




Nostalgia as a pastoral–hermeneutical key for healing complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context

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This research engaged complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context. The Afro-Christian context was described as one where traditional African beliefs form the bedrock of a unique strand of Christian faith. Christians within the philosophical and spiritual category of the African context harbour a unique outlook on death and, therefore, approach loss in a way that still embraces traditional views regarding the role of the departed. This provides for an extended grieving process, which opens the door for complicated grief as opposed to the notion of uncomplicated grief. The Christian text, where the resurrection of Christ stands central, challenges African views on the role of the departed and opens possibilities for the healing of complicated grief. In the light of this, nostalgia is investigated as a pastoral–hermeneutical key to understand and challenge the phenomenon of complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context. While nostalgia denotes a longing for the past, the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia provides valuable possibilities for pastoral work with complicated grief. It was argued that restorative nostalgia is indicative of attempts to restore the past and reflective nostalgia is indicative of a willingness to accept reality based on a cognitive and spiritual realisation that the past cannot be retrieved. It is thus contended that much pastoral potential resides within the notion of nostalgia when deployed in the context of complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The contextualisation of practical theology and pastoral care in the African context requires an interdisciplinary approach which is mindful of the African context, the Christian faith as well the variegated contexts in which Africans currently live and believe.

Keywords: pastoral care; Afro-Christian context; complicated grief; nostalgia; restorative nostalgia; reflective nostalgia.

Introduction and background

Facing loss and coming to terms with the changes it brings can be regarded as one of the enduring items on the pastoral agenda. Irrespective of creed or culture, life on earth is inadvertently curbed by immanent loss. As there is no escaping the boundary imposed on life by death (cf. Ec 3:2; Ec 9:3), ongoing reflection and theorising on pastoral care to those affected by loss should remain high on the pastoral agenda.

This research attempts to engage this challenge in an Afro-Christian context. An Afro-Christian context refers to the spiritual and emotional intersection that emanates from Christian faith in an African context. At this intersection, spiritual conflict is potentially invoked by the beliefs and practices of the African culture and the liberating and comforting message of the Christian Gospel, complicating the healing that should follow after loss. In this regard, Choabi (2016) convincingly argued that many practices embedded in the African culture can indeed complicate grief when viewed from the perspective of uncomplicated grief.

The issue of complicated grief in the Afro-Christian context is viewed through the lens of the notion of nostalgia, as it is suspected to have the potential to contribute positively to the healing of complicated grief in this context. Recently, the presence of nostalgia surfaced in several practical theological contexts (Brunsdon 2018; Holtzhausen 2018; Müller 2015), drawing attention to its pastoral potential. The notion of nostalgia in essence refers to the acute longing for the comfort associated with a better-known past (cf. Sekides et al. 2008:304). While nostalgia accommodates a yearning for the past, trying to restore and even keep the past alive (restorative nostalgia), it cannot be given free rein. Nostalgia is thus not only concerned with the past but is also sensitive about the future (reflective nostalgia) considering the realities that replaced the past, thereby

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acting as a catalyst for acceptance of the present and pondering the possibilities of the future (cf. Boym 2007:17). In recognising its pastoral potential, this notion is interrogated as a pastoral–hermeneutical key for understanding loss – and seeking healing from complicated grief – as perceived in an Afro-Christian context.

The research aims to contribute to the practical–theological discourse on contextualising pastoral care and counselling in the African context. According to Magezi (2016:138), critical reflection in the African theological sphere is for the most part still uncharted and calls for academic reflection. The paradigmatic choice for the contextualisation of pastoral care and counselling in the African context used here mainly rests on the premise that contextualisation strives to make theology relevant in a certain context (Brunsdon 2017:115). It recognises that no uniform African culture exists, owing to the complex array of ethnicities brought together in the notion of the African context. Contemplating pastoral questions in an African context would thus be better served by making theology relevant in a particular context (contextualisation), rather than trying to address the question simply by means of an indigenised or Africanised approach. In following a contextualisation-orientated approach, space is created for pastoral contemplation that is mindful of the African context, the Christian faith as well the variegated contexts in which Africans currently live and believe. This is especially fitting for the southern part of Africa from where this contribution emanates.

Main research question, aim, objectives and research method

The main research question can subsequently be formulated as follows: How can the notion of nostalgia be used as a pastoral–hermeneutical key to heal complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context? In the light of the main research question, the research aims to meet the following objectives: Firstly, to reflect on loss, grief and healing in the Afro-Christian context. Secondly, to articulate some of the unique challenges posed to pastoral care and counselling that could potentially emanate from the Afro-Christian context, leading to complicated grief. Thirdly, to interrogate the notion of nostalgia as a pastoral–hermeneutical key to aid the healing of complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context. And, lastly, to propose suggestions on how nostalgia could shape the pastoral process aimed at healing complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context.

Methodologically, the research is executed by means of a comparative literature study.

The Afro-Christian context

Research aimed at the African context innately begs contextual illumination. In this paper, ‘Africa’ is regarded wider than the physical sense of the African continent, hence the use of the word ‘context’. The African context is indeed a challenging concept to define, on the one hand, as a generic

use of the term is highly contestable owing to the plurality of ethnic groupings in this cultural denomination (Brunsdon 2017:111). On the other hand, the African context *does* remind of a generalisable group of people that distinguishes themselves from other contexts and cultures in terms of shared values regarding worldview and beliefs that seem to transcend ethnicity and physical borders, such as sociality and beliefs regarding time and ancestors (O’Donovan 2000:7, 21; Van der Walt 2008:172–175).

While this paper does not focus on a specific ethnic group in the general African culture, it is comfortable to align with Louw’s (2008:147) notion of Africa as a philosophical concept as well as a spiritual category. As a philosophical concept, Africa (African context) denotes the ‘complexity and diversity of different cultural, local and contextual settings as related to a state of being and mind’ (Louw 2008:147). As a spiritual category, it denotes a ‘hermeneutical paradigm indicating a unique approach to life that differs from the analytical approach emanating from Western thinking and Hellenism’ (Louw 2008:147).

Within this contextual framework, Christianity developed a unique character that is denoted here as Afro-Christian. As the cradle of humankind (Aden & Hanson 2014:32), life on the African continent preceded the Christian faith. Intrinsically intertwined with this ancient society was religiosity. Generally known as African Traditional Religion (ATR) or, as some like Adamo (2011:3) prefer, African Indigenous Religion (AIR), this expression of faith characterised African life until Africans were exposed to external influences. Referring to the ‘inborn and aboriginal religion of Africans’ (Adamo 2011:3), AIR denotes the beliefs of the African forefathers which includes a Supreme God, divinities, ancestors and mysterious powers that can be good or evil and an afterlife.

By the time that Africans were introduced to the Christian faith, they were also familiar with a variety of pagan cults from the Mediterranean world which fluxed into Africa for a variety of reasons. These included pagan cults that originated from Egypt and Asia Minor (Francois 2008:7). The path for Christianity was mainly paved by the expansion of the Roman Empire into North Africa. As early as 147 BC, after Carthage was taken over through a successful Roman military operation, the Roman province of Africa was established. The political assimilation of this new province of Africa (*Africa nova*) into the Roman political structures, however, took nearly a century (Francois 2008:1). The so-called *Romanisation* of Africa (Francois 2008:5) was, however, well-served by the phenomenon of urbanisation found in the Africa of the time. The existing organisation of Africans in cities offered a network in which Romanisation could thrive. At the same time, it would also benefit the future spread of Christianity.

According to Oden (2007:16), Africa also had Christians ‘from Pentecost on’. The Christian church in Africa organised themselves in dioceses and the council of Carthage that took

place in 258 AD became one of the first recorded councils where several bishops from African provinces like Numidia and Mauretania convened, affirming a notable Christian presence and the assimilation of Christianity in North Africa. In this way, an African Christianity was born, which would in fact 'lay hold of a major place in the history of the early church' (Francois 2008:8).

Christianity in the African context can thus both be regarded as 'received' and 'perceived'. Africa 'received' Christianity through the blessing of Pentecost and through the colonialising efforts of the likes of the Roman Empire. Most probably, they also came to an own 'perception' of what they heard and saw about the Christian faith. Reminiscent of the questions early Christianity faced amongst the Jews, in terms of existing beliefs and practices (cf. Rm 2:25–29), African Christians were also faced with questions regarding existing beliefs and practices within the framework of this 'new' faith.

For some decades, Christian theological thinking on what *should* happen when Africans in the AIR tradition convert to Christianity was partially shaped by Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* (1952). Although Niebuhr recognised different possibilities about the reception of the Christian faith in existing cultures, the ideal that was hoped for from a Christian perspective was that of the so-called *operational model* where Christ acts as the *transformer* of culture (Niebuhr 1952:192–228). In this model, it is believed that the Christian faith will over time *transform* a particular culture to become exclusively Christian. Viewed retrospectively, however, this was not the effect Christianity had on the African continent. Instead, African beliefs and culture endure in the hearts and minds of African Christians to this day. Getui (2017) frames this with the notion of inculturation:

Inculturation is the process whereby the faith already embodied in one culture encounters another culture. In this encounter the faith becomes part and parcel of this new culture. It fuses with the new culture and simultaneously transforms it into a novel religious-cultural reality. (p. 334)

Afro-Christianity therefore denotes faith in Christ in the framework of an African worldview and culture where faith and being human is expressed and perceived in a truly African way or as Gatu (2006) describes African Christians: 'Joyfully Christian and truly African'. What this translates to in practice is committed African Christians who 'incorporate elements of African traditional religions into their daily lives' (cf. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2010:4). These include beliefs in the power of ancestors or reverting to traditional spiritual healers in times of illness – a practice that is generally upheld and apologetically explained by African theologians (Kane 2018:30).

Loss and grief in the Afro-Christian context

In the Afro-Christian context, loss and the resulting grieving process is thought of and approached in a unique way. According to Nürnberger (2007:24), death in Africa is deeply

embedded in traditionalism. Robbing the living of vitality, it is seen as the living's greatest enemy and aptly feared. Consequently, death 'always evokes conspicuous lamentations, painful isolation of those concerned and extensive mourning' (Nürnberger 2007:24). It is this idea of 'extensive mourning' that suggests that grieving in an African context is quite unique. As for the rest of the global village, death and grieving has become somewhat of a fleeting obstacle. As Van Tongeren (2004:127) suggests: 'the funeral is the last opportunity to publicly present someone's characteristic personality'. In fact, those of us used to funerals in the current postmodern climate often leave a funeral service with the uneasy feeling that the deceased is now both buried and forgotten.

The prolonged duration of the grieving process in the African context is intrinsically linked to at least two beliefs regarding the concept of death in African thinking. First is the notion that only plants and animals die (Baloyi 2014:3) but that humans merely depart to a different realm that is not disconnected from the realm of those remaining behind. The second notion pertains to the enduring influence and power the deceased still have in the lives of the living. In this regard, Nürnberger (2007:24) aptly refers to the 'living dead' or the 'authoritative deceased' (Nürnberger 2007:25) in explaining ancestral veneration as means of keeping the deceased part of their community and recognising their rightful position of authority after passing away. This practice is supported by rituals of re-installation in order to 'bring home the dead', as there is no meaningful existence outside of one's community (Nürnberger 2007:25). Hence, 'not physical death removes one from communal existence, but estrangement, rejection, excommunication, forgetfulness or neglect' (Nürnberger 2007:25) – a belief that most probably has implications for the grieving process.

Loss in the African context thus throws the individual and the community into limbo. Moreover, limbo in the African framework is extended, owing to the beliefs regarding the enduring connectedness between the living and the (living) dead and as expressed through ancestral veneration.

Although it can be argued that the extensive African rituals that follow after death can also be seen as coping devices for survivors (Van Zyl 2009:182), Choabi (2016) raises the concern that this prolonged character of the grieving process can potentially open the door to complicated grief when viewed in the light of what is generally regarded as uncomplicated grief. Using African Christian women as a point in case, Choabi (2016:33) indicates that Christian and African values – and the rituals through which these values are expressed – can create spiritual and psychological inner conflict in the lives of Afro-Christians during the grieving process, resulting in complicated grief and which may call for pastoral intervention.

The difference between complicated and uncomplicated grief is difficult to indicate in a precise and accurate way. However, signs of complicated grief are mainly sought in the challenges

the grieving experience in accepting their loss and adapting to the new reality where a loved one is no longer present. Since early grief theory, like that of Kübler-Ross (1969), a dynamic relationship between the initial denial and the eventual acceptance of loss was established that guided thinking about complicated and uncomplicated loss. Even in more simplified approaches, like that of Worden (2008), the same dynamic applies: uncomplicated grief ensues where one can negotiate the path between acceptance of loss and moving forward with life. Complicated grief ensues if complications arise during the processes, usually associated with the linear path between the acceptance of loss and the continuation of one's own life, leading to what Kokou-Kpolou et al. (2017:1248) denote as acute grief. Left unattended, complicated or acute grief can lead to a condition known as 'persistent complex bereavement disorder' (cf. American Psychiatric Association [APA] 2013).

According to Crunk, Burke and Robinson (2017:226), complicated grief is characterised by 'intensified grief symptoms that fail to diminish naturally within 6 months post-loss, resulting in clinically significant psychological and physical distress, as well as impairment in occupational and social functioning'. In the classic Kübler-Ross paradigm, this would mean that the issues of anger, denial, bargaining and depression were not negotiated successfully, or in the case of Worden (2008) that pain and grief and the adjustment to the new environment were not negotiated successfully, resulting in maladjustment to the new environment and, therefore, calling for intervention (cf. Crunk et al. 2017:226).

In light of this understanding of complicated grief and following the argumentation of Choabi (2016), it is argued here that grief in the Afro-Christian context runs the risk of becoming complicated owing to African beliefs and rituals regarding death that jeopardise the acceptance of loss and prolong the tasks normally associated with mourning leading to 'integrated grief', where the person affected by loss starts to live purposefully without the deceased (cf. Shear 2012). From an Afro-Christian perspective, this risk is exacerbated by spiritual inner conflict arising from differences between traditional African beliefs regarding death and a Christian understanding thereof, draining emotional energy that could have been used to attend to the grieving tasks associated with loss.

A critical discussion of some of these African beliefs and rituals regarding death in the context of complicated grief necessitates a few remarks about the other side of the Afro-Christian coin, as the Afro-Christian context denotes both what is African and also what is Christian.

Christian beliefs regarding death and resulting loss can never be severed from the victory of Jesus Christ over death and the boundaries it imposes on humans. This victory was preceded by Old Testament views on life and death, which were for the most part not explicit about what lies beyond the grave. According to Van Zyl (2009:177), Old Testament believers saw life as a gift from the Creator and accepted death as a

natural phenomenon – especially if death was preceded by a long and blessed life (Routledge 2008:22). Of significance is the observation that the Old Testament acknowledges existence after death without calling it 'life' (cf. Van Zyl 2009:177). This is mainly because that which constituted life on earth does not seem possible in *Sheol*, namely, to have communion with the cultic community and with the living God. In terms of contact between the living and the dead, Saul's communication with Samuel is condemned as Canaanite belief and (Van Zyl 2009):

... that the dead can communicate with the living or influence them of their own will, as is commonly believed in Africa, for example, is nowhere suggested in the Hebrew Bible. (p. 177)

Hence, life was associated with the life expressed in the flesh and death denoted the end of this visible vitality. Although Routledge (2008:22) alludes to a growing school of Old Testament thought that suggests that *Sheol* might not have been the final resting place of the dead, there is not yet consensus of a clear articulated alternative that points in a different direction.

This restricted view about life after death was, however, set for radical adjustment in the light of the salvatory work of Jesus Christ that followed the Old Testament era. The resurrection of Jesus from the grave (Mt 28:6) became the pivotal message of Christendom and the default point of departure for missionaries like Paul (1 Cor 2:2). Explicating the significance of the victory of Christ over death comprehensively is, however, beyond the scope of this article. Hence, a number of aspects from the classic interpretation of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 are highlighted that are on the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus deemed of relevance for this research.

In the Christian tradition, Paul's interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus, as presented in 1 Corinthians 15, has through the ages become the frame of reference for understanding the meaning and relevance of the resurrection. In this lengthy chapter spanning 58 verses, Paul addresses three broad issues. In the first 11 verses, he recollects the historical narrative of the different appearances Jesus made to different individuals and different groups of people. In a certain sense, these verses represent an apologetic account of the objective reality of both Christ's death and his bodily resurrection (Fee 2014:793). From verse 12–34, Paul makes a case for the resurrection of believers (v. 12) that is based on the resurrection of Jesus as the 'firstfruits of them that slept' (v. 20). Verse 12 also contains the very reason for Paul's arguments about the resurrection of Jesus, namely, the fact that there were 'some' amongst the Corinthians that denied the possibility of life after death. According to Fee (2014:820), Paul then, through a logic called *modus tollens*, refutes this belief by forcing these particular Corinthians to believe that there is a 'future resurrection of believers on the basis of their common faith in the resurrection of Christ'. For if there was no resurrection of Christ, the preaching of the apostles would have been in vain and so would the faith of the Corinthians (v. 14). An argument

that Paul intensifies in the next verses by suggesting that such disbelief would also render the apostles as 'false witnesses of God' (v. 15) and the believers themselves still prisoners of their sins (v. 17). Worst of all, however, if the disbelief of those articulated in verse 12 was sustained, 'then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished' (v. 18).

But, according to Paul, all of this is made void in light of the fact of that Christ *has indeed risen* (v. 20). In doing so, He has become the 'firstfruits of them that slept' (v. 20). Paul's use of the metaphor of the 'firstfruits' in verse 20 is derived from the Old Testament practice where the first portion of the harvest was dedicated to God as 'pledge of the remainder and concomitantly, the assurance of a full harvest' (Thiselton 2000:1223). In denoting the resurrected Christ as 'firstfruits of them that slept', Christians receive a tangible pastoral assurance that those who pass in faith will be resurrected, as Christ was, to a new life after death (Fitzmyer 2008:568).

For the sake of the argument pursued here, it is important to establish if anything can be learnt from these verses about the nature of life after death that becomes possible through the resurrection of Jesus. Although no detailed excursion is provided here, verse 28 deserves mention as here Paul alludes to God as the focus and goal of eternal life. With death as the last enemy now subdued to God (Keener 2005:127), even the glorified Christ will subdue to God, as will have everything else, so 'that God may be all in all' (v. 28). In the new realm proclaimed here, the focus will be God and God alone. So too, John proclaims in the *Book of Revelation* that in the New Jerusalem there will be neither temple nor sun, for the glory of God will fulfil these functions through the glory of the Lamb (cf. Rv 21:22–23). Hence, the purpose and goal of life hereafter, made possible through the resurrection of Jesus, is the glory of God.

From verse 35–58, Paul deals with the resurrection body. The main feature of the resurrection body seems to be its spiritual and immortal nature that is meant for eternal life with God (v. 42). This concurs with the sentiment of verse 28 about the focus of eternal life, namely, the glory of God. In this regard, the bodies of the believers will be changed by God 'in the twinkling of an eye' (v. 52) to fit this purpose in the new reality of eternal life. While this immortality of the spiritual body is firstly a sign of the final victory over mortality (v. 54), it also changes the mortal body of the believer into the spiritual and immortal body that is needed for all eternity (Fee 2014:882). This has a pastoral implication for believers confronted by earthly death, as the 'sting' of death is now removed (v. 55), but it also exhorts believers to become 'steadfast' and 'unmoveable' as well as 'abounding in the work of the Lord' (v. 58) for the eternal destination of believers is now clear in light of the teaching of Paul.

While 1 Corinthians 15 has indeed become the frame of reference in the Christian tradition for understanding the meaning and implications of the resurrection – filling believers with hope in the light of death – it is not the only word on the topic. The cursory discussion above is in no way

meant as the final word, for the rest of the Bible still recognises the impact of death and loss amongst all people. Regardless of the hope instilled by 1 Corinthians 15, loss will still affect those who remain behind in many ways. So, even Jesus himself, shed tears as a result of the passing of Lazarus (Jn 11:35), well knowing that he was about to conquer death. While recognising this, the aim of the gospel message remains to change our thinking and beliefs regarding loss and filling the believer with hope and new direction and beliefs in the light of Christ's victory over death (cf. Rm 12:1).

By means of deduction, the resurrection of Christ then at least implies the following for a Christian understanding of death and loss.

- The shackles of death are conquered and have no final say over those who have passed on.
- The eternal life made possible through the salvatory work of Christ fills the mourner with hope and even joy as we think of those who have passed on.
- We now indeed mourn, not as people without hope, but in the faith that our loved ones share in the victory of Christ, and, therefore, we do not have to mourn forever more.
- The focus of those who have passed on is now securely on God as the focus and purpose of eternal life, rendering this world and us in it as something of the past.

When these implications are brought into the context of an Afro-Christian understanding of loss and grief, the following can be noted.

Ancestral veneration as denial of death

In the afore-going discussion, two important tenets of the beliefs surrounding death in the African context that resulted in ancestral veneration are noted. These pertain to the belief that humans do not really die and that the dead have enduring influence and power in the lives of the living – hence, Nürnberger's use of the 'living dead' or the 'authoritative deceased' (2007:24, 25). From a Christian perspective, the ensuing ancestral veneration can be regarded as a denial of earthly death – as this practice proverbially keeps the dead alive and supports the belief that the dead can still control those who remain behind. From a pastoral perspective of uncomplicated grief, this can inhibit the initial recognition and acceptance of death as a starting point for the normal grieving process as it opposes the Christian understanding of dying that does not deny earthly death, but rather awards it new meaning in the light of Christ's resurrection.

Ancestral veneration as denial of the purpose of eternal life

When it is recognised that ancestral veneration is based on the belief that humans do not really die, it also has implications for our understanding of the goal and purpose of eternal life made possible by the resurrection of Jesus. As highlighted in the discussion of 1 Corinthians 15, eternal life has as focus

and goal the glory of God. This would imply that those who passed on in faith will have no interest in the world they left through their earthly death, nor would they have any interest in controlling and influencing the loved ones they have left behind. Rather, their only purpose and goal would indeed be the glory of God. Although the Bible is not clear on what precisely happens in the period between death and Christ's second coming, there is no Scriptural reason to believe that those who are in the presence of God will have any interest in the earth and its inhabitants. From a pastoral perspective of uncomplicated grief, partaking in extended rituals aimed at appeasing ancestors and avoiding the perceived harm that can come from failure to do so robs the grieving from the hope that resides in the focus of eternal life.

Ancestral veneration as denial of the consolation of the Christian message of the resurrection of Jesus

In light of the resurrection of Jesus, the loss of a loved one is put within a framework of consolation and hope. The resurrection of Jesus surely removed the 'sting' of death (1 Cor 15:55), creating space for consolation and hope even when the faithful experience the effects of loss first-hand. Because the risen Jesus is the believer's forerunner (cf. Heb 6:20), we now have a 'lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [T]o an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you' (cf. 1 Pt 1:3, 4).

By opting for the traditional African beliefs during times of loss, the Christian hope is replaced by fear reinforced by rituals that defy this very hope which was meant to console and comfort.

Consequently, it is argued here that traditional African beliefs and the Christian message regarding death stand in opposition to one another. Traditional African beliefs as expressed through rituals have the potential to prolong the limbo following loss, while the Christian message is a message of hope and consolation, aimed at healing that is grounded in the death-defying act of the resurrection of Jesus. In terms of uncomplicated grief, the objective of pastoral care to the grieving would thus be to guide the Afro-Christian, presenting symptoms of complicated grief to accepting the Christian message of hope, as the potential for healing seems to be most favourable within the framework of the Christian message regarding death and loss.

Nostalgia

In the introduction to this article, it was stated that complicated grief in the Afro-Christian context will be viewed through the lens of nostalgia, as it is suspected to be of use in a pastoral context of healing loss. However, to define and articulate the meaning of the term is not without its challenges. As Boym (2007:11) states, this term or construct 'frustrates' psychologists, sociologists, literary theorists and philosophers alike.

According to Sekides et al. (2008:304) nostalgia finds its roots in Greek mythology describing Odysseus' longing for home while away during the Trojan War. Derived from the two Greek words *nostos* (return home) and *algos* (longing, pain, ache), it denotes the acute emotional pain of someone longing for their past (Boym 2007:7). Drawing on this meaning, nostalgia initially served as a medical term to describe the condition of homesickness. Apparently, Johannes Hofer was the first to use this term in 1688 to describe the symptoms displayed by displaced Swiss who had to work or fight abroad (Boym 2007:8). Incidentally, this was believed to be a curable medical disease.

Nostalgia and homesickness were treated as meaning the same for some time, but since the 20th century nostalgia has come to be understood as more than mere homesickness as it was not limited only to young people leaving home for the first time (Sekides et al. 2008:304). Nostalgia was also no longer confined to a single group of people, but rather deemed to be a universal experience. Hence, terminology evolved amongst different people to denote nostalgia – the Dutch *heimwee*, the Portuguese *saudade*, the Russian *toska*, the Czech *litost*, the Romanian *dor* and the German *heimweh* (Boym 2007:8).

Through the years, the scope of the term broadened beyond the strictly medical to include psychological application. In this regard, early theorists like Davis (1979:31) recognised that nostalgia serves as a psychological lens we 'employ in the never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities'. Thus, nostalgia not only became more than a medical or psychological condition but also something through which people could grow and heal.

Boym (2007:13) articulates this further upon coining the notions of restorative and reflective nostalgia. When people engage in restorative nostalgia, they are emotionally trying to restore the past. Hence, Boym (2007:12) claims that with restorative nostalgia, the focus is on a 'transhistorical reconstruction' of the past. When people engage in reflective nostalgia, they are reflecting on the past and the viability of truly restoring it and hence coming to terms 'with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude' (Boym 2007:15). Julian Müller, in his application of restorative and reflective nostalgia to *Ubuntu* research, alludes to restorative nostalgia as something that 'thrives on symbols that are disconnected from real contexts', while reflective nostalgia will rather thrive on what is real – or 'how to interpret old and faraway concepts into current contexts and try to make sense out of past stories and find the meaning of it for today' (Müller 2015:3).

In light of this background – and in the framework of this research – I would then propose that nostalgia is a form of longing that people experience as a result of loss, which can either result in prolonged attempts to restore the past (restorative nostalgia) or can lead to acceptance of the past and embracement of the future (reflective nostalgia). Consequently, it has both hermeneutic and therapeutic

potential for the pastoral healing process of those who are coming to terms with loss. As a hermeneutic key, it offers a frame of reference to inform the caregiver of where the counselee finds himself or herself in the grieving process. In a therapeutic sense, it provides a goal and function for the pastoral process. This goal will entail healing from complicated grief that may arise from indulging in restorative nostalgia, through a focus on reflective nostalgia, which may lead to acceptance of the loss and the future without a loved one.

In the next section, I expound on the implications of using the notion of nostalgia for healing complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context.

Nostalgia as pastoral–hermeneutical key for healing complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context

So far it has been indicated that death in Africa is deeply embedded in traditionalism, which lends the grieving process an extensive character. Supported by rituals that can span over more than a year, it has also been suggested that grief in an Afro-Christian context may be susceptible to complicated grief, when viewed in the light of what is normally regarded as uncomplicated grief. A Scriptural analysis of 1 Corinthians 15 suggests that the ‘sting’ of death has been removed by the resurrection of Jesus. His resurrection changed the destination of those who have passed on to that of eternal life in the presence of and to the glory of God. The Biblical message about death and loss thus supports uncomplicated mourning, as it points in the direction of hope and joy, even in the shadow of death, while at the same time, not denying the hurt and sorrow caused by the death of a loved one. It has also been shown that beliefs and practices regarding death in the African context form an antithesis to the Christian message, in that it denies this message of hope on at least three levels, namely, the reality that humans die, that the purpose of eternal life is the focus on and glorification of God and that death received the character of hope in the light of the resurrection of Jesus. In following the thesis of Choabi (2016), it is suggested that the pastoral dilemma of complicated grief may follow in the lives of Afro-Christians who become torn between African beliefs and Christian faith. This renders the question how the notion of nostalgia can serve as a pastoral–hermeneutical key for healing complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context.

It is suggested here that the operational terms in such a pastoral approach remain Boym’s (2007) distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Within this framework, restorative nostalgia resonates the connection with complicated grief and can possibly serve as a hermeneutical key to probe and understand how and whether the Afro-Christian counselee is in fact experiencing complicated grief. Reflective nostalgia would in such cases be used as a counter-activity to bring the counselee to acceptance through critical reflection on the meaning of death in the light of the Christian message as opposed to traditional beliefs and practices.

Restorative nostalgia as expression of complicated grief in the Afro-Christian context

The acute sense of loss following the death of a loved one expresses itself in many ways in the lives of those who remain behind. These can – and usually do – include a preoccupation with the deceased, feelings of acute separation and being aware of reminders about the deceased (cf. Archer 1998:94). Often accompanied by vivid dreams, a strong perceived presence of the deceased is experienced in the period directly following someone’s passing. While a Western understanding of these vivid dreams relates to the psychological process of processing loss, an African understanding goes further by seeing dreams as a way the dead communicate with the living (Ademoye 2010:1019). Being serious about understanding the meaning of these dreams (Turaki 1999:99), Africans will participate in rituals to appease the ancestor and consult with traditional healers to ascertain the meaning of these dreams.

As pointed out before, within a Scriptural framework, the pursuit of such dreams is futile as there is no Biblical support for the dead communicating with the living. Afro-Christians who support these rituals are thus conforming to traditional beliefs rather than adhering to the Christian message regarding the finality of earthly death. From the perspective of complicated grief, such attempts open the door for prolonged grief by supporting beliefs that ancestors are in fact capable of exerting power over the living. From the perspective of nostalgia, Africans actively engaging in these practices are effectively attempting to reconstruct the past by keeping the dead alive. Choabi (2016:32) points out that participation in rituals, to appease the ancestors following ancestral dreams, is often driven by fear based on the belief that bad things will come to those who do not conform to these beliefs. Another possibility, however, also exists, and that is that ancestral veneration is simply a form of restorative nostalgia, reconstructing the past and avoiding the reality of having to deal with the loss.

In order to establish if this is in fact the case, the pastoral caregiver will have to be sensitive on at least two levels. Firstly, determining if and how keenly an Afro-Christian person engages in the traditional African practices surrounding death. If the Bible is to be taken seriously on this, becoming a follower of Jesus is a life and belief-changing event. St. Paul attests to this in Philippians 3:7: ‘But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ’. Remarkable in this statement of Paul is the fact that he refers to his ‘Jewishness’ (Heil 2010:122), which he previously pursued feverishly as he so believed and trusted in the value and purpose of being a Jew. But having been found by Christ, Paul’s values and beliefs turned to Christ through faith, also changing his values. Believing in Christ thus challenges the believer holistically irrespective of ethnicity or creed. Turning to old beliefs and practices when under duress will signal to the pastoral caregiver whether an Afro-Christian person is challenging loss through faith or through cultural beliefs, which may impact in various ways on the grieving process.

Secondly, the pastoral caregiver will also have to be sensitive for the duration of engagement with old beliefs and practices. As shown, rituals surrounding death in the African context can easily surpass more than a year, which is typically associated with complicated grief. If an Afro-Christian person wholeheartedly engages in such practices for such a long time, despite a Christian conviction, it most probably may attest to something more, alerting the pastoral caregiver that an opportunity for intervention has arisen.

Challenging restorative nostalgia through reflective nostalgia to heal complicated grief in an Afro-Christian context

Within the focus of this article, I would like to think of reflective nostalgia as a cognitive and spiritual reflection on the past, present and future. Indeed, as Boym (2007:8) has stated: 'nostalgia ... is not always retrospective; it can be prospective as well ...' In the context of complicated grief, reflective nostalgia thus has the potential to counteract grief that has become complicated, because a person is adamant to restore the past by keeping it alive through beliefs and rituals. It challenges the sustainability of what an adamant restorative nostalgia wants to achieve by reflecting realistically on the loss that occurred. Reflective nostalgia is not insensitive towards nostalgia itself, as longing for the past and a loved one is in itself not wrong – in fact to cherish the past through memories consoles and comforts. Reflective nostalgia is merely honest about the reality of loss and wants to bring perspective to nostalgia. In this sense, it can also be called corrective nostalgia as it attempts to be corrective of a nostalgia that misleads the grieving by bounding them superficially to the past.

Consequently, it is suggested here that a pastoral caregiver would aim to facilitate reflection on loss in the Afro-Christian context from the framework of the Christian text on at least the following four levels:

- The reality and finality of earthly death from which no human can escape
- The reality and hope of eternal life that is possible through Christ's resurrection and victory over death
- The focus of eternal life on God and not on earth
- The liberating Christian hope that focus on a hopeful future anchored in the victory of the risen Lord

Hence, a pastoral reflective nostalgia will attempt to promote healing from complicated grief in the Afro-Christian context by facilitating acceptance of human death, correcting perceptions about the focus of eternal life and by cultivating hope that stems from the consolation that Christ has indeed removed the sting from death.

Conclusion

In this article, complicated grief in the Afro-Christian context was engaged through the lens of nostalgia. The context of Afro-Christianity was said to denote a faith in Christ in the framework of an African worldview and culture where faith and being

human is expressed and perceived in a truly African way. Subsequently, death and loss is also viewed in a unique way. Some of these unique characteristics include the view that humans do not really die but that they merely depart to a plane from where they still actively influence the lives of loved ones who remain behind. This unique view stems from a faith that is in many ways embedded in the beliefs, tradition and culture that precede Christianity. The Christian texts, however, present an antithesis to this traditional view. Anchored in the victory of Christ over death, eternal life awaits the believer where the focus is on God and not the world which is left behind. The hopeful message of eternal life with God also fills those who grieve with hope during the grieving process. It was, however, indicated that adherents to the Christian faith in the African context often still find solace in traditional beliefs and the rituals that support them. This lures Afro-Christians into an extended process of grieving, prone to what is understood as complicated grief. Measured by if and for how long Afro-Christian persons engage in this extended form of grieving, an opportunity for pastoral intervention prevails as engagement in these rituals opposes the Christian message. In the light of this phenomenon, nostalgia was interrogated as hermeneutical and a pastoral key to facilitate healing from complicated grief. It was showed that nostalgia refers to the longing people have for the past. The distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia was noted, where restorative nostalgia is indicative of attempts to restore the past and reflective nostalgia is indicative of acceptance of reality based on a cognitive and spiritual realisation that the past cannot be retrieved. It is thus concluded that much pastoral potential resides in the notion of nostalgia when deployed within the context of complicated grief, such as contemplated here.

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