

Rituals of Healing Encountered Among Street Children of Haiti

By Amber Elizabeth Lynn Gray

In a world where attention to human suffering and survival now focuses on acts of terrorism, the ongoing struggles of less newsworthy countries might be overlooked. Haiti, for example, continues to suffer from the effects of slavery-related oppression that has been an integral part of its history.

Formerly an island inhabited by the indigenous Arawak peoples, Haiti was first a Spanish, then a French, colony. The native peoples were slaughtered in a brutal colonization, and Africans were imported as part of the slave trade. Many slaves in Haiti died from extreme conditions, disease and torture. What is not commonly known is that Haiti is the first independent black nation in the Western Hemisphere. Independence came on December 31, 1804, following a decade-long struggle for liberation.

The amalgam of spiritual beliefs and practices that evolved from the forced fusion of many tribes gave rise to the tradition of communal rituals, rhythms, dance and healing rites now known as vodou. Years of civil unrest and conflict, political instability, extreme poverty and violence in the streets have contributed to ongoing trauma and suffering. Yet Haiti's extreme conditions have given rise to a spiritual force that fosters resiliency and the ability to endure. When I began my work in Haiti three years ago, I was not prepared to encounter a culture with such a strong spiritual basis, its rituals infused with healing, faith and a strong sense of family, community and social responsibility.

As a white, American dance movement therapist, I became curious how the dance and rhythm-based rituals and traditions of Haiti served therapeutic functions. In my ongoing work with street children, (tens of thousands are found in Port au Prince alone), child survivors of the prisons and torture, and abandoned children who are mentally and physically challenged, I have learned how a Western psychotherapeutic perspective must undergo a transmutation into communal and spiritual forms consistent with Haiti's traditions.

Dance movement therapy is a somatic and creative arts psychotherapy with roots in ancient healing traditions, and initially I imagined that the therapy would be a well-suited healing modality for working with these children. However, therapeutic trust developed only after the children

became my teachers in Haitian tradition, allowing me to enter their world in some small way. Both Haitian ritual and dance movement therapy often are performed in a circle, and the dance therapist facilitates a rhythmic, kinesthetic and empathic participation. But the complexity and nuances integral to Haitian dance goes beyond the physical. In vodou, for example, the ceremonial dances have a clearly delineated center, called the peristyle, which represents the intersection of the vertical and horizontal dimensions, the point where the physical world and the spiritual world meet.

In dance movement therapy, the central concept of "mirroring" is less developed than it is in the cosmology of Haiti: It is believed that those who have died exist in a world called Guinee, the ancestral home of the Haitians on the other side of the ocean. The ocean serves as the mirror through which ancestors reflect back to the people the meaning of individual and collective actions. Each human life has a ti bon ange (little good angel), the part of the soul directly associated with the individual, and a gros bon ange (big good angel), the life force that all sentient beings share. At a person's birth, these spirits enter the individual, and when death occurs, the spirits return to the universal source of life force, or God. This principle of collective experience informs a strong sense of responsibility to both the ancestors and to all those with whom life is shared. Vodou has allowed a traumatized culture to maintain an ongoing relationship with the natural, ancestral and spiritual world. These practices have served religious, cultural and therapeutic purposes in ways that are impossible to distinguish, reflecting a strikingly successful counterforce to the pressures toward fragmentation among the people in Haiti

In one group session I led, the children quickly abandoned my recorded music, and several of them began to drum. Others began to move in and out of the center of the circle, one at a time, taking turns leading, being followed and following. As each child created a movement phrase in the center, he or she turned toward each child in the outer or witness circle, and mirrored movements to one another. No child skipped being witnessed by each member of the group. Each person had to spend time in the center to lead or initiate movement, to be seen, and then to offer back to each mover in the center the mirroring of his or her movement. This practice is similar to the tradition of the solo circle that exists in African dance and rituals (and in other cultures), though here the process of being seen and witnessed as an individual seemed more consciously enacted. In this sea of abandoned street children, the ritual ensured that each one was individually acknowledged.

As our work together progressed, the children taught me rituals to begin and end each session, as a way to integrate the meaning of our work together into daily life-e.g., a simple cleansing ritual using water to retain the coolness of the dance after clearing the soul of excess energy and burden. At all times, the children stressed the importance of communal action in making connection with ancestors, asking for assistance and support, and discovering what must be done to take the right action.

I realize that my work to date has been to enter and learn about the Haitian cultural space, and only after that has been accomplished shall I have the opportunity to offer the Haitian people avenues to explore. I feel privileged to have encountered the resiliency built through a creative, collective process that mirrors and honors the roots of Haitian culture.

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