

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN RWANDA: DRUMMING AND WEAVING FOR HEALING

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The aftermath of the Rwandan tragedy in 1994 has seen a widespread cultural revival that responds to the need for the community to come together for shared pain and shared healing. The author examines how two groups of women took advantage of this renewed interest in cultural practices, as an innovative yet traditional approach to social work practice in Rwanda, by creating and fostering a free-flowing narrative that uses drumming (ngoma) and the weaving place (urubohero). These served, not only as a means of social support or working together to produce goods and services for everyday use, but also—and especially—as a way of healing.

"He who cannot stand, cannot dance." Rwandan proverb

News headlines on Africa are fraught with reports of famine, disease, and natural and man-made tragedies. They represent an unprecedented assault to human dignity, human rights, and social justice for the African people.

In the years following Africa's independence, solutions to these issues have primarily been influenced by outside funding sources, which are mostly Western European or North American. Traditional Rwandans, like those in other African communities, have considered every aspect of their lives as constituting one entity, where the spiritual, the emotional, and the physical are intertwined and, as such, treated together through cultural rituals. However, the advent of organized religions in post-colonial Africa has seen those cultural practices confined to special occasions, such as births, marriages, and funerals. Moreover, traditional healing practices have been replaced by Western medicine, especially in cities. Africa and its peoples are still facing the dilemma of trying to strike a balance between imported systems and traditional ways of dealing with current challenges. Approaches for healing war trauma or trauma resulting from tragedies, such as the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, also reflect this dilemma regarding a balance between indigenous and contemporary practices.

Providing the context for this discussion on the revival of innovative, yet traditional cultural practices—indigenous social work approaches—in Rwanda, I begin with a snapshot of current challenges to the peoples of Africa that represent a serious threat to their basic human rights. As a response to the traumas experienced as a result of the desperate situation in Africa, examples of cultural rituals used for healing are described, intertwined with a discussion of the impact of Western practices and organized religion. Selecting two salient cultural healing practices, I then examine how two groups of women have taken advantage of the renewed interest in cultural practices by creating and fostering a free-flowing narrative that uses drumming (*ngoma*) and the weaving place (*urubohero*), not only as a means of coming together for social support or working together to produce goods and services for their everyday use, but also—and especially—as a way of healing.

Assessing Human Conditions in Africa

Reports of human tragedies in Africa are common. For example, Reuters ("Uganda's LRA," 2010), citing Human Rights Watch, reported that Uganda's rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, has abducted 697 people over 18 months and murdered hundreds of them, while forcing

others, including children, to kill fellow captives. While gathering evidence on attacks in the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo, Human Rights Watch researchers discovered that the LRA has killed at least 255 adults and children, often by crushing their skulls with clubs.

On August 19, 2010, Voice of America (VOA), another news channel that has a special program on Africa, wrote that Somalia is confronted with a growing food shortage, while facing the challenges of insecurity caused by the ongoing civil war between different ethnic groups. In the last six months, United Nations aid workers have done their best to bring food assistance to more than two million people across Somalia. Armed insurgent groups have made humanitarian work difficult in that part of the world. Aid workers, especially Somalis, have been kidnapped or killed by warring factions. Insecurity combined with funding shortage has hampered delivery of critical assistance to Somalia, making it one of the neediest countries in the world. Charitable organizations have been forced to suspend their work because of threats and attacks (Voice of America, 2010). Because foreign aid is suspended from those who need it, locals have to figure out how to continue feeding their families and keep them safe. They have to come up with ingenious ways to stay alive.

The government in Niger, a West African country, reported that drought, leading to failure of the 2009 harvest, has resulted in food shortages causing nearly half of its population of about 15.2 million people to face hunger (IRIN, 2010). The World Food Program (WFP) is finding it arduous to bring food to families living in remote areas of the country, because the country is landlocked and has few usable roads. An estimated 212,500 tons of food will be needed between now and the end of the year.

Shortage of safe drinking water is another challenge faced by almost half of Africa's population of 680 million people (Integrated Regional Information Networks, IRIN, 2010). Such shortages make Africans vulnerable to a host of waterborne diseases. A South African university has created a cheap and effective

device that can purify water and make it safe to drink for millions of Africans, thereby reducing the number of waterborne diseases. But this would most certainly require funding that seems always to be lacking (IRN, 2010).

The 2010 Index for Risk of Food Security, calculated by Maplecroft, a British company specializing in risk analysis, in collaboration with the World Food Program, indicated that 9 out of 10 countries at risk are African countries. With Afghanistan at the top of the list, the other 9 include the African countries of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Angola, Liberia, Chad, and Zimbabwe. Some of the criteria used by the Index include the GIP (Gross Internal Product) per person, risks caused by extreme environmental factors, conflicts, and the quality of infrastructures. What is even more worrying about the above-listed countries, as well as others that have been left out, is the compounding effects of issues of famine, leading to poverty, disease, and armed conflicts. This paints a picture of a vicious cycle of never-ending catastrophe.

Where you find one such catastrophe, you often find others. They all represent an unprecedented assault on human dignity, human rights, and social justice for the African people. When you look up the meaning of "dignity," you find words such as self-respect, self-esteem, pride, and distinction. Situations that get in the way of people respecting themselves and being respected undermine the integrity of human life, and our moral obligation is to address the causes of these situations.

Social justice, on the other hand, is a requirement for a sense of equity among people. Every individual should have access to the same resources and services in equal measure as everybody else, instead of some individuals or groups being deprived while others have more. Social justice ultimately leads to respect for human rights. Yet different communities understand human rights differently, which can cause conflicts, discrimination, and oppression.

Lately in Africa, the continuous attack on human dignity, human rights, and social justice has caused the African people to lag behind other nations in bettering themselves and fully

contributing to human advancement. Two sayings from my people, the Banyarwanda—the people of Rwanda—come to mind here: *Udashinga ntabyina* [He who cannot stand, cannot dance] and *Ihene itiyambitse ntiyambika iyayo* [You cannot ask a goat to dress its youngsters if it cannot dress itself]. These sayings illustrate that it is almost impossible to expect people going through hardship to move forward if their basic needs are not met.

Models of Intervention: Cultural Approaches to Solutions

In the years following Africa's independence, solutions to the mentioned issues have primarily been influenced by outside funding sources, which happen to be mostly Western European or North American. I remember growing up at a time when powdered milk was also known as "*Amata ya Kennedy*" [Kennedy's milk]. Moreover, back then in Rwanda, boarding schools lived off food donations from the European Union.

My mother missed entire days of farm work because she had to line up at the clinic when she had a sick child, and the nurses there were then called "*bamadamazera*" because they were Whites. My mother, who is also a medicine woman, only used her skills for diseases that could not be treated by Western medicine. But now, all the herbs Mother used have been cleared away to make room for more construction and also because it is considered faster and more convenient to line up at the clinic.

Meanwhile, the traditional healing skills have been forgotten or no longer valued and are used only by people who cannot afford the health care fees or who live too far from the clinic. This is mainly because traditional healing practices have been replaced by Western medicine, especially in the cities. Any form of Western healing costs money and is practiced by people with a Western training; thus there is always a shortage of nurses and, even more so, a shortage of physicians. Passing on traditional healing skills requires rituals that the younger generations with a strong Western influence did not believe in, because they did not want to appear

uncivilized. I understood that Mother's healing skills could not be passed on to me, her first child. I would have felt privileged; rather the honor is traditionally given to the seventh child. One of my younger brothers was thus in line to inherit these skills. However, when he came of age, there were no more bushes around my mother's house from which to gather the herbs, and my brother was off to boarding school.

I still hear about Mother walking miles to find the special herbs to concoct potions for newborns with colic. But now my mother is aging, and the long walks, very early (before she meets other people who may interfere with the healing process) are tedious to her frail body. The art of healing among my people, the Banyarwanda, follows certain procedures: the healer has a particular way of purifying her or himself for the task, and must preserve the purity of her or his mind and body by avoiding anything that may interfere with the task, which includes not purposefully touching or speaking to other people before or while he or she is performing the healing.

Finding a Balance Between Traditional Ways and Western Ways

The dilemma is: Which way is the right way? It appears that Africa and its peoples are still trying to strike a balance between using imported systems and traditional ways of dealing with the numerous current challenges. In many cases, the traditional ways no longer seem suitable or have been superseded or made obsolete through the influence of Western culture. For example, cases of endemic famines and poverty used to be locally addressed by allowing families to temporarily migrate to neighboring locations.

Among my people, the Banyarwanda, the temporary move was called *gusuhuka*. Communities tended to have family relations or community ties with those neighboring locations. Today, migrating is an extreme alternative, because those receiving communities belong to different legal jurisdictions and sometimes are part of a different country; the migrating families would be considered outsiders and thus not welcome. Currently, Rwandans who move to Uganda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the

Congo, or Tanzania are considered immigrants—refugees—and have to be taken care of by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) because they are considered a burden to the receiving community.

Poverty and endemic famine are today addressed by Western countries, which send in their own experts to assess the situation and food donations and money to buy food and other necessities. This can be regarded as enabling the receiving individuals, because they may be led to believe that someone is going to take care of them. This discourages them from figuring out their own solution (Moyo, 2009).

Cultural Rituals as Healing

Rwandans, like the people of many African communities, have traditionally considered every aspect of their lives as constituting one entity, where the spiritual, the emotional, and the physical are intertwined and, as such, treated together through cultural rituals. For example, the Banyarwanda say, “*Agahimbaza umusyi kaba muni y’ingasire* [What gets the grinder excited and keeps her going can be found under the grinder].” Even though stone grinding seems tedious and hard work, the worker (traditionally, a woman) finds pleasure in her work by tuning in to the rhythm and sounds produced by the grinder. It is soothing, musical, and gives the worker the opportunity to turn within and meditate. She is not afraid to confront her fears, because the work makes it seem as if the fears are not the problem. The “poison” flows freely out of her and leaves her intact and healed.

The underlying idea here is that the Rwandans, at the time, did not think of compartmentalizing their lives. A human being is regarded as a whole entity. If the physical body is ill, so will the spirit and mind be ill. In fact, any ailment is usually considered to have been caused by some spiritual mismatch or dislocation. In this regard, Mazima (2002) believes that to articulate African metaphysics, one has to understand “the energy of cosmic origin that permeates and lives within all that is” (p. 219).

In another example, the *Muganura*, feast of the new crop among the Banyarwanda, is

a time to rejoice for the abundance of food for the community, a time to honor the contribution of parents for the guidance they provide to the younger generation, and the time to include the unseen world of the ancestors for their blessing and constant vigilance over the community. The departed ancestors are served first during the feast, followed by the community elders, and then the tasting of the new crop goes to the oldest, and the younger ones come last. This sharing ritual conveys a sense of togetherness, of strength and prosperity.

In times of calamity, such as when lightning strikes, once again the community (or at least the large family) will come together to curtail this tragedy. There will be a cleansing ceremony, and special concoctions will be given to the people who have witnessed or suffered from the tragedy. These practices give the victims a feeling of a clean start, after the calamity is acknowledged and given due consideration. Psychologically this allows the victims to be reintegrated into the community.

I remember the tale of a young, newlywed woman who had the misfortune of being raped by a stranger passerby. Her mother-in-law tried to shame her by saying that she had an understanding with her rapist. The stranger found out that the young woman was being mistreated by her mother-in-law and came back and raped the older woman.

After he left, the older woman, realizing she had been unfair to the daughter-in-law, offered to keep the secret between the two of them. But the younger woman knew that keeping it a secret was not going to resolve all the issues that come with being raped, namely a sense of shame and of feeling soiled. She protested, telling her mother-in-law that she could not afford to be quiet, because she still needed to have children and would need cleansing, in which case the mother-in-law offered to set up a cleansing ritual (*kumara amahano*), thus ending the effect of the bad event.

The Banyarwanda understand that women who experience rape can be affected in different aspects of their lives, and the handling of the consequences must address all aspects. By going through the prescribed rituals, the

community acknowledges that what happened is not a good thing and it can disrupt the normal course of the victim's life. It can traumatize the victim and have serious consequences in the victim's future relationships with her family and her environment and thus have dire consequences for the community, because what happens to one community member affects everybody. Mazima (2002) said of the African views of interconnection, "We cannot be satisfied with an individualistic approach but must understand that we are an organic part of a whole that includes diverse spiritual and physical entities" (p. 222).

A mother who loses her child through illness or a family who loses a member to death has to observe a period of mourning that is marked by certain cultural practices (*kwirabura no kwera*, which means, going from darkening your life to purifying it). Food that was in the house at the time of death is removed and thrown away; valuables are removed from the home before the person dies; the deceased is given a proper burial; the parent or spouse stays indoors; the mourning family has to abstain from sex for the time the mourning is going on; and families and neighbors gather around an ongoing fire for 7 days.

At the end of the 7 days, there is a special ceremony that includes the shaving and special bathing of family members, the deep cleaning of the home and symbolic laundry, and the handing over of the deceased's legacy by naming a successor and distributing the deceased's property to his or her heirs. These cultural practices allow the bereaved individuals to gain closure and move on with their lives. Different death circumstances are handled differently to make sure the soul of the deceased makes it to the afterlife and the surviving family members receive proper consideration of their loss.

None of these practices, however, were possible at the time of the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, when people were being killed en masse and their bodies thrown in mass graves. Some were thrown alive in latrine pits or buried alive or burned. The barbarism of that tragedy was unimaginable and has left surviving relatives, friends, and neighbors with a trauma

they will carry for a long time, or perhaps forever.

The Legacy of Organized Religions and Its Impact on Social Practices

The advent of organized religions during colonial times and their subsequent practice in post-colonial Africa have seen those cultural observances confined to special occasions, such as births, marriages, and funerals. Converts to Christianity or Islam were told that the ways of their ancestors were evil and satanic and were to be abolished. Those who still practiced rituals, such as the ones I have described above, had to do so in hiding. Christians could pray to Jesus and say invocations to Christian saints, but they were told that their ancestors were not part of the heavenly chosen people.

In recent years, though, I have noticed a loosening in religious attitudes. For example, children born in Muslim or Christian families can choose to practice the religion of the parents or convert to other faiths, with no dramatic consequences. Members of the same family may choose not to belong to the same faith. Even among those who have remained Christian or Muslim, many have become more tolerant of non practicing family members. They may frown upon them, but they do not shun them as used to be the case. There are still fierce devotees to imported religions, but more and more Africans are open to other forms of worship, and many practice a mixture of traditional beliefs and Christianity or Islam.

Urubohero (the Weaving Place) and Ngoma (Drumming)

Below I discuss two examples of the many approaches initiated by Rwandan women in response to the devastation our country has experienced. These approaches suggest innovative yet traditional ways of addressing the unfathomable traumas experienced by the Rwandan people.

Urubohero: The Weaving Place

The years following the 1994 Rwandan Genocide represented trying times for many of us. As many foreign non-government organizations (NGOs) flocked to Rwanda to

rebuild the country, our own local, all-women nonprofit organization, Réseau Des Femmes Oeuvrant Pour le Développement Rurale (also known as Réseau) benefited from a grant from a European donor to support our actions in reaching out to rural women. Our surviving members started tours, going from village to village to identify who was still alive and what kind of help they needed to get back on their feet. Many of the participants of our women's group had lost children, husbands, and other family members. The touring team was met by empty "gazes and looks," unresponsive bodies, and the sheer numbness and lethargy that characterizes individuals who have seen hell on earth and were not yet sure if the nightmares of the tragedy were over or if real life was an actual dream.

At that time, our team did not know what to do, but soon realized that the widowed women were picking up from the streets children who had lost their parents. We started gathering these women so we could distribute to them farm tools, household utensils, and small funds to buy a farm animal or any tool they might need for the time being. We used an old form of female gathering, known as *urubohero* (*imbohoro* in the plural).

Urubohero, the weaving place, was a place where young women met regularly for "leisure time." Traditionally, young women who were done with their daily household chores took time for themselves to meet with their peers to talk, counsel, and learn informally ways of becoming a woman. This was the time to weave mats, learn from each other new weaving patterns, sing and dance, and enjoy each other's company. Slowly awakening to our call to gather, the women started coming to the *urubohero* more regularly and more frequently. I, personally, assumed that the women wanted to come and meet so they could weave. I soon became aware that some came with no unfinished basket or mat or embroidery to work on, and I was rather frustrated, because I was convinced, at the time, that the objective of the gathering was for the women to make something to generate an income.

Then I realized that the women wanted to meet because the weaving place allowed them

to talk about their pain, mourn their losses, and offer each other tips for coping. Using their hands in weaving gave them a physical occupation, while their minds unwound what was burdening them. It allowed them to speak freely and deeply without censor, as the women joined in and finished each other's sentences. They cried together, laughed together, sang together, and unconsciously started healing together.

This form of mutual healing is different from having an expert come in and meet with individual women to talk about what happened to them as victims. Granvold (1996) believes that narrative methods used by constructivists, including storytelling, provide "opportunities for highly unstructured assessment and unharnessed self-exploration" (p. 348). The difference between Granvold's statement and what happened in the *urubohero* is that there was no expert to assess or evaluate or direct. The women used a free-flowing narrative that responded to their need to disclose, on their own terms and in their own time and fashion. If someone had come from outside the group and asked to talk about what had happened to them, they most likely could not have been able to say as much as they did among themselves.

It was through the *urubohero* that Godelieve, a member of Réseau des Femmes from Gitarama, who was a social worker by training, created a special group of rape victims, seeing that they had special needs. The women were accepting of her and guided her efforts to help them heal their wounds. It was because of the *urubohero* that Godelieve and other members of Réseau des Femmes initiated an advocacy group to change the law, making rape a crime against humanity and placing it in Category I, for crimes committed during the genocide. The following is a comment from a Réseau des Femmes member on how she is currently using *urubohero* with the women in her neighborhood:

Muvandimwe Hadidja, [Sister Hadidja]. *Uracyabaho* [Are you still there]? *Nashakishije muri Amerika yose* [I have searched all over

America]. *Ndakubura* [I did not find you]. *None ndangira aho nakubona* [Now tell me where I can find you] *nkagukoraho* [so that I can touch you], *bitari ibi by'ibi byuma* [not in a way of this technology], *nubwo, nicaye mu "rubohero"* [even though I am sitting in the weaving place], *rugizwe kandi ruyobowe cyane cyane n'umukobwa Athanasia* [made by and mainly led by lady Athanasie], *udasiba kunkubita agashyi bene aka kageni* [who never stops to remind me in this way]; *anyibutsa wowe n'abanditwigeze kwicarana mu gacaca ducuma amagambo* [she reminds me of you and others with whom we sat and talked]!

Nukora ubwo bushakashatsi urimo kwandikira "paper" [When you do the research you are writing about], *uzibuke ubwoko bw'urubohero nk'urwo* [remember the kind of weaving place like that one], *runashoboka iyo abarugize bategeranye* [which is possible even when the members are not together]! *Hera kuri ibyo byishimo by'ikibuguzo cyakugeze* [Start with the joy of the *kibuguzo* that you received]! *Kurwanya "trauma" birenze ibyo ni ibihe* [What other way of healing trauma is stronger than that]? *Ni ukunkoraho, nanjye nkagukora, tugakorananho* [You have to touch me and I would do the same, and we will touch each other]!

Ubu hongeye kwaduka twa "duseke" ndashidikanya ko ujya ukumbura [Now there is a comeback of the baskets that I know you miss, without a doubt], *tugenda ku mutwe cyanga se mu kwaha bitewe n'ingano n'uburemere bwato* [the ones we carry on the head or under the arm depending on their size and weight], *tugahinguka umuvandimwe akanezerwa* [the ones that bring joy

to a relative when they appear], *kandi ako kebo kuzuye kakazasubira iya "Mugarura"* [and the ones, when they are full, go back for a reciprocal visit]!

Mperutse kohereza abakobwa banjye mu kabande k'aho twita "Iwabo wa twese" [I recently sent my girls down in the valley we call our shared home]. *Bancirayo ubwatsi bwiza barabuhonda, barabwanika* [They gathered beautiful grass for me, they smoothed it for me and dried it for me]. *Maze ku gicamunsi babutabukana imicyamu yose ya Kigali uruzi*. [Then in midday, they walked through the whole Kigali neighborhoods and brought the grass to me]. *Abababona babaha impundu ngo "dore disi abakobwa baracyariho iwacu i Rwanda"* [People who saw them were awed and exclaimed, "Look, there are still young women in our country, Rwanda"]! *Ndetse no muri kaburimbo ya kapitali* [Even in the paved roads of the capital city]! *Benshi basabye "umuce" ngo biyibutse, abandi bati uwaduha umutima nk'uwo* [Many requested a small mat so they can remind themselves of how to make them. Others wished they had the same heart as the women]!

Barabwanitse buruma neza, maze si ukwiyibutsa twivayo [They dried the grass beautifully, and then came time for us to remind ourselves of our traditions without reservation]. *Dushakira "imigwegwe" kutayibura* [We looked for sisal]. *Ibirere byiza by'ingabo bifite amabara anyuranye tubimara mu ntoki ziboneka bigoye hafi yacu* [We found long, nice banana plant leaves with multiple color. These are hard to find in our area]! *Ubwo bwatsi twarabuboshye buvamo ibirago, imisambi n'utunye gamo,*

maze turasasa turisegura, dutaka inzu, ubundi twumva uko tubaye [We wove the grass and made big and small mats to sit on and other decorative ones; we displayed them in our houses and used other ones as headrests and felt very happy]!

Urwo rubohero rwacu ubu rugeze mu bworozi bw'inkwavu, zibyara buri kwezi tugashimishwa ukuntu "ubuzima bubura aho bwahoze, ariko mu kwicungura umurabyo ugatinda" [Our weaving place is now at the point of raising rabbits. They give birth every month and we are pleased with that fact. There is no missing life where life used to be, but in renewing themselves, they are faster than lightning]! *Ntacyo wanganya kubona buri kwezi havuka uturemwa dukura vuba bihebuje, twinsi kandi dore ko iyo havutse duke tuba ari 7, kandi nta na rimwe hadakura nibura 5! Urabyumva nawe ko akanyama katakibura muri urwo rubohero* [There is nothing you can compare with having so many animals that come to life every month. The fewest number we get is 7, and 5 of them always mature/survive. You understand that we do not lack meat in the weaving place]!

Ariko nkubwire igisumba ibindi [Let me tell you what is more important in all this], *n'ubu unduzi kuri iki cyuma nkwandikira* [even now that you see me on this machine writing to you]: *Umutima ukunda ndawukeshya "urwungo rw'ibikomere nkesha amasaha menshi twicarana n'abandi bakobwa* [I owe my loving heart to the healing effect of the many hours of sitting with other women]. *Twiyibutsa ibyo byiza byo gucuma urugwiro, tugashakisha igitunga ubuzima* [We reminisce on the positive effect of building warm

relationships; we look together for ways to nurture life]. *Tuboha, dutera amabara* [We weave and create patterns in the mats], *ari nako ducoca ibibazo bidutera imbaraga zo kuzinduka buri munsi mu bikorwa byabikemura* [while at the same time, we analyze problems that give us the energy to get up early every morning to be involved in activities that will resolve those problems]!

Urwo rubohero kandi nkubwira, twarushinze aho ntuye [The above-described weaving place has been created here where I live]! *Sevota n'izindi mbohero, nabo bakubwire ibigwi byabo, ibyo ni ibyanjye mpagazeho* [Sevota and the other weaving places will tell you of their own weaving place when they feel like it. I told you what I witnessed].

Ngoma: Drumming for Healing

"Sijye uzarota kuwagatandatu hageze ngo tujye mu ngoma [I cannot wait until Saturday so we can go to the 'drums']. I heard this comment from a young woman one day and did not know what to make of it. The women dance as if their lives depend on it. They dance as if no one is watching. They dance as if they are the only ones who matter, and they seem to be dancing for themselves and no one else. Women of all ages dance. In Rwanda, everybody seems to want to dance now. There are more You Tube videos about Rwandan music and dance than I have ever seen before. School girls have dance clubs; village women and Rwandans of the diaspora are finding any reason to meet and dance.

The Ngwinonshuti are a group of Rwandan Muslim women who live in Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda. The group started out as a gathering for women to welcome other women who had recently arrived in the capital when they or their husbands had had to move because of a new job. Ngwinonshuti wanted to create a welcoming framework to integrate the newcomers. They met once a week in the

beginning and gathered at one another's homes. They met more often when one of them needed help in situations of illness, a birth, a death, or a wedding, in which case, the gathering was called "*mwito*" and involved other people who were not initially part of Ngwinonshuti. *Mwito* is a Kiswahili word for "a calling." It could be used for "invitation to a function," but when I think about it, I get a strong impression of urgency from the caller and a sense of shared responsibility on the part of the person who is being invited. Someone can choose not to attend, but when the person misses the calling, this may result in dire consequences for the relationship between the person and the community. Missing a *mwito* repeatedly can lead to self-isolation. It is a matter of social networking and social responsibility.

It is about fun and work. *Mwito* are characterized by large numbers of people, drum beating, gift giving, food, music, and dancing. The drum is of particular significance. The women stand in a circle and place a drum in the middle of the circle. The most skilled singer usually beats the drum or has "an assistant" who beats the drum to start the dancing. Songs are usually provocative and get every person in attendance to want to say something or do something. The singer usually calls the lady of the house first. For example, in the song "*Anawubaya Gani* [She Does Nothing Wrong]," the singer tells the audience that the lady who has been called is such a nice person that everybody should be associated with her. The lady in question has to show up and show off. She gives money to the singer and customarily is joined by a family member or friend for support, and usually the older dancer will give something to the accompanying dancer (*guhamba* or rewarding).

This is where it gets interesting, because it combines several characteristics of Rwandan dancing and elements of Swahili civilizations. There is a call and a response, where the lead singer says something that is repeated by the audience. Someone in the audience takes over and expresses whatever is on her heart: praise to someone or complaint about a situation. The improvisation and

creative nature of this type of dance and song allow the participants to freely express themselves in a narrative that flows with the rhythm and emotions that are being evoked. For example, in the song "*Ninge Kuwa Kwetu Nakwetu ni Mbali Ninge Mlilia Mama* [If I Were Home and Home Is Far, I Would Cry to My Mother]," the lead singer gives permission to all these women who have never had a chance to mourn the loss of their parents, relatives, friends, and loved ones to break free and cry while they dance.

The women dancers use these opportunities to counsel other women, censure bad behavior, warn younger women who may fall for unworthy men, and talk about family relationships. These are opportunities for each one of the women in attendance to express themselves and be sure to be heard. You can tell which theme meets the participants' approval when many people go to the lead singer to request an encore by giving more money.

Two elements here are very characteristic of the ritualistic symbolism of the dance: the circle and the drum (*ngoma*). Women's dancing in a circle gives a sense of completion, support, and equal value to everybody's contribution. The circular form tends to be used in many Rwandan items: the circular shape of the traditional Rwandan house, the motherhood crown, the baskets, and the cooking pots, to name a few. Mazima (2002) goes so far as to affirm that the circle is "the African spiritual symbol par excellence....[It] stands for the constant renewal of life through death and birth" (p. 221). The women's dance in a circle unconsciously conveys the message of the cyclic nature of life.

The drum (*ngoma*), on the other hand, has always served as a communication tool. Different beats have different meanings, and the sound of a drumbeat conveys a sense of homecoming and of being among your own kind. The term *ngoma* has three meanings, depending on the situation: It can connote the musical instrument itself, the sound of the drumbeat, or the event that involves the drum, such as the *mwito*. The African self is a relational self with humans and other beings, with body, mind, and soul being connected.

What Rwandans do is a spontaneous recourse to a form of expression their inner selves hunger for: to gather in pain and gather in healing.

As the celebration progresses, the lady of the house is given the signal to bring in the offerings. In the case of a bridal shower, if she gives a cheap item to the bride-to-be, this can send a signal that she is "cheap" herself. My sister once told me there was a woman in the group who, when she attended a *mwito*, invariably brought a laundry basin. My sister then asked a rhetorical question, "What would she do if she had a *mwito* and all she gets from the people in attendance is a laundry basin?" That story tells me of the sense of reciprocity and social responsibility each woman holds towards the group.

On another occasion, my sister told me the story of a religious leader, a sheikh with rigid Muslim practices, who still believes that Rwandan cultural practices, such as dancing at the *mwito*, are "pagan, unholy" practices. When he had a *mwito*, he did not want any dancing at his home, only the gifts—no show of rejoicing or drumbeating. My sister reported that in such cases, people are reluctant to attend, and when they do, they stay for a very short period of time, because supporting the host with gifts is a good gesture, but is not the only reason people attend a *mwito*. When there is a *ngoma* (the sound of the drumbeat), though even uninvited, women show up and do their best to bring a gift to the family, so that they can be a part of the celebration and benefit from the community support and warmth from the dancing and singing.

At the end of the gathering, women make new friends. They report having fewer nightmares and as a consequence, sleep better. My sister told me that a non-Muslim woman who had attended a *mwito* at my sister's house asked her if she could invite other women. This woman mentioned having been surprised at how many more women she now knows, following her having met them at my sister's house. At a time when the Rwandan people are trying to reconcile after the genocide, the *mwito*, involving *ngoma*, is a positive forum to get people to gather and to know each other, cry together, build together, and heal together.

Stepakoff, Hubbard, Katoh, Falk, Mikulu, et al. (2006) acknowledged the importance of including the cultural dimension in any trauma-healing approach, because the victim's cultural practices have a unique meaning that reaches the inner core of her or his being.

The needs of Rwandan society are psychological, physical, and material. The activities initiated by the women in the above-described examples tend to be easy to organize, because they use approaches that promote interdependence and synchronicity, and are already inherent in the culture of the Rwandan people. They weave each other's lives around their shared pain, their shared joy, their shared skills, and their shared meaning and destiny. Rwandans say, "*Akimuhana kaza invura ihise* [The rescue from outside your own home arrives always after the rain]." It pleases me to know that Rwandans have been trying to find solutions to their own problems, while the outside world tries to help.

It is important that social work practitioners be educated in the different cultural practices of the clients they serve here in the United States as well as overseas with African clients. It can be a challenge to put aside the traditional way of practicing social work and instead, allow the unstructured, spontaneous outburst of cultural practices that seem out of place in a Western world, but have far-reaching effects on restoring wholeness to the African people.

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