

**“Dancing the Darkness Away: A Study of Identity and Healing through the Arts
among Children of Rwanda”**

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My first night in Rwanda began, appropriately enough, with a power outage. After the confusion of my arrival, I had been welcomed, fed, and put to bed in a rapid succession. I had timidly explored my new room, and pulled some soap, a pair of pajamas, and my toothbrush out of my travel backpack, heading to the bathroom in order to prepare for my first night under the mosquito net. The instant I walked out of the door the power abruptly went out. The hallway became pitch black, and although the bathroom was right next-door, I immediately lost all orientation. “Arlene?” I said softly, hoping that my American “mama” for the summer would still be awake. She was not, but my neighbor Julliette (who I would later learn is our cook) opened her door and expertly brushed past me, still standing as one struck blind in the hallway clutching my sweat pants. She walked expertly through the thick darkness down the hall to the cupboard, and soon returned bearing a lit candle. I thanked her, not sure just yet who she was or if she could understand me, and proceeded to perform my nighttime bathroom activities by candlelight, a tradition to which I would soon become accustomed. After returning to my room, I attempted to finish my evening ritual by candlelight. In America this includes charging all my electronic devices, so I methodically pulled out my ipod cord and attempted, by candlelight, to plug it in! After the realization sunk in that clearly without power my ipod would not charge, I had a good laugh at myself, and acknowledged for the umpteenth time in my 3 hours at the home that I had a lot to learn about life in Africa. That night I was not sure if I was ready to learn it all. After almost 2 months in Rwanda, I discovered that silly mistakes like that one were part of my daily African life, but that

despite these errors, perhaps even because of them, I would prove to be capable of learning more in one summer than I ever expected possible. My experience this summer was one of successful learning about life in Rwanda, particularly for 10 little girls. I learned how they use music, dance and other forms of artistic expression in the formation of their own identity and a community. I did meet several challenges but overcame them thanks to the tools available to me, and plan to use this research both for my senior thesis and for further writing this year.

I entered this research project with the accurate assumption that things may not go as planned. I was prepared to deal with changes in my research. I had planned to use participant observation, artistic analysis and interviews to discover how these children use the arts in their daily lives, and perhaps my biggest concern was that the girls would just not enjoy or wish to use the arts in any way. Luckily this concern was completely unfounded and my proposed methods of research served me perfectly in understanding and documenting these girls' artistic activities. In fact I found that they utilized the arts more than American children. Young girls without many possessions, who have been through such trying circumstances, use what they have and use it well. They could knit with some dirty string and two sticks, and used their God-given materials, their own bodies, to sing and dance all the time. They already knew many hymns and other English songs that had been translated into French and Kinyarwanda. I helped by translating these songs back into English and teaching those. Dance and song also hold a special meaning for them because of the traditional element of these arts. The girls would teach each other, or learn from their "mama's" traditional Rwandese songs and dance. This is a way for these children to construct their identity, by keeping these songs and dances alive that

their mothers, aunts and grandmothers had known. These relatives may be dead or very distant, but I believe that one way in which the girls kept the memory of them was through these dances and songs. I did my best to record the songs and to find out what the songs were about. While singing and dancing, the girls each took on individual roles in their demeanor and style. They performed songs at church, which allowed the congregation to view them as a defined group. They sang and danced at my going away party, another instance in which they were able to perform as a group within their community. Throughout all these experiences I was able to observe and record the girls both as a group and as individuals. Also, in order to increase my understanding of the children's lives in Rwanda, I interviewed teachers, a primary school superintendent, and a few social organizations who assist children. I also talked to many people about the genocide and its effect on the new generation of children who did not live through that event. These conversations helped me to round out my conception of the life of a Rwandese child.

This experience has also opened my eyes to many other issues of which I was previously unaware. I confronted cultural differences in attitudes towards marriage and women, different conceptions of disease and religion, corruption in seemingly unexpected organizations and groups, and power struggles of varying degrees. I also was able to sit in on a gacaca court session, which judges genocide offenders, as well as a rehearsal of a international gospel singing group. These fascinating experiences, outside the realm of my research, also engaged my thoughts this summer, and while they are not related to this research, they will probably affect my next project and definitely have expanded my basic global knowledge.

I did meet some unexpected challenges. First, the language barrier was much more difficult than I had anticipated. I should have known that just because children were learning English in school did not mean that they were already able to communicate at all, especially girls who may have only started school a month earlier. Most of them were unable to communicate at all in English. But we adapted, and I soon learned the usefulness of a translator, of body language, and of the reliable hand motions.

I also felt a slight conflict between my role as an orphanage volunteer and as an anthropological researcher. As I had learned in courses on anthropological research, my goal was to be as inconspicuous as possible and to simply observe what the children did on their own. However, as a volunteer, it was my role to *teach* the children music, not let them do what they already knew. In the end we struck a good balance between learning new pieces in English and allowing them to sing and dance in their own traditional way. I would teach a little bit, and then appoint one of the older or more spirited girls to lead a song or a dance that they knew in Kinyarwanda. Sometimes these pieces would turn out to be translated older hymns, brought during the missionary period to Rwanda, and then I would translate it back to English for them and we would learn that as well. In this I was able to observe the children in their own uses of the music and dance but was also able to provide something new for them to experience.

This research experience has provided ample material for my senior thesis and beyond. I am excited to get started in the fall working with a new professor of world music at the university to follow up this fieldwork with some analysis and intellectual research. I am also taking several courses that relate to my experience in Rwanda, one on world music and another on cultural difference and social change. Both require

substantial papers that I plan to write about my summer research. I also hope to be able to publish some of the writing I did while in Rwanda and afterwards. This research has given me much to think about, relating to the proposal I had written and otherwise. It has fed my own creativity as a descriptive writer, and honed my analytical skills as a researcher. I have so much material I want to further investigate now it's hard to know where to start!