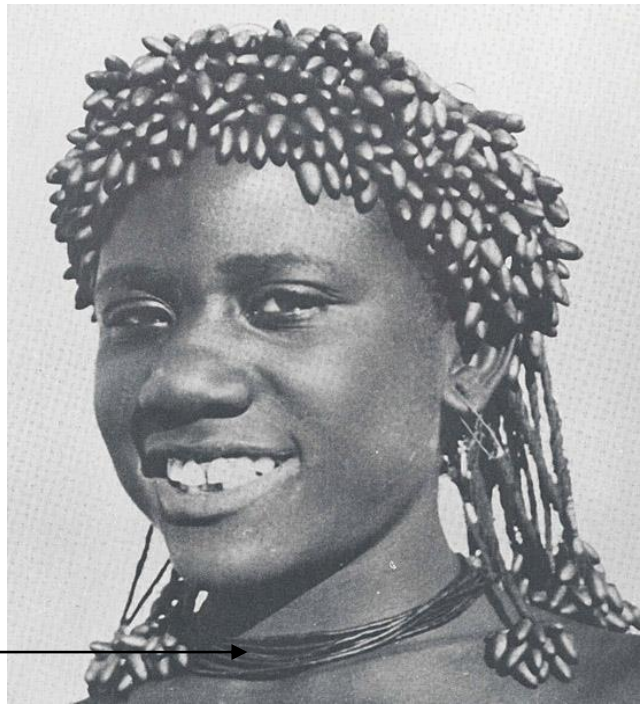


Photo 2: An undated photo of a girl from western Owamboland Uukwaluudhi and Ongandjera in Onyiki hair style. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981: 61.



Oshilanda W glass beads

Photo 3: An undated photograph of a girl in the oshilendathingo\oshimbongola hairstyle. The photo seems to have been taken later than the earlier photo of the oshilenda hair-dress by noting the glass beads on her neck and the pins oosipela used as earings. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981: 52. See back of the same woman in the photograph on the next page.

The *Oshilendathingo* was the second hairstyle, replacing the *onyiki* hairstyle when the plaits grew longer and she loosened the plaits. They were also decorated with seeds from plum trees but since they were much longer they were suspended down the neck, sitting on the shoulders, henceforth, the name *oshilendathingo/ oshimbongola.* The hair were plaited with animal sinew entangled around and formed several hornlike structures on the head. This was a symbolic imitation of a young female calf when it develops horns, signs

of entering maturity and, more importantly, signalling the the development of sexual organs, maturity and fertility. The extensions of the hairstyle gave a visual distinction about a girl's age, clan and social status. This hairstyle was significant for the girls between eleven and twelve years old.

Photo 4: The back of the Oshilendathingo

The fourth style was called *Uunyatela*. The hair was naturally much longer at this stage. The animal sinew was again used to entangle the hair but no artificial extension was made to the hair, since it had, by this time, grown much longer and could form longer plaits without using artificial materials.

The *Uunyatela* was then replaced by the fifth hairstyle called *Iipando*. These horn-like structures hung loosely from the head, like cattle horns, informing family members, relatives and friends that the bearer would soon go for their wedding. They were a combination of animal sinews, human hair and palm leaves. Locally, the final hair do before the girl went for her wedding were called *iipando yuuwala wOngolo,* because of the mixed stripes that resembled the stripes of a Zebra. Initially, the head was decorated with three pairs of *iipando* hanging down from the head, but as she drew closer to the day of the wedding, more iipando were added to the head. There were three of them on each side of the head, one at the back and two on either side of the head. When the *iipando* were entangled with palm leaves at both ends, it was an indication that the girl would go to *Ombalantu,* (the reasons why girls from Uukwaluudhi and Ongandjera went to Ombalantu for weddings has been explained below in this chapter) for her wedding in a few weeks.

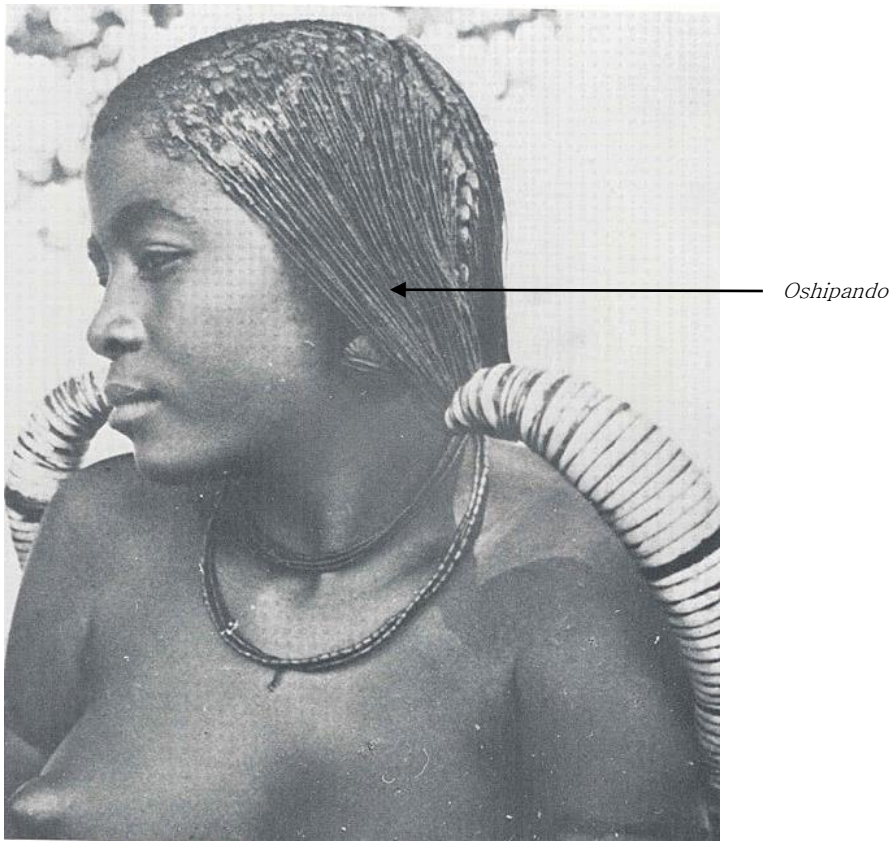


Photo 5: An undated photo of a young woman, probably just married in the Iipando hair styles. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981: 63

After the wedding a head crown called *Oshikoma* made from palm leaves was crowned on the middle of the head. Three *iipando,* were left intact, hanging down loosely as symbols of circumcision, maturity and womanhood. The custom did not permit a circumcised woman to take off the head crown. If it got old a replacement was done in due course. “This traditional protocol lasted for long but, “in a gross violation and

disrespect for our traditions, when missionaries Christianised the community, our women were compelled to undress the head crowns, *oshikoma* and shave their heads clean. This was called *Okuheulwa*"(Mbandi, 2002: *Ontanda, Uukwaluudhi*). This expression demonstrates another element to feed the argument that missionaries who came to *Owamaboland* were not friendly to the respected traditions that they found in practice.

Parents knew very well at what age girls should start making preparations for wedding. Everything was done uniformly and procedurally. At that time most people did not know how to read and write, but they did everything precisely and on time. I asked Ndjene to explain how did parents know that an individual had reached the age for marriage since they could not read and write? *"Knowing at what age the child is ready to start preparations for wedding was accredited to seasonal patterns, natural environment, significant events in history like droughts, prosperous harvests, deaths, etc. Parents knew exactly when each child was ripe for initiation like efundula and male circumcision-etanda. Children's upbringing was like preparing your field for a planting season. It is like planting sorghum, omahangu you planted it, hence, you would know exactly at what time you must start weeding and at what time it were ripe for harvesting (Mbandi)".* When the dates for *efundula* approached every parent and guardian invited her daughter to inform and notify her of the planned wedding. She would be counselled on matters relating to the ethics and protocol of wedding principles and advised not to embarrass her family, particularly her mother by failing to meet what would be required of her.

Like in *Uukwaluudhi*, *Ongandjera* and *Uukolonkadhi* hairstyles were conventionally significant in *Ondonga* too. According to Shilongo Uukule, before weddings, parents consulted their grandparents to seek advice on whether their daughter should register for the wedding. A substance called *Onyanka* was put on the hair to stretch it out. *Onyanka* served to inform the public that the girl would be wed that year. It was made from *Oonzinku and Omundhikankelo,* types of local grass. When the hair was stretched out, women gathered and prepared animal sinews called *Oondjuhi* to plait the girl in preparation for the wedding. The plaits were usually thin and long, reaching down to the heels. The process of plaiting was called *Okukoma*. When the time for the wedding approached, usually between August and November, brides lined up for *Efilo,* this was when girls who were preparing for their wedding set off for the *Namunganga* house, the one who conducts the *efundula.* The *Namungangas* were people of integrity in the community. They operated under full jurisdiction of the customary laws and were mandated to initiate and also orient and counsel the young girls on issues related to the ethics and morals of the wedding ceremony, the correct behaviour of a mature woman, motherhood and parenthood. The *Namungaga* role in this regard started when he spent the first night with all the girls in his bedroom, *omutala.* However, circumcised or initiated women (women who have wedded traditionally were metaphorically, in *Oshiwambo* language referred to as *aafuko ya pita etanda*, as it applied to circumcised men) were forbidden to reveal the issues discussed or activities performed during the night they spent in *Namunganga's* bedroom.

Young girls from *Uukwambi* were plaited with plum tree seeds resembling the `Rasta' plaits of nowadays. Married *Ovakwambi* women's hairs was typically characterized by thick long plaits made from animal sinews or palm tree fibres. Moller described the *Ovakwambi* hair styles as follows: *"the hair–style of the Uukwambi women is really amazing and when you see them from far for the first time you ask yourself if it is really possible that these women have long hair… But on studying them closer you discover your mistake: those long switches are not hair, but palm-leaf fibres and animal sinews that have been fastened to the hair and then tied together so that they look like plaits"* (Moller, 1899: 116). Moller's indication suggests an interesting point of argument as he underestimates and puts doubts on the traditional skills and creativity of the community to design long hairs, perhaps in Moller mind incompatible to the natural being of the *Aawambo* and an imitation of the Europeans long hair which I disagree that it was not the case, since the *Aawambo* are known to have implemented and used such styles before Europeans came by using items from the immediate local environment.

A young girl preparing for *efundula* in *Uukwambi* had her hair plaited in a style called *Oshikonya* or *Iishish.* As the *elende* was peculiar to the *Ovakwanyama,* the *iishisho* were peculiar to the *Ovakwambi* alone. However, both styles are similar in the way that the hair is plaited by the means of animals sinew and decorated by cowry shells. There is, however, a slight difference that in the case of *elende,* the plaits were rolled at the back to form a single roll hanging below the neck. The *Iishisho* on the other hand may form long sinew or palm tree leave stripes called *Omakosa* [kw] reaching to the knees. Copper beads*Uuputu* were decorated on these stripes. The end of each stripe was decorated with

white beads called *Iingele.* A number of these beads, *Iingele* were packaged together to form a crown-like bundle called *onenga.* The *Omakwendjenge* black copper beads were also decorated below the *Onenga* to reach the knees of the bride. This style was typical among the *Ovakwambi* only. It was the responsibility of every bridegroom to provide animal sinews, *uuputu,* a leather belt and other basic requirements for the bride. Every girl preparing for *Efundula* was expected to stay in such plaits for about half a year prior to her wedding ceremony.

Photo 6: A photo of an Owambo woman ,from the German colonial period in traditiona1 costumes, leather baby carrier with a baby at the back and a spectacular hair-style peculiar to the Aakwambi women. Also note the belt front apron, eteta, ostrich beads omwaanga|Ondjeva and the back leather apron called epushu. Source: Namibia Scientific Society

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The *Ovakwambi* women had two significant hairstyles, depending on the age of a person. While younger women had their hair plaited loosely with artificial hairstyles, a few

women mostly the more elderly were plaited in much more sophisticated hairstyles, in which the *eedjushi,* the loose plaited hair, were each rolled and mended together at the middle of the head. These plaits were called *Onyanka.* Activities to plait the *Onyaka* style involved breaking open *ooombeke* fruits to remove the nuts, frying them on a piece of clay pot (called *oshikangwa*) and pounding them at the *oshini*\pounding area to produce oil. The oil was mixed with cow fat applied on the plaits to make the hair thick, shiny and attractive. Two horn-like shapes were left to protrude upright on the head like the horns of cattle. These were called *Omashunango.* Women with the *Onyanka* hairstyle were of high profile with particular cultural procurements and reputations attached to them. If a woman qualified to wear *Onyanka* she was spiritually believed to posses the power to heal and chase out demons in individuals. Such women, who were skilful in this regard, could for example succeed in procuring the lifting of evil spirits from an assassin \ killer or any person who had taken another person's life for whatever reasons.

A song in respect of such women reads this way; *Omuntu a dhipaga ka e nda nomatati manga uutoni i na wu pangiwa. Wo uutoni ota wu yambwa ku meme gwa namagumbo o shoka okuna omutse gOnyanka.* The English translation would read: 'If a person has killed another person, he must first be cured by a reputable and circumcised woman with her head crowned with the *onyanka*, to remove the curse'. Eliakim Uutoni (Iita ya Kadha) told me that although it is very rare nowadays to see an elderly woman with an *Onyanka* head, a few of the elderly people in the community still share the procurement integrity and the ability to dispossess the evil caused by killing a person. For example, he continued, *aanona yetu mboka ya li mokuti shoyagaluka, yamwe o ya pangwa uutoni*

kaantu ya fukala na o ya pita etanda, oshoka pamwe oya dhipaga mboka yali ta yeya kondjitha, opo ya ngungumane yo yaninge natango aakwashigwana aawanawa oyali yena okupangwa uutoni. This translates as ‘many of our children who returned from exile underwent this procurement because they were in war and many of them would have taken lives of those they were fighting against, therefore, they had to be treated to normalise their lives and integrate them, peacefully in the community again. He continued that, it is like when a dog is bitten by another dog suffering from rabies (*ombwa yomutima)* the affected dog is given *enyanganyanga / eyakatoni,* a local grass that bears nodules resembling an onion to prevent it from getting rabies.(Uutoni, 2002: Elim, Uukwambi).

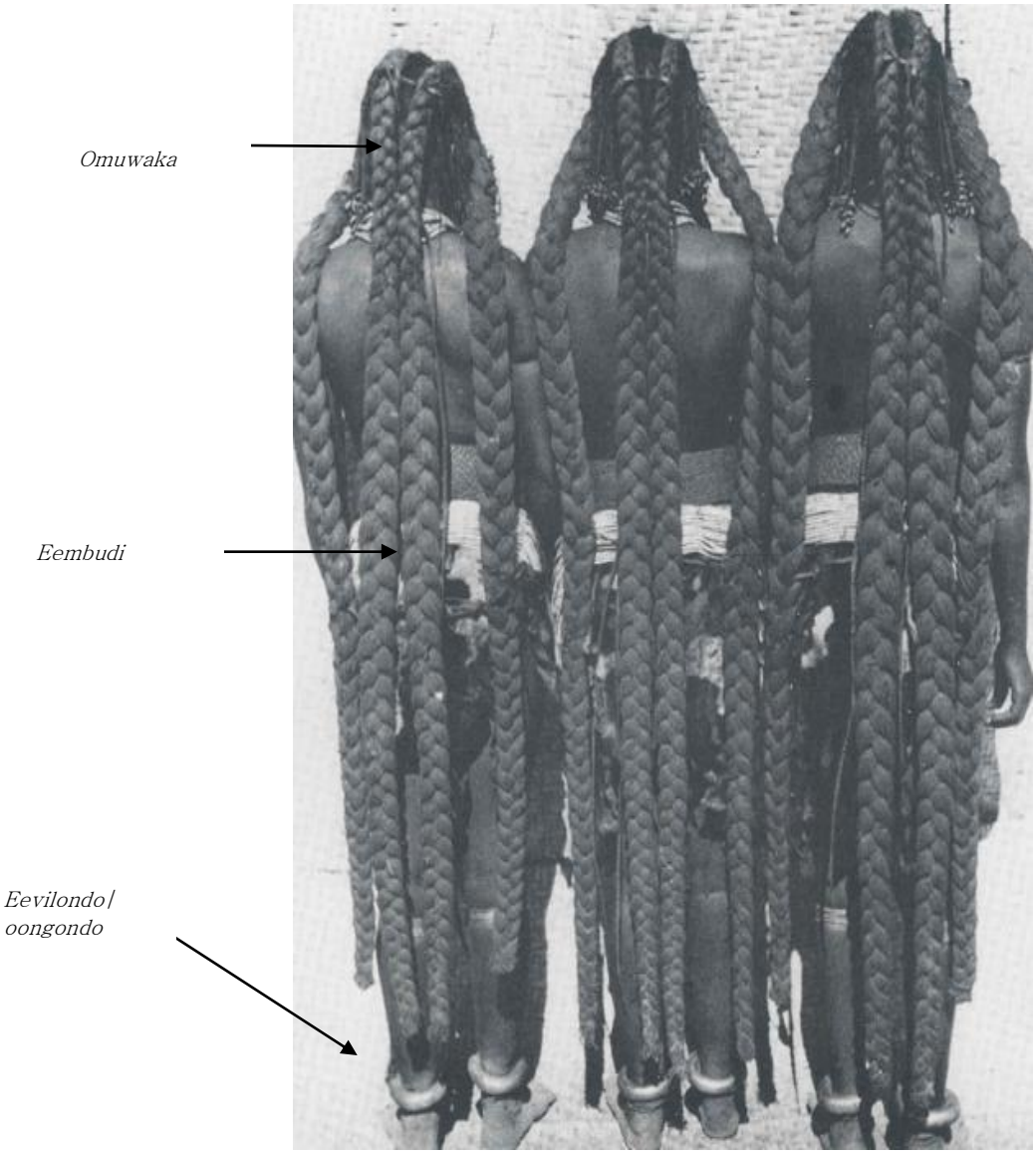


Photo 7. Girls from Ombalantu with hair plaited into Eeembudhi. This takes a year before the hair were undone into the second final hair style before wedding called elende (next page). Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981: 55.

In *Ombalantu* and *Ombandja* when a girl was preparing for her wedding, she had to allow her hair to grow for a period of time so that she could have it plaited for the

wedding. Brides were to be plaited in a style called *elende.* These were long plaits made from the fibres from the barks of baobab trees called *Eembudhi*. The *Eembudhi* were chewed and knitted together into a structure called *okooviwa* by hand, before making plaits. The hairstyles worn by brides from *Ombalantu* were fairly elongated as a result of the fairly long fibre roots, reaching to the ankles.

Elende ₩ Threads of baobab tree barks Ombalantu girls

Photo 8: An undated photograph of women from Ombalantu in spectacular long plaits. Most of these plaits were made from roots of baobab trees that are very common in that area. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981:53.

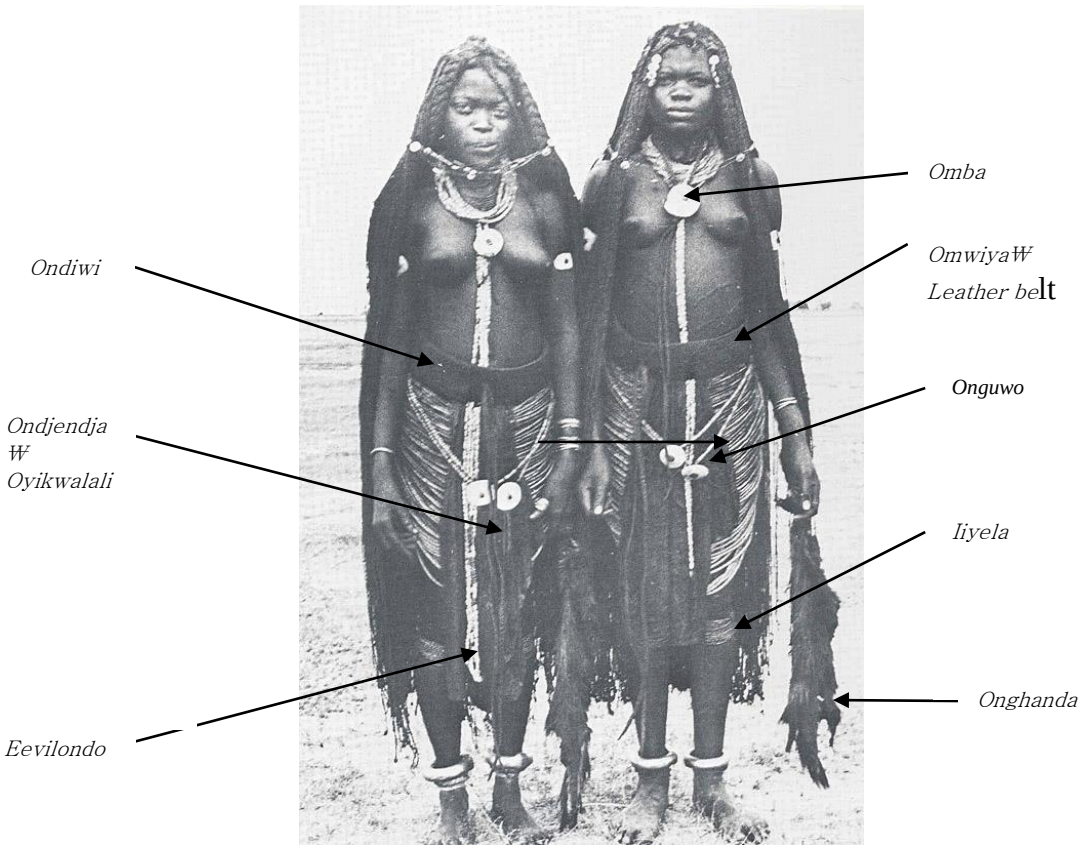
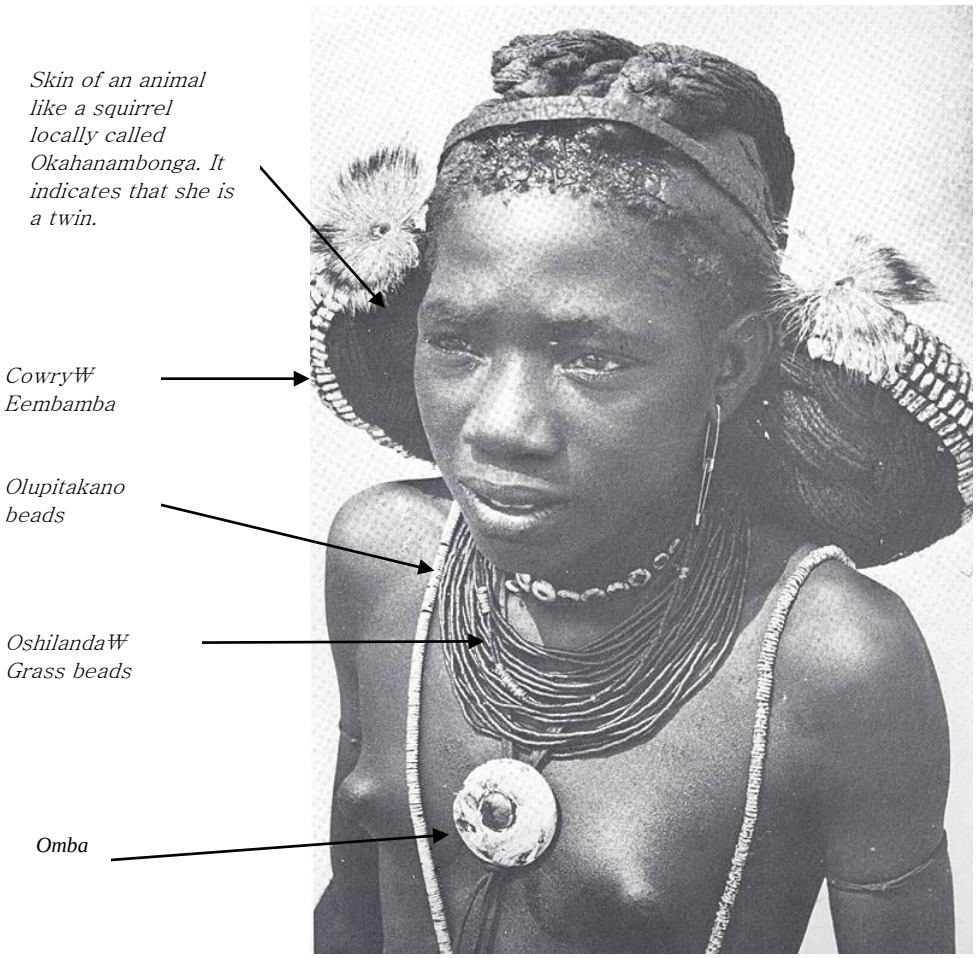
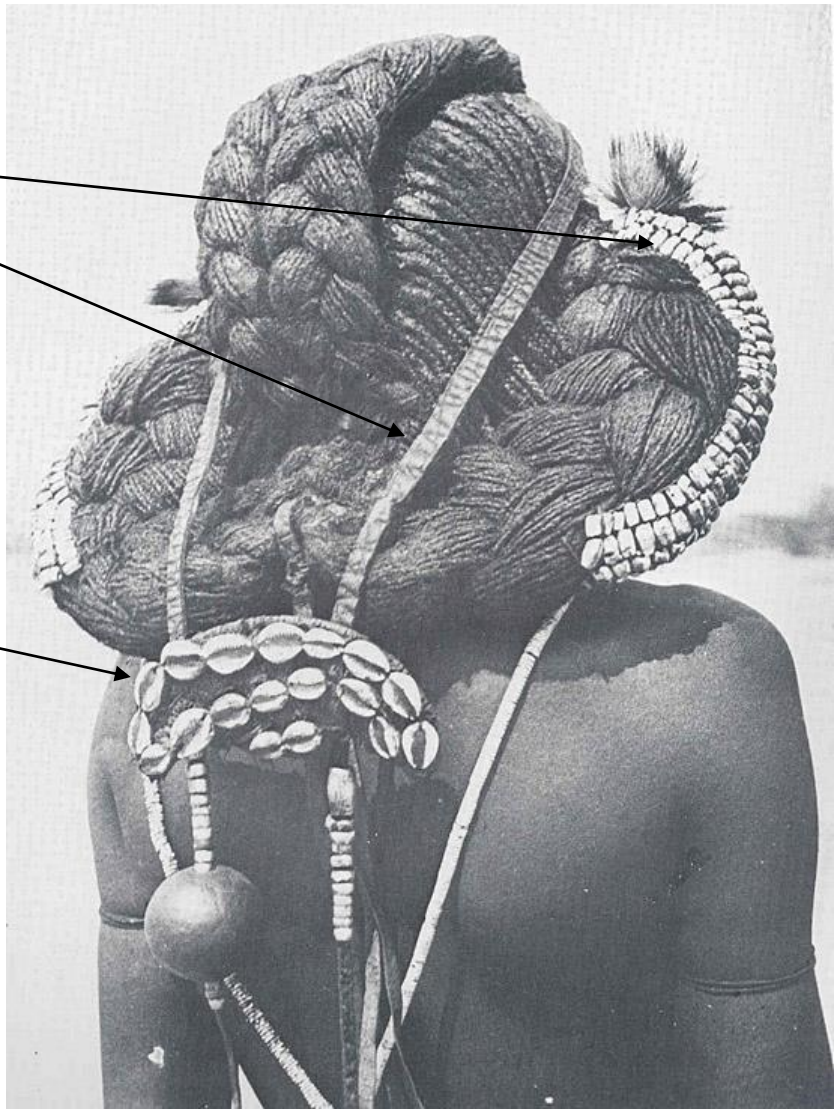


Photo 9: An undated photo of women from Ombalantu in rich costumes. Note the long stripes of beads hanging loose from the neck to the ankles as well as ivory and oongondo anklets. Each woman also carry a skin probably onghanda used as handkerchiefs during a wedding. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981:53.

After the wedding these long plaits were converted into a different style called *omhatela.* The *Omhatela* indicates that a woman had been initiated and had gone through the *efundula,* as it replaced the *elende*. Plaiting the *omhatela* was usually done by experts. A initiated woman was expected to renew the *omhatela* several times during her lifetime and not to go in public without it. When the plaits became old and loose, replacements were constantly provided. Plaits were significant, not just as a mere indication that a woman was initiated, but were also interpreted as signs of her integrity and dignity, and indicated her social status and identity.

Photo 10: An undated photo of a young woman from Ombalantu who probably had just wedded. At this stage her hairs plaits are no longer hanging loose but plaited into an Omhatela. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981:58.





Oshingombe is a piece of cattle skin decorated with cowry shells to indicate that an Ombalantu woman has wedded.

In *Uukwanyama* when a girl was matured, ready for marriage her hair were plaited into a style called *Oikome\Oipuli,* These were artificial hairs for the girls who were preparing for their wedding, made from the leaves of the palm trees. Women had to chew the palm tree leaves to soften them. When ready they were stitched together to form a flat middle head crown called *ekekelende,* when it extended from the forehead to the neck, it was called *Elende.* The artificial hair plait, *elende* was decorated with cowry shells called

eembamba. The next stage was the *Omhatela*. These were also plaits but plaited after the girl had completed the initiation process 'the wedding'. The *omhatela* was plaited in the horn like structure. Cattle horns were roasted and cut into pieces and plaited on the middle of the head to form the replica of a female cow's horns. The style dignified cattle as the main source of the cultural and economic set up for the *Ovakwanyama* and other population groups as mainly the source of dress and food. The replica of the head crown in the form of a cow horns also explained and symbolized the credibility, dignity, and reproductive value of a woman and her role as a mother and the source of new life, prosperity and continuity.

Oshikwata, a bracelet to indicate that she is married. When a married man / woman died, this bracelet was given to the person who inherited the property of the deceased – mainly cattle.

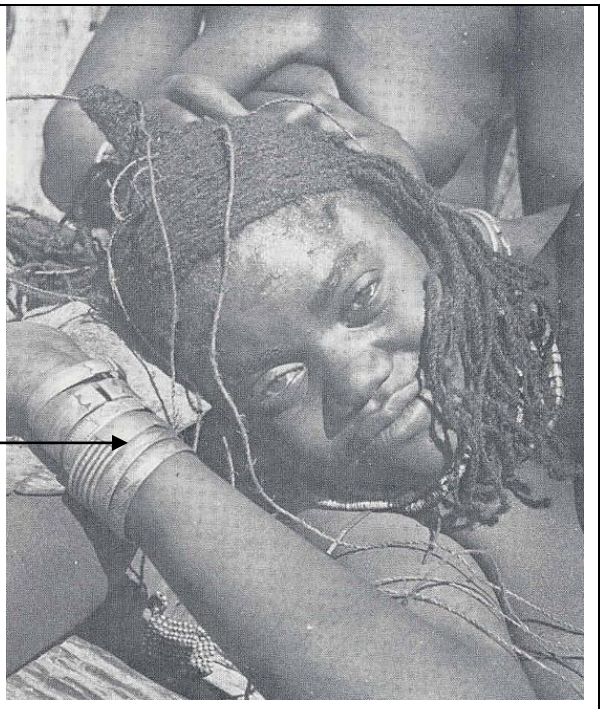


Photo 11: An undated photo of a young Kwanyama woman being plaited into Omhatela hairstyle. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981: 45.

After the *efundula,* the bridal headdress, the *oipole* hair that replaced the *elende* with a post-wedding *Omhatela,* was ceremoniously converted into a packaged style called *Omhatela* during a special occasion called *Okudula*. The hair had become longer by this time. It was customary for the newly-wed woman to decide whether she wanted to have all the hair plaited or preferred to cut some of them. If she chose to cut some of her hairs, it was not thrown away but was stored safely in a basket (*oshimbale)* or in a clay pot, *Oitoo*. This was not for ritual purposes, but, to be used again in plaiting by generations to come. An elderly woman, *Kuku* Ndekume, now deceased, showed me some of these hairs which according to her originated from her great grandmother, and had been circulating in the family for over two hundred years. Her daughter who is now seventy (70) years old was the last to use it. She now keeps it for posterity and sometimes youths in cultural groups do come to fetch it when participating in cultural festivals. A woman who did not cut all her hair maintained them hygienically by regularly applying *Olukula* and *Eemeke* oil. The *Olukula* as illustrated earlier is a brown powder that comes from the roots of *omuuva* trees, common in *Uukwanyama.* Men from all of the Aawambo kingdoms travelled long distances to *Uukwanyama* to fetch olukula sticks from the jungle, *Oshimholo,* to do their wives' proud. Women broke the large *Olukula* sticks into smaller pieces before pounding them into flour.

As it has been illustrated above, the Aawambo hairstyles were significantly unique, and were culturally given common interpretations regardless of a few differences in style and materials used. It is, however, important to note that hairstyles in all the kingdoms were

only meaningful should they match the code and style of the dresses that a person wore. This is to say that since most dresses encoded meaning about prominent social values and customary practices in the community, hairstyles, particularly of women were also expected to interpret and conform to the body language transmitted by costumes.

Costumes and Weddings

Wedding ceremonies were culturally important to initiate and accord young girls the right to marry. Different places for wedding ceremonies were occasioned in *Ondonga, Uukwanyama, Uukolonkadhi* and *Ombalantu,* but sites for wedding initiations did not exist in *Uukwaluudhi, Ongandjera and Uukwambi* kingdoms. Girls from these kingdoms went to neighbouring independent polities for weddings. For example girls from *Uukwaluudhi* and *Ongandjera* travelled to *Ombandjele* in *Ombalantu* or to *Uukolonkadhi* for weddings while those in *Uukwambi* travelled to *Ombalantu*. One argument explaining why the three kingdoms did not allow weddings to take place within their communities was that it was believed that if weddings were conducted in any of these kingdoms, the king would die or become ill. This notion, seems to have been formulated not far into the distant history of the seven kingdoms. The *Uuukolonkadhi* never had a king, but, if brides went to *Ombalantu* for marriage on the basis that the *Ombalantu* did not have a king, then this practice should have started in the early years of the nineteenth century after the assassination of king Kamhaku Kahuhwa who according to McKittrick (2002: 26) died towards the end of the eighteenth century. In the *Ondonga* and *Uukwanyama* kingdoms wedding ceremonies were conducted within the boundaries of their kingdoms. Why these

two kingdoms ignored the prevalent ritual in the other kingdoms could not be explained during the interviews.

According to Shilongo Uukule there were two places in *Ondonga* where young girls went for weddings. One of these places was at *Onambeke* between *Omandongo,* and *Onayena*, the other one was at *Oshikwiyu,* east of *Olukonda.* Girls from *Onamoongo* wedded there, they did not go to *Onambeke*. This is where the clans of those who were authorized to contact marriage ceremonies were settled. There were three different *Namunganga* houses at the two places mentioned above, but they were all performing the same functions. Shilongo continued that, there was one at *Onandhikwa* (where I grew up), and others at *Amuteya* and at *Ombuga,* in the southern part of *Ondonga.* Girls lined up as they proceeded to such houses. Each girl had to cover her face with a cloth of a cow skin or tail, *efungu* as they followed the same road that they would also have to follow when coming back from *efundula.* They were not expected to look elsewhere than concentrating on bending their faces down as they walked. This lining up was called *ehwina.* Each mother had to register her daughter at the *Namunganga's* house and to pay registration fees in kind, for the wedding. Usually ostrich beads \ *omihanga*, cattle and goats were paid to *Namunganga* for his work. Most of the *Namungangas* at *Onambeke* came from the *aakuusinda* clan, a wealthy clan indeed.

Shilongo recalled that before weddings, girls wore mini leather aprons in front, but, after the *ohango or efundula,* the initiated women wore the tanned membranes of cow's stomachs in front, called *eteta,* and a bundle of folded *Omwaanga* beads and a piece of

leather apron called *oshifelelo* at the back, covering the buttocks. This was what distinguished a initiated woman from a young girl. A married woman was not expected to dress like an unmarried young girl as it is the case today; *Omukadhona o hi ikonyeke, o manga omukulukadhi ha zala oshifelelo,* translated into English as a young girl wore a tiny apron in front while a married woman wore a larger and broader apron, *Oshifelelo*. The *Aandonga* differed from the *Aakwanyama* in some respects; married women in *Ondonga* continued to wear their girlhood *Omwaanga* after the wedding, while the *Aakwanyama w*ould change from girlhood ostrich egg beads *ondjeva* into *oshilanda* beads.

Ndahafa Kakonda from *Omalyata* in *Uukwanyama* gave an account of wedding procedures in *Uukwanyama.* The night before girls departed to the *Namunganga* house, a special ceremony called *Omafikameno/Onghuta* was conducted, during which girls were stripped of their girlhood *oondjeva.* After the marriage, she was expected to dress in *Oshilanda,* an everyday traditional dress for married women. Unlike the *Aakwanyama, Aandonga, Aakwambi, Aangandjera, Aakwaluudhi, Aambalantu, Aakolonkadhi* and *Aammbandja* a married woman could still wear her girlhood *Ondjeva* after *efundula,* but rolled up to the waist.

The popular dress for a married *Kwanyama* was *Onguwo*, a leather attire often decorated with various ornaments like cowry shells, ivory, etc. It was heavy and often pulling down uncomfortably on the waist of the wearer to the extent that brides developed blisters on the waist. One woman who went through the ceremony rememembered her

discomfort;*"During my wedding, wounds deformed around my waist due to the combination of the weight of the Onguwo, ivory, and beads decorated on a large rough leather belt around the waist. Despite that I was proud… I was excited about the new costumes and of becoming a woman, so, I cared very little about the pain'.* (Kakonda 2002, Omalyata).

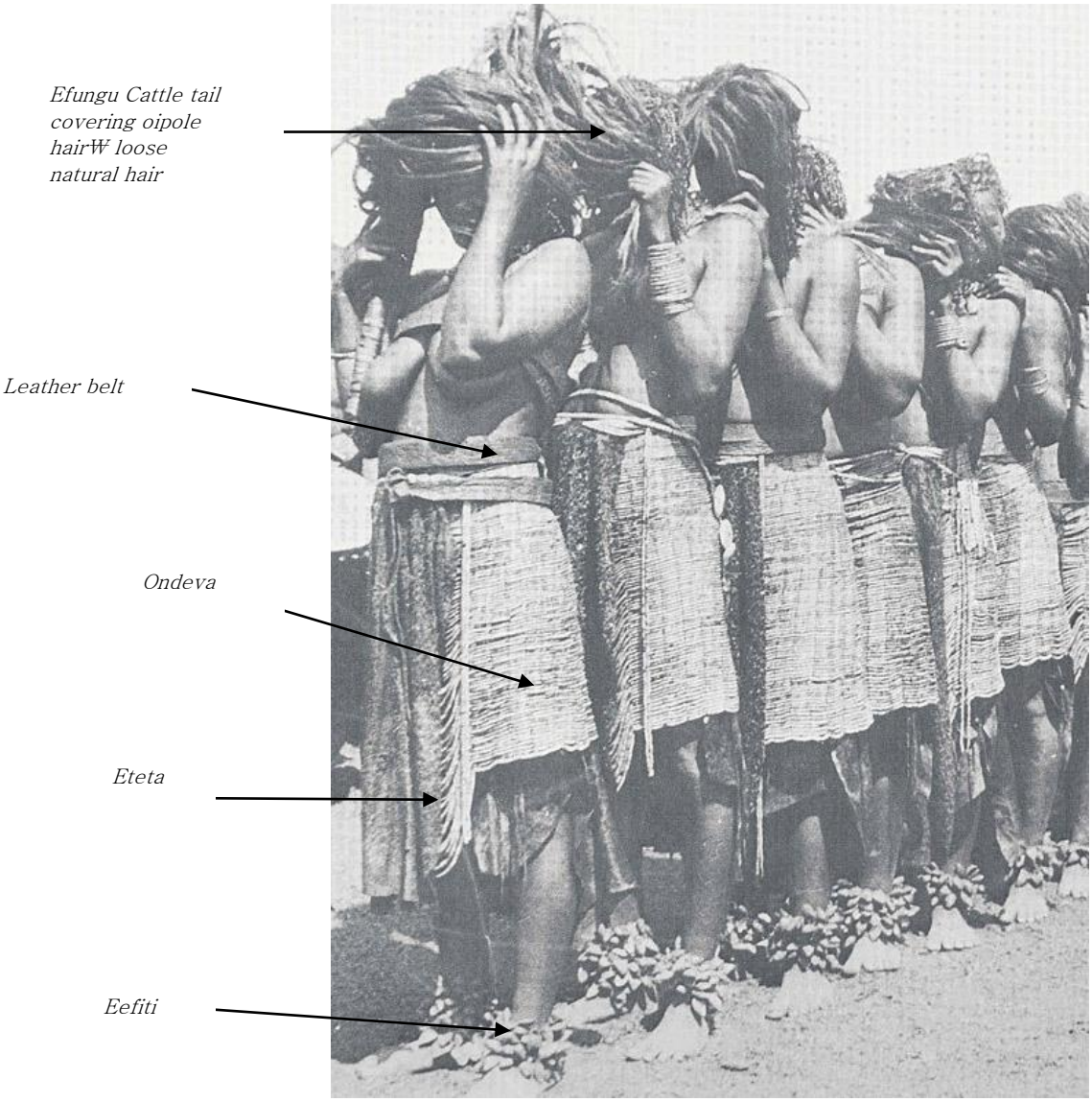


Photo 12: An undated photo of the brides aafuko in traditional wedding costumes. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981: 44.

In *Uukwanyama*, like in other communities, the *aafuko* could wear stripes of *Oonyoka* beads around their arms for decoration and insect egg shells called *eefifiti* laid on the *omihongo* trees were worn around the anklets. Beads were inserted inside the *eefiti* and sealed to produce musical sounds as the girls danced and sung during the second day of the wedding called - *eemhoko.* Another important dress for the *aafuko* in *Uukwanyama* that appears not to have been pertinent in other kingdoms was called *omushendje*, a root from an *omushendje* bush. The *oingushe* fibres were rolled in stripes around it [the *omushendje*] for decoration.

Photo 13: An undated photo of a young Kwanyama woman wearing the omhatele hair-style Note the round omushendje sticks. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981: 48.

It was then worn around the waist, neck and ankles as a wedding certifying ring. Ndahafa Kakonda told me that the o*mushendje* bush was significant for its power to resist drought and other harsh factors in the environment such as termites. Though it was rare, many people preferred using its poles when constructing huts because it is resistant to termites. Therefore, wearing *omushendje* around the neck or waist symbolised a woman's strength, maturity and endurance to successfully face challenges in life as she became an adult and in particular a mother and wife. After the wedding, the *omushendje* was taken off during an occasion called *okudula* and kept in front of the entrance to the main bedroom called *ondjugo.* It was put inside a wooden object like a tray called *epeta* and placed on top of the entrance to her bedroom *oshipamba shondjugo*. Costumes that were used on a daily basis were also kept inside the tray.

The *efundula\Ohango* of the *Aakwanyama* ceremony lasted for four days. On the fourth and last day, *Efundo,* all the brides were stripped of all their wedding garments [illustrated above]. Their bodies were smeared in white ash and hairs plaited into a horn-like head dress called *omhatela* signifying that a woman had been initiated. As brides removed their costumes they wore Aloe *[Omadombo]* stalks as bras and around their waists as skirts, which they made by themselves. For the first time each bride wore *Onyoka* with an *Omba* attached to it and their hairs were styled into *Onyeme* [kw] \ *Omapando* [kwb]. They always carried a spear sealed at the edge [*egonga lina oshigongoti*]. A few days before the *efundula wa*s concluded, *Namunganga* and the wife of *Sheembandi* took the brides to the Kunene River to finalise the initiation process, *okunyita\Okushita.* This was the final and the most challenging stage of *efundula*

whereby the brides were obliged to prepare for a long walk to the Kunene River to pay homage to the graves of their ancestors. They did not take any food or drinks with them. This practice was spiritually significant as it allowed the young women a chance to communicate with the spirits of the ancestors for blessings, especially to ask for fertility in marriage and protection during delivery.

The mothers to the brides were not allowed to accompany their daughters, citing an existing ritual that an initiated woman could not go to the river, *omulonga,* twice. They instead, stayed behind, brewing for the people who had come to the wedding. Every bride was dressed in the most expensive ornaments before leaving to the river. Upon their return they were expected to leave all their precious ornaments at the place of the initiation, for the *Namunganga* to claim possession. This might explain why the wives of *Namunganga* were usually prosperous. This stage was described by many women who had wed traditionally, as the most difficult period characterized by boredom and suffering since brides were without their families and no food was provided. In some cases this even resulted in deaths.

If a bride died during the initiation process, the mother of the deceased was not expected to mourn her daughter, but, to continue with the procedurally preparations for the wedding as if nothing has happened, worse still, they were not even informed of the death, and, those who witnessed the death were also instructed not to divulge the information as they could be cursed. A tool called *Oshitendo* (an object used to crack open marula tree kernels), a metaphor for the deceased daughter, was given to her to

carry, this notified her that her daughter was dead. In this context one could reason beyond no doubt that some of the principles laid down in the ethics of *efundula* were harsh, but people still observed them in fear. Arguably, this and other circumstances could have also served as reasons why the community embraced Christianity as it criticised those unpopular and inhuman practices.

The night before the *enyitiko,* the return of the brides, parents of the brides slaughtered cattle and sheep (goats were not allowed by the custom to be slaughtered as this would bring misfortunes to some clans [death] as the name *Oshikombo* / goat means to 'sweep or wipe'] at *Namunganga* \ *Sheembandi's* house. Though they did spend many days without food, for a few days after their return from the Kunene River, brides were only allowed to eat meat from the head of the sheep or cattle. Eating the head symbolised wisdom and the ability to make independent decisions as future parents. The *Namunganga* and his wife received the *Oshooko* [arm] and *Ondete* [chest] from each animal slaughtered and a pot of traditional beer. When the brides returned to the Namunganga's house they were to be dressed into new attires (*oonguwo).* For every cow slaughtered each bride received a large belt. The belt was given to her in anticipation of pregnancy and birth, to tighten the baby carrier and also to hold tight the woman's stomach after birth so that the stomach retained its shape after the mother had given birth.

Oonyondo[nd] or *Oondago [kw]* were types of wild groundnuts that were also an important symbol attached to the stripes of two long strings, *Omalupitakano.* One of these carried *Onyoka* beads and the other one *Omwaanga* beads, each running across

from a different shoulder to form an x crossing below the lower abdomen. *Onyondo* was, therefore, attached to the two stripes at the point where the two stripes crossed each other. It symbolized that the bearer had been engaged. When the bridegroom had taken his bride for marriage he was tasked to take off the *Onyondo* from the *Omalupitakano* by biting it off. The bride was obliged to hide the *Olupitakano* from the new husband. Until the new husband found the hidden costume, no sexual intercourse could take place. First the *Olupitakano* had to be found and the *Onyondo* bitten off. If the ornaments were found but the *Onyondo* wasn't there, the bride would be held responsible for the whereabouts of it and could be suspected of having had love affairs with other men.

In an interview with *Sivia* from *Uukolonkadhi* she drew my attention to her traditional earrings and highlighted on additional added value of the *Onyondo* by commenting: *"Look at my beautiful earrings carved from omupopo tree wood. This other piece is Onyondo attached to the seeds of the bird plum trees, and worn like this around my upper arm. The Onyondo is very significant, it protects my children. If a child were sick like when she suffers from a whooping cough or okwiikanyatela, I would just bite on it, chew and spit inside her nostrils. She will begin to sneeze 'ta tsu eendjadhila' and will recover from the sickness on sight. It was used as medicine. Children were protected in this way. I either wear it around my arm, put it inside my hand bag called omethi or attach it to the belt or to the ongata yoshikoma. This other piece of wood around my neck is called, Odete. It is believed to have come from the Ovatjimba, originally. This is an added beauty to what I wear and also to give pleasant smell".* Sivia's explanation indicates an element of harmonious relationship between man and natural environment in the pre-

colonial *Owamboland.* The *Aawambo* did not only invent clothes and ornaments from the local environment, but their cultural link to the environment enabled them to harmoniously and knowledgeable explore imperative mechanisms to heal diseases using traditional knowledge. In essence, the natural environment was not only essentially important to the *Aawambo* in the supply of materials for clothing, but it was generally a primary factor that sustained man and shaped his sense of identity.

After the *Efundula* ceremony, the brides and their mothers were expected to return to their respective homes to wait to be called back to the *Namunganga's* house to mark the final ceremony called *efukulo* \ *Ekosho*. The following new attires were therefore commissioned at this ceremony dignifying girls' proven outstanding abilities of being mature and of having the tested quality to withstand hardships and other challenges in life. The new attires could be listed as follows; *Oompuku, Omihanga, Oompole\Oshihapole* around the calves [these were seeds decorated on the hair styles and on the ankles of the bride to produce musical sounds when the bride dances] and *Iiyela Iikwaya* / ash anklets. The engaged brides wore *Oontanto* made from reddish *iiyela* around their wrists and ankles mainly for decoration purposes. She would even receive more of these beautiful ornaments called *iigonda* when the husband took her for marriage.

After the *efundula* the bride was given her own *Onghanda* (a leather cloth used as a ceremonial baby carrier) by the bridegroom's paternal family to indicate that she had been engaged. The bride had to carry with her the *Onghanda* hanging on either of her

arms as a symbol of maturity and readiness to start her own family. It was a ritual practice that when a woman gave birth, every child was first carried in *Onghanda* before other baby carriers were used. So *Onghanda* was also used as a baby carrier. Though not a regular carrier, every baby was required to be carried in it for ritual purposes. It was a common practice that after *efundula* the bride went around the village with her *Okafidiki* for receptions organized by friends and other well-wishers in the village. If a girl had been less helpful especially to the elderly people she would receive less gifts in kind for the wedding. The *Oghende* was used as a handbag for the bride. The outer surface of it was decorated with the bones of chickens and goats slaughtered for the bride after the efundula. This demonstrated to the other brides the popularity and respect that one had in the community. If the bride were not popular she had fewer bones decorating her *Onghede.*

Kings in all the seven kingdoms were the custodians as well as patrons of wedding ceremonies to which they attached particular importance. This is proven by the unwavering support for *Omafundula* as well as the physical presence of the king himself at the wedding scene on the last day of the actual wedding, the *omuuhalo \ etoolo liikuti*. In fact this date was especially reserved for the king. Here he came dressed in royal costume, as he was obliged to choose a new wife (or wives) at each wedding ceremony. *Shilongo Uukule* told me that when the wedding had drawn to an end the king slaughtered cattle to 'dance for the brides', *okutantela aafuko.* The king himself paid a visit to the *Namunganga's* house to witness the final proceedings of the *Ohango*. He and his senior headmen could choose new wives from the brides if they so wished. This

occasion, when the king and his *Omalenga* paid visits, was the most attended of all the days of the *ohango* as many people turned up and a lot of food and drinks was prepared.

After the king's visit the *iingombwele* (shelters for the brides), were destroyed. All the brides had to return to the house of *omafikameno*, where they first departed before coming to the *Namunganga* house. From the house every mother could carry her daughter back home, but this happened several days after they had been deployed in the bush were they had catered for their own food, shelter and water. Those who were engaged were free to be married and those who did not have men could wait at their parent's homes until they got men to marry them. It was also when the girls had returned to their respective homes after the *efundula* that the actual wedding and festivities took place. It should be noted that the *Ohango* at the house of *Namunganga* was a mere cleansing process, the actual wedding was conducted at home after the cleansing period. It was during this time that the parents, relatives and prospective husbands slaughtered cattle to celebrate the wedding. Uukule noted that he still recalls vividly that the last formalized *Ohango* in Ondonga was conducted in 1947.

The *Oshiwambo* custom prohibited newly married couples to share a bedroom before adhering to laid down traditional requirements. The hoe, *etemo* was significant in the *Oshiwambo* traditional wedding. Five or more hoes were given to a single bride as lobola - *iigonda* in addition to cattle and tobacco - *ombandu yekaya.* In addition, there was one significant hoe called *etemo lyoghenda*. This was so symbolic and secretive that its hidden implications, not rituals, were confined to the couple in a fresh marriage. The

oghenda was an *etemo* that served as a means by which a man convinced his newly married wife of his genuine love and faithfulness to her, and, a means of authorizing the wife to offer sex to her new husband, for the first time.

After a wedding, if a man was engaged he sent a man and a woman *eengoleka \ iinkumbi* to fetch his new wife from her parents' home. Before the wife settled permanently in their new home the husband should release her on the fourth day to go back to her former home. This was called *olushuno,* allowing her family to make necessary preparations as their daughter prepared to start a family. The newly married couple might not sleep in a single room and should not have sex until the *olushuno* had been conducted and a child, called *okafundiki,* was instructed not to depart from the newly married wife. Only after she had returned from *olushuno*, and the *Okafundiki* had been sent home could the new wife freely share her bedroom with the husband. But, until she went back to her parents home after spending four days at her new home she continued to share her bed with her *okafudiki.* The young girl would not move to a different bedroom, unless, the husband persuaded her to leave by offering her gifts in kind. Unless the child left the bedroom the couples could not mate. The newly married wife could also intentionally continue to deny her husband sex until he had given her a hoe called *etemo lyopoghida*. The wife would in turn give it to her parents or guardians to prove acceptance in marriage and to demonstrate that the couples have had sex.

The wife 'joyfully' received and kept the hoe at a secret place until she paid a visit to her mother. On the fourth day, the husband would again release his wife to go to her parents,

bearing in mind that the *etemo* would be delivered to them. The mother and relatives would be excited, they would ululate and celebrate when their daughter had given them the *etemo* - a sign that their daughter was accepted and she would soon bear offspring. On the other hand, the family would lavish in lamentations should she fail to produce the *etemo* to them on her first visit from the husband, as this would have been an indication that she was not wanted. When obtained the hoe became the property of the father. This presentation might however, serve to explain that traditional marriage was not necessarily a right but a privilege, subject to awkward conditions. To secure marriage a woman must produce children as a guarantee to secure her place in marriage and recognition, not only of her husband but also of the two families and community at large. One child in marriage was not enough, a woman was expected to give birth until menopause bid her farewell; *Omwaikadi o kuna o ku dala nokomushila.* If a woman were infertile or could not fall pregnant within the expected time frame following marriage, her maternal uncles and grandparents, would instigate ways to end the marriage; fetch her back and give her to another man with whom she might produce offspring.

A man was also never recognized and never given any status if he was not able to make his wife conceive and become pregnant. He could also lose the respect of his wife's relatives. His brothers-in-law, for example, expected nephews by the sister who were heirs to the property of the uncle \ aunt when he died. This may explain why marriage was important as it served to produce offspring. This tradition was also, as one could imagine, rooted in the need to have as many children to support the family with various tasks at home like farming, herding cattle and so on. Fatal diseases were also common in

those days claiming many lives, therefore, if the number of children were few they might be wiped out entirely by deadly diseases like chicken pox, whooping cough and malaria.

A woman's value lay in her ability to produce, extend the family and keep her clan title alive. The family of an infertile victim was also expected to pay back the lobola, *iigonda*. It appeared that when women suffered this humiliation, they were divorced from their loved ones when they could not fall pregnant; on the other hand men were never considered to be infertile. Seemingly this tradition, the construction of which was male dominated, protected men in this regard. If a man were suspected of being infertile a brother or a close relative from the family was asked to have sex with his brothers' wife and produce children for him. The infertile husband, however, had the right to name the children. This was however, kept a top secret in the family.

Beads and Meaning

As it appears above, traditional weddings were significantly important, a remarkable platform of transition from girlhood to womanhood and an initiation rite for marriage and adulthood. Wedding ceremonies, therefore, marked an important transition in the dress code and behavioural attitudes. A married woman was not expected to dress like a young girl. It was recommended that she wore clothing that interpreted the different stages that she went through as she became a 'real woman'. In this regard beads played a significant role in interpreting a young woman's development into a full woman as detailed below.

In *Uukwanyama* for example married women were not expected to wear the *ondjeva*, an important skirt that symbolized virginity and girlhood. Instead, a circumcised woman wore skirts made from *Omushambe* beads. Two lines of *ondjeva* were attached below the *omushambe* of a woman who had not yet conceived her first pregnancy. This was called *omushambe wa shiga ondjeva.* When she fell pregnant she discontinued wearing the *omushambe* for an *onguwo*; *Ngele omwaikandi o kwa ningi omufimba - omushambe taukufwa mo tau kuyulwa mo.* The beads are then given to her mother to put them together in the form of a necklace, also called *omushambe,* that the daughter wore around the neck as an indication that she was pregnant, *omufuko a dula.* Other necklaces like the oyster shell beads called *Onyoka* were also taken off from her neck when she became pregnant to give room to the *omushambe* until she gave birth.

The *Omushambe,* therefore served as a symbol of hope, fortune, pride, endurance and prosperity. It was not only pregnant women who were expected to wear *Omushambe,* but a mother who was breast-feeding was also expected to continue wearing *Omushambe* until the child was weaned, after which she was then free to stop wearing it. More importantly when a mother had her daughter or son getting married, she was also entitled to wear *Omushambe* to dignify her role as the mother in bringing up her child to that stage. The *Omushambe* also served as a symbol of death and sorrow. A deceased wife wore *Omushambe* throughout the mourning period to notify the public that the husband or a close member of her family had just died. Differences between the *Omushambe* that were worn when a mother was celebrating a wedding and that worn by an expectant

mother and during breast feeding could be seen by the format and way in which it was worn. An *Oshipando* format of *omushambe* was typically for mourning. This, format called *okupilikila mwene*, meaning `to mourn the husband', could be recognized when the strings that joined it at the back of the neck were not properly tied together and no ornaments were decorated on it. This was called *Omushambe ina gu pyatulwa.*

Julia Shikesho remembered that "conceiving the first pregnancy was the most exciting and memorable experience by most women. When other women see you wearing an *omushambe* on your neck they gossiped joyfully and congratulated the husband for having worked hard to make the wife pregnant, and the lobola \ *iigonda* paid would not be in vain" The *Oshikwanyama* translation of the gossip goes this way; "*Konale ngele omukulukadhi okwamonika a zala omushambe ohaku tiwa winya omufimba, o kwa wapala, utya omulumenhu a lwa iita kaanaanve. O! oo paife o kwa mona omwaikandi, emupa edimo! Ee! okwamona omwaikadi, ena edimo! Paife nongombe yinya ita yi kakufwako vali oya kana shaashi omunhu okuna edimo. Omufuko oho gondwa omatemo nongombe tayi yi oku dandja. Omatemo wonale kashiimba okwali ngoo haa ningi a tano nenge oku li a ne'.*

There were a variety of local beads and jewellery, among these were the iron beads - *iiyela,* ostrich eggshells/*omihanga,* oyster shell beads/*oonyoka* and seeds or grass from local plants. Beads had significant symbolic identity among the *Aawambo*. Glass beads called *Oondjendje* were the commonest neckwear for all the girls in the community. Most of my interviewees have indicated that it was very embarrassing whenever a

woman went in public without wearing an *onyoka* on her neck *Omunkiintu i ha kala ompwedha mothingo*. The *Aawambo* did not produce glass beads locally, but they admired and popularised them, because, they were attractive, rare and precious, they were bartered for cattle or ivory. By whom and when glass beads were invented in the community could be traced back to trade networks between Southern Africa communities and European traders and explores. According to Beck:

Beads were first introduced into the Southern Africa by the Portuguese through present-day Mozambique and Zimbabwe. It was not until the Dutch East Indian Company at Cape Town had been established in 1652, that significant amounts of glass beads were to be distributed among communities within and those bordering the Cape Colony. Earlier, beads were not imported in great quantities until the early nineteenth century when different societies on the periphery of the Cape Colony began to develop traditions linked to their use. These new customs, however, encouraged traders to consider trading these items more to local communities as the market expanded. Missionaries, and other traders, had to keep abreast of these local predilections, as well as the desires of those societies deeper in the interior to whom the beads might eventually be traded. The missionaries' letters indicate that the tastes in beads varied from mission, society to society and year to year (Beck, 2003: 220).

It is believed that glass beads were introduced to Southern Africa in the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Portuguese traders frequented the Southern African port of Lourenco Marque (now Maputo, the capital of Mozambique), bringing glass beads to

exchange for ivory and gold. Whether beads were intended for royalty, commoners, diviners, males, females (married or unmarried), particularly age groups for ornamentation or trade (internally within the community or externally with other societies) remains unclear.

In *Owamboland,* it was initially, the rich who could afford glass beads, mainly kings and their senior headmen. There have been stories that the subordinates were at a particular point in history, not allowed to own the glass beads. It is also told that the beads were slowly sneaked to the ordinary members of the community through the closest aides to the kings, especially those who were entrusted with the responsibility of dressing and looking after the wealth of royal families. One of my informants in this regard, Julia Shikesho told me that; *"the beads were swallowed by kings' aides, and, when the aide went to stool he removed them (the beads), hid them and secretly passed them to his family members".* Shikesho, who at the time I was interviewing her was wearing some of these rich bead *omave goshilongo* ornaments on her neck, narrated how her great grandfather who served as an aide to Haimbili yaHaufiku (1811 – 1858), smuggled out the beads. Sivia from *Ombalantu* also wore similar *omawe goshilongo,* at the time of my interview with her. According to her *"these beads are very rare nowadays. They belonged to the ancestors most of whom died in caves inside baobab trees- over there* [pointing at some baobab trees]. *They died fighting intertribal, omapumbu war with cattle raiders from Uukwambi, Ongandjera and Uukwaluudhi. When our last king died, the neighbouring kingdoms took organized raids against our kingdom taking cattle and captives ... I inherited a few of these beads from my parents. My mother told me that their*

grandparents picked the beads near and inside some of the baobab tree caves where the royal family of Kamhaku, the Ekwaghwiyu clan, sought refuge after the murder of the king". (Sivia, 2003: Uukolonkadhi). Beads in all the eight communities were used for decoration, beauty, and status but also for ritual purposes. Some of them served as protective magic, others as objects to draw fortune and luck, for example if a woman had been giving birth to children who eventually died while young, her next baby would be pierced and pieces of beads were worn in anticipation that the misfortunes would be prevented. Arguably, the association of beads with traditional practices made them form part of the *Aawambo* cultural heritage and was an early eample of the way in which tradition was dynamic and flexible enough to incorporate new materials into existing practices.

It is assumed that beads began to multiply as early as the mid 1800s, as one of the early European commodities in the community. Before the influx of the contract labour system most men from Owamboland went to work in Angola called *Koputu-kOkuubata.* Therefore, in addition to native Angolan traders like the *Kumb*i and *Aambwela*, *Aawambo* men who went to work at the Angolan coastal towns like Lobito, Tobwa, Benguela and Namibe brought beads with them for their wives and relatives. Some of the beads were given local *Oshiwambo* names like the *Ondjendje yomutse godhi* and *Omushambe.* The name *Omushambe* literally refers to 'Namibe' (the other name for the Namibe town, still popular today, is *Omushambe*), a town found on the south western coast of Angola. Hence the *Omushambe* beads were nicknamed after the place where they came from.

Glass beads were used as precious earrings too, in addition to other localized fashions of earrings like animal sinews, palm leaves and thorn sticks. The elderly initiated women wore *Omagola* earrings made from *uuputu* \ silver nickel beads, *Onyoka* or *Omwaanga* beads as well as *Omushambe* beads. *Omushambe* beads that were used for earrings were simply used as decoration and not worn on the neck to transmit messages about birth, and death as it had been illustrated above. Wives of the rich could wear a combination of valuable matching ornaments as decorations. Hermans Tonjes describes having seen in the 1890s: *"*[Owambo] *women with large holes pierced in their ears, pieces of wood and ear adornments made from glass of beads … were pierced in their ears"* (Tonjes, 1996: 42).

On every woman's waist, ostrich egg - shells *Omuhanga/ omwaanga* beads were worn. These were among elderly women skilfully folded at the back to form a bundle called *Egongo*. The front was plaited in such a way that it formed an apron-like shape to cover and prevent the exposure of her lap. A piece of soft leather skin, *epushu* [Kwl, Ng, Kwb, Nkl & Mbl.] from young calves covered the buttocks. When a woman married she also wore the same style but the *omwaanga* of the married woman was larger than that of the uninitiated women, in addition it was knitted with ostrich eggshells reaching to the knees and covering her bosoms as they enlarged after giving birth. If a woman were rich her *omwaanga* was definitely thick, rich in texture, plentiful in size and ornaments, and falling below her knees.

Locally produced beads made from nickel *Iiyela\uuputu* were the commonest anklets worn for decorational purposes. They were of two different types – the black and ash colours, worn separately or in a mixed format. Usually, the black *iiyela* were worn below the knees [*eendjeshe]*. The ash coloured *iiyela* were worn around the anklets, but either way she wore them, was fine. Women also wore heavy nickel anklets for decorational purposes, but in most cases also to heal dislocations or joint pains. It was however, very rare for women to wear shoes, unlike men who were away in the bush most of the time. However, a few women, mostly the elderly who owned houses, wore shoes to protect themselves, because they did work at home.

As illustrated earlier, during the celebration of the birth of the child, *epito / epiitho,* when the mother and her baby left the bedroom, *Ondjugo*, for the first time coincided with the handing over of the baby's first costumes. Although it was the fathers, not the mothers, who bore the responsibility of supplying the baby's dress, he must not send the baby's dress until it was born, as it was a taboo that the child would not be born if the father collected and prepared costumes and other objects before the child was born. A ceremony when the father handed over clothes to his son was organised a week after the birth of the baby. The father could also slaughter a bull to provide clothing to his wife and children. The skin was tanned (*okupelwa*) into soft leather by those who were skilled at doing it. However, the most important ornaments, that formed part of this occasion were the beads given to the child to associate him with the clan to which she belonged. It should be reiterated, in Ndahafa Kakonda's words, that the *epiitho* ceremony was an important ritual conducted about a week after the birth of the baby. However, another important,

though conducted separately, ceremony called *Ezaleko lyondiwi or lyoshinyenye* was also held in due course after the *epiitho.* This has been given a more detailed explanation above.

The *Onyoka and Omwaanga \ Omuhanga*, were important strings of beads made from oyster or ostrich egg shells. The amount, quality and design of the strings of *Onyoka* or *Omwaanga* that a woman wore acted as a measure of her husband's wealth. The more strings of *Onyoka* or O*mwaanga* a woman possessed, the richer the husband, as men acted as sole providers of costumes for their wives. According to Herman Tonjes, *"Most of the adornments are given to the women by their husbands, but remain the man's property. The contents of a woman's 'jewellery box' will, therefore, always be determined by the husband's wealth."* (Tonjes 1996: 45). As clothing items remained the property of the husband, he could always claim repossession of them in case of arguments or separation, but not divorce, as it was not legalized, in the past. A wife could leave her husband for her relatives for months, but she was always entitled to go back home, provided the husband negotiated her return with her family.

Every married woman should at least put on a piece of *Onyoka* string on her neck. If a woman was seen without a piece of it on, it was immoral. One of my informants, Helvi Kondombolo noted that; *"a woman going public with a bare neck was as bad in the public eyes as someone who has lost a husband, because when the husband dies, the deceased wife removed all the ornaments that she wore. She must stay with a bare neck and waist until the dates for mourning the husband were over".* As indicated above, a

bare neck was a sign of expressing a loss of a husband or a child. According to the custom, when the husband died, the deceased wife was stripped of all her jewellery, bracelets and the other precious ornaments worn around the neck, waist, and ankles. This was an expression to indicate that the husband who by tradition must dress and provide the wife with all the precious ornaments was no longer there. The deceased wife could become poor as the family of the deceased husband could decide to confiscate all the ornaments and costumes of the former wife, which, traditionally, were the properties of the husband.

Kondombolo went on to explain that upon the death of the husband, the wife wore the clothes of the husband. This was called *okupilikila mwene*. It was however a bad omen should the wife wear the husband's clothes while he was still alive, as it was feared to signal the immediate death of the husband. It was a conceived taboo to inherit *Onyoka* belonging to clans other than that of your mother's lineage. It was also a taboo to steal *Onyoka,* as this would not only bring bad luck to the culprit, but to the entire family in the clan lineage. When the entire family suffered from cursed related circumstances it was referred to as *ezimo lya tikilwa*, meaning a family that had been cursed, as members of that family would die tragically and suffered from other misfortunes, prompting the family to seek the advice of seers and traditional diviners for recovery. Failure to consult a seer would result in the total extinction of family members

To make the *Onyoka\Omwaanga* valuable, an *Oomba*, made from hard oyster shells or elephant tusks were decorated at the back of the strings. Animal sinew called *Oothipa*

was used to put beads of *Onyoka* together. The *Oomba* [pl] were very scarce and costly to buy because they were not local products, but were mostly traded by communities from neighbouring Angola like the *Nkumbi* and the *Ovimbundu* communities in the South and central parts of Angola. Oral history informs us that *Aawambo* went on organized expeditions, on the commands of the king or influential chiefs to collect oysters for the royal clans. Simeon Hendimbi from Onahmida told me that:

as the king sent his warriors for expedition to rivers in Southern Angola, they were given a cow to slaughter at the river bed where the oysters were to be collected. The purpose was not to eat the meat but what was important was the dung from the intestine and the belly that were taken in the shallow water on the riverbed. The oysters would then cling to the waste materials as they fed on them. In a few days, the intestine would be fully covered with oysters and other water creatures. The men would remove them and put back the intestines in the water, several times, until the desired number of the oysters was collected or until the waste from the intestine was all eaten up. Men on the expedition used local made baskets called Onghu and Iimbamba made from barks of young mopane trees and palm leaves respectively to carry the unprocessed Oomba to the king. (Hedimbi, 2003: Onamhinda, Ohangwena).

An *Omba* was very expensive, the price of one was equivalent to the price of a cow. Therefore, seeing a woman wearing *Onyoka* with several *Oomba* on it symbolised that she came from a very wealthy family. Dressing up in expensive and scarce costumes was a status that did not only heap fame and popularity on both the husband and the wife. If

the wife were rich in terms of costumes it was the husband, who was commended for keeping the wife neat and good looking; *"Naturally, of course, the women know very well that their masters attach considerable importance to having their wives dress up properly and fittingly"* (Tonjes, 1996: 45). Giving the wife an *Omba* was, therefore, a sign of high esteem, respect and adornment for the wife. An *Omba* could also be given to a person by the king or a friend in recognition of a person's outstanding quality or friendship.

Herman Tonjes, elaborating on the value attached to an *Omba* writes that: *"They, Oomba are extremely valuable, and it is very difficult to obtain such an adornment. I was able to obtain only a single of such specimen; ...this [Omba] was given to me, by a lady of a noble blood, who often came to visit us and who attached considerable value to our friendship. By giving me an Omba, she wished to indicate to us how much our friendship meant to her"* (Tonjes, 1996: 45). The value attached to *Omba* is still predominant among the community today.

Other equally important women's ornaments and bracelet fashions included *Oongondo* (heavy round objects made from nickel or copper and worn around the ankles). Blacksmithing that centred on iron and metal smelting was, in addition to pottery and basketry, one of the many specialized artistic skills among the *Aawambo*. Veijo Notkola and Harri Siiskonen wrote that: *"before the advent of European traders Owambo smiths almost monopolized the production of copper and iron artefacts in the Northern and Central parts of Namibian territory…. Owambos played an active role in the long distance trade in South West Africa"* (Siiskonen, 1990: 10).

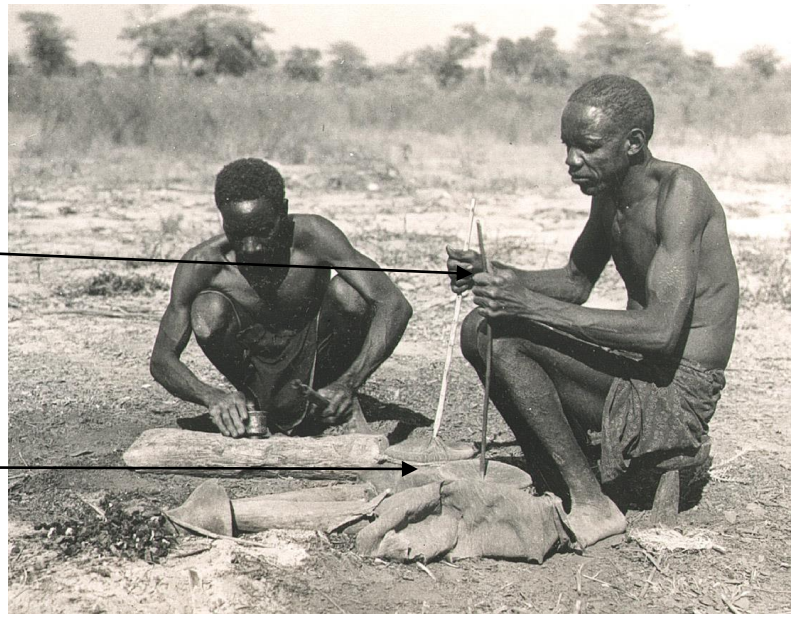


Photo14: An undated photo of the Aawambo blacksmiths at work. Blacksmithing was an important industry in the pre-colonial society. Source: The National Archives of Namibia.

The *Oongondo* served a multiple cultural role. Initiated women wore them around the anklets so that when they walked they did it slowly and steadily. Traditionally women were expected to be gentle and calm in their movements. By walking slowly she dignified her status and represented beauty, motherhood, maturity, ownership and control. Other *Oongondo*, much larger in size and heavier were used as handcuffs for wrongdoers. They were also used to heal the dislocation of joints, and to produce an important product called *edhilo* that was used to add value to the *Olukula* lotion, as

described earlier. There were also locally produced strings of nickel called *Omaposhe* [pl.] *eposhe* [sing.]. Wealthy women wore them on both arms, extending from the hand to the upper part of the arm in combination with other important nickel bracelets like *Iiyela.*

An interview with Ndandu and Sivia [who at the time of the interview wore 'traditional clothes' and were both residing in *Uukolonkadhi* but originally from *Uukwaluudhi* and Ongandjera] threw more light on the cultural significance of beads and bracelets. At birth a baby was given an *ondiwi* by the father. The *oondiwi* consisted of different types, *omwaanga,* iron beads*iiyela\uuputu* and *okathepati* sticks. The *omuthepati* sticks were worn by *Aakwanambwa/*the dog clans to indicate the number of children in the family including the mother. Each time a baby was born, a stick was added to the existing ones meaning that they all belonged to the same family. If she had no children she wore a single stick.

I [Ndandu] *belong to the aakwanambwa clan, let me show you my sticks. I should begin to count my children according to these sticks. This one is for me, this one for Shalongo this one is for Niimpungu. The rest are for my late mother and her children. I have inherited her sticks because we belong to the same clan. This stick is for her and the other three are for her three children who are still in life, including me. My father's clan <u>Aakwandjamba</u> \ the elephants clan wore an ondiwi called ongolongo made from ostrich egg shells'.*

Ndandu continued by saying *"my children also had to put on arm rings and anklets called iigole". Iigole* consisted of *omwaanga* that is, pieces of ostrich

eggshells*omuhanga* and Copper\nickel beads called *iiyela* dressed together on a string of animal sinew to form a string of Jewelry. These too were worn to indicate to what clan one belonged. There were several clans like the *Aakwanangombe, aakwaniilya, aakwambashu aakwatjitha* and so on. The *aakwatjitha* [kwl.]*Aakwaanime* [kwj.] clan for example wore white ostrich beads called *omwaanga omutokele*. This also applied to other clans like the *Aakwatembu, Aakwaanjoka* and *Aakwamandjila.* By wearing similar totems, it explained that they belonged to a common family ancestry. The number of the string of the beads around the waist depended on the wealth of the father or his clan.

Among the western communities (*Uukwaluudhi, Ogandjera, Ombalantu, Uukolonkahi* and *Uukwambi*) in *Owamboland,* the *Onyoka* beads were spectacular and unique. *Onyoka o ya li yaalinawa,* can be translated into English as Onyoka beads were initially worn by the rich. They were reserved for influential and dominant clans like the *Aakwanambwa* clans (the clan for the kings of *Uukwaluudhi, Ongandjera* and some people from the *aakwambashu,* the grasshoppers clan). These were important and meaningful objects in the community. If a man failed to give his child *ondiwi* he lost respect from the community – a worthless person called *omukatalume*. Beads of copper were stitched on the surface of the *okateta* front apron of a new born baby piece of cloth. When a child was born, the father gave a trusted brother – a basket, *oshimbale.* The *oshimbale* symbolized that the father had chosen a guardian for his child, who would take care of his child if he died. The child was nicknamed after this person and he was accorded all the power to preside at all the important ceremonies of that child such at wedding, circumcision, death and burial.

Ndandu also told me that boys did not wear ostrich beads *omwaanga* on their waists, except on the neck. Instead, they wore a leather belt and a front apron called *onheta.* A girl on the other hand continued to wear *omwaanga* around her waist. When she prepared for *efundula,* her hair were plaited in a style called *iishisho.* She then wore a complete set of *omwaanga* and other costumes.

Our hair was not cut, but plaited okushishwa with seeds from bird plum trees when we were about to register for efundula. When this style got old, it was replaced by another style called omulenda standing upright and another one that hanged down; [Omulenda gwakulama\gwathikama na gumwe gwa endjelela] like the iipando that I wear. Tate, look on my head! When omulenda gets old they were replaced by iipando which were in return replaced by oshikoma.

Sivia elaborated further on the topic in response to the following question:

Vilho: *What is this on your head?*

Sivia: *It is a metal object like that of the Ovatjimba that they continue to wear today. We shared similarities. I use this one to scratch underneath the plaits when itching. The pieces of wood around my neck are called Otupapa. Most Aawambo wore them for the nice and pleasant smell. I am a woman therefore my neck should smell nice. In my culture a lady's neck should always smell pleasantly. A husband expects a pleasant smell from his wife. This other object is called the omwiya goshilongo, the sacred belt. It is*

only worn by those who belong to the clan of those who ruled this community. Rulers of Uukolonkadhi like Iikasha ya Shituula who handed over the thrown to Iingungula ya Nyolo, who was my uncle belonged to the Aakwanangombe \ cattle clan. This belt is always worn around the neck like this [demonstrating]! All aakwanangombe wore this belt. When I have to pay homage to the place where the first people from this clan settled I have to wear it. Inside this belt is a sacred stick called omusidilo gOshilongo \ the omusinda gOshilongo. This belt is like the sacred fire in the homestead, it protects and gives the ruler a vision of how the community should be ruled. Without this belt the ruler will never have solid and stable leadership and he could not go to sacred sites and places of ritual significance to worship the ancestors.

Sivia explained that the sacred places were feared and respected. They were places of awe, but also of hope. They acted as sites where the king could go to communicate with the ancestors and strengthen their power. In most cases people were not allowed to settle in them. If one settled there without adhering to the laid down ritual, and without proper cultural procedures being observed, one could be harmed.

Let me give you a familiar example. I should assume that you have heard of Uushona waShoombe's former homestead at Olukuma in Uukwaluudhi. Sylvanus Shaanika, was an Evangelist, and under the influence of his faith as a Christian, he ignored the advice of the traditional elders not to occupy Uushona waShoombe's field as it was associated with sacred objects such as the oomwiya dhoshilongo for the preservation of the sacred rituals of the community. He ignored the advice and built his home on the site. In a few months

that followed his entire family began to experience problems. I do not want to elaborate further, but it is a sad story that is still very common to this day and the problem still affects Sylvanus' family offspring. Every elderly person who was brought up in that community knows this tragedy. The family was forced to vacate their home in the late 1970s and nobody has occupied the site since that time. I tell you, these were sacred sites that could not be tampered with anyhow, without protective costumes. Protective amulets were to be offered to everyone who desired to settle there, and it was done in close consultations with the elders and seers in that community, so that no harm will affect those who will settle in the place.

In this regard Hiltunen indicated that some of the protective costumes that were effective in this regard were of a more:

general symbolism, [these] were usually small wooden pieces in a leather string. They were not just any pieces of wood, but power or spirit to resist [ancestors supernatural power] *were put into them …by a diviner of higher grade.* [For example] *a mother hangs amulets around the neck, on arms, around the waist and ankles of her new born baby to guard him from destruction …(*Hiltunen, 1986:68).

In this regard therefore, as Sivia and Hiltunen suggest costumes did not only interpret the standard socio-cultural values of the wearer, clan and his community, but they also mediated communication between an individual and his ancestors.

In summing up this chapter, I should point out that the variety of pre-colonial *Oshiwambo* costumes with regard to texture, utility and meaning in relation to all the eight polities *Uukwambi, Ongandjera, Ombalantu,Uukwaluudhi, Ondonga, Ombandja and Uukkwanyama* have been elaborated in this chapter to demonstrate that *Aawambo* traditional costumes have been central to the socio-cultural identity of the same communities. This information is useful in providing the necessary background to the next chapters that argue that Europeans did not find our ancestors 'naked' [as missionaries and colonialists claim], but it was they [the missionaries and colonialists] who created this perception. As Phyllis M. Martin argues *"Missionaries and others who introduced new ideas on clothing were grafting onto an existing praxis, rather than introducing a new means of social differentiation"* (Martin, 2003: 405). However, what this thesis aims at achieving is to prove why the *Aawambo* lost their traditional costumes and to ask who should bear responsibility ? This complexity can only be understood by examining and analyzing the political, economic, religious and socio-cultural developments that reorganized and reshaped the Aawambo communities as Europeans occupied and controlled them. Socio-economic change was intensive in the period between 1870 and 1989. This period was indeed significant as it was marked by rapid changes in local traditional customs and, undisputedly, a period of unwittingly intensified religious, social, and economic appropriation by outsiders and by the rapid spread of European commodities with new fashions being consolidated by intensive advertising. Smear campaigns were aimed at destroying meaningful ways of *Aawambo* socio-economic organization without any efforts being made to preserve and conserve commodities that constituted assets of our cultural heritage, the torch of illuminating light

from which we might gain pride in our identity and history . Therefore, changes in costumes, religion, music, source of income, patterns of marriage and death ceremonies were indeed painfully unethical and uncalled for and were part of the cultural baggage that accompanied European imperialism as will be argued in chapter three.

Chapter Three: Significant Influences on Changes in Fashion.

The role of different missionary denominations in *Owamboland* since 1870, is crucial in understanding the circumstances that implemented the dramatic transformations of traditional clothing fashions since the turn of the twentieth century. The population of Namibia stands at 1.8 million according to the 2001 population and housing census. The country is alleged to be over 90% Christian and the *Aawambo* constitute the largest population of Christians in Namibia. Christian missionaries, it must be said, were successful in their religious mission, but this chapter will consider the extent to which they were responsible for cultural transformation in northern Namibia and especially in the area of clothing. To what extent, if any, were the various denominations that operated in northern Namibia implicated in the loss of the traditional and cultural heritage of the *Aawambo* population.

Key developments and efforts to Christianise northern Namibia gained momentum at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first missionaries to set up permanent stations in *Owamboland* were the Finnish Lutherans in 1870. In 1924 the South African administration accorded permission to the Catholic and the Anglican Mission to start missionary work in *Owamboland* (MMC at *Oshigambo*, 20 – 21 January 1925 Hha:9, NAF). Catholics established their first mission station at *Oshikuku* in *Uukwambi* and Anglicans at *Odibo* in *Uukwanyama* in 1924 (Peltola 1958: 199 – 200; Veijo Notkola and Harri Siiskonen, 2000: 29).

It appears that Kings and other influential community leaders, the custodians of traditional wealth were the first to be attracted by European commodities. Even before missionaries made contact with the *Aawambo* communities, a few hunters and explorers who had traded in *Owamboland,* had already subjected some of the leaders to the taste of European commodities. For example, in 1851 Sir Francis Galton visited King Nangolo dhAmutenya of *Ondonga* [1820 – 1857] and gave him a crown [possibly with other European costumes] as a gift. In the years that followed leaders were frequently visited with gifts some of which were precious like guns and ammunition. It appears that in the early years Europeans mostly targeted influential people in the community other than the ordinary people for the supply of European products. Arguably, gifts `in kind' of European products such as clothes, guns, brandy and ammunition were used as traps for the leaders to accommodate Europeans in their communities and spread their influence. Galton, for example, would have offered the king western dress anticipating to bridge the gap between the two cultures. He [Galton] remarked that by offering a gift of a European dress to the king he would appreciate his culture and accept him. King Nangolo, presumably on the advice of his counsellors or wives, presented Galton with another type of fashion. Galton indicated that:

I did much to make myself agreeable, investing Nangoro with a big theatrical crown that I had bought in Drury Lane for some such purpose. But I have reason to believe that I deeply wounded his pride by the non–acceptance of his niece as, presume, a temporary wife. I found her installed in my tent in negress finery, raddled [painted with red] with red ochre and butter, and as capable of leaving a mark on anything she touched as well–

inked printer's roller. I was dressed in my one well–preserved suit of white linen, so I had her ejected with scant ceremony (1853).

It is interesting to note in the words of Galton a degree of disgusted taste and disrespect for the traditional *Oshiwambo* costumes, that in itself could be an indication that by providing the king with European clothes he would have meant that the king should abandon his 'dirty attires' and resort to European fashions after which his subordinates would follow suit. This is overtly disclosed in Galton's words defaming and discrediting the native's clothes as dirty and smelly –'red ochre and butter'. He concluded that his dress were not only superior to those of the 'native' but immaculate 'white linen'. This could be seen to symbolise the belief that, to Galton, European dress symbolized civilization. In contrast, those of the `native' were not only 'primitive' but also seen as `dirty' and to be replaced by clean clothes.

A few kings continued to resist European dress but many of them, as early as 1870, began to change slowly and rejected and abandoned traditional costumes in favour of European fashions. This surprising and sudden move purged traditional norms on which the community previously stood firm. Oral and documentary evidence gathered to date does not provide any accounts of chiefs acting like those studied in South Africa by Jean Comaroff who 'responded to missionaries seeking to impose European clothing by ordering their people, including Christian converts, to wear traditional attire'. However, there have been accounts of chiefs who, as individuals, chose to dress themselves in European clothing that was even more stylish and `fashionable' than that of the

Europeans who lived in the community. Dressing as such gave them the status of being rich and having wisdom in their communities.

King Weyulu Hedimbi [1884-1904] a predecessor of the famous king Mandume ya Ndemufayo [1911 – 1917], of *Uukwanyama* was reported to have left his traditional royal dresses for European costumes, as such acting in violation of traditional ethics regulating his royal throne. Some people even predicted that the king's European styles would provoke danger and misfortunes for the kingdom, as it was a conceived taboo for a king to go public without his royal regalia and other ritual ornaments like the *Omwiya gOshilongo* associated with the power and vision to the throne. It is clear that if the king's royal dress were changed, this would have obviously affected his moral principles and cultural perspective on the kingdom's identity. Worse still what ever side the king took, his followers were also likely to follow suit or fall apart. A famous adage in Oshiwambo says; *Olukateko ngele o lwazi Olwaale o ta lu halakana* (when the broom loses the support that holds it together, the broom sticks fall apart loosely). Therefore, when kings became weak and modelled European costumes their subordinates copied them, since the poor have always emulated the fashions of the rich and famous, when they could afford and were permitted.

It appears that the Finnish interest in *Owamboland* was motivated by Sir Galton's visit to Owamboland in 1851. In his report he described the area as "a charming country of corn" (Peltola, 2002: 9). The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission arrived in Owamboland in July 1870. Another influential personality in this regard, sparking the Finnish Mission

interest to come to *Owamboland* was Karl Hugo Hahn of the "Baltic German Mission", who had worked among the Hereros since 1842 (Peltola 2002:25).

Hahn visited Finland in 1862. By this time he had already spent more than twenty years in central Namibia where he had operated as a missionary with the Rhenish Missionary Society. Since then Hahn had repeatedly encouraged the Missionary Board to send missionaries to *Owamboland*. According to Marti Peltola "As early as 1864 he (Hahn) had written that he with pleasure would lead the Finnish missionaries to the *Ovambo* peoples whose land lay to the north...In 1866, he took another journey to *Ovamboland* and sent a copy of his diaries to the Finnish Missionary Society and made an appeal that Finnish missionaries would be send to South West Africa. … he had even promised that the *Ovambo* chiefs would get missionaries and begun thinking of Finns. When the Mission Board heard this, the idea of choosing *Ovamboland* to be the mission field soon matured." (2002: 25). According to Nancy Robson (who was born at Odibo in the 1930s) to Anglican missionaries the Finnish were more puritanical and strict in their dress code than the Anglicans, but both the Anglicans and the Finnish supplied the same clothes and taught the same sewing styles to the Owambo girls who were under their care. She recalls vividly how her mother spent most of her week days teaching and supervising young girls in sewing dresses that were similar to those of the Finnish Lutherans.

Notkota and Siiskonen argue that, soon after their arrival in Ondonga in 1870, the Finnish

missionaries made plans to expand the mission to *Uukwanyama*, *Uukwambi* and *Ongandjera*. By the end of 1871, missionary work had already started in Rehoboth (*Ehao* or *Okahao* in *Ongandjera)* and *Elim (Uukwambi).* However the Finnish failed to establish trusted relationships with the rulers in *Owamboland* and were forced to give up their work in much of *Owamboland* from 1872 particularly that in *Uukwambi* and in *Ongandjera* in 1873. Indeed until 1903 Finnish missionary work in *Ovamboland* was confined to *Ondonga* (Siiskonen, 1990: 124-5). It therefore clear that it took several decades before northern Namibia became Christianized [far later than in most other parts of Africa and this might be viewed as a consequence of the relatively late colonisation of the country], but ironically the kingdoms came to admire, accommodate, praise and advocate Christianity more than many other neighbouring African communities.

This chapter constitutes an analysis of interviews and a few written source that indicate that various church denominations in Namibia were very much responsible for the weakening and destruction of traditional norms in *Owamboland* as they directly interfered and interrupted patterns of cultural life and practices of local traditions. The main aim is to analyse to what degree the Christian doctrines impaired conventional traditional customs. In particular, this chapter will trace and highlight the loss of significant traditional costumes and the ethical values that were relevant to the cultural heritage of the community. According to Sabina David:

*When the missionaries came, the Aawambo wore traditional costumes. The missionaries considered traditional costumes 'pagan' and heathen objects. They believed that when one wore costumes made from skins and rubbed himself / herself with red ochre, it was a pagan and primitive practice. The first converts who in turn also played a major role in influencing other people in the community to abandon traditional costumes were not allowed to smear their bodies with the red ochre [Olukula] and advised not to dress in traditional outfits when attending church services, instead they had to wear cotton clothes (*Sabina, 2002: Oral interview).

By so doing the missionaries were the first to impose European standards of dressing, described by Langner as 'modest behaviours'. Those who emerged in conformity with this accepted standard were regarded and hailed by the missionaries as immaculate and superior to those who wore leather dresses. *"Eventually, people did away with traditional clothes and burned them.By so doing they were persuaded to belief that they were abandoning paganism and evil objects for the righteousness of God, the saviour" (*Sabina, 2002: Oral interview).

In view of the above claims, the arrival of missionaries in northern Namibia was according to most of my informants the beginning of a new social and economic pattern that in the following years dominated and transformed the community's socio-cultural organization. It should, however be noted that the traditional customs and commodities of the *Aawambo* have always been dynamic and subjected to change. Change in the modes of production, distribution of commodities and transformations in ruling clans would lead

to alterations in the materials used and meaning of different items of clothing. But the point of contention is that the Finnish missionaries chose to settle permanently in the community, unlike the early traders and explorers. Traditional costumes and the code of dressing traditionally trembled and wavered in the wake of the onslaught of European values. It is believed that until the onset of Finnish missionaries northern Namibia had never before experienced permanent settlement by outsiders. Therefore, the Finnish missionaries were the first to have established permanent settlement from outside and the first to have openly advocated and formulated strategies for a change in costumes and customs in the host community. One of the early strategies was to provide the people living around the mission station with clothes as Christmas presents (Buys and Nambala, 2003: 34).

The missionaries' cultural backgrounds and training appear to have shaped different denominations differently with regard to being tolerant to some of the traditional norms of the communities in which they operated. According to Totemeyer:

. . . the three missions that served in Owamboland differed in moral values and mission principles. The long-term goal of the Lutheran mission was from the 1920s the establishment of an autonomous and independent church. Indeed by 1972, out of the 97 ministers of ELOC only four were still white. The Roman Catholic mission was characterised by critics as having a more paternalistic attitude towards the 'native' population. For example, at the beginning of the 1970s white Catholic missionaries insisted that any Owambo joining the ministry should have the same training and

qualifications as whites, which retarded the birth of a local independent church. The Anglican mission was more autonomous than that of the Catholic Church. At the beginning of the 1970s the Anglican Mission Church already had black priests who had been trained in Owamboland (1978:23-5).

Totemeyer's presentation seems to support the argument that the Finnish, despite being in the field since 1870, had for forty years failed to have remarkable tangible success until the early years of the twentieth century. The Finnish mission's objective of Christianising the community did not materialize as fast as they should have expected. Peltola puts a reason for this that the:

Finnish missionaries set more demanding criteria for catechumens than Germans ... Therefore, the first Ovambos who wanted to be baptized were baptized by the Germans in their mission field in central Namibia". Matti Peltola adds that *"In 1881, Gotlieb Viehe of the German missionary baptized four young Ovambo men in Omaruru …This proved that Owambos could also be baptized. There were many who had been taught Christianity for years and who wanted to be baptized. The Finnish missionaries had not wished to act hurriedly in this important matter* (2002: 97).

There was a common perception that the Finnish missionaries were less tolerant of traditional practices than some of the other denominations. After many years of the Finnish missionary work in the community the first baptism did not take place until 1881.

Peltola puts the reason for this as a *"strategy used by the missionaries to study carefully what the requirements (for a Christian) would be ... they (the missionaries) were careful to aim high so that the firstling Christians would be a good example to others"* (2002 : 97). However, one could argue that it was not the `high' standards of the missionaries that led to the slow rate of conversion, but the active resistance of the people to the new religion.

Missionaries were faced with a consistent and firm challenge by a community that was not willing to listen and dared not to flee from its cultural heritage values and objects of potency. It should have been easier for the community to welcome Christianity. It would seem that Christian converts were not expecting to have to denounce their existing religious beliefs and customary conventional cultural practices such as clothes, names, rituals ceremonies, magic skills and so on. However, since all of these were expected to be abandoned, declared sinful and unacceptable by every convert it was a bitter pill, as any one could imagine, for the community to swallow. Therefore, fearing that the community would not commit itself to Christianity at the stake of sacrificing its meaningful traditional practices, the missionaries considered not offering baptisms too hastily as people were likely to revert back to their valuable traditional practices.

In his capacity as one of the early missionaries of the Rhenish Mission in Namibia, Herman Tonjes wrote about *'clothing and adornments'* in *Owamboland.* He provided primary evidence that, some of the chiefs in *Owamboland,* discarded, betrayed and annihilated traditional customs for which they (traditional leaders) were sworn in and

entrusted as custodian of traditional assets and antique. Tonjes noted that; *"I can remember that especially Ueyulu* [King Ueyulu Hendimbi who ruled in Uukwanyama between 1884 and 1904] *... was very selective when it came to what he wore. Despite the protests of his elders, he wore exclusively European clothing which he received from traders and missionaries in his country. He enjoyed being well and elegantly dressed, and in some regards he was a true gentleman"*(46). The interesting point that I would pick up here is that, although Tonjes had worked in *Owamboland* during the rule of King Ueyulu whom his book suggests, Tonjes had met several times, his weakness is the failure to interview the king to explain why he fashioned western dress, rather than choosing to speak for the king, choosing words and reasons that seem to have been predetermined by his career and identity as a missionary and European. Speculating about why the king was fond of dressing in European clothes, Tonjes suggested that the king's appetite for European clothes reflected a simple desire to mimic the missionary: *". . . one day he [Ueyulu] noticed that one of the missionaries was wearing a normal shirt and he [Ueyulu] did not rest until he also possessed such a shirt"* [1996: 46].

Furthermore Tonjes made a direct comparison between western and local costumes. He advocated for the supremacy and immaculacy of western dress as compared with the inferior and messy local costumes. This argument is demonstrated clearly when Tonjes' describes chief Ueyulu as *"well and elegantly dressed [in European dress] and in some regards, he was a true gentleman"* [1996: 47]. Other missionaries who wrote about the pre- colonial communities of northern Namibia attacked and slandered local traditions as primitive, awkward and retarding western development. It is however, painful to note that

those who wrote from the missionary points of view avoided commenting on remarkably advanced local skills such as blacksmithing and so on.

There is however, an element of interest in Tonjes' argument that King Ueyulu abused his power as a custodian of the community traditions by refusing to dress as the community expected him to dress. However, Tonjes' use of terms like 'normal shirts' [using personal and pre-determined judgment without representing the alternative perspectives and opinions of the community] appears to have been carefully chosen to discredit local costumes which at that time were culturally authentic and ethically meaningful in the socio-cultural lives of the *Aawambo.* The traces of oral history from the distant past illuminates and provide such alternative perspectives into discovering what happened and why western costumes became popular and reveals the danger of an uncritical reading of the Eurocentric assumptions of the observations of missionaries such as Tonjes. This serves to reason that through systematic interviews with the elderly population of the community the reasons why western costumes became dominant in our community should not continue to stand aloof from our generation or be judged from missionaries' bias and continuing distortions that mislead the community and discredit its material culture that constitutes its identity.

Parallel to this argument, most of my informants suggested that the *Aawambo* would have wanted to copy and make use of European commodities and teachings, but not to the extent of becoming Christians; that ridiculed, denied and dismissed indigenous customs, in order to partake in practicing their traditions freely. Peltola's account of

King Kambonde kaMpingana's attitude in this regard is obvious testimony to support this argument:

The king's (Kambonde's) own attitude towards the new faith became cautiously positive. Sometimes he said that he wanted to learn to read and write without becoming a Christian. It would have required that he had only one wife and he could not agree to it. To fulfil the Christian requirements of monogamy had been an insurmountable barrier to many tribal chiefs ... Kambonde kaMpingana stuck to the old beliefs of his people to the end of his life (2002: 112).

There were multiple examples of similar difficulties and strange conditions formulated by missionaries for the community. Deterring a person from marrying in accordance with his customs was as complicated and unethical as depriving and denying a person of his unalienable customary rights to marry, raise children, own property and so on. In this regard one would be tempted to ask why was it not possible for a polygamist to become a Christian? Why were missionaries not prepared to tolerate and accommodate some of the host community's values to co–exist with Christianity? I would further argue that missionaries demonstrated a non-caring and unsympathetic attitude that destroyed the unity of individual families and community ethics. It was absurd and ironic for the missionaries who preached humanism to encourage family division and disunity to the detriment of children and mothers, which in return encouraged uncontrolled

behaviour by children and poverty as they grew up without the supervision of both parents.

Another remarkable element furnished by oral evidence was the case of king Mwaala gwaNashilongo who ruled *Uukwaluudhi* from 1990–1959. He was reported to have strong convictions and a taste for traditional leather costumes, which he never forfeited for European costumes till his death in 1961. Despite receiving Western clothes as gifts, he distributed them among his counsellors. The European hat that most kings and chiefs fashioned as a sign of chieftaincy was not of interest to him as "even in his old age Mwaala remained custodian of the community traditional conventions" (Bette, 1998: *Uukwanampembe*).

Despite king Mwaala's neutral attitude to Christianity, he did not want to be baptized nor was he motivated to embrace Western civilization. The first ruling Christian king in *Uukwaluudhi* was his successor, Josia Shikongo Taapopi (1960 to today). Notably, king Mwaala was baptized in his palace, in his old age bed. His new name became 'Sam.' The church would have expected the king to be called by the new name that had no relevance and no meaning rooted in the local traditions. The fact that today many people didn't know that King Mwaala was 'Sam' (I myself only came to know of the name and confirmed this name when I was researching for the date of the king's baptism in the church files at the *Tshandi* Lutheran church) indicates the lack of relevance and meaning of the name in the community that he served.

The replacement of the king's name 'Mwaala' with 'Sam' was spectacularly astonishing and of fundamental concern to the local and cultural interpretation of naming a person. For example king Mwaala was born a twin and in accordance with the local customs, every male twin was given that name to decode the circumstances surrounding his birth. Diluting the name 'Mwaala' for 'Sam' was directly destructive in essence, as it violated local traditions. Although the king had for long been defiantly sceptical of becoming a Christian, he could not continue defying as he became weakened by old age. The Finnish missionaries took advantage of his weaknesses to baptise him. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding his Christianisation the general consensus in the community today is that the king was baptised against his convictions rooted in the community traditions that he represented.

One of king Mwaala's many children told me that his father was "baptized wearing his traditional costumes" (Gwamwaala 2002, *Ombugu).* The reason why the church did not strip his clothes off at baptism was not given, but it appears that the royal family acted in defiance of the missionary's requests to undress the king. It is however, important to recognise an element of cultural treachery, where the church was acting in subjection to local traditions to lobby local support. Baptising the king dressed in his royal costumes clearly shows the church was willing, at times, to contradict church-proclaimed moral values and to ignore their normal argument that traditional costumes were symbols of Satanism and that to show righteousness every convert should wear European costumes, preferably white robes to symbolize holiness and purity from sins. However, ignoring these principles during the king's baptism, the missionaries might have reasoned, was

justified as his subordinates would be encouraged to follow suit and to become Christians.

Another circumstance where Christianity succumbed to local traditional norms was during king Mwaala's death. The church would have wished his body to be given a Christian burial ceremony. But, in defiance of the church, the royal family organized the king's burial in accordance with traditional norms of how the king should be buried. According to *Oshiwambo* traditions, when a king dies, his kingly ornaments such as charms and protective magic objects should be removed from the body, after which the body was ceremonially wrapped inside the skin of a black bull for burial. Acting in respect of the local traditions, the royal clan had refused the missionaries offer to bury the king at the newly founded missionary cemetery near the Finnish station at *Tshandi* in *Uukwaluudhi.* Finally, the king was put to rest in his cattle kraal, next to his homestead. King *Mwaala* himself was believed to have made a statement to his family that when he died his body should be buried in his cattle kraal. The *Aawambo* strongly believed that words spoken by a deceased cannot be violated, hence they had to adhere to the king's wishes despite objections from the church representatives. The site of the king's grave has been preserved to this day. In recent years, it has become a cemetery for close relatives of king Mwaala's maternal clan, the *Aakwanambwa.* It is located at a place called *Omundjuwala*, about 800 metres north of the former missionary centre at *Tshandi.*

King Mwaala was also described as having compelled his community not to succumb to foreign customs. This may explain why despite the presence of missionaries in

Uukwaluudhi the population of those who became Christians remained relatively low. The first Christians were baptized in 1930 - after 25 years of service, and nobody from the community served as a pastor until 1972 when Junias Vaino Kaapanda was ordained. The community as such remained strong in terms of observing traditional practices such as dress and traditional marriage. At present several individuals from communities that were close to the king's palace and where the king's mother and influential head-men lived still possess items of traditional costumes. These include villages like *Olukulo, Ondugu, Omapale, Iikokola* and *Okakuyu.* Some people from these communities are still not Christians, although they have adopted European dress. One example is that of Iipinge yaHikandwa who died recently in June 2003. His body was refused access to the church because he did not join the church and this sparked complaints, particularly among family members. Although one can still find many unbaptized adults in these places, many of them are becoming Christians due to old age and sickness, but many of them were only baptised recently (between 1998 and 2002) when Rev. Andreas Iiyambo introduced a system of visiting non-Christians in their homes.

Women in some communities were in particular noted to have posed strong and open resistance to have defied church influences. There have been a few instances of women who have defied the church's orders by going to the church dressed in their traditional head crowns, leather dresses and with their bodies smeared with the red ochre *Olukula.* Ndjene Mbandi pointed out that a recent example is that of *kuku* Bete the wife of Katukutuku – the senior councillor to king Mwaaala gwaNashilongo and Yina

Uugudhi. They used to go to church entirely dressed in traditional costumes. "These were the only two women I have seen at the church service. They were not Christians, (*kuku* Bete died as a non-Christian in 2001) but they attended church service sometimes, perhaps to demonstrate that it was the soul and not the body that the salvation is all about, or perhaps they staged a peaceful demonstration against the church doctrines. I think women in *Uukwaluudhi* were more outspoken. Ndjene further indicated that he had never seen a man staging a public attack or demonstration against the church, but that ". . . women were active in this regard, raising their concerns, by soliciting, presumably the mens' support which I did not see happen … hence, their legitimate peaceful revolt and courage to make their defiant voice heard and listened to by those whom were intended for, fell on deaf ears". (Ndjene, 2003: Ontanda). This again may explain the fact that it has been commented on that women in most communities of the *Aawambo* appear to have been more outstanding and visible in their efforts to preserve traditional costumes. Today, there are several women who still possess material culture passed to them by their mothers, on the other hand, most men appear to have been negligent in this regard.

Another element of women's resistance to colonial and church manipulation with regard to the resistance to pressures to dismantle traditional dress is described by Meredith McKittrick and Fanuel Shingenge with regard to the youthful Nangombe who declined to remove her traditional attires when she appeared for prosecution before a European magistrate court in a foreign country - South Africa. Nangombe was taken from Uukwaluudhi, in the early 1900s, accused of killing her daughter in accordance with the tradition that children born to pre-wedded girls should be killed as they could cause

misfortunes to the rulers and the common unity at large. In pointing out such significant elements of women's defiance of the colonial dismissal of local traditions, McKittrick noted from this real life account that *"perhaps the most poignant symbol of the equation of hybridity with the transgression was Nangombe's attire. In court she wore her beads, girdle, and other traditional dress under a European dress given to her by someone [presumably the prosecutors or the colonial administration]; this led the lawyers and judge in the court to assume mistakenly for much of the trial that she was pregnant".* [McKittrick, 2002: 221]. I would make an assumption that Nangombe had refused to strip off her traditional attire, and acting as such she should have fully reasoned and understood that the colonial costumes that were given to her were not superior to her own attires nor would they pronounce her guilty or not. She would have been more comfortable and relaxed in her traditional attire in a European court room rather than dividing her mind between the testimony that she had to give and a European dress that was strange to her body and would have troubled her mind and complicated the unfamiliar court session [the court ruling, the foreign language, strange people, environment, etc].

Timoteus Negumbo told me that, some people did not go to church because they were believers, but went there to make a mockery of how the white man dressed, sang, prayed and read. Some kings sent people to the church as spies, to spy on what was said in the church. Some kings also attended Sunday devotions, not necessarily because they were born again but some did it intentionally to listen and question the superiority of the white man's God. King Iipumbu ya Shilongo was once quoted to have given instructions to his

subordinates while attending a church service at Elim, that they should not sing and praise that the God of Israel is love, but instead they should sing *"Iipumbu is love for his people"*.

Peltola indicated that many of the early Christians among all communities were forced into submission to Christianity. Proof of this lies in the fact that some of the early Christian converts could not stick to the laid down principles of Christianity. As indicated earlier, the command of marrying a single wife was one of the most challenging doctrines. To most converts, the concept of marrying a single wife was a dogma, the essence of which was meaningless and difficult to abide to. Matti Peltola pointed out that *"polygamy became a problem in the Christian congregation".* This was particularly the case among the Finnish congregations who were stingy with laid down principles basic to Christianity. *"The ideal of an Owambo man was to have many wives …[This became], the most common reason for excluding a male member from the congregation…This was also the case with one of the three young men whom Rautanen had baptized at Olukonda on Whit Sunday in 1884. David Niitembu has already behaved `disrespectfully when in December 1885 he married another wife and had to be excluded from the congregation."* (Peltola, 2002: 102). In other words whilst it had taken over ten years to get the first three Christians to be baptised at Olukonda, in less than a year one of them has already left the church when the new religion tried to prevent him following traditional custom for a wealthy man.

It appears clear that the degree of community resistance to early European influences was prevalent in all categories of people in the community both young and old, men and women. On the other hand, missionaries did not compromise their firm stand in defence of Christianity and its doctrines as opposed to local traditions; clothes, polygamy and traditional physicians were most targeted. Reliable written and oral sources inform us that most people who became Christian converts very often violated Christian doctrines by reverting to a variety of traditional norms. Overt cases like practicing polygamy were explicit to invite the condemnations of the missionaries. Evidence to support this claim can be verified by the following extract from Bishop Tobias' [of the Anglican church at *Odibo*] in a letter:

Paul has disappeared these last 5 days without a word to me. He told me point blank that he intended to keep the second wife and so I gave him notice to leave on 13th of this month. He admitted that there was no other course open to me and I told him how sorry that things have come to this pass. I have never interfered with Paul. No time to. Left him to himself and he took things easy (Rev. Tobias, 1925: Odibo).

In other words, forty years after the case of David Niitembu, the church was still experiencing cases where men were still seeking to be members of Christian congregations and claim the traditional right to a second wife. As it appears above a degree of tension and conflict of cultural interest were eminent because of the missionaries' tendencies not to accommodate the cultural interests of the community in which the missionaries were hosted. It is however, important to note an overt tendency of

missionaries ignorance, disregard for the traditional customs and threats posed to those who choose to continue practicing their traditions. Why did Bishop Tobias have to order his baptised African, Paul, to go home? Marrying two wives was contrary to western Christian principles, but one would have expected the Bishop to be liberal in approach especially with respect to expelling Paul from serving him. Was servitude by a baptized polygamist a sin to Rev. Tobias? Instances of this nature and magnitude serve as evidence that the missionaries purged our traditions and were not prepared to listen to genuine demands and concerns of the local people to continue practicing and preserving some of their basic traditional customs when they became converts.

With the spread of Christianity, reports about elements of revolt against traditional customs escalated. During that time missionaries recorded cases of girls refusing to attend traditional weddings. It is assumed that incidents of this nature did not happen or were not reported in the pre-Christian northern Namibia communities. There was no genuine justification for the refusal, except that, the practice was now considered ‘primitive’ and ‘heathen’. These were terms that found their way into the community following European colonization and its religious influence. It appears that the church influence in this magnified, bringing confusion and posing a threat to local traditional values. Missionaries also encouraged unethical behaviours among the youths by encouraging them to revolt and become disobedient to their parents and customs:

The question of Ohango [wedding] was a constant problem. In the years that followed, countless tears were shed when heathen relatives tried to force a girl at the mission

station, to ohango. The girl was tempted and fell prey to temptation Martin Rautanen mentioned in the Annual Report of 1885: `There would be no difficulty here if Christian girls would be brave enough to count everything else so much garbage for the sake of Christianity, and be ready to suffer ridicule and insult, even death, if need be, but such pearls are rare in Christendom. How could one expect to find many pearls where the heathen reign of terror and darkness prevails' (Peltola, 2002: 101-102).

It is, of course, also possible that the missionaries were threatening the girls with the `terror' of the pits of hell if they chose to attend. Missionaries targeted the youths, especially those whose parents had `repented' knowing that children were soft targets and easy to convince in any way to change the old traditional customs and clothes. Anna Stewart, an Anglican missionary who served at Odibo wrote in an annual report from the 1920s that:

It has seemed to me for a long time that if these people's [Aawambo] religion is to become more than skin deep we should be doing more for the children - I have gathered a group, children of Christian parents – to try to give them, not so much actual instruction as training in worship. They are funny little scamps. They seem to learn anything by heart easily (Stewart: Odibo).

I should also comment that encouraging the young people to revolt against their traditional customs such as declining to attend weddings did not only threaten the family's moral behaviour and reputation, but it affected the clan and whole community as

well. As such this became an institutional crime. The girl could be expelled from the community, but with the influence and presence of missionary stations this became harder. In this regard missionary stations welcomed the youths who were offenders in the community and their parents were not allowed access to them. Nancy Robson, a retired nurse who was born to missionary parents at Odibo in the 1930s told me that *"children who came to the missionary station were very often locked up when they were not in contact with the missionaries for the fear that their parents would take them. As a child my duty was to lock them up at night and open the gate again in the evening"* (Robson, 2003: Odibo). In this regard it is explicit that children where not only locked up in an inside enclosure where they had no access to their parents, but more than this children were indoctrinated in every way European; attitudes, clothes and so on.

Local leaders had always been fearful and sceptical of the missionaries presence in their respective communities for the fear that local politics, social, and cultural spheres would be threatened and placed at risk by the influence of alien cultures. Matti Peltola wrote that:

. . . at the end of the 1890's a political campaign was waged against Martin Rautanen which was joined by Nehale, king Negumbo of Uukwambi and king Weyulu of Oukwanyama. Again and again they brought accusations of inviting Germans to the country against Nakambale. Kambonde had to expel him from the country. After getting rid of Nakambale, it would be easy to send the other missionaries away. They justified

their suspicions by Nakambale's continuous correspondence with the Germans (Peltola, 2002:110***)***.

It is important to note here that despite efforts to get rid and drive the missionaries away it was all in vain. One reason for this could be that the missionaries' skills such as their possession of modern medicine to heal deadly and most chronic diseases earned them the trust and tolerance of some leaders. The story about King Kambonde kaNankwaya who ruled from1874 to 1883 is testimony to this argument. According to Matti Peltola, the king had long been suffering from bad ulcers which missionary Skoglund had successfully attended for months. When they opened again it was Rautanen's duty to do his best. Peltola quoted Rautanen's words as follows:

"Everyday for two months I went to the court to wash the ulcers and to bind them anew…I learned to know my patient better and deeper and when I judged the time convenient, I threw a seed of the kingdom of God into the field in his head ...His ulcers, gradually healed…and they never opened again." As a result, the relationship between the two grew into personal intimacy. Following this, Rautanen resumed the responsibility of "shaving the king's beard, using a knife and becoming his councillor". (Peltola, 2002: 87).

The missionaries' success to heal the king's wounds which had resisted traditional medicine would have sparked and awakened interest for European products, including

clothes. As one can imagine the two missionaries, Rautanen and Skoglund could have encouraged the king to abandon traditional costumes, that they would have regarded as unhygienic [and might even have packaged this advice as part of his medical treatment to prevent infection]. His disassociation with traditional costumes would have definitely enticed the community to copy their leader and would have helped to popularise European dress in the community.

It is still interesting to examine how and why missionaries came to different communities in Owamboland. Although, I have earlier indicated that missionaries came to different communities in *Owamboland* on their own interest. There were however debatable cases when missionaries received invitations, particularly, from chiefs for different purposes such as protection against other tribes and to benefit in terms of European goods supply such as clothes and guns, but, notably, not to be Christianised. Veijo Notkola and Harri Siiskonen highlighted these incidents, for example with regard to instances that precipitated the Finish missionaries work at Tshandi in *Uukwaluudh*i. The need to have the Finnish missionaries establish a station in Uukwaluudhi was necessitated by "the Portuguese colonial administration who had started to strengthen their influence in the Southern part of Angola and the border zone between Angola and German South West Africa, which since the late 1890 had caused unrest among Aavambo living on the SouthWest African side of the border (Veijo & Harri, 2000: 36: in Clarence-Smith, 1975: 303-14).

In view of the missionary expansion from the north I would argue that the coming and settlement of missionaries in some communities did not result from deliberate wishes of the community to invite Europeans and offer them land for settlements, but it should be contextalized in the larger regional political context of rival imperialisms encroachments into some of the northern Namibia communities, precipitating the fear by local leaders of losing their power and the control of land. Therefore, it became necessarily to secure European alliances to counter the most obvious threat, especially of the Portuguese whose colonial expansion was already imminent among neighbouring communities in Southern Angola.

Whether missionaries in general did or didn't perpetuate explicit campaigns to destroy traditional costumes of the community is highly contentious. However, it is imperative for this study to carefully weigh both sides equally and arrive at a decisive conclusion of what actually happened and who should take the blame in this regard. Missionaries had always been defensive and elusive when it came to statements that their evangelical work in the north had been the cause for the rapid transformation from traditional costumes to modern fashion. Herman Tonjes of the Rhenish Missionary Society, in his role as a missionary advocated that*: "It is not the mission that pressurizes the people into dressing properly; once the people have attended lessons in the school for some time, they themselves find their virtual nakedness to be quite undignified."* (Tonjes, 1996: 272). It is important to note that this statement appears to underestimate the pride and dignity that the community bestowed on traditional attire. It suggests that the people had seen the light and had a revelation about their `nakedness'. The statement is vague in

acknowledging the fact that in the nature of man's diverse socio-cultural foundations, historical background and environmental factors different customs emerge at different places and in different societies. Therefore, every tradition is meaningfully invented and highly esteemed by its recipients and cannot change so rapidly and suddenly unless some sorts of coercion or treachery have been used. Another important point to recognize is that if missionaries really cared about our ancestors and were truly concerned about promoting the social and spiritual welfare of the Aawambo, they should not have condemned and slammed their traditional practices and customs. It does not make sense to claim intimacy with an infant while discarding its mother.

Matti Peltola illustrates elements of what I would refer to as missionaries' 'cleansing culture' that crucified our traditional costumes to purify Christian converts as 'born again'. In a metaphor for repentance, decontamination from sins and separation or alienation of converts from their community's ethical values a new emphasis was placed on getting dressed. Peltola indicated, without explaining, that *'those who had been baptized got the clothes as presents and used them afterwards everyday*' [2002: 98]. If new converts were instructed on how and what to dress, it clearly shows elements of missionaries oppression of local costumes, but Peltola like many other missionary sources ignored or obscured the representation of community views with regard to what was the reaction of the people when they were banned and separated from their costumes and valued customs.

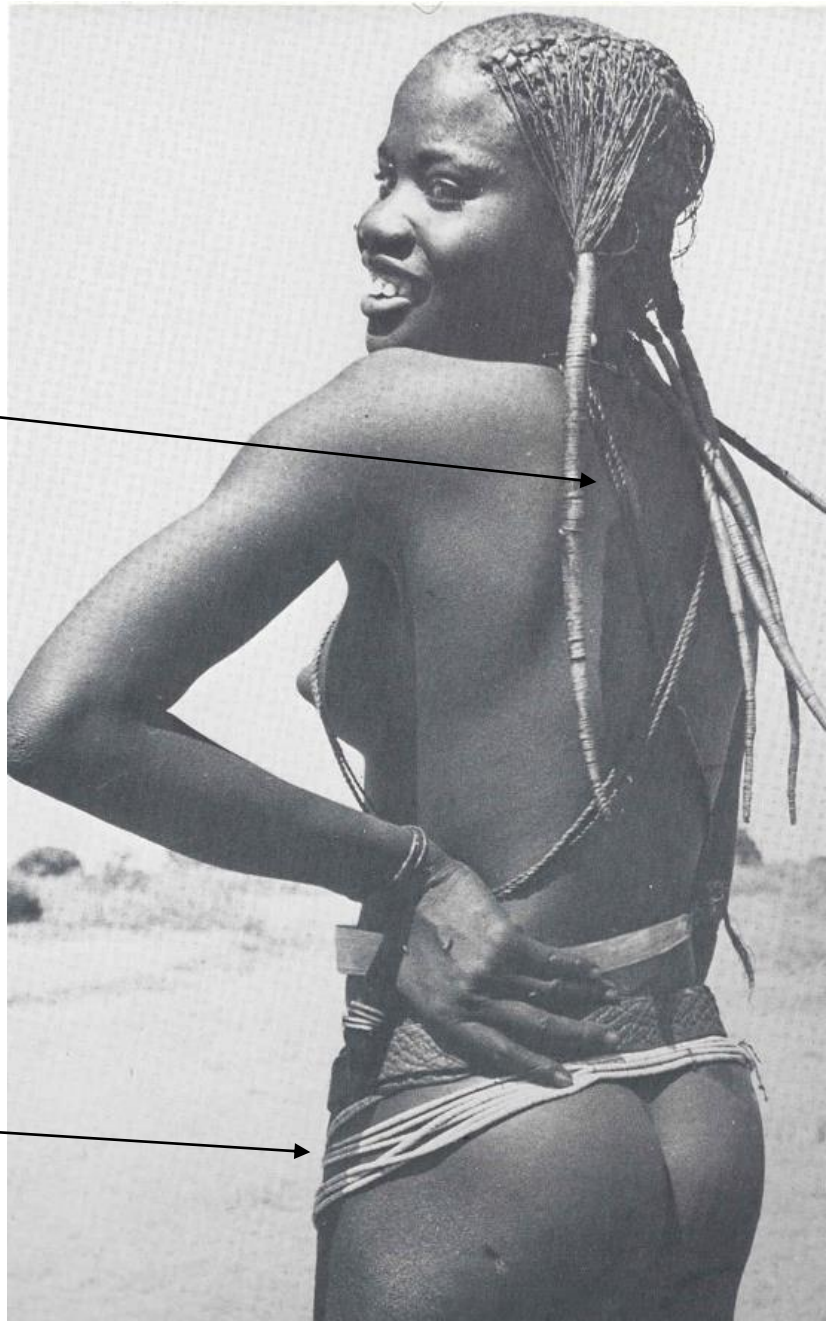
Inasmuch as Peltola's argument is concerned he is clearly reflective of missionaries' religious perspectives and allegations against respected local customs as an extract from his notes indicates; *"it was not suitable for, especially, women to walk about practically naked … we can understand the move made by the missionaries, which symbolically emphasized the new life of the Christian starting from baptism, but it was a seed that grew into many in the next decade"[*99].As it appears above, Peltola uses derogatory terms towards the alleged 'nakedness' of the local people. In this thesis it will be argued that this allegation is absolutely false, a humiliation, absurd and devoid of respect for the community customs and identity.

Allegations like this one stands to speak for itself and provides concrete evidence to support allegations that Europeans, particularly the missionaries did not tolerate aspects of the *Aawambo* cultural heritage that were linked to their sense of cultural pride. Our ancestors were not naked, as oral traditions from the community testify, particularly in the light of the leather skirts and other products that were popular dress at the time of the arrival of the missionaries. Indeed, if Peltola's understanding and definition of 'nakedness' corresponds to the Oxford dictionary definition of 'naked (ness) as *`unclothed, nude …without ornaments…'* then one must squarely dismiss his allegations as naïvely unfounded, deceptive and unrealistic.

One notes the general consensus of missionaries that traditional costumes threatened the smooth transition to Christianity. Rev. Herman Tonjes wrote that:

One of the greatest problems experienced by the mission in Owamboland is the matter of clothing. The people's traditional dress is so primitive that its retention can hardly be recommended to the Christian congregations…How primitive this clothing can be seen on the photograph showing bartering natives … The mission is now faced with the question of who should supply all these clothes [Western clothes to replace the traditional leather costumes of the Aawambo] (Tonjes, 1996: 85, 270).

Statements by missionaries like Tonjes that the costumes and ethical values of the *Aawambo* were 'primitive' demonstrate their unethical behaviour – a disrespect for other people's forms of civilization. Missionaries always alluded to the *Aawambo `nakedness'*, This was however vulgar and showed their disregard for our cultural values. Western clothes and religion might have meant civilization to the inventors but not to those who were subjected to such values. Many people today would confidently argue that Christianity retarded and destroyed our early civilization that was making progress before the colonial occupation and annexation of our country. Up to the turn of the twentieth century it was a normal practice among the Aawambo men and women not to cover their buttocks. The only part of the body that were culturally worth covering and protecting were the genital areas of the body.



Nakedness? Photo 15: A young wedded girl from

Uukwambi, comfortably in traditional

Costumes. Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi and Otto, 1981: 72

I would argue that Europeans who came to *Owamboland* in the 1800s or earlier were ignorant about the local costumes that the *Aawambo* used before European cultural influences. They did not perhaps expect to see Africans dressed in costumes other than theirs – clothing that was different in texture, style and taste as they knew them in Europe. As it was morally wrong in most European cultures to exhibit for example a woman's breasts and buttocks, Europeans who came here used that cultural background to condemn and declare local traditions; clothing, beliefs, artistic skills and language as primitive and doomed. Yet to the *Aawambo,* women were not cultured to cover their breasts in public, it was an accepted standard in the community, it was not 'nakedness'. Indeed, the host community found such statements derogatory and devoid of dignity and integrity of their cultural values. When I interviewed Sylvia Ndinelago Nghipitwako on this subject, she indicated to me that *"…there was nothing wrong with the ancestors types of fashion and the mode of dressing. It was our rich and admirable tradition not to cover breasts and buttocks … They only paid attention to the sexual parts…these were completely covered."* [Nghipitwako, 2002: Egambo–Eenhana]. In the context of Nghipitwako's words it is obvious that Aawambo interpreted 'nakedness' contrary to European understandings. In the *Oshiwambo* language the synonym for 'nakedness is *'Epenge'*. It applies only to the exhibition of genital parts below a person's waist. These parts were carefully and consistently covered with available materials. It was very embarrassing to exhibit them. Some of the materials that were worn have been elaborated

upon in the previous chapter, hence, it is difficult to establish on what grounds did missionaries base their claims that they found our ancestors naked.

Persistent campaigns by missionaries to implement Christianity in *Owamboland* plunged the population of the *Aawambo* into socio-cultural and economic exploitation by Europeans allowing them an upper hand in plundering and alienating the cultural resources of the population. The meaning and significance of traditional costumes and other objects were largely humiliated and degraded in the process, to meet the European gaze on exotic primitive cultures. Traditional costumes were shipped to European countries where they were displayed as 'ethnographic objects', representing a dark continent and `primitive' communities of heathens. Those who collected them were also ignorant of their functional uses and significance to the mother community, instead objects were juxtapositioned to compare the African primitivity to European civilization. The Finnish, who collected the most objects of the *Aawambo* material culture during their field work, knowingly, misinterpreted the functional role of what they collected to impress observers and viewers in Europe. In Finland for example, our ancestors' costumes and other objects suffered from such humiliations. One example is a piece of stone taken from the power stone*emanya lyOshilongo* in *Ondonga* by Martin Rautanen to Finland in 1891. Addressing an audience at Tyrvaa on the importance of mission work and its progress in Owamboland he *"showed his audience* [I believe in a mocking way] *a piece of stone that the people in Ondonga had worshipped as their God ..."* (Nakambale, 2002: 142).

As one can imagine, the power stone was given a wrong interpretation, perhaps to encourage support for missionary work in *Owamboland* from Europe. The general description of the power stone, as an object that the "Ondonga worshipped as their god", is misleading in the essence of its cultural value and significance. In essence in the traditions of the *Aawambo*, a power stone was a sacred symbol, not a god, symbolising the power, strength and stability of the king's rule. Each king ascending to power was unified with his ancestors in a ceremonial occasion. In this regard the power stone acted as a significant mediator making the association between the king and the new ruler possible. It was a sacred object by which the new king was expected to make a solemn pledge of delivering good governance to his people by drawing strength through laid down principles of community law in association with the ancestors. The power stone was therefore under the custodianship of the royal house's elders, mainly elderly women from the king's maternal clan. It was as important as other kingly protective amulets and royal ornaments, but it was never worshipped. The *Aawambo* believed in an invisible god, *Kalunga ka Nangombe*, the creator of the universe and who gave rain. This supernatural being was worshipped through the spirits of the ancestors, *aathithi*, but not in the form of superficial objects, like 'the stone of the kingdom' as Martin Rautenan claimed to his audience in Finland.

One should revert to the question of why missionaries aimed at destroying traditional fashion? Did traditional costumes pose a threat to their missionary work and objectives? In this regard, most of the elderly population who had witnessed the transition from the old into new fashion expressed dismay at the loss. They claimed that missionaries acted

in bad faith that their efforts were to turn round the community, mislead, divide, separate and generate an antagonistic contradiction within oneself. Culturally, self-identity rested largely on the everyday displays in which the presentation of the body and costumes were inseparable. Missionaries ignored and violated such traditional concepts by advocating that the body and soul were two separate entities and that the body was a holy temple of Jehovah that needed purity. Therefore, the body must be separated from any thing that contaminated it with evil such as traditional costumes. However, it is interestingly ironic to note that as the missionaries denounced local costumes as evil they on the other hand encouraged the community to dress and copy European costumes. Perhaps missionaries needed to explain what made the 'native' (and not European costumes) incompatible with the body and who defined the notion of acceptability, cleanliness and dirtiness?

It is however ironic to note that missionaries elicited objects of potent values, that they claimed were evil, from the community and sent them to Europe. Martin Rautanen, for example, visited Finland in 1890 and *". . . deposited cultural objects from Owamboland to the National Museum in Finland"* (Peltola, 2002: 120), and when he (Rautanen) returned to Owamboland in October, 1892, he was encouraged by the interest of Europeans in Europe to collect ethnographic artefacts from Owamboland. *"…he (Martin) continued to collect articles whenever it was possible. This time he sent them to the Germans who were interested in their new protectorates. Dr Georg Hartmann, the agent of the English South – West Africa Company, acted as an intermediary. Towards the end of 1894, Rautanen received a letter from Dr. Hartmann, who wished to acquire ethnological objects. In November 1895 Rautanen packed the things in big boxes and*

found out that they filled four boxes. He later got a letter of thanks for this collection from the Konigliches Museum in Berlin where Dr.Hartmann had taken it." (Peltolla, 2002: 120).

In this regard, it appears as if Europeans had a hidden interest in the traditional attire of the community, and this impulse to collect and preserve should be seen as complicating their actions to ban and destroy the same items locally, instead, of encouraging the community to preserve them. Therefore, labelling African cultural heritage as primitive and barbaric was 'metaphorically ironic' and imperially intended to deceive the community, impair and retard its productive power and skills and increase reliance on finished manufactured European products.

When I interviewed Paulus Helmuth on this subject he had the following to say:

When Christianity was introduced in Ondonga traditional costumes began to shrink and diminish amicably . . . When an Owambo woman was seen wearing Eteta [front leather apron], smeared with the red ochre Olukula – she was called 'pagan', meaning dirty and evil. When your neighbour, friend or family member became a Christian, the relationship between you strained . . . it was unholy for a non-Christian to interact with a Christian…I think the new converts were wrong they avoided their brothers, the 'pagans.' Christians were forbidden to practice initiation ceremonies, traditional medicine, male circumcision and other beliefs, etc . . . who ever was found practicing any of those was

excommunicated for no genuine reason that the community could understand…Nowadays people want to revive their old traditions [Helmuth, 2002: Windhoek].

Therefore, there is enough evidence that the Finnish missionaries, who were the first to establish permanent contact in northern Namibia and had been very successful in evangelising the community, were to blame for the demotion and washing away of some of the most important traditional costumes. Dr Mathew Kapolo of the Evangelical Luthern Church in Namibia offered a confession in this regard:

We, who are pastors today, accept the blame . . . The missionaries who established the church and led it, did not understand most of the things. Several mistakes were made to encourage the people to do away with their traditions. Besides . . . pastors who were trained by the missionaries, due to their level of training and understanding, they copied the missionaries [way of thinking] and compelled the Aawambo to abandon their own traditional practices... We are speaking of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries… I think religion is a strong force in every person's life, when one moves from one religion to another, one abandons all things relating to his previous religion. This is exactly what happened when the people abandon the tradition to join Christianity . . . The missionaries were happy when people flocked to the church because that was the aim of their mission. People even adopted new names in which they find no meaning . . . Some people burned down their traditional things . . .Some traditional things were burned down but some were taken to Europe. Maybe a day will come when our traditional things will be returned to us. [Kapolo, 2002: Interview]

Kapolo's statement recognizes that local pastors also encouraged their own community members to disinherit their traditional practices. Those who became catechumens were in particular men who had spent most of the youthful time with the missionaries under constant monitoring and indoctrination to change their cultural perspective before becoming preachers\Christians. This argument becomes clear when one reads the account given by Rautanen about the first Olukonda Christians. *"Three of them were young Ndonga men Paulus, David and Elias whose previous names were Omushimba, Niitembu and Ashikomba . . . David Niitembu . . . had lived with Martin for over ten years. Paulus Omushimba had also been with the teachers almost from the time they arrived in Ondonga. Ashikomba had stayed with the Rautanens for three years and before that with Weikkolin"* (Petola, 2002: 99). Despite efforts for many years to draw the community to embrace and welcome western civilization, the local community did not, initially, volunteer to become Christians, but submitted to missionary pressure. As some changed into wearing western clothes, adopted Christian names and disassociated themselves from traditional ceremonies and rituals, most of them could still revert back to traditional practices, and, inwardly they still shared and believed in traditional conventions and treated what the Church preached with some scepticism.

Matti Peltola recognises the submissive rather than voluntary action that erupted as the two cultures encountered each other, he quotes Martin Rautanen as follows; "It is common knowledge that missionaries preached the message of sin and mercy, but their listeners heard something different, but which they also accepted" (Peltola, 2002: 100).

Peltola further noted a degree of contradiction between kings, the custodians of the local traditional values, acting in opposition to those who negated the tradition. The statement also explicitly explained the reasons that some youths became Christians or ventured into Finnish mission stations to escape penalties for wrong doings in the community; and how the missionaries played a double role in assisting those who were violating the community's customary norms:

Some young men from Ondonga, who had long been servants and gone to schools at mission stations, wished to be prepared for baptism at the end of the 1870's. King Kambonde kaNankwaya proceeded to force one of them who was married, to take a second wife, as he had power to give orders concerning the private life of his subjects. The young man refused and incurred the king's anger. The subject decided to flee to Hereroland in order to become a catechumen. The Finnish brothers were too afraid to give him a letter, but Martin Rautanen wrote in German on the cover of his book that he was fleeing because his life was in danger (Peltola, 2002: 97). In essence, it is worth explaining that missionaries encouraged rebellious actions among subordinates of traditional authorities to violate, trespass and evade customary regulations of the community. Missionaries, as I have argued earlier, targeted mainly the youths to leave their homesteads to their stations. This was arguably a strategy of the missionaries to indoctrinate and prepare the people for conversion into Christianity.

Photo 16: An undated photo of one of the early mision schools. Those who appear wearing European clothes would have acted as models to those who did not own them and would have inspired them to own them. Source: The Namibia Scientific Society.

However, the fact that European costumes were appreciated and attractive to those who became Christians and non-Christians cannot be ruled out. During one of his regular contacts with influential community leaders, Herman Tonjes stated that:

On one occasion while visiting, Haisi, Queen Nekoto's husband [Nekoto was an aunt to King Weyulu Hedimbi] . . . reached out for my trousers: "Where did you get those

trousers? Can't you give me a pair?" Or he would stand up and take my hat… "I want a hat just like this one; don't you have more of them? (Tonjes, 1911: 237).

As it appears above, European costumes were not strange objects in the community by the time missionaries increased their presence in northern Namibia. This is particularly true of the *Ovakwanyama* who already had constant exposure to long-distance trade commodities with the Portuguese before the start of the 1870s. Harri Siiskonen wrote that *"Upon arrival in Owamboland the Finnish missionaries observed that Portuguese traders clearly dominated trade everywhere there, except for in Ondonga; even in Ondonga the firearms owned by the king were procured from the Mossamedes traders"* (Siiskonen, 1990: 131).

It is therefore, clear that when missionaries and other Europeans multiplied in the community at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century the community already had new European clothes and the prestige invested in some of the rare, unique and expensive fashions like the European hat. Reverend Tobias, head of the church at *Odibo* wrote in 1938 that: *Ever since the Ovakwanjama came into contact with the Portuguese it has been their ambition to have a cotton loin cloth and if possible European shirt, coat and trousers. When Bishop Gibson visited Uejulu, the Chief of the Ovakwanjama in 1904, he found him, heathen as he was, neatly dressed in European clothes* (Rev. Tobias, 1938: 244)

In this regard, one would argue that the community was curios about wearing European dress. Prior to the arrival of the missionaries, European clothes were already in use in *Owamboland.* A few kings and elites had arguably fashioned them by then, an indication that European dress was appreciated, but as argued earlier, what the community disliked and was not comfortable with was the command to denounce their traditional heritage, that Europeans regarded as not compatible to exist side by side with European clothing and other commodities. Chiefs and the elite class were very privileged in the acquisition of European clothes regardless of their religious stand point. They were very rich and could buy or exchange commodities for any of the European products that were available. It was also them who received and welcomed Europeans in the community. In this regard I would again reiterate that as community leaders popularised European fashions their subordinates were encouraged to copy and imitate them.

Photo 17: An undated photo of local people, presumably from Ondonga waiting outside a missionary home with hens for exchange with European items such as cotton materials, tobacco, matches and other essential commodities.

Western influences in view of colonialism, Christianisation and Western commodification of northern Namibia communities was highly contentious with regard to

the loss of pre-colonial conventional practices, but historically the central question is why did the community embrace the new and discard the old fashions? Did the momentum of change come from within or from outside? The unsubstantiated general public outcry that *Aawambo* were compelled to abandon their traditional costumes needs to be studied closely, to shed light as to what actually happened in the former seven kingdoms. It is clear that it was not only the church, but, other European agents, the state in particular, that also had an important role in influencing local costumes. By the late 1930s Rev. Tobias noted that *"I notice moreover that the servants of Government officials, their police boys, etc., all wear European clothes…"* (Tobias, 1938: 244). The fact that this was noticeable implies that the majority of people were still wearing traditional dress. This appears to inform us that the government also encouraged the wearing of European dress. However, the Finnish role was crucial as they acted as hard-nosed champions in the campaign that enforced direct changes to traditional costumes. One should examine the influence of the church under a number of categories:

The massive imports of Finnish textile products

"Until now, many women societies [in Finland] have taken part of this responsibility upon themselves by sending simple cotton clothing. These items are sent to various mission stations and distributed to people there…" (Tonjes, 1996: 272). One might argue that the free distribution of clothes served as a way of attracting people to visit the mission station. It has been argued that the distribution of western clothing by missionaries served as an *"important tool in instilling Christian values of simplicity,*

humility and modesty, and in reinforcing notions of the 'place' of Africans in the church and colonial hierarchy…" (Martin, 2003: 410). This statement is another indication that the Finnish played a major role in the supply of European textile products. Prior to introducing exotic costumes to Ow*amboland*, the Finnish would have investigated the possibility that Finnish attires would dilute the values embodied in traditional African costumes and had a negative economic impact on local clothes production. In this regard the Finnish worked relentlessly to supply clothes to *Owamboland*.

The sewing circles in Finland worked diligently to sew clothes for Aawambo Christians Mission magazines were supplied to give advice and encourage the Aawambo themselves to make decent clothes to wear. Home-made clothes were common in Finland at the end of the nineteenth century, at least in the country side. In the field, efforts were made to encourage Ovambos themselves to make decent clothes to wear. It was found that cotton could be grown in Owamboland, if it was watered during the dry season. Cotton tools, spinning-wheels and hand looms were sent to Owamboland from Finland. One could argue that the Finnish relentless efforts were hostile to local traditions and were arguably market oriented. The higher costs involved in shipping commodities to Africa as well as sending experts to work within the community to promote Finnish cotton products in *Owamboland* serves as an indication that the Finnish Missionaries were strategically committed to promoting and securing a market in *Owamboland* for the Finnish material products. By introducing cotton plantations in *Owamboland*, missionaries, perhaps intended to alter the cultural environment that in turn would have rendered impossible the production and preservation of traditional costumes.

It is also important to note that Tilda Hannula had taught some girls and managed, with hard work, to produce short pieces of material. Augustin Petinen campaigned enthusiastically for growing cotton and making clothes from locally produced material. It is interesting to note that missionaries had sensed the importance of producing costumes from the local environment, but analytically it becomes complicated (perhaps in attempts to skew the community from using locally available materials to produce clothing) when missionaries interpretation of materials from the local environment implies the production of exotic materials locally. This is contrary to the *Aawambo* cultural meaning and interpretation of 'local environment'. Missionaries attitudes in this regard are further complicated and suspected of not accommodating local skills and materials in the production. In this, regard not only the materials were to be imported but also the manpower (as the quote suggests below). In this regard it becomes interesting to know that if missionaries focus was on using materials from the local environment to make clothing, why then were those who had the skills of the cultural environment (the Aawambo) not considered to provide skills on the production of clothing compatible to their cultural heritage? *The cotton project needed special workers of its own, and in Finland an effort was made to get hold of a couple of weavers to develop the growing of cotton and prepare it for the loom…In October 1893 Albin Savola (Nuufule), a young student missionary, arrived in the field. He was sent with a special task in mind to develop the growing and processing of cotton in Ovamboland.*"(Peltola, 2002:124).

The cotton project failed to materialize due to drought, but still the Finnish were not discouraged to discontinue their plans to change traditional fashions. Missionaries, continued to receive raw materials from home (Finland). Herman Tonjes' field notes of missionary work in Namibia gives a detailed account to describe this phenomenon: "Faced with such a situation it proved that the operating costs were extremely high,and that the material produced locally was considerably more expensive than imported clothes. As a result, it was decided to cease the production of cloth in the country". (Tonjes, 1996: 272). Despite the failure of the cotton plantation, tailoring training did not stop as missionaries continued to receive cotton materials from Finland. The end result was an increase in the number of *Oohema dhOontulo* - this is what Petola referred to as 'home-made clothes' deemed fit for the *Aawambo* women. Today these dresses are among the popularly perceived traditional dress and are even called "The *Oshiwambo* traditional dress"

The house maidens

At every station in Ovamboland there are a number of youths, both boys and girls. Among them, there are some who heard the word of God at their homes and who left their parents' homesteads to come to be educated at the mission stations. Most of them, however, came to the stations to work there as servants… The young girls who were under the direct supervision of the missionaries' wives live on the station itself, while the boys live outside, by close proximity (Tonjes, 1911: 266- 267).

It is worth noting and explaining that the house maidens, *aakalele*, were assimilated in most manners conforming to European accepted norms and values. Missionaries put more emphasis on orienting women to emulate the social values of the Finnish home. This was for the reason that women were constantly in touch with children and were expected to pass learned values to their children and influence them to change the traditional status quo. Offering manual training on how to dress, wash, iron clothes, cook, and wash dishes were basic requirements to cultivate them to emulate and abide to western values. The *aakalele* were enclaved and under constant supervision. They were forbidden to do anything not companionable with the Finnish accepted norms of civilization. Hair plaits that transmitted important and meaningful traditional ethics, earrings, anklets, bracelets, necklaces and face tattoos *oompya* [common among the *Aakwambi*] and local cosmetics like the red body ochre *olukula* lotion were regarded as filthy, unhygienic and sordid. Therefore, the *aakalele* were compelled to distance themselves from such practices. As a result of binding religious confinements to Christianity, maidens abandoned overt practices of their traditions. Most of them also distanced themselves from their parents for the fear of being criticised for what they wore, hair styles and general behaviour that contradicted and distorted cultural norms.

Maidens and converts were supplied with European clothes. It is argued here that by offering gifts like clothes the missionaries hoped to motivate more local people to become Christians and draw them to missionary stations. Enslavements as Sanneh puts it introduced *"disruptive changes by encouraging…individualism and parasitic dependence. The adoption by converts of European names and clothing; the consumption*

of European goods; the use of new tools and implements; enrolment in European schools; the taking up of European habits and tastes - all these and more ruptured tribal bonds of solidarity and reciprocity and induced dependence on foreign customs, manners" [and in particular costumes]. Therefore, missions influence on those who stayed close and worked for them for many years created, as McKittrick puts it *'new forms of social network, but it carried with it its own patriarchal ideas and it only freed young women inasmuch as it gave them wider choice of relationships of social dependency. Young women could leave their families and live with missionaries until marriage…'* (McKittrick, 1998: 261). Inasmuch this argument is concerned, one should develop it further by arguing that the wearing of European dress introduced a drastic change to women's socio-cultural perspectives, attitudes and status. Missionary dresses kept most of the women especially those who worked for them aloof of observing and preserving traits of their traditional heritage. Some converts were convinced that the wearing of western clothes purified their bodies from sins. It is obvious that western clothes weakened pre-Christian socio-economic competency among most converts.

Clothes were given on merit, and, commitment to Christianity was a prerequisite. Therefore, to be given clothes one was expected to commit herself to servitude and exploitative labour meant to improve the social welfare of missionaries and their families. As has been mentioned before, those who resorted to European dress in the earlier days, regarded themselves as immaculate. In this regard therefore, women's socio-cultural responsibilities and role as educators of their children about features of their traditional heritage weakened and paralysed. This may explain how the community came close to

losing almost every aspect and ethics of its traditional heritage and limited the cultural role of women in the community as custodians of the ancestors traditions.

The Impact of Social outcasts.

At *Olukonda,* where Martin Rauntanen lived for over 40 years [1870–1926], an exit was made in the roof of the missionary's home (one of the first adobe buildings in Owamboland built in 1895) where the escapees, the community fugitives lived and received Christian training and education that was intended to shape their later lives as Christians. Most of the people concealed at that station included those accused of pre-marriage pregnancies, witchcraft, sorcery, and young girls who were scared of wedding traditionally due to its hardships. Herman Tonjes on the same subject noted that

There were cases of girls living at the mission station who were forcibly abducted by their heathen parents or relatives at the time of the efundula and compelled to participate in the ceremony. The Rev. Rautanen, who has been there for more than forty years now, is stationed with the congregation at Olukonda (Ondonga). (Tonjes, 1911: 270)

In pre-Christian communities kings exercised absolute powers over their subordinates. It was an approved custom to kill or expel culprits of capital offences from the community. Some of offences and taboos that were punishable by death included pre-marriage pregnancy, conspiracy against rulers, and the birth of twin babies. One of my interviewees, Andreas Shilongo Uukule told me that a number of harsh traditional

practices were instrumental in softening the community stand in preserving tangible traditions. For example:

When a person died he/she was buried in the sitting position. The joints and other parts of the body were chopped and folded, if it were the king, one of his senior chiefs was killed, to guard the king's soul and his home, Ompampa. Moreover, the king was never buried , but his body was left to decay above the ground. The deceased king's senior chiefs Omalenga were delegated to keep the rot together, no maggot or piece of fresh was allowed to be moved from the scene of the Ompampa. (Uukule, 2002: *Uukwanambwa).*

As any one can imagine, this was an awkward custom. It was never easy with members of the homestead who lived within the vicinity of the unburied king for months before the heavy smell subsided, and worse still for the caretakers of the corpse who were obliged to be in close constant contact with the corpse over a month. It is obvious that such practices were crude and not compatible to most of the ordinary *Aawambo* sense of cultural pride and dignity, and indeed as one can imagine, observing these customs was perpetuated by the fear of the ruling class.

To make things worse, the immediate royal clan was above the law, therefore, laws that were cruel applied only to ordinary people. One good example of this is king Mwaala gwaNashilongo the king of *Uukwaluudhi* [1909–1959]. According to oral sources, king Mwaala was born as a twin baby. His twin brother died a natural death at birth and because of his attachment to an immediate royal clan his life was spared. With the firm

support of his royal family, he further broke the taboo of the community when he was enthroned king of *Uukwaluudhi.* This was in gross violation of the customary norms of the community that did not permit a twin to rule. If Mwaala had been born to an ordinary family, he would have been killed at birth, but because of his link to the royal clan his life was spared and he even ascended to power acting in violation of the long observed taboo of the kingdom.

Male circumcision, *etanda,* was an obligatory rite of passage to manhood just as *Efudula* was to womanhood, and this was another crucial factor that had aided the campaign to Christianise the *Aawambo*. Many young boys died from intensive bleeding and unhealing wounds. Deformity of the skin also happened to the penis as a result of poor instruments like the *Oshimbi,* the locally made knife used at circumcision. Crude medicine and treatment was also used following circumcision. Traditionally, the flour of seeds from wild fruits called *Oombeke* was the commonest medicine applied to the wound. In cases of natural illness the patient was requested to pay exorbitant prices to be cured. It was also a custom that when a person died during circumcision his parents were not informed of his death but had to learn of it from hearsay or when his colleagues had returned to the community without him. Family members were also forbidden to mourn for the deceased, otherwise more family members would die from circumcision during their turn.

It was therefore, on the basis of some of the illustrated weaknesses that missionaries had popularised and consolidated their campaigns, emerging victorious at the end of the day. I fully agree and reason that some of our ancestors practices were rudimentary and

perhaps harsh by doing no justice to the community, but this was not the case with most of the laid down customary norms and material culture. For example our ancestors costumes were not unpopular in the community. Traditional costumes did not offend anybody and deserved no condemnation and destruction.

By taking advantage of the 1715-1789 enlightment that gave birth to the industrial revolution and improved science in Europe, Missionaries introduced modern medicine to *Owamboland.* This was another significant factor in influencing the community to believe in the doctrine of missionaries*aaahongi*.

When an ill person comes to the missionary, with deep, nasty wounds the missionary dresses and cleans the wounds without any further ado, and without insisting on rather exorbitant payment, as is the case with the country's wizards. Also, a poor person who is unjustly oppressed and violated by his rich adversary often turns to the missionary and requests him to be his adversary before the king. [Tonjes 1911: 198, 263].

This indicates that it was not only the use of crude medicine, but missionaries also took advantage of cruel policies and unjust practices of indigenous people within themselves to win the hearts and minds of the people including the kings and elite class. By so doing the missionaries manoeuvred their strategies of infiltrating and weakening local values as they promoted European concepts. This also suggests why some missionaries such as Rautanen also ascended to become advisors to the ruling class.

Early *Aawambo* Christian converts were condemned and rejected by the community. This

is what Herman Tonjes had to say about what one of the people felt about becoming westernised: *"I do not care what the king and his aunt Nekoto have to say – I will become a Christian. The king and Nekoto soon learnt of his contact with the missionaries, and the other great men began mocking and scorning him about his possible intentions to convert to Christianity"* (Tonjes 1911: 277). Elsewhere, in other kingdoms kings had reacted angrily to missionaries intentions to violate local customs. Tension between traditional rulers and missionaries intensified further as missionaries appropriated for themselves the power to conduct and organize marriage in the western styles without notifying local leaders, who traditionally had been custodians of traditional wedding ceremonies. Nevertheless, such oppositions did not change the Christian converts attitudes, they eventually triumphed victoriously, implanting and ploughing back western values and costumes in the community.

Meredith McKittrick in her work has analyzed the meaning of traditional clothes in Owamboland and the influences by the church that weakened the role and importance of traditional clothes. She argues it was not just social outcasts who had reasons to wear new types of clothing. McKittrick states that ". . . converts saw clothing as marking not just power and status but something more an intangible connection between foreign goods… and a way of life that promised less... of the uncertainty inhering in volatile local social relations" (2002: 126). In this regard, the general attitude among young people to abandon their traditional costumes and the general influx to go and work in the south is argued as having been motivated by the new concept that European dress eliminated barriers between the rich and the poor as expressed in clothes, as there were no longer

limitations and regulations that prevented ordinary people to wear the fashions adopted by the rich in the community. Her argument is that the decision to wear Western fashion should not just be seen as one that was made by people in positions of power, such as traditional leaders and missionaries, but might also have been one made by ordinary people themselves.

Drought and famines.

Namibia is a semi-arid country and northern Namibia is particularly dry. Rainfall has always been unreliable resulting in successive droughts year after year. Serious droughts have claimed thousands of human and animal lives. One of the most devastating famine was called *Ondjala yEkomba,* the famine that swept many lives and occurred during the 1913 to 1917 harvesting periods. Another devastating famine locally called *Ondjala yokapeleki \ Ondjala yoondama* occurred between 1929 and 1930 Most people in all parts of *Owamboland* were affected. Many left their homes to seek food at the missionary stations. People travelled to different communities anticipating that other communities were better of and could help in offering drought relief supplies. According to Siiskonen:

Migration from Oshigambo to Oukwanyama tripled compared with the previous year. Famine migration was also directed to the western parts of Owambo region – Uukwaluudhi, Ongandjera and Ombalantu - much further than migrants would have normally considered travelling. The Finnish missionary Aarni reported in October 1929 that a great number of starving people had arrived at the Tshandi [Uukwaluudhi]

mission station of whom the majority were from Oshigambo and Elim (Siiskonen, 1998: 232, 233).

As the community, young and old, migrated in a desperate search of where they could find food many of them died of hunger on the road before reaching their intended destination. Missionary Martin Rautanen described the devastating drought of 1913 - 1917 as follows*:*

The present famine is simply indescribable, as far as August and still earlier one saw living skeletons from other tribes wandering down to Ondonga. A great number of such men, women and children died in the forests, being unable to reach Ondonga. In some cases the mothers threw their living babies into the bush, being unable to carry them further . . . of these children of misfortune I adopted more than 30 (Peltol*: 2002).* It is worth arguing therefore that as missionaries were relatively helpful in providing food and also shelter to the starving people, the position and command of traditional leaders weakened and was undermined as the trust and fame was put on the missionaries who saved some lives.

Photo 18: A group of starving Aawambo desperately waiting for food probably outside a missionary station. The photo was probably taken between 1913 and 1917. The National Archives of Namibia.

As starving people, in desperate need for water and food, crowded missionary stations, the teachers\ missionaries – *Ovahongi* as they were locally called - took drought as a ploy to draw hungry people into the church. As people became socially destituted, displaced and desperate, it became easier to sacrifice their traditions to survive, in this regard it might be argued that missionaries achieved high conversion rates of the Aawambo during the years of intensive droughts. Natural factors had therefore also created an enabling environment for a greater penetration and 'substantial intervention' of Christian doctrines and colonialism that eventually reduced the community's commitment to traditional

practices. Arguably, as people migrated to different communities it disintegrated family, clan and community values and on the other hand integrated a broader unified inter-sub ethnic clothing identity among the Aawambo. Siiskonen developed this argument further that:

Increased movement within, Owamboland – played an important part in the construction of a broader identity among the Oshiwambo-speaking communities. The construction and movement of Christian 'nuclear families' was one way in which Christianisation started to gnaw at the sinews of the 'extended family' networks which formed the basis of distinct communities. The movement of Christian families between communities also confounded the colonial desire for impenetrable 'ethnic' borders and thus the fragmentation of Ovamboland (Siiskonen, 1998: 235).

As Siiskonen has pointed out some of the people who migrated were already Christian converts whose influence could have created a difference in changing the traditional attitudes of non-converts.

Drought also encouraged the break away of women from their husbands as families separated in the desperate hunt for food. Polygamists in this regard were given a devastating blow as men found it extremely difficult to keep many wives and children. This did not only damage and destroyed the legacy of marrying more than one wife, but it also tarnished the image and continuity of traditional costumes. As cattle, the main source of traditional leather clothes died in massive numbers during the famine, it became no

longer possible to manufacture new dresses. It took many years before cattle replenished, and those who owned them after the devastating droughts became reluctant to slaughter them to provide materials for traditional costumes.

Oral evidence suggests that it was during this time that some communities resorted to using other local materials for clothing. Palm tree leaves and the roots of baobab trees for example were fabricated into costumes, particularly for children and brides during *efundula.* The *efundula* one of the traditional ceremonies that preserved and ensured continuity of local dress, costumes and customs is noted as one of the traditional practices that began to fade during the years of effective droughts as there was no sorghum*omushokolo* to brew traditional beer*Omalovu,* no cattle to be slaughtered for the brides*aafuko* costumes as they were not entitled to wearing second-hand costumes. Siiskonen stated that *"in 1915 the efundula ceremony had been delayed as a result of the famine and war"* (Siiskonen, 1998: 233). It is therefore, clear that the sweeping drought made the *Aawambo* vulnerable to cultural manipulations and influences from outside.

Mission School Influence

Western education was formally introduced in *Owamboland* by the Finnish Missionaries. Although missionary education work in Namibia goes back to 1805, when the London Missionary established a station and a school at Warmbad in what is today Karas region, the first formal school in *Owamboland* was not launched until the Finnish missionaries

settled in the community in 1870**.** Writing about the mission and vision of early missionary education in Namibia, Cynthia Cohen indicated that:

Initially, missionary education aimed to Christianise the indigenous people. The missionaries therefore emphasised literacy, necessary for reading the bible, hymn books and other evangelical literature. The most promising pupils were selected and trained to aid the missionaries in spreading the gospel. Through their teaching the missionaries imbued their pupils with Western norms and values. The missionaries believed these to be superior to African values. In this way they severed local populations from their traditional African cultures, history and identity. Education was one of the most important instruments of change within the old order, playing a crucial role in helping to create new social and economic structure [Cohen, 1994:62-63].

The fact that missionary education eroded the community's cultural values, in particular costumes is undisputable. However, although missionary education was initially a poor one cannot deny the fact that missionary education, nevertheless, contributed to a number of positive changes. It gave the community exposure to learn how to read and write, although it failed to fully advance the community in terms of social, cultural and economic empowerment. However, the exposure to reading and writing became rudimentary essential in enlightening the community to demand for political, economic and socio-cultural emancipation.

Missionaries were agents of an Ideological State Apparatus sent to weaken local traditional customs. In the context of the above, the church (Catholic, Finnish and Rhenish and Anglicans), through its curriculum that was designed to oppress the mind of the pupil was a locomotive that channelled the community to embrace the values of western civilization and commodification. Throughout the early years of educational work in the community, the main emphasis was mainly didactic, teaching the indigenous pupils western moral values rather than focussing on academic principles. They designed methods and strategies that would motivate the local population to adapt to new ways of dressing. The girls for example were trained in needlework, tailoring skills and domestic work that would enable them to work as servants in the missionary homes, were they were expected not to dress in 'filthy African attires' but compelled to copy, emulate and accumulate European values. Cynthia Cohen concludes that *"instilling the values of obedience, order, punctuality, and sobriety, honesty, diligence and moderation was considered more important than academic learning"* (1994: 67). In essence, it is generally felt and interpreted in the community today, as it was expressed by some of my interviewers that early missionary education was persuasive in nature, formulated to change the pupils' ways of live, cultural practices and to take a lead in encouraging others in the community to embrace European values. Therefore, it was mainly the educated converts who became destructive to their own traditions. It was through indigenous teachers, preachers and catechists (oral teachers of Christian beliefs) that the church came out stronger and most successful, particularly in its evangelical work. Graduates from missionary schools such as teachers, evangelists, catechists and other close aides to the missionaries inherited the values of missionary education. These people were very

influential in the community in terms of the service they provided and the styles of their clothes. Reflecting on these influential new fashions of the teachers other people were motivated to emulate the fashions of the teachers. One reason for this could be as Sivia told me that; teachers and catechisms were respected and admired especially since they could read and write. The ability to read and write was earlier perceived as an amusingly magical skill and a few of those who possessed such skills were highly appreciated and respected, (Sivia, 2002: Onesi). In this context, it should be argued that, although many people, especially young people in the community would have wanted to possess the reading and writing skills they however, did not intend to alter changes to their cultural heritage. They nevertheless, wanted to embrace the new skills to co-exist with their traditional values to strengthen and enrich their customary norms.

I fully support Malan's statement that: *". . . the influence of education and Evangelization has in conjunction with the process of internal cultural recognition, brought about a tremendous swing away from traditional concepts in regard to religion and magic"* [1980: 99]. In his presentation, Malan fails to explain the exact ways in which Western education and Christianity have dramatically changed the traditional practices of the *Aawambo* and how such uncoordinated changes have caused such tremendous permanent damages posing serious threats to the continuity of our customary norms in particular the eminent loss of the community's material culture. However, Malan's emphasis on 'religion and magic' as important institutions that Christianity and Western education targeted for change are central to my argument and should be analysed in the wider context of European stigma and the perception that African

religious institutions accommodated and lived on the legacy of promoting superstitions and `witchcraft' – a word that has a very negative meaning in English.

In this respect most of our ancestors' cultural objects and costumes were stigmatized and observed through such predetermined and pseudo prejudices that clearly demonstrated European hatred and lack of tolerance as they redefined and repackaged African traditions through the western gaze and taste. In strengthening this argument John Mbiti indicated that, *"many books and articles about African Religion [and traditions] have been written by outsiders. In these writings a number of wrong and derogatory things have been said…It is completely wrong to speak of African Religion as superstition. A superstition is a readiness to believe and fear something without proper grounds. In African Religion beliefs are based on deep reflections and long experiences. They cannot, therefore, be called 'superstitions"* [18]. In the light of Mbiti's statement, it has been obviously revealed by those I have interviewed that in northern Namibia, the central aim of early missionary education was to mock African religion as part of its campaign to promote Christianity. Although the *Aawambo* were culturally powerful, the majority of the ordinary people in the community were not consolidated economically and socially, this was arguably one of the reasons that rendered the community vulnerable to Europeans social and economic manipulations.

The Influence of Colonial Administration.

Namibia has been the colony of two colonial masters – first the Germans [1884 – 1915] and then the South Africans [1915 – 1989] who ruled following the German defeat in the First World War. *Owamboland* as it is popularly known had remained relatively autonomous of German direct rule. However, following the 1904 –1908 German-Herero war in which German reduced the Herero population from 80 000 to 15 000, the colonialist government was compelled to bring the communities of the *Aawambo* under direct political control. The Germans feared that the *Aawambo* who constituted the largest population group of German South West Africa, would, if not monitored closely join the Hereros and the Namas. Should that happen, it would cause havoc and even an end to the Germans colonial occupation of 'German South West Africa.'

The Germans in particular, had come to Namibia at the time when northern Namibia communities were still firmly rooted in observing local traditions. Traditional leather costumes were still very popular at the time of the German occupation. However, in the following years the value of traditional costumes diminished. The following factors contributed significantly:

1. The contract labour system
2. The impact of the Second World War
3. The influence of the Ondjondjo

The Contract Labour System

The recruitment of the *Aawambo* men for the contract labour system can be traced back to 1890. Native labourers were desperately needed in south and central Namibia, where Europeans had taken land for commercial farming and cattle ranching. The colonialists depended and expected much of its cheap labour force to come from *Owamboland*. This dependency became necessary following the drastic reduction of the population of the Hereros and the Namas between 1904–1908. As a result, a big number of young men turning up for recruitment with the process being described by my interviewees as 'selective'. Preference was given to physically fit young men who were selected for railways and mines. The weaker and much younger boys were taken to work in other economic sectors such as the farms to herd cattle, sheep and goats. McKittrick points out that: *". . . the decision to go south was not taken lightly. Mortality rates for labourers were treacherous, labour conditions bad and the pay extremely low. Contracts were not undertaken on a whim, but only after a calculation of the potential risks and gains".* Paradoxically, McKittrick goes on to note that *"... the majority of these young labourers were seeking, not 'refuge' from starvation or raiding , but access to commodities such as clothing, blankets, soap, and household goods".* One can fully agree with McKittrick that access to commodities was a motivational factor for the youth taking up employment in the south under very harsh working conditions. However, McKittrick fails to recognize that although going to the south could be simply seen as voluntary, it was not, but, was forced on people; the unfavourable natural and political factors as McKittrick pointed

out were some of the contributing elements that encouraged male youths to leave their homes to take 'refuge' in an alien and strange land.

In addition, McKittrick does not present sufficient evidence to support her general statement that "young people went south without parental permission …throughout the colonial period" (McKittrick, 1998: 249). Clothes and blankets were basic commodities that most parents would have wanted to posses. Any parent whose son got employed had high hopes that their son would bring wealth home. Cases of those who went to work without approval of their parents cannot be ruled out, but were rare. One reason was that boys who wanted to go had to plan the journey in advance and communicate such information to their parents to make necessary arrangements such as food. This was necessary particularly during the early years, when men had to travel on foot from distant places like *Uukolonkadhi* to *Amutoni (Onamutoni)* or even *Tsumeb*. Therefore, since these were group activities the names of those listed for the journey were known throughout their villages, and the group was likely not to accommodate any intruder who might be trying to leave their home without the approval of their family. I cannot, however, rule out the need to keep young boys at home to look after cattle and farm, but as cash crops subdued to European products, the demand to keep boys at home became secondary.

Lucas Shinedima told me how, at one time he was denied joining a group of other boys going for the contract labour system, from his village, because, he did not tell his parents about it. McKittrick, has further stressed that most parents were sceptical of allowing

their children to go for contract labour 'throughout the colonial period' This is however, contrary to oral accounts given to me that contract labour gained increased popularity among most young men and parents in northern Namibia. A young man who chose not to go south for work did not get a good reputation or fame in his community, particularly among his peer group. He would be compared to a coward and called *omukatalume* or someone who was petrified of coming into contact with whites. The possession of European goods and materials such as blankets, cotton materials, soap and other detergents became prominent in getting a fiancé. It became hard and sometimes impossible for any man to get a girl to marry without the required European items, to get them one must get work and work hard away from home for twelve to sixteen months. Therefore, as the wearing of the new forms of clothing gained status as signs of manhood, masculinity and fame more youths were encouraged to go and work to get western fashions and other commodities that the new economic environment had created.

Parents too became interested in young men who had fame in the community and were not hesitant to offer them their daughters for marriage as the prospective husband's qualities were judged on the basis of being hard-working. Young men were also obliged to buy clothing items that they would distribute among family members, and friends as gifts. By so doing he was investing to receive gifts in kind such as cattle and sheep when he married his first wife. A man who had not been generous and supportive to other people might receive nothing or very little from friends and acquaintance. His closest family relatives like grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins might fail to assist him at his marriage should he have been ungenerous to them. Initially, a one metre long cloth could

be divided into several tiny pieces of cloths, three to four people could then each get a share from a metre cloth. Each man received a piece, double the size of a man's hand. Other popular items that were substituted for cloths include blankets, body Vaseline, soaps and other detergents. A blanket was however, so special that whoever got it made sure that he gave a cow in return. In most cases, elderly men instructed young men to bring them blankets in exchange for cattle (usually cows that would produce offspring). So the exchange of clothing began to play a greater role in the reciprocal exchange that helped define new relationships and obligations and the social structure of the community (Shinedima, 2001, Onhuno).

Ndjene told me that most of the cattle that he owned had been bartered for blankets. According to him *"blankets were very thick and strong blankets not like these ones of today – we called them okaponda meaning 'it costs a pound'. One blanket could be bartered for a cow or even sometimes, two oxen"* (Ndjene 2002: *Ontanda*). Kings were also interested in modern products, not only clothes and blankets but other items like gramophones. Jonas Kadhila Martin told me a story that as a child he bought a gramophone in 1945 and brought it home in 1946. Since the gramophone was the first in the community, it drew many people's attention, including the present king of Uukwaluudhi, Josia Shikongo Taapopi who sent his *omalenga* to propose buying the gramophone for two cows, the suggestion to which Jonas agreed. The two cattle were the first ever he owned in life since his parents had both died while he was an infant. By the time he got married his cattle had multiplied and he paid lobola, *iigonda*, out of this (Martin, 2003: Olukulo).

This is an indication that those who were in possession of western products such as clothes, coffee, sugar, and tobacco became rich even if they did not come from rich families. It gave opportunities to families who had always been poor and culturally deprived of material possession if they were not linked to the monarch's immediate family. This in turn also increased social mobility. As a result a few women who were married to ordinary people also became rich in material possessions and famous - like the wives of the aristocracy. Women were, therefore, despite the prolonged time that their husbands had to spent at work often prepared to suffer the consequences. This does not however, mean that women were more interested in material possession than the general welfare of their husbands, but an indication that women seem to have been ignorant of the sufferings that men endured at work, as they looked healthy and neatly dressed when they returning home after their contracts.

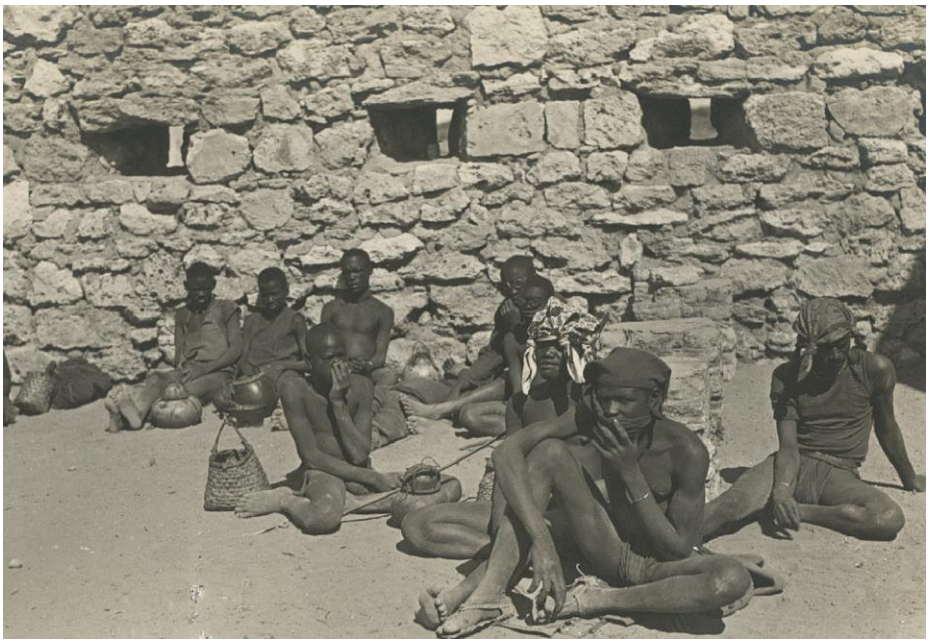


Photo 19: An undated photo of migrants from Owamboland waiting at the Namutoni gate before they were recruited to go south of the country to work mainly in the mines, railways and farms. Note that most of them are dressed in loin clothes and none of them appear to put on any short trousers and only a few have put on tattered shirts. Source: The National Archives of Namibia.

In the early years of the contract labour system most men leaving for work in the south of the country were dressed in traditional leather costumes. This however, changed as European clothes multiplied in the community, but still most of the boys who went for work at the turn of the twentieth century wore a combination of traditional clothes and

European tattered clothes, mainly only shorts were worn and most of them had no shirts. Reports that contract workers were forced to abandon their leather costumes for European clothing, usually *'khaki'* uniforms, for work have been dismissed by most of my interviewees. According to Ndjene Mbandi, the South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA) officials were obligated to scrutinize the workers and ensure that 'proper attire' were distributed to all recruits, but their loin clothes were not confiscated. '*We were left to decide on what to do with the old clothes'* (Mbandi, 2002: Ontanda). As it appears in photo 20 below, recruits were dressed into shorts for inspections. The shorts look old, an indication that each group of new recruits used them when they were inspected. Lucas Shinedima told me that sometimes new sets of khaki shorts and shirts called *oombendeka* were supplied to those who were registered to go for work, but very often labourers were transported to their places of work dressed in tattered khaki shorts and no shirts (2001: Onhuno). Esthel Jones verifies this when she writes that: *"Lorry loads of naked labourers* [I assume labourers were not naked but simply without shirts) *departing week by week for the mines, bring back those same boys in a year in Khaki shirts and shorts or football blazers and Trilby hats, and often boots"* (Jones, 1938: 2).

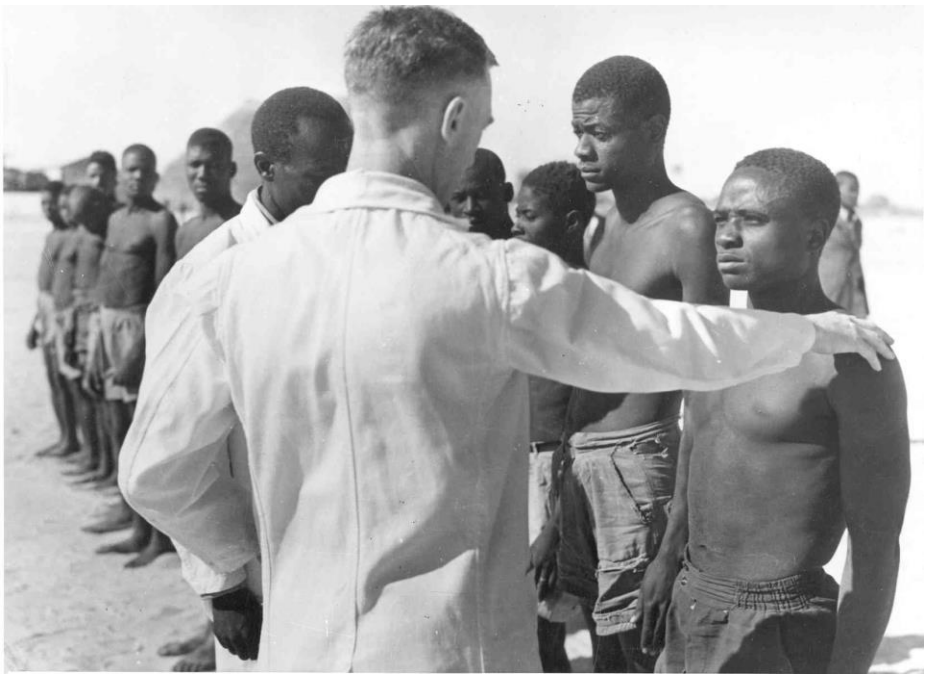


Photo 20: Ready for the final body inspections. These young Aawambo men had presumably been selected to go for work. The type of work that one was selected for depended on the body structure. The heavily built men went to mines and railways while the weaker and younger ones went to work on the farms. Source: National Archives of Namibia

I asked Ndjene Mbandi to explain his position with regard to wearing traditional clothes when he got European clothes and the general attitudes of white officers towards those who wore traditional African costumes. The dialogue was as follows:

Vilho: *What happened to your traditional costumes when you got European ones?*

Ndjene: *I no yi pumbwa we nokuli! Wa pewa elapi! Wa ya kOmoonda! O to tsala ku n? Wa pewa ombulukweya…! We didn't need them as we received new clothes! We were in the land of the white man, so, what was the use of the loin clothes when you have shirts and trousers? You could choose to take loin clothes with you or to leave them behind. But it was also essential and wiser to take them with you to your place of work and be wearing those to spare your new clothes that you have to wear to impress others at home when you return at the end of the twelve to twenty-four months.* (2002: Ontanda)

Jonas Kadhila Martin added that:

… I still remember vividly that when I went to Onamutuni I had a traditional leather costume worn by cattle herders called Ombede. Other costumes included a stripe of my clan affiliation neck wear called Ondiwi, leather shoes, traditional dagger Omukonda, a leather carriage bag as well as bows and arrows. I kept them and brought them home when I returned home at the end of my first contract. I did not take them with me when I went back to work the second time …The most horrible experience however, was when recruits were compelled to take off their costumes: the naked bodies were inspected, including private parts…after that we had to bath in a pool. It was largely felt by most of us that the water was diluted with insecticides that I believe could be hazardous to a person's health. We became used to European shorts and shirts [which, though, I wanted to own], but initially, it was extremely difficult, sometimes uncomfortable, but with time

we learnt and became used to and never wanted to go back to our traditional clothes. We had however, never wanted to abandon our traditional costumes completely
(Martin, 2002: Olukulo).

The last sentence above is most interesting. Analysing Martin's statement it shows that although contract workers were inspired by European clothes most of them were not deterred away from the values embodied in their traditional costumes, in them [traditional clothes] there was life, meaning and language, not represented in their masters' fashions. This explains why Martin was committed to preserving his traditional costumes for almost two years and he made sure that he returned them home because, losing them would have made him vulnerable to losing the sense of who he was and lose the logic about his identity.

Vilho: *How did your recruiters perceive your traditional costumes?*

Ndjene: *It was the church, the missionaries\aahongi who did not like our traditional costumes. They spoiled and defamed the way we dressed as not compatible to Christian teachings\values. However, those who worked as stewards were compelled to definitely adapt to Europeans ways of life, clothes and general hygiene. At Namutoni we were ordered to undress for nude bodies inspections. We lined up naked though we did not belong to the same age. Those who were older were most humiliated as it was in gross violation of the tradition, to be seen naked by younger ones. They must have suspected that our clothes were dirty or harbouring harmful insects like ticks, lice and so on. I*

suspect, this could be one reason why they undressed us, against our traditional values. It was morally wrong; in the presence of young boys in the group. (2002: Ontanda)

Ndjene's statement can be interpreted as suggesting a European impression that western clothes symbolized civilization and that those who dressed in them were `modern' men. When young men returned home at the end of their contracts, they pretended as if they were 'modern' and 'civilized' men from town, contrary to the fact that most of them had actually only worked in farms and mines and would have seen little of urban life. They did not only return home with western clothes, but in addition there were some who arrived with strange hair cuts or relaxed hair and exaggerated civilized `town boy' lifestyles, A few rode bicycles, smoked cigarettes and spoke Afrikaans. The relative affluence of the returning men also meant that their habits influenced changes in the other younger people in the community to whom those who returned from work in the south were role models and inspired them to leave the community and work in the mines or farms.

It is also important to note that the prolonged absence of these men from the community had a profound impact on the socio-cultural equilibrium of the pre-colonial society. Some of the men who went for work never returned home, they settled permanently in towns and commercial farming areas, they were called *Oombwiti*. This group did not only lose the identity of their costumes but also maintained a very low profile and distanced themselves from their mother tongue and traditional attitudes.

With respect to the impact of the contract labour system on the traditional costumes of the ancestors, Malan indicated that, *"since 1907, increasing numbers of migratory labours left their homeland for employment in the south. In this way they were exposed to much more intensive acculturation"* [1980 17]. In this regard, although most of them did not lose their beliefs and the concept of who they were, the significant and obvious acculturation change in some aspects of traditional culture was eminent in attaining clothing and of course, most of them were motivated to go and work to get European clothes. This representation is supportive of my argument that contract labour was indeed one of the factors that contributed to the washing away and devaluing of traditional costumes.

However, I differ with Malan in the sense that, he failed to indicate the factors that urged young men to go and work under the introduced cash economy and European controlled market, leaving behind their own means of economic and socio-cultural source to decay and decline. Among these factors were the looming of European retail stores, the supply of uniforms and other European clothes to the contract workers, the campaign by missionaries that the wearing of European clothes would encourage hygiene in the community, the decline in livestock due to devastating droughts, the decline in food production and so on.

The allegation that young men from *Owamboland* wanted to go and work for the whites voluntarily has also been exaggerated to some extent. It is however, worth arguing that there might had been a few men who were motivated to go and work in the south, but

most of my interviewees who worked under the contract labour system (*iilonga yokodhalate,* as it is locally called) in the earlier days, have told me that most of the young men were not happy with the work that they were given and the treatment they received from their employers. Most of them suffered from nostalgia to return home and never to go back and work for a white man, but since escaping would had been extremely difficult and in most cases led to being captured, it was wise not to run away because once you were caught you were returned to the place of your work and extra days were added to the contract.

Malan further indicated that the contract labour system disrupted the socio-economic organization of the *Aawambo* as *"large numbers of them [Aawambo men] entered the labour market outside Owamboland and some even migrated permanently to their places of employment … [this led to] the dispersal of matrilineages as a result of new rules of residence…among the Aawambo. In many ways people completely abandoned traditional settlement patterns and the economic activities passed by their tribes men*" (33). Against this background, it is however, worth ascertaining that the damages and humiliations caused to our traditions were enormous, but Malan's allegation that most of the *Aawambo* who went for contract work *'completely abandoned their traditional settlement patterns…'* appears to have been exaggerated. I would argue that European intentions to completely disinherit the community of its customs created remarkably less impact on the beliefs and physical structures like the homesteads [the nucleus for traditional cultural values] than it did on traditional costumes and other objects of cultural potency. A few individuals who became *oombwiti* [those who choose to live permanently in urban areas]

faced outraged criticism and they were constantly advised and reminded by family members, clan and the community that it was still important to build a traditional home, own a field and pass on traditional beliefs to the children even if they were living in town.

In this regard, above, parents who had settled in urban areas were expected to send their children regularly to their parents and families in *Owamboland*. More importantly, if the couples were to marry the family and clan expected that the dating, marriage, birth and naming of the children were coordinated by the family or clan in accordance with the traditional requirements. For example when a new baby was born it was expected to come to its family and clan in *Owamboland*, to be adorned with traditional costumes in recognition of his clan and sexual identity. This included the wearing of *Oshinyenye\Ondiwi* beads given to young women when they married and also to newborn babies by the father's clan and as approval of the father's clan to accept him in the clan. These practices, despite the painful history of European acculturisation of the community are still respected today, inclusive of those who live in towns permanently.

The loss of traditional costumes is undisputable, and as indicated earlier it was due to the influx of European commodities that it was possible for traditional practices to disappear so rapidly. It is obvious that the Finnish missionaries piloted and pioneered a fertile dependency on western clothes that was to place the community into the socio-economic sphere of western influence. However, the European companies and agents of the government that controlled our country's natural resources also created opportunities that

facilitated changes to our traditional customs. Some of the conditions like that of the introduction of tax in *Owamboland* were harsh, forcing young men to seek work outside their communities where they became vulnerable to losing their traditions. Therefore, analytically, the contract labour impoverished most of the workers, destabilized their socio-cultural values and subjected them to the disability of economic dependency. Bishop Tobias also echoes this view; "to tax such a community in cash seems tantamount to compelling numbers of them to leave their own work and holdings and go and work for the white man with disastrous results to themselves" .(Bishop Tobias' letters, 1923).

Although the earlier European cultural influence appeared to have been confined to eastern *Owamboland*, particularly to communities within the range of mission stations like *Oniipa* and *Olukonda*, the influence soon spread to other communities. Initially missionaries insisted on giving more emphasis to the supply of womens' clothes than men's, until the commencement of the contract labour system as well as the establishment of German mercantile clothing shops in the community, first at *Ondangwa*, eastern *Owamboland.* As a result men's desire and opportunity to wear European fashions increased and eventually superseded that of women; Since then, arguably, there was an element of desire among the youth to partake independently in the new structure of economic dispensation in urban settlements, commercial farms and railways construction.

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Photo 21: An undated photo of a group of Aawambo men resting in the veld on their way home from work. Most of those who returned from work had to walk about three hundred kilometres from Oshivelo to their respective communities. Source: The Scientific Society of Namibia.

Photo 22: An undated photo of a young boy returning from work, dressed in a great coat and a spectacular hat. The style appears to be an imitation of the German's Army uniforms of WW 1. Presumably the young boy worked for a German family that would have given him the dress and a hat. Source: The Scientific Society of Namibia.

Labour migration, therefore became popular for every young man as a means to meet the youths' material goals. It provided an opportunity for young men to demonstrate the ability and the talent to invest, dreaming to improve their depressing social status and provide the financial basis for his future as a prospective husband and head of a household. Generally, by the turn of the twentieth century, the influence of the cash economy and imported goods was becoming dominant over local means of production and distribution. In this regard European clothing as they emerged in the community carried a different social perception and taste. In essence modern fashions became icons of popular self, of public admiration and of individual 'civilization' interpreted in the assumption that those who wore Europeans dress fittingly could read and write or they were educated. However, it is important to note that despite changes in clothes, there were clan laws and some objects like the *ondiwi*\necklace beads that have survived European transgression. It should also be noted that most people remained faithful to traditional dances, songs and other aspects relating to family and clan obligations.

In due course the *Aawambo* redefined and modified western fashions to suit their socio-cultural taste and historical background. In most cases, for example, *Aawambo* women preferred reddening their dress with *olukula*, while men, in general, did not conform to the European ethics of wearing trousers and shirts. For example in most cases shirts were worn without tucking them inside trousers. Longer shirts that floated were most preferred as they could be worn without any trousers and panties, it was just fine for the wearer. Men's waist belts were loaded with sticks, snuff, knobkerries and other objects. Most

men wore leather sandals or went bare footed. This was what Europeans regarded as `ridiculous' African innovation as they redefined European clothes into provocative ways of dressing not conforming to Europeans standardized culture.

It is noticeable that aspects of European material culture, be it, clothing or other objects were to a large extent converted to uses to suit the local cultural heritage, valued customs and the natural environment. This answers Karen Hansen's theory that argues convincingly that:

Commodities are socially constructed and things have social lives. Because a commodity does not always remain in the place where it was produced, it can be said to have a 'social life' whose value and meanings change as it moves through space and time. Friedman has added an important caveat by suggesting that it is not the things themselves that take on meaning but the strategies within which they are embedded. In effect, he argues, 'things do not have social lives. Rather, social lives have things' (Hansen, 1995: 136).

I should argue that Africans did not wear modern dresses as Europeans expected and wanted to see them being worn. These modifications should not be interpreted as acts of ignorance or 'backwardness' but it was arguably purposefully done as a `strategy', an act of demonstrating emotions and strong conventions in the social meaning of traditional costumes. Converted Christians for example could only dress up properly during Sunday services, when they were compelled to do so, but as soon as they came back home they

reverted to the use of traditional costumes when in social groups, the family or the community at large. Moreover, the fact that plain cotton materials that were earlier bought at *Ondjondjo* were converted into designs that imitated the structures of traditional costumes is also evidence to support this argument. Hansen further argues that:

Africans consumption of clothing was then and more so today influenced strongly by capitalist consumption practices. African interests in European clothing never implied that Africans actually strove to appropriate European identities, nor does the widespread wearing of Salaula\used clothes, mean that Zambians today believe that they somehow became 'Western. (Hansen 1995: 144).

As elsewhere in most other African communities it is worth noting that for the *Aawambo*, like the people in Zanzibar written about by Laura Fair *"appropriations of western clothing was not a mere imitation of European style, but 'modified them' with important local meanings that spoke not to Europeans,"* (2001: 72) As such *Aawambo* continued to apply the red ochre mixed with cattle fat to the new cotton dress *Odhelela* to make them look red in conformity with their bodies and environment. Ostrich shells, leather belts and ivory were added to the *Odhelela*. The neck was also decorated with the usual traditional beads the *Onyoka*. They also wore silver or black nickels *Iiyela* around their ankles and wrists.

The rapid growth in the popularity of European goods appears to be an indication that *Aawambo* had uncompromising desires for qualitative products. Perhaps it is worth arguing that if it had not been due to Europeans' early intrusion and occupation of the region the *Aawambo* would have invented similar goods in due course by themselves as activities of their earlier economy such as blacksmithing, skin tanning and many other activities of the pre-colonial socio-economic structure demonstrated that the resources and skills required were present. However, such developments were hampered by the factory finished products that Europeans brought to the community doorsteps.

The influence of the Ondjondjo trading shop

As early as 1909 a retail trading shopping centre called Ondjondjo Trading Limited was established in Ondonga at a village called *Ondjondjo*, by a certain individual remembered as Emirich, a German. The trading outlet provided support and promotion for the marketing of European products. The most traded items at *Ondjondjo* were cotton materials and products like blankets, short pants, tobacco, matches etc. The early establishment of a textile market in the community indicated that the Finnish were not the sole promoters who influenced the development of textile products in *Owambo*, and the mission stations coexisted with a competent and *'productive system dedicated to the marketing of commercial cloth for profit…'* (Schneider 2003: 434). As a result missionaries stood to lose in the competition, resulting in a hostile market relationship between the missionaries and German traders. According to Schneider, the Finnish:

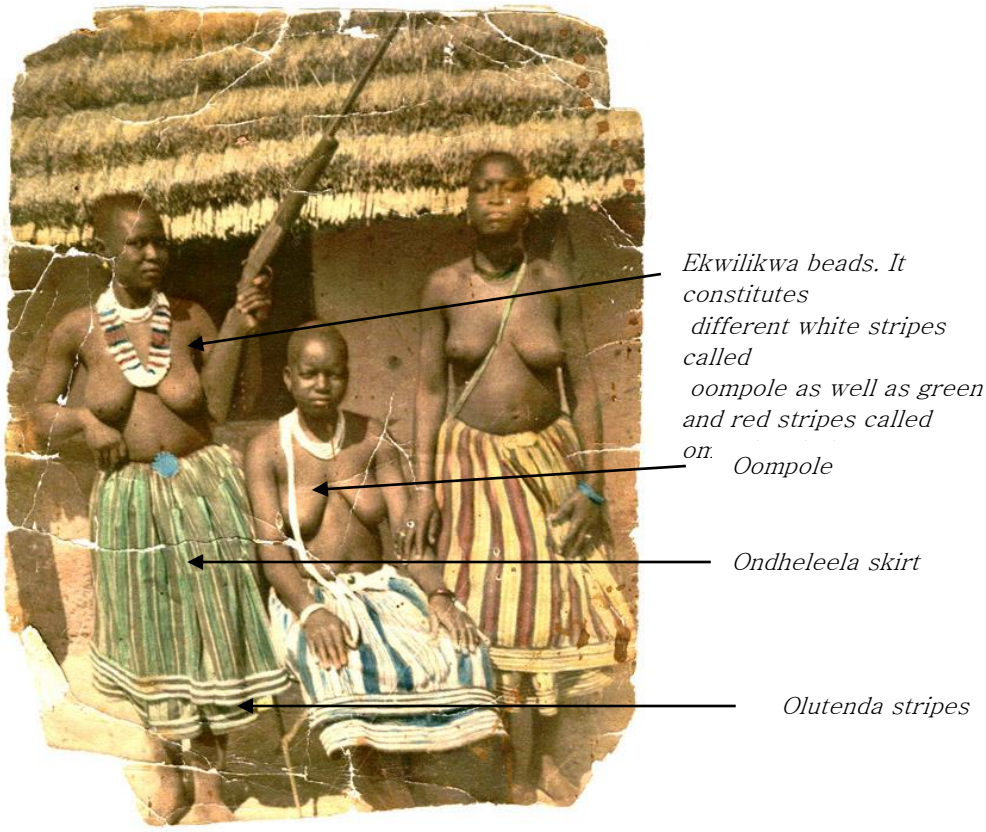
. . . criticised indigenous peoples for adopting Western finery [sold by the Germans] as a result, missionaries were duty bound to impose new standards of appearance and add quality to their textiles in efforts not to fall out of the competition. They also began to issue European clothing to children in mission schools. These schools [Oniipa, for example, described earlier], moreover, taught embroidery sewing, and knitting – textile arts that made extensive use of European cloth and yarns, while undermining the transmission of indigenous skills (Schneider 2003: 234).

The establishment of the *Ondjondjo* wholesaler clearly shows that not only the Finnish were influential in changing the material culture of the Aawambo, but other Europeans including individuals, undisputedly, also played a pivotal role in supplying the community with European products. Whether this was done in conjunction with the Finnish is not clear, but as early as 1913, the *Ondjondjo* trading company, was fully operational in *Ondonga*, about seven kilometres north of *Olukonda* and west of *Oniipa* missionary station. It is believed that by this time the demand for European products was gaining momentum in the community. Esther Mbumba, daughter of Erastus Mbumba, who served at the *Ondjondjo* as a shop attendant from its initial years told me that:

When the shop manager first baby was born, the shop manager Emirich (the Aawambo called him Emilia) asked my father to release me to take care of the baby and wash the nappies. I worked with Loide Shikongo shaKalulu (the mother to Bishop Leonard Awala of ELCIN). She taught me how to wash and iron trousers, suits and shirts. I became an expert in this regards. I had been there at the Ondjondjo since my childhood. When I got

married I applied European home values in our house. For example I had a charcoal iron and I used to iron my husband clothes regularly. I was the only one doing that in the whole village and my husband was always appreciated for wearing neat clothes, he was nicknamed 'Omwele' meaning 'edge of the knife', because his trousers ridges were straight and looked sharp. (Mbumba, 2003: Omapundo, Ondonga).

European products that were, mainly sold at *Ondjodjo* were plain cotton called *omalapi*. These were all given different nicknames according to the cultural and environmental perception of the community. Assigning them local names was also easier for the community to be able to differentiate the different types of costumes, since it was difficult for them to pronounce these items by their European names. They were of different types such as *Negoya lyaNdjondjo, Okande kandjondjo, Oshapapa, Omutse godhi* (it resembled the large blue flies), *Omukandjani*, *Olushikato, Toyela nawa* and *Oshikokola. Okande ka ndjondjo* was red with long stripes; it was attractive, famous and very popular among the girls. It was so famous because the *Olukula* products absorbed very well within these fabrics. The O*shapapa* and *egoya lya Ndjondjo* were also popular fashions for girls. These were also red. Selma Mbumba said that as young girls they wore *Oompole* (white beads) on top of the calves and *ekwilikwa* around the neck as can be noted in the photo (Mbumba, 2003: Omapundo, Ondonga).



Girls from Ondonga. Seated in the centre is Esther Mbumba Omapundo. She is flanked by two sisters (both deceased) Martha Petrus Katokele on her right and Hilma Petrus Katokele on her left. They were from Ondangwa. The gun belongs to the photographer, Erick Etikili (Mbinzi-Mbali). Source: Esther Mbumba, Omapundo.

As can be seen individuals in the community had a variety of choices to choose the colour of clothes that they wanted because plain materials were of a variety of colours. This was particularly so when the retail shop was brought closer to the community. Goods were bought with the `Dutch' pounds *iiponda*, but local products like *Omahangu* and goats were also bartered but this stopped at some point. A plain cloth of about two metres, *omizalo mbali*\half clone used to cost about five pounds *(iiponda iyali) nomulongo*. Popular footwear, canvas or *iikapute* cost 5 shillings. Twenty litres of *Omahangu* was equivalent to five metres of cloth*omizalo ntano* of the cloth, *elapi* and *oshiyata.*

As pointed out earlier, influential people like the elites were in most cases, among the first to receive and resort to western clothes, popularising them in the configuration of power, fame and self-endowment. As in the case of the leather costumes, kings and senior counsellors had preference to choose the best quality material for their fashions. Shilongo Uukule told me that, the *Olushikato* for example was an important cotton material specially reserved for the shirts of important people like the king and his senior chiefs. The popular royal fashions in *Ondonga* became the long sleeved shirts with long tails falling below the knees. These fashions made a distinction between the rulers and the commoners (Uukule, 2002: UUkwanambwa, Ondonga)**.** The *Olushikato* fashions, the materials of which were of white and black stripes, were in fashion, especially during the reign of king Martin Kadhikwa (1912-1942) in *Ondonga*. They were expensive, so ordinary people could not afford to buy them. In most cases they were also out of stock, as they were ordered directly from the suppliers by the king. In most cases they did not

buy, but received these items free of charge. These type of shirts are still common especially among the elderly *Ovakwambi* traditional dancers like the famous group of *Iita ya Kadha*.

Owambo lapi

Photo 23: An undated photo of a retail shop at Omafo in Uukwanyama. It was one of the first shops in northern Namibia that traded in cotton material which came to be called Owambo malapi that the Aawambo fashioned into new traditional costumes. Note some piles of the cotton materials lying on the table. Source: The National Archives of Namibia.

Other retail shops were later opened at other corners of the kingdoms, as the demand for European clothes rose. Three other stores were built by early 1930**.** These included the *Endola dh'Amunyela Metunda* at *Endola*. *Amunyela* refers to the nickname of the

German who owned the shop as people only knew him by that name. The other shop was at *Omafo* in *Uukwanyama* where Hamunyela used to come and take supplies from *Ondjondjo.* Ndahafa Kakonda from *Omalyata* remembered two of the shop attendants at *Omafo.* They were Namba Kamati and Konisa. As trading stores multiplied it increased the supply of European clothes in the community and overwhelmed traditional costumes particularly in the *Uukwanyama* and *Ondonga* polities between 1920 and 1960. Some other polities remained relatively independent of the retail shops establishments and supply. These communities included *Uukwaluudhi, Ombalantu, Uukolonkadhi* and *Ongandjera.* Arguably these communities remained somewhat in the practice of using traditional costumes much longer than polities to the east of *Owamboland* that were particularly targeted by European merchants. The reason for choosing such sites might had been due to the larger population in those communities but also that they were centres on the route of the contract labourer. Another reason was that merchants felt more secure as people in the areas where they had settled were already on good terms with Europeans. This was true with regard to the communities that lived near *Olukonda, Oniipa, Ondjonbdjo, Engela, Edola,* etc. These places were among the first to strongly embrace Christianity and became the epicentre for the spread of 'European civilization' to other communities in *Owamboland.*

The *Ondjondjo* and other branches subsided in popularity towards the end of the 1960s. Reasons for their closure were, among others, political but they also faced increasing competition from retail shops from South Africa. Although a few South African stores operated in the community by the early '1970s', most clothes were bought (as many

people began to read and speak Afrikaans) by ordering goods from catalogues. Popular catalogues in the seventies and eighties were the Mahomedays and Charles and Ebony. Most of the clothes that were sold were particularly fashions intended for the youths including the popular fashions of the late seventies like baggie trousers *(omahepi)* and high heel shoes (o*dopi)*, for boys.

The people who came to buy, were given some other European items like matches, sweets and so on free of charge, *oofelefenda.* This included perfumed body soaps, washing soaps*Omakosha* body lotion called *Omagadhi guutikoloni* as well as singlets. This was done, presumably, to market and popularise such unknown items in the community to capture the community interest to support the market. Men and women were also given tobacco, snuff and pipes. Soaps and, in particular, the body lotion were very special. *"It was the scent that was most pleasant, when used it could be smelled several metres away. These cosmetics made us popular and attractive than the rest of the girls in the community".* (Mbumba, 2003: Omapundo).

Esther Mbumba pointed out further that when material supplies from *Ondjondjo* became popular and multiplied, skilful tailors emerged in the community: *There were famous tailors like Valaliu (father's name unknown), an Oshimbundu from Angola. He owned a sewing machine that was foot-controlled. There was also Maria–Johanna Niikanor from Omashaka and Aune Beniata from Ondangwa. Esther recalled that they were good at sewing the olutenda skirts. They were also very good at sewing different styles. "We stitched our clothes by hand when we didn't have the machines. We used threads and*

needles from Ondjondjo". Stitching was skilful and interesting, yet easy, because, traditionally the Aawambo knew how to sew and mend costumes together. They mended together their leather costumes, leather shoes, aprons and beads, using animal sinews, palm leaves and mopane barks. They used wire instruments called omalunisho for the needles. These were manufactured locally by blacksmiths, using wind bellows and iron that they skilfully produced from local raw materials called Okantale. These were mainly mined from Tsumeb, Otavi and the Grootfontein\Oshaandashongwe areas. In this regard it is envisaged important to note that the production of `traditional' and `new' materials were mixed to create new fashions. Arguably traditional skills dominated the choice of what materials to buy, the colour of the material and what design to take. All these were influenced by the instinct of traditional values of local designers and wearers. This demonstrates that local traditions were still valued despite the new materials that found their way in the community.

She further explained that: *". . . when the whites multiplied, they sold sewing machines cheaply. I, myself, bought my own sewing machine when I was a young girl. My mother was a tailor, I learned fast how to sew by her" (*Mbumba 2003: Omapundo, Ondonga). One would imagine that the supply of sewing machines to the community and indeed the fact that they were so cheap could also explain European efforts at encouraging and facilitating the community's smooth transition from traditional leather into European fashions.

As pointed out earlier, changes from leather to cotton clothes did not fully put an end to the application of traditional lotion *olukula* on costumes. European cotton materials that were received by the community were modified by soaking them in boiled water. The *Olukula* lotion was applied to improve the quality. Material thickness combined with a dark brown colour was most preferable. This reflection proved that the preservation of traditional practices continue to co-exist side-by-side with modernity as women in particular continued to value and admire their tradition. But suddenly in an effort to silence and devalue local products and skills, an *Oshidhe*, a European modified powder, a substitute for the local dark *oshidhe* product flooded the market. It came from *Ombundu ya Kiiyala*\ Swakopmund, and was, presumably imported from Germany. This further shows Europe's relentless efforts to substitute local cosmetics, not only clothes, with European products that performed the same functions, perhaps to incapacitate the community skills and artistic initiatives(Mbumba, 2003: Omapundo).

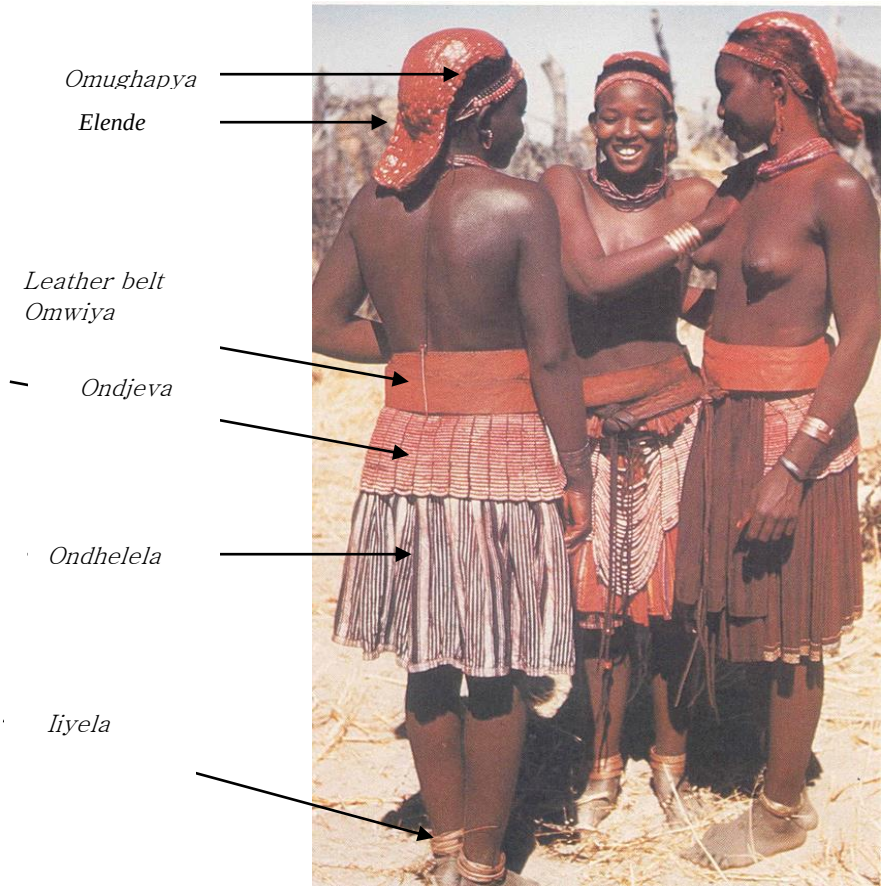


Photo 24: An undated photo of the Kwanyama girls\ Omahelende. Note the Elende hair styles indicating that they are in the final preparations for wedding.

Source: Scherz, Scherz, Taapopi & Otto, 1981:

Date: Noting the change in leather skirts the photo was probably taken around the 1930s.

As the community changed from leather costumes into western clothes, prominently in the mid-1950s, white linens called *Oondhelela* in the form of a skirt became popular among all women as they increasingly abandoned their leather skirts that had once reflected their ethical identity like the *Onguwo\Oshivelelo*. The *odhelela* is the local name and is reflecting the way this skirts flaps or 'dances' as a person moves. Initially, these skirts were worn without tops but later on a new fashion of wearing the skirts with white singlets was invented and became a popular fashion lasting through the 1950s. This marked a remarkable transition from the popular traditional fashion of not covering the breasts to the tradition of assuming that a woman's breasts were sinful and even sexually attractive when not covered. The church seems to have been instrumental in promoting this fashion, however, up to the 1960s most women still went about with naked breasts during their routine work at home.

As Europeans modified products similar to those Africans had already invented and used, many people were triggered to shift from commodities of 'low' quality to those of 'high' quality**.** As I have indicated above, substances like the popular body lotion *Olukula* were modified so that the local population could buy such stuff instead of relying on the local products. Ironically if Europeans had earlier opposed and banned the *olukula* as dirty and primitive why then did the same people who objected to the use and application of the red ochre introduce similar products like the *oshidhe* that was even redder than the *olukula*? As a result of the added value to the *oshidhe* women who had access to it would no longer use *Olukula* because the *Oshidhe* quality and colour was more durable and attractive than *Olukula.* Those who smeared their bodies and clothes with *Oshidhe* lotion

were more admired than those who used the '*omakwangha',* this became an invented name for *olukula*, defaming it as the new subsidy *oshidhe* became popular. However, we still preserved the art of applying red lotion to our bodies and in particular to cotton clothes, regardless of the shift from *Oshidhe* to *Olukula.* Indeed many people did not abandon the *Olukula* and the *oshidhe* is no longer even found in the market today.

It was an obligation for Europeans to see to it that they put efforts and energy into making their maidens as attractive as possible to inspire other youths in the community to want to be like them. Mbumba explained that . . . *most young girls in the community who did not have access to European costumes wanted to be like us, who, received constant supply and were under obligation to use European costumes regularly and to be smart and neat at all times. Our appearance was most attractive and exemplary…we became popular and centre of focus in our communities. We were 'respected' in the community, because we were very few who could use special body pomade and soap. Most other girls in the community used Ongundi \ cow fat to smear their bodies and didn't use soap at all. When we went to attend traditional ceremonies like efundula, we were differently dressed, neat and smelt very nice, entirely European. Everybody gazed at us, amazingly. Boys in particular, focussed their attention on us. It was fame to fall in love with neat girls like us. That was what motivated other girls to emulate our fashions. (EstherMbumba).*

It is interesting commenting that Esther's narration expresses a degree of pride and self esteem in wearing European clothes. This may arguably demonstrate that those who

worked for the missionaries and other Europeans were indeed indoctrinated and influenced by European commodities and values. They became ostensibly ostracised to denounce and dishonour their cultural traditions in a bid that disoriented and alienated them and also encouraged others in the community to move and shy away from wearing their traditional clothes.

Ester Mbumba further noted that: *Those who were in constant contact with Europeans, who worked for them, did not wear the traditional ostrich beads Onyoka, but substituted it with the European made glass beads called ekwilikwa; These were several pairs of assorted beads which were skilfully plaited together. We did not intend to disinherit our traditional costumes but we just wanted to be unique and to reserve special recognition. We did not buy most of these items, but got them free of charge. Beads were also given local names. Some of the names I still remember were the Oompole\white, Embombolo\black beads, Onyango\dark green the colour of the onyango\bladder liquid, Osino\resembling Oryx. There were also endamufa bracelets, a popular fashion among the girls, but only a few of us who could afford them. We who worked for the whites were privileged, we had everything and most other girls in the village wanted to be like us, but it was not easy to get them, we had unique dresses. It were the women who were in the service of Europeans that rapidly adapted European dresses and encouraged others in remote areas to emulate them.* (Mbumba, 2003: Omapundo)

As Esther points out above, it is understandable that those who worked for the Finnish and other European groups became influential to other people in the community. But one

should also recognize that the community had mixed responses to those who adopted European fashions and promoted their products. Despite Europeans efforts to dress those who worked for them exceptionally well, to win the support of fellow Africans, it was a battle that took long to win the hearts and minds, especially of the elderly people and among communities in remote areas that were not in contact with the missionaries, as they remained faithful to their traditional dresses for much longer.

I would argue that, although, women were the first to be introduced to European costumes through the missionaries, the impact of it did not spread, especially in the rural remote areas of north central Namibia. Up to the 1940s most women remained faithful to their traditional costumes. On the other hand, men became in a shorter period of time susceptible to western fashion and other products. Perhaps, one of the reason why most women did not entirely abandon their costumes for European fashions was as a result of their position in society, as they culturally, remained 'indoors', largely confined to household activities and labour. These traditional rites denied them the opportunity to walk beyond the homestead boundary to search for work to earn them materials that they would have needed for clothing. Secondly, women's costumes required several metres of cloth, hence it was expensive to buy them with the little wages paid. Thirdly, it was also not easy to transport heavy luggage on foot. As such women, relied on men to supply them with the European fashions when they wanted, and despite the threats by the church, women maintained their meaningful African hair dress styles, kept their ankle and wrist bangles and their necklaces particularly the *Onyoka* and *Ondiwi/Oshinyenye*, and observed traditional ceremonies - if often indoors due to fear of the church. Although

tradition is not static one could reason that, had it not been for the church and other factors stated earlier, our community would have held more firmly to its orthodox traditional costumes.

Photo 25: An undated photo of Chief Nehemia Shoovaleka of Uukwanyama [1934 - 1966] with his wives, Iikuvali Hangushu on his right, Kashikundi Kamutufe is being pointed out with the index figure. It appears that most women remained faithful to the old traditions. Source: National Archives of Namibia

Another reason why women appear to have held firmly to their traditional costumes longer than the men did, was also due to the combination of traditional gender laws and colonial laws as both prohibited women from entering the Police Zone. But, on a

different approach one cannot also rule out the fact that, women had a sense of being more faithful and committed to promoting and preserving what they had inherited than their men. As mothers they had a responsibility to bequeath, promote and pass on the inherited

traditional values to future generations. The only significant shift came with womens' dresses where the *Onguwo,* the black oxen leather skirt, was swapped for cotton skirts called *Ondhelela.* The *Ondhelela* was not worn alone but traditional items like ornaments like *Omwaanga* (ostrich beads), *Omushambe*, *Elambakwa, oomba, Omakipa*, *Oshilanda* and *Ondjeva* remained objects with important additional values. The front apron, *Elambakwa* that was worn in front of *Onguwo* by breast-feeding mothers as well as the *Omupolo* were replaced by a thick cloth in most cases a towel representing the real apron that was usually made from an animal skin. Neckwear, like *Onyoka*, has also remained popular among most women to this day.

As I have indicated earlier, men's early cotton clothes were also worn in ways similar to how traditional leather costumes were worn. Initially, the popular fashion was called *Ombwaka,* that was worn by passing the cloth between the legs and hanging it down in flaps, front and back, below the waist. Despite this new fashion the traditional leather belt did not vanish. It continued to play an important functional role in terms of holding various traditional objects like the dagger, snuff, knobkerrie and other traditional objects. Until lately, leather shoes remained common footwear. The *Ombwaka* remained in fashion among men until the early 1960s when trousers became popular in the

community. Yet despite the visible changes in men's' appearance, most of them remained faithful to traditional dances, songs and other aspects related to family and clans status.

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The Impact of the Second World War.

When Word War II, *Iita yaHitila*, broke out in 1939 – 1945, South Africa in conjunction with Britain recruited young men from *Owamboland* to fight on their side against the Germans and their allies – Italy and Japan. These men were taken to different places outside their community, in Namibia and abroad. Some of them went as far as South Africa and possibly to some other countries, but the majority of them ended up in other parts of Namibia. The exposure to the outside world, diverse cultures and military ethos made significant contributions to changing the social values of the service men as far as traditional costumes were concerned. This was an opportunity for Europeans to pursue other agendas such as imposing western moral values on African soldiers**.** By dressing the young *Aawambo* in uniforms, they would have expected them to act according to the conventions and uniform appearance of European army traditions. Every soldier was required to dress in military uniforms, berets, boots and pyjamas when going to bed. They also learned how to keep their uniforms clean by washing them regularly. They were also exposed to different types of bedroom linen and expected to regularly wash and iron them. Therefore, while they were at war they should have developed an appetite and attached additional value to European clothes, and other material products like soap, lotion and perfumes that were contrasted to the ochre, *Olukula,* which though it softened the body, at the same time stained the costumes that a person wore.

When most of them [the soldiers] returned home at the end of the war, they brought along several uniforms and other civilian clothes that they bought or were given at the end of their service. The late Rev. Michael Nengola, who served in the Second World War told me that:

. . . when we returned home, our appearance in the new costumes as compared to the traditional attires introduced a new attractive fashion that people in the community desired to own. This motivated and encouraged young people to consider leaving the community to go and work in the far south and central Namibia as well as to other countries like South Africa and Angola, kOmbishi meaning fishing area, because most of the workers were employed to work in fishing companies either in boats or to dry fish by salting them with salt. These men who worked at Ombishi introduced costumes called Okaponda and Oosheshele to the community (Nengolah, 2001: Onheleyiwa).

In summing up this chapter, I should state that although it appears at some point that the *Aawambo,* did, in the long run, embrace European fashions for comfort, prestige and status in society, my arguments are still firmly rooted in the fact that missionaries were largely responsible. I reiterate vigorously that Christianisation of the community, from the 1870s onwards was directly and mainly responsible for the destruction of traditional fashions and other popular cultural practices. Evidence lies in the popular memory from oral sources in the community that informs us that it was only a handful of people who at the beginning of the period of western influences were motivated and prepared to adapt to

European culture and a large number of them were children. This smaller group of Christian converts, faced a wide public outcry and rejection from their families, friends and the community at large. In the words of Meredith McKittrick:

. . . both oral evidence and the written records abound with stories of the struggles that went on between parents and children over associating with the missionaries. These struggles were centred within households at the beginning, but changed and entered the public realm as the Christian community began to comprise a substantial percentage of the society and thus became a greater threat. They only began to resolve themselves after the vast majority of the population had converted, and, even then, debates over the meaning and role of Christianity within Ovamboland continued. Informants who were children in the 1920s and 1930s report that virtually all parents and guardians resisted the idea of children joining churches. One woman said her uncle tied her and her siblings to physically restrain them from going to church when she was a girl in Ombandja. (McKittrick, 2002: 192)

Not everything European was rejected. At the beginning, there were a few commodities that were reportedly popularly received - clothes, soap, tea and sugar were some of the exotic items that were hailed and embraced in the community, but the community was generally initially in opposition to Christianity and its doctrines. The Aawambo, particularly women were fond of using natural herbs as body perfumes. In this regard, soap was initially used as a body lotion rather than as a bathing product. One reason could have been to spare the scarce products, but it is also true to point out that the

community was not familiar with the functional role of the soap. The scent could be smelled hundreds of metres away when used. This explains the scarcity of these products. What stroked the community to liking these products was the nice smell rather than its functional role to keep the body clean.

As European clothes multiplied, the supply of detergents remained very rare. Esther Mbumba told me that: *"it was only a very few individuals who worked as house maidens for the Europeans aakalele could get soap, before Ondjondjo was built. The tradition of washing dresses, using detergents to kill the parasites like lice and ticks was not very common in the community until very recently."* [Mbumba, 2003: Omapundo). Growing up as a child in the seventies, I can also still vividly remember that soaps were still very rare. By then only a few households- not necessarily Christian households - but those that had men working in urban towns - *uushimba* – possessed such luxury items. Tim Burke has written of colonial Zimbabwe *". . . wealth, prestige, and identity, as expressed through goods, had begun to evolve a fundamentally new grammar"* [1996: 90]. In this regard, it is imperative to note that clothes and soap as a metaphor for cleanliness is relatively idealistic and irrational to the *Aawambo* cultural values with respect to the promotion and maintenance of cleanliness in the pre-colonial *Owamboland.* My argument is that clothes in essence; traditional or European do not determine a person's cleanliness, but it were hygienic principles that shaped the status of a health society and arguably these principles and mechanisms were in place in the pre-colonial *Owamboland* as they are fundamentally and essentially vital to life.

Chapter Four: The meaning of ‘tradition’ and `culture’ - Modern ‘traditional costumes’

To most of the *Oshiwambo*-speaking population group the concept of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ is subtle. In *Oshiwambo* the two terms can be interpreted as *omuthigululwakalo [Nd.]\Omufyuululwakalo [Kw.] and Eenghulughedi [Kw.]*. Literarily, both terms are closely interwoven and appear inseparable as both evoke and echo meanings in dress, language, food, work and other socio-cultural norms of the past. Nevertheless, it is clear that to most *Aawambo* ‘culture’ *eeghulughedi* is the accumulation of traditional knowledge, a way of orienting the community to accept and embellish ways of life, norms and attitudes that are fundamental and central to the socio-economic set up of the people, thus; the family, homestead, clan, community and society at large. The role of imparting cultural knowledge starts at home; the homestead being the nucleus of social organization that promotes and bequeaths community inspirational and conventional cultural wealth to new generations as their future traditions.

Important components of the past socio-economic structure like songs, folklore, dance and music that reflect the history, heritage and identity of the community are all interpreted as traditional cultural components. Songs for example were traditional or cultural because they formed an integral part of an individual’s education. When a person went about traditional routine activities or when people worked together in a group such as when hoeing*Oshitemo,* stamping *mahangu\Okakungungu,* looking after cattle,

pounding at *Oshini*, etc. songs were always sung to boost morale and more importantly to tell, inform and educate, in particular the youths about important historical aspects pertaining to the community and its individuals. Every song told a story and conveyed meaning about important historic conventions. Songs were also used to accompany other work like thatching (*okuuvilika)* a hut or constructing storage baskets (*Omashisha\Omaanda)*. Songs accompanied by traditional dances like the spectacular *Omupem*be *Gwaandema w*ere popular among the *Aakwaluudhi, Aangandjera* and the *Aakolonkadhi* or during the *Ovakwanyama eeghama* dances. It should be noted that different costumes were worn for different types of dances to match the tune and the purpose of the dance.

However, by analysing the two terms closely it appears that the two do have distinguishable features that compliment each other. As it has been indicated above it is obvious that culture is a way of cultivating and investing in the youth knowledge of the community's cultural resources that they should continue to cater for and promote to coming generations as their 'traditions'. Therefore, the way the family brings up its children within the context of the homestead norms is what defines their cultural values, historical background and shapes our identity that is as embodied in our inherited traditional customs.

Photo 26: The omupembe traditional dancers from Omusati region in oombwaka aprons modifying the earlier leather aprons called Oonkuntuwa. Source: The History Research Project. Date: November 2002.

Culture determines and defines a person's character, emotions, attitudes, and temperament and choice of clothing. The *Aawambo* for example, are known for their hospitality, calmness and tolerance. It is not the colour of the skin that determines a person's cultural behaviour, but, our morals are determined by where and how we were brought up. Take the *Rukwangali* people from *Okavango* for example, they are

genetically relative of the *Aawambo*, but they differ from us in their social set up and customary norms in their culture and clothing. These differences are predominantly determined by differences in their environment and history that influenced our social behaviour, food, dress etc. The *Aawambo* having been brought up and nurtured in a different natural environment differ from other groups in Namibia socially, culturally and economically. Therefore, it is very clear that a person is born without any customs but he/she is (in the words of Paulus Helmuth) 'cultivated', moulded and oriented into becoming what his parents and community wants him to become. Helmuth pointed out that:

. . . scientists have proved that; if you put a person among monkeys he /she will never walk on two legs nor will he be able to communicate in the mother tongue, a person learns to speak, walk and do other things by imitation. Human beings enforce laws and norms to regulate their behaviours because they are not animals. When you go to bed, you cannot sleep with your shoes on. This is what makes us human beings and intelligently distinguishes us from other animals that are less intelligent than descendants of homosapiens family. (2003: Windhoek)

"Tradition" on the other hand refers to fundamental principles regulating our identity. A peoples' tradition is what the community embraces consciously and practices with pride and dignity. What is important to note is that tradition, unlike culture, is persistent, but when destroyed it is hard to bring back or revive. This is true with regard to the pre-colonial norms, customs, and rituals through which the Aawambo traditions were

observed, but, nowadays, most of these are no longer practical and some have been completely forgotten.

It has been indicated that any tradition should have value and pride. Where the pride and interest of the custodians are in decline, the tradition may also become vulnerable to decay and stands to lose the respect and esteem of the younger generations. This could be caused by many factors, but most important of all is when the parents, the custodians of any tradition, neglect their custodianship role of transmitting traditional traits to their children. Most of the *Oshiwambo*-speaking population groups appear to be suffering from this dangerous syndrome, reflecting a mentality that has been implanted in the community by the influence of the colonialists and church cultures. Many people today, in an independent Namibia, feel the need to observe, preserve and pay homage to the ancestors traditions, however, it appears extremely difficult to know some of the traditions or get some of the important objects of traditional practices. Many ethnological objects were destroyed during a period of over a century of cultural subjugation and isolation of indigenous cultural practices. Bringing this knowledge back is possible, but it requires a lot of effort, a committed team and close links with nations that have taken part in Namibia's colonization and Christianisation, among them Finland, German, England, Sweden and other formerly imperial countries.

Our sets of traditions were carefully regulated by norms. Despite their significance to the community, they (norms) were not written down but have been transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. Some of these concepts were to regulate

decent behavioural attitudes in the community for example one could not look up when another person was climbing up a tree, otherwise it was believed the person would fall down from the tree. This could be viewed in the nature of the clothes that the people wore. Since there were no pants looking up at a person climbing on a tree could be very embarrassing, seeing the person's nakedness. It was also a taboo for a married woman to come home after the cattle had been taken to the kraal, as it was believed this would cause the death of the cattle, the main source of traditional dress and other sources of wealth. In essence, this was to regulate women's' behaviour by ensuring that they were home before dark to prepare food for the family.

As it has been shown above, the discourse of what is tradition is highly contentious. Traditional leather costumes had been diminishing since the advent of missionaries and colonialists. Most of the people born since the 1930s have not seen their parents in leather costumes, but found them wearing *Omalapi.* This practice persisted for many years, only to subside slowly following the increase in the supply of trousers, skirts, and shirts. I have argued earlier that tradition should be persistent, popular and ideal in the minds of the people. It is worth noting that with the invention of *Oompuku\Oondhelela,* regardless of the material being imported from outside, the design was local. The materials were initially worn plain, but later on women resorted to stitching them together into skirts, using local stitching methods. Animals sinew and palm leaves were used as fibre to stitch the materials together. Following the introduction of sewing machines, the designs were modified by African trained tailors who converted the design of the old leather costumes into the new materials. The skirts were decorated with stripes called *Olutenda* at the

bottom of the skirt. These resemble the old style called *Omushambe wa shiga Ondjeva*, (described in chapter two) an imitation of the clothes for initiated women. Most of these clothes are still worn among elderly women in the community, especially during the celebrations of national days.

As I have pointed out earlier, leather costumes have given way to popular European dress since the turn of the twentieth century. For over a century, the Owambo communities tested new costumes; predominantly beads and clothes. The Finnish tailored styles which the community call *Oohema dhoontulo* are one of the fashioned items that have persisted over the years. In addition there have also been long skirts called *Oondhelela* which are still popularly worn today, especially at special ceremonies like weddings, child naming and during cultural festivals.

By the 1940s most women especially those who became Christians had adopted to the Finnish invented fashions that later on were modified into the *Oohema dhoontulo,* that, today are portrayed as 'traditional costumes'. These dresses partly resembled the long dress that the *Ovaherero* women wear today and are interpreted as the 'traditional' costumes of the *Ovaherero*. Like the *Ovaherero* long dress, the *oohema dhoontulo* have been recently packaged as symbols of *Oshiwambo* cultural identity. In conformity with past traditional practices, a circumcised woman wore clothes that reached down to her anklets as, a sign of maturity and responsibility. She was also expected to be slow and steady in her movement. This symbolized tenderness, dignity, control and ownership. Girls on the other hand wore miniskirts

Photo 27: Meme demonstrating her traditional dress. When cotton materials multiplied in the community women changed from cotton skirts into dress. Nevertheless these dresses are worn with other traditional ornaments like the ostrich beads and the dress is boiled with the red olukula and so includes elements of the pre-colonial costumes. Source: The History Research Projec (2002).

The discourse of alluding to the *oohema dhoontulo* as traditional or not traditional clothes has become a contentious issue particularly after Namibia's independence. However, in order to consider whether the *Oohema dhoontulo* are traditional or not, is equally to ask whether other fashions accumulated over the course of the existence of the *Aawambo* as a community (like the *Oonkutuwa, Oompole, Omalapi* and many others) are 'traditional' costumes or not. Therefore, it becomes a question of who determines what is 'traditional' and on what criteria can a particular items of clothing becomes accepted as a traditional dress. The moral authority to decide what is traditional or not traditional is highly contested, but should rest on the shoulders of the community to decide. This chapter will make an attempt to draw conclusions on the basis of the community's perspective of how it wants to define and portray traditional costumes.

The discourse of whether the *oohema dhoontulo* are traditional clothes or not has split the community debate into two factions. One group, perhaps the most tolerant feels that these costumes are traditional, the other group the conservatives persist that *oohema dhoontulo* are not traditional costumes. Those who say these costumes are not traditional base their arguments on the point that the material for these costumes was originally from Europe. Thomas Kalumbu stated that:

These materials were not produced locally. Their origin is in the west… their designs and styles of dressing are also not unique to the Aawambo cultural norms, and worse still, our women cover their heads with head crowns and head ties like the crown of the queen

of England. "If this is what the Aawambo women wear and call tradition it distorts the public. In our tradition, women never covered their heads, except when plaited or when she was wedding. If a woman covered her head, it was interpreted differently. People would think she were bride or deceased. Women covered their heads when they mourned their husbands or children. (Kalumbu, 2002: Olukonda).

One might however, argue that although the material that make *oohema dhoontulu* were imported, what is important is that the materials have been modified to suit African womens' tastes and cultural background, this cultural intimacy link cannot be overlooked. These are also not only tailored in a particular style but most importantly there are conditions that accessories and beads like *Onyoka* must form part of the set of the dress for the wearer to qualify that she has put on traditional attires. Another important aspect that is worth illustrating and promoting is that the *oohema dhoontula* unifies and unites the entire community of the *Aawambo* as a single entity unlike in the past where a sense of sub-tribal affiliation determined what and how one should dress.

Paulus Helmuth argued that: *All these [oohema dhoontulo] have been borrowed. these are European products, traditional costumes should be products of the local environment, Involving local skills in their production. Moreover, tradition should be resistant to foreign cultures for many years without eminent modification. We have deserted and departed with our tradition. Our fathers wore skin leathers for costumes, not cotton dresses. We have tried to modify the make and design of the cotton dress to suit our foregonetraditions, but, we have failed. It is common to see elderly Aawambo*

women wearing long dresses and claim to dress traditionally. Look at the Himbas, how do they dress? Their dresses are made from cattle leathers. Our traditional costumes used to be very similar to theirs. They are the only community that has preserved its traditional values to this day in Namibia. Nothing much has changed between generations, and it is likely to continue for many years. We should however, admit the fact that we have embarrassingly defied our traditions. You hail another person's tradition while forfeiting yours, at stake\risk. You cannot serve two masters at the same time. Take the food we eat today, for an example rice, macaroni and even potatoes would you call these traditional food? It would be wrong to refer to a plough as traditional tool. (Helmuth, 2002: Windhoek).

Contrary to Helmuth's interpretation I argue that there appear to be no costumes that are traditionally `authentic'. Hence, every passing generation tends to accustom itself to a prescribed code of cultural clothing with variations in fashion that conform with political and economic developments. Therefore, any code of dressing that has been accepted locally within a given socio-political and cultural dispensation becomes a 'tradition' in as much as it defines and interprets the cultural identity of an individual or group with definite similarities of continuities with the clothing worn by previous generations.

Analysing what is traditional or not cannot be accurate without respecting the views of the host community about what and how they want to define traditional costumes. The tracing of tradition should be inclusive of all historic periods, since every generation experiences sets of new norms shaped by factors of social evolution. As new cultures

emerge, existing values may become weaker and subdue to the new political and socio-economic dispensation, that in itself may enforce and shape new social values. The seven kingdoms have gone through different stages in history. In this regard it is right to declare glass beads\ *Omawe gOshilongo, omushambe, iimpole* and cotton dresses as traditional. Historically, they are not indigenous, but they commemorate cultural changes. It is however, distressing to note that the transformation from the leather costumes into the latest traditional fashions was done at random and focussed on dismantling the old tradition without balancing the two to co-exist.

It is an undisputed reality to accept that European dresses have become overwhelmingly fashionable. However, although these fashions have been largely blamed for the loss of traditional clothing, it could be claimed that the 'invention' of the new European-inspired traditional fashions has played a major role in the social unification of the eight ethnic groups of the *Aawambo.* Dressing people uniformly subjected the community to encoding a sense of a common geographical background and cultural identity. It could also be argued that greater diversity in clothing has led to the end to the hierarchy of traditional costumes and the creation of more unified homogenous group. The danger, in this, lies in the peoples' loss of important cultural items. As European clothes became dominant, interest in traditional objects subsided. This created a social tension and general confusion.

Almost every set of our ancestors pre-colonial customary practices is diluted by modernization. The traditional marriage is a good example in this regard. Before

independence, *Efundula* was pacified but it has been emerging again since 1990. I have attended several of them to familiarise myself with the way it is organized in comparison to the existing written\oral literature on how it was done before it subsided. The church's role in weakening the ceremony is clear. Today there are evident changes from the way *efundula* was conducted at the turn of the twentieth century. One of the major differences is the type and styles of clothes that the brides wore. Today the brides no longer wear leather costumes but cotton dresses *Oondhelela.* Another significant difference is the hair style. As I have indicated in an earlier chapter once there was a dress code for the hairstyle of every girl preparing for *efundula*. This is no longer applicable. Girls go for the *efundula* with saloon plaited or loosely fashioned hair. The uniform hairstyle that every bride wore after the wedding like the *Oshikoma* among the western tribes or *Omhatela* among the *Ovakwanyama* are no longer applicable, and during traditional festivals participants like girls are advised to cover their breasts and to wear tight pants.

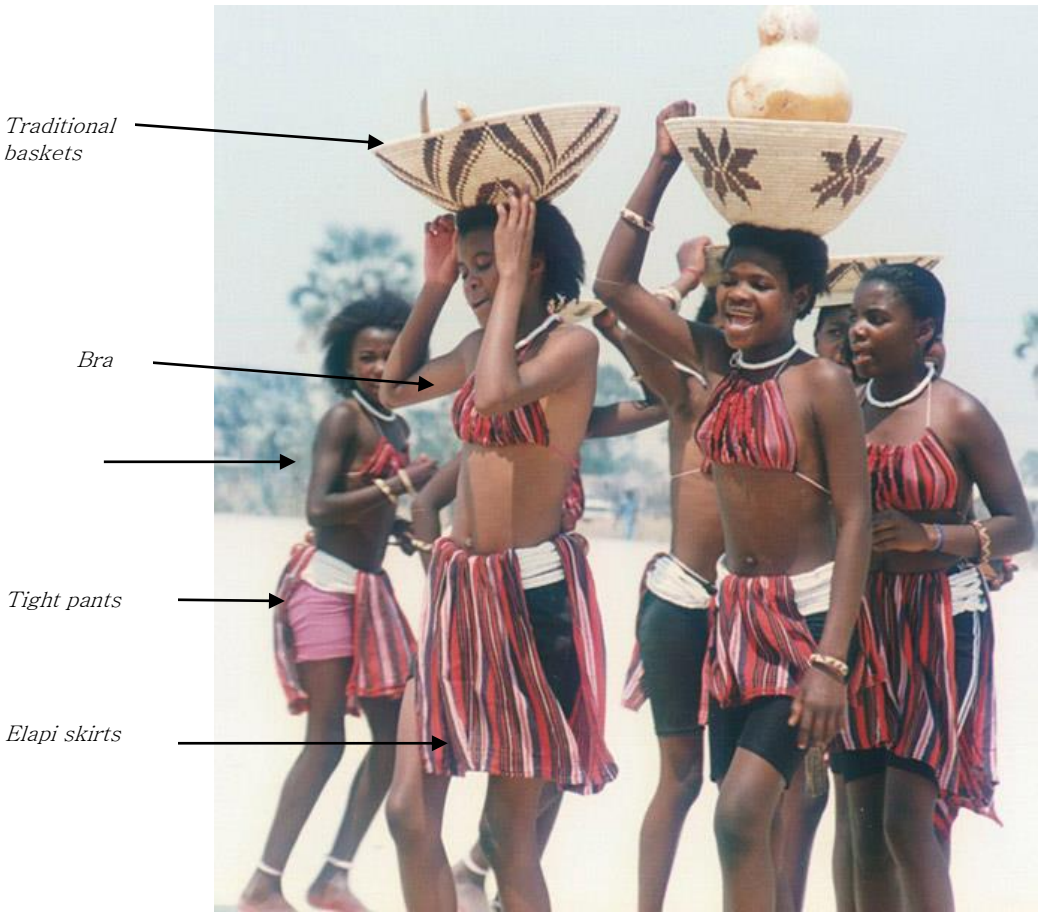


Photo 28: Young girls in the contested traditional costumes. The wearing of bras and tight pants is regarded, by some, as not `Tradtional'. Source: The History Research Project. Date: August 2001

It is also surprising to see the *Namunganga,* the one who conducts the *efundula,* dressed in European costumes as he performs the ceremony. Moreover, the brides were sent to the bush for a period not less than three weeks, before the *efundula* was called off. This is

no longer applicable. My objective is not to dwell on the changes introduced to the *efundula,* but to show the extent to which traditional costumes have been affected by modernity and its influences on the traditional norms and cultural ethics of the *Aawambo*, which are not only reflected in dress, but also in the way in which 'tradition' is performed today.

The new fashions are called by European names, most of which do not echo a sense of pride in the material culture of northern Namibia. In this way, not only material production, but also the names and functional uses of 'traditional costumes' are slowly disappearing from the community. Although the local people did name European fashions by local names, it basically enriched the language vocabulary, but impaired and negated local heritage. Some of the names peculiar to the *Oshiwambo* traditional costumes and those that were given to the imported fashions have been described in the previous chapters. New clothing did not only influence change in language, but also violated the sense of clan identity and gender differences that were defined by what a person wore.

During the history exhibition organized by the History Research Project that I facilitated, at the University of Namibia in November 2002, I was amazed by the lack of cultural awareness with regard to traditional costumes demonstrated by the young people who turned up for the exhibition. As people were looking at some Oshiwambo traditional objects on display I was peeping at comments made by some people about some of the items exhibited; *'Omizalo dh'Aashimba',* meaning, *'Ovahimba* costumes' was one of the

disappointing comments collectively ushered by several young people as they went around the exhibits.

Esther Mbumba from Omapundo in *Ondonga* told me a similar story. One afternoon in 1985 while she was farming with her children, a man dressed in traditional costumes approached them from a distance. To her surprises her children ran away when he came closer, thinking that he was a 'madman'. Incidents like these clearly explains the degree of cultural unawareness, negligence and the loss of ideal symbolic identity in the sense of traditional costumes. Although, European influences have been dominant in most other communities in Namibia and broadly in Africa; cultural disinheritance appears to have done particular damage to the cultural heritage of the *Aawambo* in contrast to our immediate neighbours, the *Ovahimba* who for centuries had also been in contact with Europeans of all categories and who for some years fell under the traditional jurisdiction of north-western Owambo kingdoms, in particular under the rule of king Mwaala GwaNashilongo of *Uukwaluudhi* yet have successfully preserved their traditional practices. Traditional ceremonies like male circumcision and traditional marriage are still part of their Culture.

Some people advocate returning to the leather costumes, which I think is quite impossible However, what is important is to remember to record and preserve what our grandmothers inherited. The community at the moment is fortunate that a few elderly people acquainted with knowledge of traditional costumes are still in the community and

when interviewed they provide rich information on the traditional costumes of the ancestors. As Paulus Helmuth puts it:

. . . it is hard to do away completely with our valued traditional customs because these are an integral part of our personality. Once we get rid of them then we no longer whom we are. Materially we might change, but the inborn instinct always compel us to be cautious and reluctant to embracing fully what is culturally not part of us. To some extent we adapt to European values and agree with them because, nature applies equally to all of us but it should be regulated by the ancestral spirits, mediating between human beings and their ancestors. (2003: Windhoek)

How can the community preserve its past?

Missionaries like Martin Rautanen (Nakambale) spent over forty years working among the *Aawambo*, but his work never discussed the meaning and cultural significance of clothing to the *Aawambo*, nor did he take initiatives in the local community to make ways and methods of preserving their rich and unique materials of cultural heritage. Yet Rautanen had come from a society where museums were already in existence. As missionaries encouraged the community to disregard and destroy its beliefs and material culture they, ironically, also collected and trafficked cultural properties to Finland for display. Peltola testifies that *'after arriving in Finland in summer 1891, Rautanen arranged a "museum" in his home in Helsinki where he showed his guests objects from Ondonga'* [2002: 144]

The construction of museums in northern Namibia was not encouraged by missionaries, although in post-independent Namibia the Finnish church has supported the development of a museum at Olukonda. However, in general terms the development of a community museum could be a solution to the region's cultural crisis. This should be an institution that collects, gathers, documents, preserves, interprets material evidence and exhibits items for the purpose of research, education, remembrance and enjoyment. A museum plays a vital role in preserving the past. The community fashions dresses, beads, ornaments, cutlery, farming implements, cooking facilities, food stuff and many other items that could be hosted in a museum. The notion of a museum should, however, not be interpreted as a place where old things are kept, but as a mechanism where the community will continue to openly participate in dialogue with its historic past in efforts to repair and rehabilitate our culture and open up opportunities for further research to further recover what has been lost. In this context recent debates about the role of museums in the community are relevant. Fuller has discussed the idea of an `ecomuseum' as a method of community development and an alternative to the traditional museum. He states that: . . . *an `ecomuseum' recognises the importance of culture in the development of self-identity and its role in helping a community adjust to rapid change. The ecomuseum thus becomes a tool for the economic, social, and political growth and development of the society from which it springs* (1992: 328). This concept of 'ecomuseum' is ideally significant and relevant for the preservation and conservation of northern Namibian communities that have ruined their history and rich traditions as a

result of the past century of colonial subjugation and the negative influence of Christianity on the people's perspective and perception of their traditions.

As I have pointed out earlier it is always significant to note that history is not only dynamic in process, but also indefinitely fragile as it can be distorted easily, especially, when material evidence of the past have not been carefully preserved. For long there has been an agonizing attitude of carelessly neglecting our history and cultural heritage. A fresh example of how inattentive Namibians are with their history is the failure to adequately document Namibia's independence struggle. Fourteen years since Namibia obtained democratic rule no systematic team effort has been taken to collect, research and preserve the history of the liberation struggle while those who took part in it are still alive. A few individuals and institutions like the northern campus of the University of Namibia seem to be committed to promoting awareness of the importance to document and preserve aspects of historical past, but there appears to be little coordination or motivation, especially from government institutions to support such initiatives..

The History Research Project at the University of Namibia Northern Campus has so far collected stories and artefacts, which need to be preserved and exhibited in a proactive approach to preserve traditional knowledge. However, although the project is doing this work with the full support of the community, its continuity is in doubt as there is no solid support, direct involvement or ownership by the University or any other supportive agency. The project has come up with innovative ideas. One of these ideas is to set up a Local History Association to draw membership from *Oshana, Omusati, Ohangwena* and

Oshikoto regions. The idea for a local history association emerged as a result of current developments with the project activities and expectations that should seek to collect a substantial number of interviews with reference to the community's cultural heritage and, in particular, memories of the recent liberation struggle, major battles of which were fought in the north.

Cotton materials that were introduced to the community about a century ago have also not been documented nor steps made to collect, document and preserve the history of how these items got into the community, why did the community allow them to substitute and later replace leather costumes and what role each item played in the construction of our cultural heritage. Some places like the *Ondjondjo* have contributed significantly to the transformation of the *Aawambo* clothing. However, it appears that little research has been carried out to date to recover the silenced histories of northern Namibia communities. One reason could be that there seems to be no clearly defined national policy or board to coordinate and encourage the preservation of cultural heritage at community level. The Ministry of Basic Education and Culture is entrusted with the responsibility of promoting cultural awareness and preservation of Namibia's cultural heritage, but, it appears that it is failing to deliver the expected tangible benefits to respective communities particularly to the formerly culturally disadvantaged communities in the former *Owamboland*.

Can the National policy on Arts and Culture promote museum development?

A national conference on Arts and Culture policy in Namibia took place in Windhoek, from the 5th to the 7th June, 2001 and in November, 2001 the Cabinet of the Republic of Namibia accepted the policy. The main objective for the national cultural policy was elaborated in the following speech by the Director of Culture and Heritage Dr. Helbert Diaz, who argued that:

Due to the vital need to retrieve, preserve and protect the national cultural heritage of the Namibian nation, it is of cardinal importance that a national Arts and Culture Policy be created to strengthen the Namibian culture, which has played resistance role during the struggle in the political and social liberation, also to play a full part in the rehabilitation and unification efforts. Such a policy should guide the Namibians towards a common determination to strengthen understanding among our people and cooperation in order to meet the vision and aspirations of our communities to see brotherhood and solidarity reinforced and integrated within a greater cultural unity which will transcend the various ethnics in our country into national unity. The Namibian National Arts and Culture Policy should therefore be designed as a codification of social practices and concerted activities whose aim is to satisfy cultural needs and national development through the optimal utilization of all the available material and human resources, in other words the National Arts and Culture Policy should attempt to integrate the cultural development plan in the overall programme for economic and social development (Diaz 2001, 2).

In the above analysis it is significantly important that the Ministries like that of Basic Education and Culture recognize how much Namibians have lost in terms of their history and cultural heritage, but despite all these recognitions the Ministry appears to be reluctant, inactive and very slow in carrying out initiatives and implement actions that will facilitate research, collection and indeed preservation of displaced items of Namibia's rich cultural heritage and historical documentations. Therefore in as much the Ministry continues to show reluctance and lack of motivation, various communities since they are now inspired and empowered, may carry out individual community projects to preserve their cultural heritage and history. While such initiatives are in essence good, literally such moves might be harmful to promoting the national unity of all Namibians, should every community decide to establish its own separate museum celebrating local traditions and history other than promoting aspects of Namibian cultural heritage and their history jointly in efforts to foster `national unity' and `greater cultural unity' as fostering separate establishments of local cultures and identities might ultimately, promote disunity and even successionism.

Yet with regard to the formulation of the national policy on Arts and Culture, some crucial components of the policy regarding cultural heritage are vague or have not been clearly stipulated. Although there is mention of the importance of developing cultural centres and museums, the main focus of the draft policy of Arts and Culture seems to be directed to improving the National Museum alone. It suggests that "the national museum should be strengthened, and in particular consideration should be given to making this

institution an independent body in terms of an act of parliament" (Draft Policy on Arts and Culture in Namibia, 2001, 11).

I would also support and recommend the recognition of the national museum by an act of parliament. However, it needs further elaboration on which ways the capacity of the museum should be strengthened. The national museum, ought to act as a coordinating body for the establishment of community museums and to advocate as well as lobby government and non-governmental support for institutions and projects committed to the preservation of Namibia's cultural heritage like the history research project at UNAM, Oshakati. As such the National Museum should strengthen and consolidate coordinated links with community museums and projects as satellite bodies that extend the national museum outreach programs to grassroots communities. Communities like that of north-central Namibia, have, as a result of the past history of cultural and economic subjugation, no provisions for museums till today. Many people in these communities have never been to a museum, though they are highly motivated and understand the concept of collecting and
documenting for preservation.

A centralized, state controlled museum is a good idea. The persisting perception however, is that although there is an urgent appeal and desire among communities in *Ohangwena, Omusati, Oshana and Oshikoto* to establish community museums, it appears that there is no consistent effort by the government to assist communities in this regard. One can imagine that even if communities were to establish museums, there is fear about

being able to sustain them fully, as the Policy on Arts and Culture does not provide any strategy for financial assistance to developing museums in the regions. This raises concerns about financial support, the training of personnel, management and operational costs of community museums. As the community continues to lose local knowledge of its artistic, aesthetic and ethnographic items like costumes; items of material culture that survived cultural oppression also continue to be removed from the local community and context. Material culture is disappearing because there is no effective legislative machinery to prohibit and monitor the unauthorized removal of cultural resources and to research our cultural heritage. Cultural tourism is also put into jeopardy, the longer it continues to exist without museums.

This becomes essential, given the alarming state of unemployment among the youths, compelling some of them with access to precious cultural objects to sell them to tourists who visit the community. Some people even travel as far as Windhoek and Swakopmund to sell these scarce and unique materials to foreign collectors.

As a result of the absence of community museums in the former Owamboland cultural objects that belong to this community now also find their home in the National Museum and some other institutions like the Swakopmund and Tsumeb Museums. Exhibiting cultural artefacts outside the mother community is ideal when done through consensus. However, my opinion has always been that the components of any tradition become more meaningful when exhibited within the mother community. Moreover, it is appropriate that each community is given the opportunity to directly learn from resources generated

from its arsenal of cultural heritage. Moreover, *Owamboland* is one of the most disadvantaged areas in Namibia in terms of basic infrastructure such as roads, schools, clinics and the provision of clean drinking water. Therefore, investing in objects of cultural heritage for the development of cultural tourism within communities to which they belong could address some of the problems facing these communities.

By not making sufficient provisions for smaller museums development, the policy on Arts and Culture does not complement the broader perspective of national unity with regard to nationally accepted cultural ethics and practices. One might even argue that it conflicts with the rights enshrined in the Namibian constitution as the following statement shows:

While the valid things from the past must be preserved, there are practices in all our cultures which must be changed, especially when these are in conflict with the rights enshrined in our constitution or with internationally accepted ethics or the common or environmental limitations (Draft Policy on Arts and Culture, 2001, 8).

Commenting on the above statement I would echo Minette Mans' concern that *"Although, a policy needs checks and balances, one becomes concerned about such broad statements. Who decides what are valid things from the past and who decides that a culture must be changed? Does this imply that government decides what has value and what may or may not be practiced ?"* (Mans 2001: 12).

In view of Man's concerns I would like to add that the preservation of cultural heritage should be indiscriminately inclusive of every occurrence of traditional custom of past generations. Every piece of past tradition is equally needed by succeeding generations to understand the past and shape the future. It should be remembered that what might be seen today as 'invalid' was previously considered essential and valid, hence it was invented. Furthermore, we should note that we value ideas of the past, artistic beauty, attitudes, etc not because all can apply in our society today, but because they act as a repository of wisdom for our positive growth and moral judgements. Therefore, our moral judgements and decision on what is 'good' or 'bad' culture should not point fingers to categorize and classify them as 'valid' or 'invalid'. This could be a distortion that serves as an insult to past forms of civilization. Every passing generation's activities have been shaped by the four main prevailing factors of that time, which are economic, social, political and environmental. Therefore, the heritage sector should not be selective nor make judgements on what is 'good' or 'bad' heritage, but should strive to preserve every component (oral history, written documents, photographs, sketches, etc). And after all who determines for whom what is valid or invalid? I think this should be an individual choice in society today as we all have different tastes and attitudes. As Mans states *"the standards of some cultures are not better or worse than others, but merely different"* (Mans, 2001, 16).

The draft policy claims that it will address the need for research; " The Directorate of Arts and Culture will therefore initiate a council on cultural heritage research that will have links with the National Heritage Council, any national research body that might be

established, UNAM, the National Museum and the National Archives"(Draft Policy on Arts and Culture, 2001, 10). There seems to be many loop holes in this regard, as it appears that no strategic planning body has yet been established to coordinate activities in this regard and it has been several years since the plan to establish such an institution was announced. As a result regional cultural offices seem to be confused about what directional approach they should take. The issues become even more complicated and duplicated as every cultural office in each of the four northern regions strive to establish cultural centres and museums without, apparently any effective co-ordination. Each of these four now has some collections of cultural objects packed in tiny unconditioned store rooms which are not humidity controlled for many years without any clear vision on how they can be utilized in the sense of a museum. The point of concern however, is how many museums will these same demographic regions have? How will they differ in content and mission statements? How will they be sustained and who are their target groups?

A different approach, was taken in November 2002 when the History Research Project launched its first exhibition, under the theme "Keep our fire burning; the traditional homestead". The exhibition consisted of cultural artefacts, posters, an exhibition booklet, a model of the traditional homestead and a documentary video that interprets the importance of preserving and conserving significant traditions and the cultural history of the *Oshiwambo* speaking population. The exhibition was an important milestone, a forum where information on culture, history and traditions of the community was shared and digested by a large audience from the community and at large.

The exhibition was hailed by many people in the community. King Kauluma Elifas of Ondonga described it as:

… *informative and educational in essence…a stimulating experience to encourage and motivate the community, especially our youths, to realize that the community has lost much of its precious history and traditional heritage and blindly continues neglecting its recent history which is tomorrow's heritage. The task to collect, gather, document, record, preserve and disseminate historic information involve every one of us so that future generations may inherit our identity and cherished wisdom, that they may continue to pay homage to this legacy* (King Kauluma, November, 2003: Oshakati).

The November exhibition was the first of the many series of exhibitions planned for the next four years by the project. All the three phases converge under the theme 'Keeping our fire burning; the traditional homestead'. The theme is selected for the series of these exhibitions because the homestead had not only been the centre where traditional values, customs and cultural practices were passed on to the younger generation, but it has also been immensely dynamic in response to the social, economic and political changes which have transformed the community over the years.

The exhibition for phase two of the project is planned to take place in August 2005. In staging the exhibition we are showing our respect and appreciation of the fountain for the democratic values we enjoy today, and at the same time educating the citizens of this

country in matters that are of common value to all of us. The hope is that through activities like these (the gathering of materials for research) we are providing young people, and adults alike, with the inspiration, ideas and methods to deepen their search for understanding their community and encourage them to carry out further research in the field.

It is hoped that the next series of exhibitions will hopefully transform the project into the North-Central Historical and Resource Centre. This will create opportunities for a permanent exhibition space to educate, inform and preserve the culture and rich heritage of these communities through the following activities: further research on the history and culture of the north central Namibia; the continuing collection of historical and cultural objects and information in the form of photos, videos and oral interviews; the dissemination of research findings to the community, development of educational materials for schools and other institutions, development and mounting of exhibitions; and archiving of materials and information for public access..

The community strongly supports the idea of collecting cultural objects for preservation. This is also echoed by the words of King Elifas at the inauguration of the exhibition

The community is still fortunate at this stage to have few resourceful and knowledgeable elderly people as well as other people who possess memories of the past traumas of the liberation struggle. Like in the Greek proverb; "A society grows bigger when old men and women plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in." The few

historically and culturally resourceful people in the community feel that the treasure that they have belongs to the community and should be left with the community to feed on rather than go to the grave with all the community wisdom. Thus, should we become reluctant in recording our own history and cultural heritage, there will be no justification to defend ourselves against blames by future generations on negligence of the community heritage resources. (2003: Oshakati)

As shown in the previous chapters it is obvious that the north-central regions of Namibia, namely *Omusati*, *Oshana*, *Ohangwena* and *Oshikoto* share a common history and cultural heritage. However, very little has been done to document and preserve these regions' heritage. Negligence, uncoordinated activities, a lack of networking, the duplication of activities, the lack of resources and lack of committed team work have been some of the challenges hampering the communities' efforts to preserve our cultural values and memories with regard to our common history, art, costumes, attitudes, religion, rituals, and material objects. In most cases, blame for the loss of traditional valued aspects of the pre-colonial *Aawambo* is squarely placed on the church and colonialism. Ironically though, representatives of the affected people seem to be doing little to repair the damages inflicted on our history and culture.

Some communities having realized the need to preserve tradition, have taken the initiative of developing community museums**.** The community of *Uukwaluudhi* is already engaged in this whereby the king of *Uukwaluudhi* has converted his traditional homestead into a community museum. In *Uukwambi,* Vilho Tshilongo told me of his

plans with Mr. Kaapama to set up an *Uukwambi* museum; *"We have began to collect cultural objects for a museum to be located at Elim…where king Negumbo LyaKandenge had his palace..piiti kiidhiluka"* According to Tshilongo the proposed museum will celebrate and commemorate the kings of *Uukwambi*. While plans to set up community museums should be encouraged, the concern is on how to make each of them unique in its representation to avoid duplication and also to ensure that they meet professional standards for conservation and documentation. There is also concern that such sites might groom and spark ethnicity. I am not against such initiatives but I would rather suggest and encourage initiatives that suggest an establishment of a more collective museum for all the former seven kingdoms. This would be more informative, educational and likely to generate support from the government as the major museum in the region.

The Finnish supported *Nakambale* museum at *Olukonda* though it has existed since independence is confronted with some of the concerns raised above. The museum is not representing a full historical account of the cultural heritage and traditions of the former seven kingdoms. From close observation the museum represents, partly, the history of the Finnish missionary society in *Olukonda* as well as a handful of cultural and traditional aspects of the *Olukonda* community within which Martin Rautanen ('*Nakambale'*) served for over forty years. Rautanen, a Finnish missionary, pioneered Christianity in *Owamboland.* Located in a building that used to be the house of *Nakambale's* family, the museum, appears to celebrate the work of *Nakambale* and the Finnish church's success in *Olukonda*. As a result the museum appears to lack substantial popular support from the host community, as the community's involvement is low and the cultural objects in the

museum have been simply reduced to ethnological tools of cultural impotence. Ian Fairweather's observation of this argument is both supportive and contrary. He argued that "*the villagers of Olukonda are certainly aware that the museum has the function of preserving things that might otherwise be forgotten, but I did not feel that this was its primary importance to them. Museums, as Macdonald argues are one medium through which selves and others may be defined – through which the detailed identity contests of everyday life may be waged (Macdonald 1996, p. 11). It is for this reason that Nakambale museum is important to the people of Olukonda. Oshiwambo-speakers are engaged in a continuous process of reconstructing their culture, and the transformation of Nakambale's house from mission to museum is an outward expression of this process.* (Fairweather, 2001).

I agree with this application of Macdonald's argument on the primary importance of a museum, but this is arguably not applicable to the Nakambale Museum at this time. It is true that a few cultural objects have been exhibited in the museum. Most of these cultural objects were collected presumably, from the local, nearby community. However, the link between the existing community and objects in the museum appear to be poorly represented, arguably as the museum was not set up with the close consultation and involvement of the community that it claims to represent. For this reason and others, the captions and other written sources in the museum are vague in detailing the role of the objects on display and their cultural values and their contribution to shaping the community's cultural heritage and identity have not been explained.

There is also no information on the process by which the community lost most of its precious cultural objects. In this regard, comprehensive information on the nature of the community's first contact with the missionaries is important. The Nakambale Museum, is in the ideal position to do this. *Olukonda* was a stronghold for early missionaries and this put the neighbouring community under the direct influences of the missionaries. As a result, the community became one of the first to be Christianised in northern Namibia. Important traditional practices were annihilated in this regard, resulting remarkably, in the prohibition of traditional ceremonial practices like *Efundula.* Musical instruments to celebrate weddings or even drumming to inform the community of a prominent person's death (like that of the king or important chiefs) were banned.

Traditional fashion such as the unique hair styles that distinguished *Ondonga* women from the other seven ethnic groups faced early eradication due to the presence of the missionaries in the vicinity. The location of the church in the village of *Olukonda* also had an influence on the structure of the homestead and the surroundings, and skewed its role in a Eurocentric direction. Polygamy was the most affected in this regard. Information in this regard needs to be exhibited in the Nakambale museum to inform and explain the effect the mission station had on the community. Another important element that is missing in the museum is the popular women's dresses *Oohema dhoontulo*, which are today called traditional dress. These dresses as illustrated earlier, were introduced to the community by the Finnish missionaries. Being the first cotton fibre dresses in Owamboland their representation in the museum is essential to invite dialogue on how such fashions could form part of local cultural heritage and traditions.

The Nakambale museum has an opportunity, perhaps, to initiate dialogue for the possible repatriation of the community's cultural heritage. This is with regard to the museum's location within the realm of an institution that accelerated the loss of its cultural heritage partly as a result of the Finnish initial contact followed by years of hard work to Christianise the community. Most importantly, the museum needs to take initiatives that encourage research on the community's cultural heritage and traditions. This could include what objects were taken from the community, when, how, by whom why? The cultural value attached to such objects needs to be examined and studied closely and mechanisms on how such objects could be preserved when repatriated needs to be clearly defined and outlined to smoothen demands for possible repatriation of objects found in other countries.

Chapter Five: European Fashion, Aawambo Style.

Deborah Heath has commented on the practice of the 'language of dress', that, *"Sanse, meaning dressing up or dressing well, embodies a dialogue between dominant and subordinates".* (Heath 2003: 19). In the concurrently heterogeneous, but culturally diverse Namibia, the discourse of '*sanse'* becomes highly contentious, and, sometimes, contradictory, in the light of what and how a person is expected to dress. This thesis has sought to illustrate that the *Aawambo* had a unique civilization that clearly defined accepted standards of ethical behaviours to which every community member was to adhere. There were, as described earlier, accepted codes of dress for different groups according to age, gender and status. All these conformed to the laid down standards of the civilization that preceded the advent of European intrusion.

The *Oshiwambo* traditional culture of dressing has since been replaced by European fashions. Carol Tulloch has described clothes as having a *"conflicting ability to initiate and confirm change, to broadcast the political conflict or status within a community; and to be a metaphor of domination and conversely opposition . . ." (*1999 : 63). Since the advent of European fashions, a uniform identity has been developed, leaving customary traditional fashions in disarray and in total submission to contemporary fashions. As one can imagine changes from the traditional to modern fashions have been characterised by contradictions throughout the twentieth century but continued alarmingly after Namibia's independence. One might reason that since the transition from the pre-colonial to modern

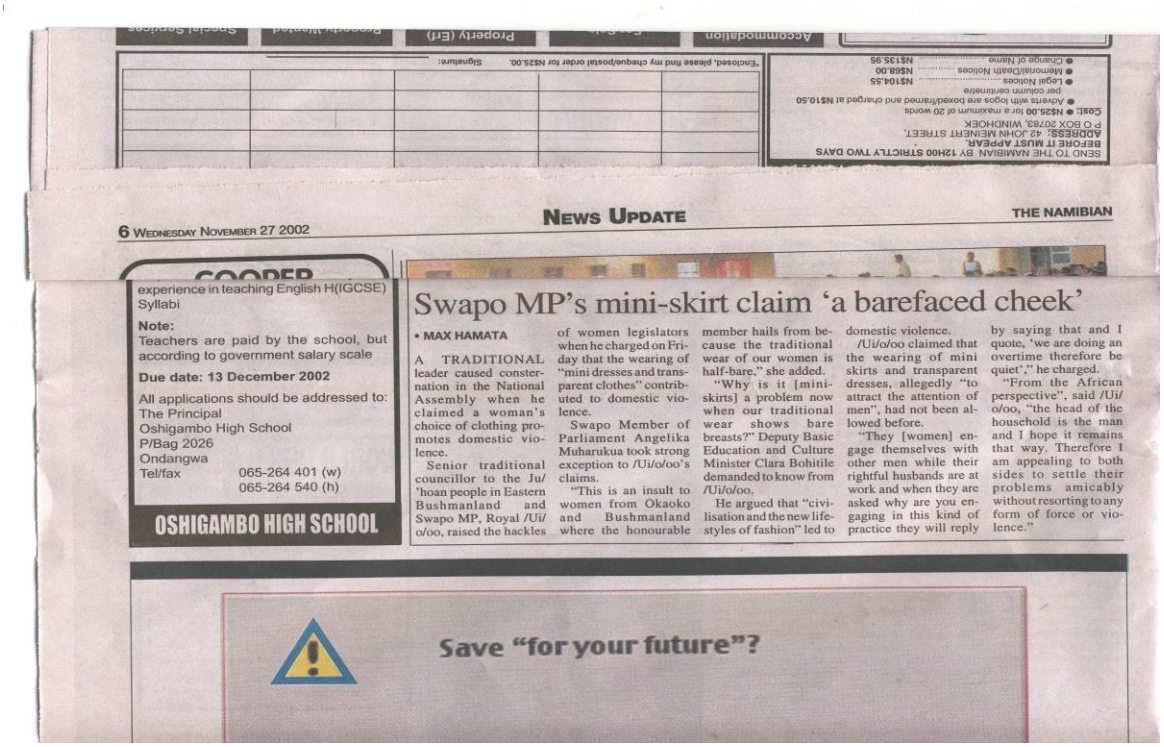
fashions was done without respect for the old tradition it gave birth to the nature of the antagonistic and ambivalent attitudes about African culture that are found today not only among the *Aawambo* but in Namibia as a whole.

As a result of more than a century of colonial and church dominance the community came to adopt a standard code of dressing. The church strengthened and consolidated the already popular cultural ethos that discouraged married woman from wearing short, tight and transparent clothes in public, by recommending women to wear long dresses not only the *Oohema dhoontulo* elaborated earlier, but other dresses too, provided they conformed to the laid down dressing norms'. I have indicated in the previous chapters that in the nature of being dynamic any tradition is destined to become history. As a result of significant political, economic and social changes that affect Namibia as a society, traditional dress appears to have become unpopular among the youths who today are faced with an alarming exposure to the multiple choices provided by the globalisation of fashion.

However, those who were nurtured and cultured in the old fashion dispensation are becoming concerned about immodest fashions worn particularly by the youths. Most of these fashions are body tight, designed in such a way that they emphasise the shape of buttocks and breasts and show the naked waist in a manner that is contrary to the rich traditional norms of the community. Women, who once had been the custodians of tradition are largely blamed and accused of neglecting tradition by shamefully wearing dresses that expose their bodies to 'nakedness'. In the words of Julia Shikesho:

Today's ladies don't dress diligently. Some wear blouses that partly cover their bosoms …naked backs… they wear very short skirts … edges of buttocks and bosoms … it contributes to rape cases that are common in the community today. Men can easily be tempted seeing a woman almost half naked. We had our upper body exposed but wore longer costumes "oondhelela" from the waist and when sitting down you hardly see my underwears. Today it is totally different and unbearable, women wear clothes that are in discrepancy of their cultural identity and to the discrepancy of their dignity as women. Women wear extremely short skirts even at church services to the extent that if something falls down she can't pick it up comfortably. Maybe there are so many different types of clothes and people don't know which one is decent to wear. It is not our way of life. If we could go back to our roots, we would love to see our children inheriting our values (Shikesho, 2002: Eenhana, Uukwanyama)

In recent months, the issue of the mini-skirt was raised in the national parliament, where national leaders were accused of putting to shame their integrity as African women and as public servants representing a society that is largely African. The article published in this regard appears below:



6 WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 27 2002 NEWS UPDATE THE NAMIBIAN

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Swapo MP's mini-skirt claim 'a barefaced cheek'

• MAX HAMATA

A TRADITIONAL leader caused consternation in the National Assembly when he claimed a woman's choice of clothing promotes domestic violence.

Senior traditional councillor to the Ju/'hoan people in Eastern Bushmanland and Swapo MP, Royal /Ui/o/oo, raised the hackles of women legislators when he charged on Friday that the wearing of "mini dresses and transparent clothes" contributed to domestic violence.

Swapo Member of Parliament Angelika Muharukua took strong exception to /Ui/o/oo's claims.

"This is an insult to women from Okaoko and Bushmanland where the honourable member hails from because the traditional wear of our women is half-bare," she added.

"Why is it [mini-skirts] a problem now when our traditional wear shows bare breasts?" Deputy Basic Education and Culture Minister Clara Bohitile demanded to know from /Ui/o/oo.

He argued that "civilisation and the new lifestyles of fashion" led to domestic violence.

/Ui/o/oo claimed that the wearing of mini skirts and transparent dresses, allegedly "to attract the attention of men", had not been allowed before.

"They [women] engage themselves with other men while their rightful husbands are at work and when they are asked why are you engaging in this kind of practice they will reply by saying that and I quote, 'we are doing an overtime therefore be quiet'," he charged.

"From the African perspective", said /Ui/o/oo, "the head of the household is the man and I hope it remains that way. Therefore I am appealing to both sides to settle their problems amicably without resorting to any form of force or violence."

Save "for your future"?

Article 1: Source, The Namibian Newspaper

As the content of the article above illustrates, a tug of war is imminent between the traditional conservatives and liberals over fashion and the larger issue of what should be accepted as Namibian traditional ethical codes of dressing, that today seem to be largely influenced by either Christianity or other religions like the emerging Islam. Pragmatically, western fashions are popular forms of measuring a person's social and economic status in the community today. Traditional dress has since disappeared and most people feel that it is not possible to go back to the traditional ways of dressing. However, the same people regrettably, express strong sentiments about the loss not only of traditional materials, but also show concern that people, especially women do not dress smartly and neatly. It is feared that the community is in jeopardy of permanently losing a sense of respect and dignity for our community values.

The general perception in the community echoes the concern of the parliamentary debate. The way most people dress, especially the youth was largely criticized as in breach of the traditional norms of the community and alarmingly perpetuating increased sodomy. In this connection, the following are some of the strong views expressed by some of the people with whom I have discussed this issue. According to Thomas Kalumbu: *"Nowadays most of our youths, appear to use clothes unconventionally, dressing the body half naked to attract and harass the opposite sex sexually".* (2002: Olukonda) One of the other interviewees noted that; *"Some women dress disappointingly, they wear to attract certain people…the object looses concentration in what was being done by gazing surprisingly at what captures the instant attention…And when they walk in streets men are usually whistling and those in cars look at them, sometimes drivers lose consideration and can cause fatal accidents"* (Kalumbu, 2002: Olukonda, Ondonga)

In the above separate connections, the explicit point is that clothing is presented in these comments as a metaphor or symbol for a wider perception that the moral guidelines followed by older generations are being broken and thus, Namibians, and in particular the parliamentarians who are role models for an African nation should act in line with the respected traditional values of Namibians communities. Therefore, this argument is stimulated by the discourse of promoting and preserving Namibian traditions and seeks to construct a moral framework which is validated through an appeal to African traditional values.

Katrina Tshikongo was concerned that most of the youths' code of dress defies conventional community values. In her view:

Most of our young women are at the forefront of this shameful show of demonstrating naked bodies. It is a disgusting phenomenon threatening and jeopardizing the dignity of an African woman; A genuine African woman was not expected to wear short skirts, tight pants or transparent costumes. It puts us, the senior citizen to shame. We feel betrayed … we are desperate to see a change. We are also embarrassing the world. I don't think our visitors too do want to see us dressing that way they would like to see and conceive genuine African values. Despite the fact that the world has become a global village, we still have to be unique and faithful to our cultural identity, regardless of what we share in common with other communities and nations (Tshikongo, May 2002: Windhoek). Tshikongo's argument could be interpreted in the light of the youths intentionally exhibiting their bodies to attract the sexual pressure of the opposite sex. This argument is basically based on the cultural perception that traditionally women, although they did not have enough overall dresses as it is today, it was morally wrong not to dress up properly. Bosoms of married women and those who were matured to start preparing for weddings were not entitled to be uncovered.

Multiple fashions worn particularly by the youth have not only become a parliamentarian's concern, but also come under direct community scrutiny, as the youth adapt to emerging fashions in search for individual, group or peer identity. However, in essence, if all styles of dressing were invented in response to social, economic and

political responses, why should modern rather than traditional fashions not be ostracized and scrutinized through the public eyes, when literally, Namibia today, entirely dresses in fashions from western materials?

A participant on the *Oshiwambo* service, who did not give her name, indicated that the youth are not only dressing embarrassingly but also accommodate and promote other unruly behavior not in harmony with the traditional values of the community:

Let me give you a few examples, we the blacks did not cultivate a culture of a man and a woman holding hands or embracing each other in public. We did all these things behind closed doors. We should realize that clothes are prominent factors that determine the social organization, uphold moral values and shape group identity. This explains why in some cultures women are compelled to have their faces covered at all times. If we destroy our culture we should be prepared to face the consequence. It is essential to set trends as to how we want our cultural identity interpreted (Tshikongo, 2002: UNAM, Oshakati)

As it has been illustrated above, the preservation of a unique cultural heritage is central to promoting a group identity that needs to be passed to generations to come. How a person should dress has become a national concern. However, the contentious point is whether it is really possible to argue that the wearing of mini dresses and transparent clothes contributes to rape and ‘domestic violence’? In essence one could argue convincingly that

modern fashions are not displaying `nakedness' to the extent that was found in traditional fashions.

The concern raised by Clara Bohitile in the Parliamentary debate when she asked the question "Why is it [miniskirts] a problem now when our traditional wear shows bare breasts ?) [The Namibian, 27th November, 2002: 6] created dialogue nationally. I fully agree with Bohitile that traditionally, our women did not cover their whole bodies, and that breasts were not covered in pre-colonial society. Meme Julia Shikesho with whom I discussed this subject explained that:

. . . what was prohibited by our tradition was for a initiated woman to wear a short 'mini' skirts, not covering her knees, like an uninitiated young girl. We continued to popularize this tradition even when European clothes were introduced. I can't say that the way young girls dress today is bad or unacceptable, because they are in a different period of time, different exposure, taste, environment and that is what they want and comfortable with, (it is their tradition, a rich one provided they do not abuse it). But, I would rather encourage married women to dress properly. They should wear longer dresses, to differentiate themselves from young girls. This is the custom that I think is genuine and should be promoted. (Shikesho, 2002: Eenhana, Uukwanyama).

I am also in support of \Ui\o\oo, and his concern that elderly women should dress in a way that dignifies them and their status in society, but I am not content with his claim

that civilization and the new styles of fashions have led to domestic violence and rape. Does it mean that reverting to wearing long dresses would reduce the sexual desire of men? And historically why was it that among 'habitually naked' people eroticism due to viewing the opposite sex 'nude' was less? I tend to fully agree with Langner that "man's curiosity about a woman body, no matter how well her charms are hidden by her clothes, is perennial and insistent..." (1991 :40). In this respect, responding to callers who raised concerns on the History Research Project radio program '*ongushu yomithigululwakalo noondjokonona',* that women are now raped because they dress to provoke men; *Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah,* Member of the Parliament and Minister of Women's Affairs and Child Abuse, made the following remarks in an interview with the *Oshiwambo* radio service presenter, John Kanamundjembo.

John Kanamundjembo: *Mrs. Netumbo you've listened to the caller's comment. Would you like to comment on why men rape women?*

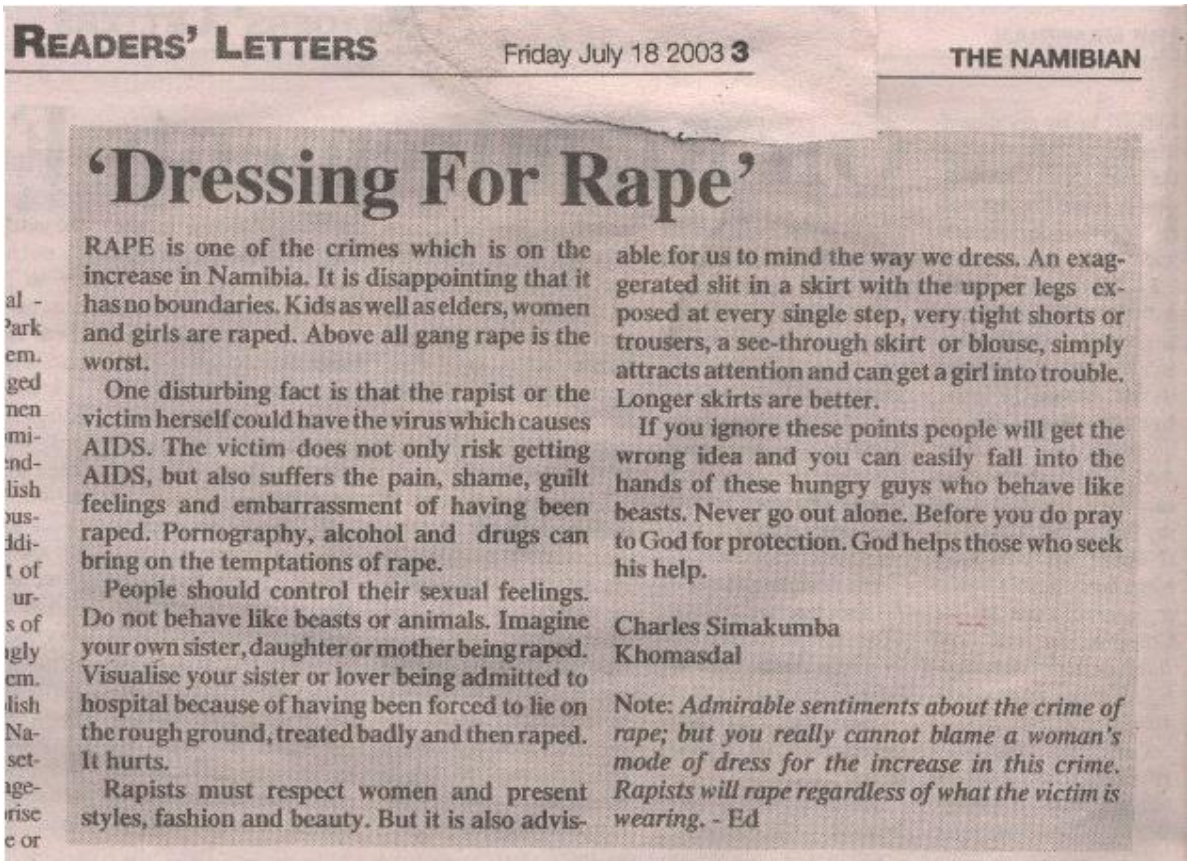
Netumbo Ndaitwah: *I don't want people to associate costumes with rape because as far as I can remember women used to wear traditional skirts and their breast were always exposed. The first thing is that people are usually raped in their homes rather than on streets. We have cases of babies being sodomized sexually. I do not want to call that rape. But does this mean that the rape of the baby in its infancy was seduced by what the baby wear? We should not associate what and how a person dresses with sodomy. Doing this is like praising the rapists and encouraging them to continue raping our women and innocent children. Moreover, most of the rape victims were sodomized indoors, in their*

homes, not while walking in streets. In the news, it is always people abducted from their houses and raped…We still don't know what causes increase on rape… we should find out because rapists don't rape costumes. Rape is destructive whereas clothes is not, therefore, we should avoid trying to create a link between the two.

I am supportive of Ndaitwah's argument that the concern on causes of rape cannot be blamed on what and how women dresses nor should it be judged on the basis of traditional or 'modern' dress but on the immoral behaviour of the rapist and the influence of drugs and other intoxications. I would emphasis that *"a rapist will rape, regardless of what the victim is wearing…".* (Charles Simakumba; The Namibian, 18th July, 2003: 3)

Moreover, I think dressing 'formally' or 'traditionally' will not act as a counter offensive to the rapists. Women could dress in dignified ways and still be raped. Sometimes a person's behaviour contradicts the way he\she dresses, which is to say that not every woman who dresses 'formally' demonstrates decent manners and 'dignity' as a woman. What if for an example the dress is long enough, loose and not transparent, but the wearer's behaviour are not compatible to the code of dressing, for example abusing drugs and alcohol.

Paulus Helmuth, a regular caller to both the *Oshiwambo* and the national radio 'chat show program', once responded to a caller who alleged that when men are drunk they are tempted to rape women who are not properly dressed;



READERS' LETTERS Friday July 18 2003 3 THE NAMIBIAN

'Dressing For Rape'

RAPE is one of the crimes which is on the increase in Namibia. It is disappointing that it has no boundaries. Kids as well as elders, women and girls are raped. Above all gang rape is the worst.

One disturbing fact is that the rapist or the victim herself could have the virus which causes AIDS. The victim does not only risk getting AIDS, but also suffers the pain, shame, guilt feelings and embarrassment of having been raped. Pornography, alcohol and drugs can bring on the temptations of rape.

People should control their sexual feelings. Do not behave like beasts or animals. Imagine your own sister, daughter or mother being raped. Visualise your sister or lover being admitted to hospital because of having been forced to lie on the rough ground, treated badly and then raped. It hurts.

Rapists must respect women and present styles, fashion and beauty. But it is also advisable for us to mind the way we dress. An exaggerated slit in a skirt with the upper legs exposed at every single step, very tight shorts or trousers, a see-through skirt or blouse, simply attracts attention and can get a girl into trouble. Longer skirts are better.

If you ignore these points people will get the wrong idea and you can easily fall into the hands of these hungry guys who behave like beasts. Never go out alone. Before you do pray to God for protection. God helps those who seek his help.

Charles Simakumba
Khomasdal

Note: *Admirable sentiments about the crime of rape; but you really cannot blame a woman's mode of dress for the increase in this crime. Rapists will rape regardless of what the victim is wearing.* - Ed

Article 2: Source, The Namibian Newspaper.

Not very long ago our women wore nothing to conceal breast, buttocks and stomach, but they were not raped. I fail to understand why our men are embarrassing us. They behave like animals. Men seem to take women for granted, as if women are objects of pleasure.

Regardless of what she wears, she is just a human being like you and deserves respect whether she is dressed or naked, whether you (the man) is drunk or sober. We never had a statutory norm that stipulates that when men see naked on them. Let's not ever blame intoxication and poor dressing for rape cases. In Oshiwambo there is an adage that says; "Sha ningwa konkolwe o ya enda nasho komutima" – a drunkard person does not do something under the influence of alcohol without prior planning for it. We should not debate about obvious things like this one…we came from the cultural background where clothes were in short supply but people were not subjected to these barbaric acts. (Helmuth, 2003: Windhoek)

Generally I would suggest that there is nothing wrong with the way the youth of today dress themselves. It appears impossible to decide for them on how and what they should wear. New group identities and peer pressure, both locally, nationally and increasingly internationally, due to improved means of communication technology shape and determine our social behaviours, especially that of our youths. However, it is important to note that as a dynamic community we should embrace new positive changes and reconcile our social values to them without forfeiting what we have. Complaints about the dress of young people are normal and express the characteristic features of a community where local ethical boundaries are challenged as it integrates into a larger national; or global community. However, it is important to note that these popular debates over what is `traditional' (in terms of dress codes and behaviour) are a powerful ingredient of contemporary debates in the public sphere about a whole range of issues with an appeal being made to the concept of `African tradition' to mobilise support for

the preservation of Namibian cultural heritage and of course the recent history of Namibia liberation struggle, tomorrow's heritage.

Logically, arguments of this kind should involve a sense of our cultural and natural environment as well as climate factors. One could argue that if it were not because of the characteristics features of a semi-arid climate as it is in the case of the north-central Namibia, characterized by a scorching sun and extreme heat (northern Namibia records up to 39 degree Celsius between September and March), the culture of dressing could have been different. I have observed with keen interest that people in *Owamboland* cover up their entire bodies during the winter season, especially during the coldest months of June through August. It appears that it is the environment that acts as a determining force on what and how a person dresses. Therefore, the climate and the adjacent environment can determine and shape a community's unique identity. Dr. Kapolo elaborates that:

October is the hottest month, for an example, going to church in October, we should not wear suits, it is too hot, simply wear a shirt and put on a necktie. I can also wear my jeans to church, nothing wrong with it, provided it is clean. Young people wear dresses without sleeves, mini-skirts and tiny T-shirts, they feel good about what they wear. It is not right to restrict choice on clothing among the youth nor should we judge people' moral behaviour by what they wear, 'one cannot judge the colour of the coconut by its shell'. Judgement should be made when they misuse their bodies. However, adults should set good examples by becoming role models for the youths. If one goes to church, one should wear a suit ... Women can wear the oohema dhoontulo (Kapolo, 2002:

Windhoek.). The arguments raised in a third article are also interesting and again raise issues about the conventions of dress and conventions of dress and extent to which constructions of 'African' and 'Western' notions of 'responsibility' are contested.

Parliamentarians ridicule journalists

• MAX HAMATA

SOME male Swapo lawmakers yesterday took a swipe at male parliamentary reporters whom they claimed "dress like women".

Speaking during the Budget debate, Deputy Minister of Prisons, Jeremia Nambinga, deviated from the issue at hand to launch an attack on the dress style of the NBC's cameraman Ronnie Goabeb. He charged that he his dress sense was not "man-like".

"Last year we made a special call for the NBC to respect this House. We requested that anybody coming into this House must dress parliamentary-like (sic) so that we are not put in a situation of guessing whether you are a man or a wife," he said.

He added that male reporters should not cover parliament if they have plaited hair or dreadlocks.

Deputy Higher Education, Training and Employment Creation Minister Hadino Hishongwa interjected saying "for a man putting on [clothes] like a woman does not contribute to the Namibian culture".

Goabeb, who was dressed in a smart suit, has plaited hair.

DTA-UDF coalition leader Katuutire Kaura, however, said it was unfair for MPs to try and ridicule the NBC cameraman.

Kaura claimed the way Deputy Minister of Environment and Tourism Petrus Ilonga and Hishongwa were dressed was not appropriate for Parliament.

"Is that dress parliamentarian-like?" asked Kaura, pointing at Hishongwa.

"His [Hishongwa's] dress is like pyjamas or some sleeping wear," he said. Hishongwa was wearing a long shirt, while Ilonga was wearing a hat.

Said Kaura: "In this modern world the young people are moving towards unisex wear."

The DTA leader added that if legislators wanted to set rules for journalists' dress style "we must take it to the dress code committee and address the issue in the presence of a journalist".

Goabeb told *The Namibian*: "I am not going to change my hairstyle because it doesn't affect my intelligence."

Article 3: Source, The Namibian Newspaper.

Jeremia Nambinga indicated that *"last year we made a special call for the NBC to respect this House. We requested that anybody coming into this House must dress parliamentary-like so that we are not put in a situation of guessing whether you are a man or wife."* This dramatic episode in the parliament is similar to the earlier articles on the question of *'miniskirts in the parliament' and that of 'dressing for rape',* but this tends to be different in the sense that the earlier raised attacks on women parliamentarians' code of dressing and the general public respectively and appealed to a notion of 'traditional' African modesty.

In developing this argument a journalist, was criticized for his dreadlocks. What hair styles would be 'parliamentarian like' hairstyles? If men for example in the parliament were to cut their hair short, what about women parliamentarians, who have adapted to the style of cutting their hair short? I think the attack on Ronnie Goabeb's dreadlocks shows an ignorance in promoting African cultural heritage. Dreadlocks hail King Haille Selasie the emperor of Ethiopia and father of Rastafarians. This is something that I think African parliamentarians should have hailed and embraced instead of criticising in favour of 'European' values and conventions. If a Himba came to parliament entirely dressed in traditional costumes and with that unique and meaningful hairstyle with matted dreadlocks, would he be attacked in a similar way as 'womanish', because of his hairstyle?

It is important to recognize the utilitarian role of modern fashions. Langner provides a useful summary stating that: *"almost every article of clothing from ancient times to down to today performs the following functions: (a) It is useful, as for instance in protecting the body, (b) it is ornamental or possesses aesthetic qualities, (c) it indicates the superior rank, or lack of rank, of the wearer… (d) and it has qualities which tend to stimulate sexual interest"* (Langner 1991: 36). However, I should in addition to Langner's definition, argue that it is important to explain and analyse that in a multi racial Namibia, and where a dichotomy between 'modern' and 'traditional dress is clearly distinguishable it is important to analyse argue that in multi-racial society dress should be perceived as consolidating allegiance to different sets of social values and beliefs. Therefore, diversity in dress might rather, for example, be seen to reflect an emphasis on the importance of individual identity, than communal allegiance.

When two cultures encounter each other, the host culture resists cultural imperialism, but in encounters with colonial powers was usually subjugated. One reason for this subjection was historically that Europeans entered the community with the attitude that western values and material culture were better and superior to African values and objects. Western clothes were auxiliary materials and wearing them was not a sin nor need it have been detrimental to sustainability of local tradition if things had been handled with great care and concern for the archival survival of local traditions.

The church in particular, presented African ways of life as `primitive' and `savage', without encouraging the community to preserve and conserve its traditions. Europeans

condemned African traditions, as incompatible to co-existing harmoniously, side-by-side with European traditional values. Europeans clothing and other items like the guns that were indeed superior and influential, were promoted by smear campaign against local products and the manipulation of local production. Generally, *Aawambo* costumes were not uniquely identical, disparities in ways of dressing, material, fashions and names were remarkable among the eight *Aawambo* ethnic groups. This was largely attributed to disparities in their environments and the huge distances between communities but, interpretation and customary use were generally uniform. Unlike in recent times, individuals had little choice and could not wear any costume that did not conform to the standard norms that indicated the community's identity.

Cattle was the supreme common source of most traditional clothing. Traditional dresses interpreted common values regardless of the differences among the seven independent polities. Since the area inhabited by the *Aawambo* is diverse in vegetation. Vegetation or trees abundant in one area – *Uukwanyama* – might not be found in *Ombalantu*. Local environment was therefore, influential in determining what the inhabitants of that area should wear, resulting in minor clothing difference among communities of the *Oshiwambo*-speaking population groups. Not only were there differences in structural design of some of the costumes, but there were also been differences in dialectical expressions

Although there were differences in names, the essence and interpretation of most of the Oshiwambo costumes were the same. In some areas where the community had been in

constant contact with each other, and where a similar physical environment was shared like *Uukwaluudhi, Ongandjera* and *Uukolonkadhi,* it is hard to detect differences in costumes and language. Visible differences in costumes as a result of environmental factors, geographical locations and differences in dialects used could raise the contentious question (which I do not want to deal with here) as to whether there were also ethical differences in the value systems of the seven kingdoms. The loss of traditional fashions due to western influence was substantial and, in my opinion undesirable. A few traditional costumes can be found in homesteads today. However, most of them are in decay, unattended to, and prone to damage. The value and meaningful cultural traits that such objects ones represent have disappeared with history due to the lack of proper co-ordination between generations, and a decline perpetuated by Christianity.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In the course of six decades, between 1850 and 1910, *Ovambo* societies were opened up to European merchant capital, to missionary influence and colonialism. According to Morner and Svensson, the first European trader, Charles John Anderson, entered the area in 1851. Contact with European merchant traders impaired cross-cultural trade between indigenous polities as it brought European commodities into the community through exchange. Initially, active trade took place mainly between wealthy individuals, mostly members of the aristocracy and prominent chiefs. Eirola has argued that at first only the highest parts of society, the kings, could buy the expensive things considered as luxuries but step by step the new wares became more common among the people. As trade goods intensified, other people also became actively involved in trade.

As Fair has indicated earlier, men and women, throughout history have consciously manipulated their material world in order to physically fabricate their identies as well as to differentiate themselves from others. This thesis has argued that Europeans, particularly the Finnish missionaries underestimated the cultural values attached to local traditions in *Owamboland.* They absurdly claimed to have found our forefathers `naked' and packaged our ancestors' fashions as heathen objects that lagged behind European 'civilization'. This thesis has analysed *Aawambo* costumes and the ethical principles that traditionally determined how people dressed. I have examined major developments, transformations, and changes in clothing in the region as well as the causes and consequences of the European economic and political invasion of the community.

The argument has been presented that in respect of the earlier technology, the *Aawambo* were fairly self-sufficient. Tool-making, basketry and the production of clothes were all carried out locally. Iron beads and bracelets, hoes, spearheads, arrowheads were manufactured by Aawambo blacksmiths and artists. The *Aakwanyama* were remarkable, in this regard as they had direct access to excavate, smelt and forge iron from the Mupa Mountains, north of the kingdom of the *Uukwanyama.* According to Elizabeth Heath the development of a flourishing metal-working industry and participation in the long-distance caravan trade in salt, copper and iron ore brought prosperity to *Owamboland.* Trade was an important means that supplied raw materials for some of the earlier traditional costumes, ornaments and adornments. Such items formed important assets that formalized traditional heritage and customs among the eight population groups of the *Aawambo* before European colonialists and missionaries campaigned to destroy this heritage, without compromise or remorse.

The fact that prior to Namibia colonization and Christianisation, northern Namibia's indigenous communities were engaging freely in active trade with other communities and within themselves is an indication that the *Aawambo* were engaged in the production of valuable material culture. During the process of colonization and Christianisation the *Aawambo* communities were manipulated culturally and economically. Traditional costumes were condemned and replaced with what Europeans called `civilized' and `modern' fashions. This thesis has provided an analysis of the arguments that African costumes, particularly in the context of *Aawambo* culture were not primitive but

represented a pattern of unique socio-cultural values that reflected a dynamic process of regional civilization. As Europeans strengthened their cultural influence in *Ovamboland*, in the twentieth century, they introduced ways and procedures to advocate that European clothes and other products were of superior value to local commodities.

In this regard, it has been argued that the colonial intrusion into northern Namibia combined with missionary activities marked, not only, the plunder and exploitation of Namibia's physical natural resources, but also the extinction of unreplenishable cultural resources, resulting in a substantial loss of prominent cultural values and objects that had once defined the *Aawambo* and other communities' social organisational structures and diverse identities. Although *Owamboland* remained relatively autonomous and independent of German political influence, European socio-economic influence was prevalent in the area as it filtered along the paths of migrant workers and through the mission station network. A strong cultural and religious influence was coordinated by the church - which included the Roman Catholics that earlier confined its activities to *Anamulenge* in *Ombalantu* or if one could put it the west of *Owamboland.* The Anglicans, who were mainly British, settled in the north-east, particularly at *Odibo*, and the dominant Evangelical Lutheran [mainly Finnish based] church operated in most parts of *Owamboland*. In the concurrence of such cultural influence developments, the church, and in particular the Finnish, had made an earlier major impact in transforming communities in eastern Owamboland. In particular some communities in the kingdom of *Ondonga* like *Olukonda* and *Oniipa* were among the earliest to succumb to the Finnish influence in terms of accepting Christianity and European fashions

It has also been exemplified that the concept and significance of pre-colonial costumes of the *Aawambo* must be explored in the context of the community's opinions and dissatisfaction with regard to missionary and colonial attitudes that disinherited the community of its cultural objects and customs and left a culturally disoriented post-colonial community. The major factors that bound the community to replace traditional costumes with European clothes have been analysed and reasons for the changes that took place without preserving the discarded traditions. Many people nowadays advocate for the return to 'our traditions'; but it has been argued that one must be sceptical as, in practical terms, returning to traditional costumes might not be possible. However, the study does suggest ways to collect and preserve items of the old traditions and the memories of the meaning of traditional fashions.

Contemporary community perceptions and views about clothes and styles of dressing that, according to some opinions in the community 'do not conform to our customs' have been presented and analysed and proposals made to suggest the way forward. European costumes are an important component of our history and cultural heritage, acting as a bridge between pre-colonial and modern socio-economic patterns, and are therefore essential to stimulate understanding and are integral parts of the dynamic socio-economic and cultural changes that took place over the years. According to Elizabeth Tonkin "We … shape our futures in the light of past experience, by representing how things were, we draw a social portrait, a model which is a reference list of what to follow and what to avoid." In this regard therefore, it is important to note and recognise that every element

of history is unique and important. If one is to really understand the circumstances and dynamics of change both sides of the cultural mix have to be examined and analysed objectively.

I have argued in the light of Comaroff's argument that *'missionaries concern with dress in Southern Africa often revealed a vain effort to fuse the cultivation of the body with conversion of the spirit'*. In this regard I have hypothesized that Europeans were undisputedly triumphant in changing and replacing the *Aawambo* cultural dress with imported costumes and cosmetics. However, they were less successful in changing fundamental ethical values and customary norms of the community. Western commodities subdued the values of local commodities, prominently leather clothes and traditional hairstyles. It remains remarkably important to note, with some pride that to this day, the *Aawambo* still respect important beliefs of their ancestors traditions, although on the other hand they are bereaved and express nostalgia for the discarded and irreplaceable traditional heritage.

I would agree with Malan's argument that the *"introduction of the western monetary economy in Owamboland exerted a tremendous influence on the traditional barter ... the making of clothes and utensils*" . He further argues that the *"demand for food and modern commodities has led to the erection of numerous shops and trading centers throughout the territory"* [1995:27]. It appears that he omits and overlooks pointing out the factors that maneuvered the community to demand for western products. I assume that if Malan had conducted interviews with the community for their opinions as I did, the truth would

had been that the *Aawambo* were decapitated into becoming dependent and slaves to European markets and commodities as they were deprived access to their earlier sources of cultural material production.

Many of my interviewees specified and identified social responsibilities that different costumes and dress conveyed in the past and in the present. They elaborated on dress as important makers of identity. Traditional costumes were instrumental in shaping and facilitating changes of identities. Today as most of the ancestors traditional costumes have disappeared from the community, it is important to recognize and recommend the values attached to western consumer goods. In *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1997), Comarrof and Comarrof, deal with the issue of the shift from the prevalent symbolic interpretation of traditional fashions into modern dress. This analysis is arguably to bridge and reconcile western fashions with traditional African fashion, in efforts to reclaim and retain a distinct identity. However, I have argued in chapter two that in a literal sense no costumes are traditionally authentic. As history is dynamic, every passing generation tends to become accustomed to a prescribed code of dress with variations in fashions that conform to the political and economic status quo. Any code of dressing that has been accepted as ethical within a given socio-political and cultural dispensation becomes a set of inherited traditions and customs. Therefore, traditions should not be understood as the opposite of modernity, because traditions are continually created, not only in the past but in the present and in the future. Today fashion is part of `globalisation' with most international conferences involving senior politicians or government officials full of men from diverse cultural backgrounds in suits and ties.

Herman Tonjes testified that some of our ancient chiefs, like Ueyulu, lavishly wore western dress and popularized them. In this regard, Chief Ueyulu's gesture of embracing western dress could be interpreted critically, but did not seem to mean that he was embracing Christianity. Although missionaries initially made the wearing of western dress a condition for conversion to Christianity and acceptance in congregations, some people in the community wore western dress as symbols of modernity not as a prerequisite to Christianity. This is supportive of Meredith McKittrick's argument that 'people converted for the dress often, not so much for the religion [or to forfeit their traditional customary beliefs and objects]', but presumably, those who acclimated to western commodities were attracted by the image of self esteem and a desire for special recognition.

In addition to this, Kirsten Ruether, argued that by dressing like their aggressors, Africans expressed a willingness to take on the competitors encroaching on their lands. *"They claimed equality through a strategy of sartorial assimilation rather than opposition to European dress"* [2002: 366]. Like in Ruether's argument, I would also argue with credit to the Comarrof's argument and in the light of the *Hereros* wearing of the Germans uniforms, that the *Aawambo* resorted to the wearing of European dress as a way of communicating messages of triumph, social emancipation and the equal status of all human kind. To dress like the oppressor could be seen as the assertion of a visual claim to be equal with those who claimed to be superior to others. However, as I have indicated

earlier, it is important to note that as traditional dress and objects declined in value and fame the beliefs in them and respect for the role of traditional costumes persisted longer. Although leather costumes were no longer worn as western dress substituted traditional dress, the community did not destroy them, unless when individuals were under pressure to do so. During my fieldwork, several items of traditional objects that had been carefully stored and preserved were shown to me. This was an indication that there had been concealed methods of preserving traditional assets, a responsibility that was carried out largely by individual families and clans. However, in most cases custodians of these items explained to me that for a very long time they had not put these objects to use nor explained the old fashions to their children. It is however, remarkable to note that a few costumes and other objects of material culture that are still in possession of the community are in a deteriorating condition. Their cultural values and the interpretation of their role in shaping the cultural identity of the community is also fading and disappearing as the older generations who are knowledgeable about them are dying without recording their uses.

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