

[Article] Interacting with and Performing the Book of Ruth as a Pathway toward Trauma Healing: An Empirical Study from Côte D'Ivoire¹



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Introduction

Among the basic elements that have been shown to be crucial in trauma healing are the following:

- 1) The traumatized person must *regain agency* and be able to tell her story from her perspective. The trauma event must be addressed, but in a safe, contained² way.
- 2) The traumatized person is helped when others hear her story and listen with empathy. *Connecting with others* enables the traumatized to move forward to a future with positivity.
- 3) Those who have been victims of abuse often sense “emotional release” when they know that *justice will one day be executed* against those who caused their pain.³ It is then easier for them to be able to *forgive* the perpetrator, for their own benefit and healing.

In this paper, we report on a seminar held with a group of Bete women who have undergone significant trauma. We first discuss literature which supports the above principles, and the theoretical bases of our approach (which combines performing arts and exposure to Scripture content). The method of the empirical work is then described, followed by the results achieved. Finally, the concluding section notes lessons learned from this experience and suggests ideas that could be explored to further develop this method.

Theoretical basis for this approach

Oral art (performance) as a means to trauma healing

Many researchers report positive outcomes from using various art forms (in particular, music, dance, and drama) for promoting psychological healing. Mollica (2006, 107), for example, states that “Artistic activity can aid

¹ We wish to thank the *Translation towards Transformation* program managed by Brian Schrag for their generosity in funding this and another song-based seminar in Daloa, Côte d'Ivoire, in September 2021. We wish to also thank Barbara Schrag for her practical help and the Catholic Center in Daloa for accepting to house our group.

² “Containment” implies that care is taken to ensure that the emotion resulting from the presentation of the “trauma triggers” is not overwhelming.

³ The study of Ruth was complemented by daily devotions taken from the Psalms. During a study of lament psalms (for example, Psalm 3), the women learned that not only can we hand over our hurts to God, but we can also ask God to execute justice on our behalf (as happens in Psalm 3:7).

the healing process even when indeed, the healing power of aesthetics and the arts is clear in therapy based on talking and medications fails." Similarly, Schrag (2013, 169) notes that "The arts provide a socially-accepted release for intense feelings." Gorelick (2005, 126) further claims that all people are potentially capable of responding to the creativity of others with their own creativity. Often, those more gifted can create a space allowing for the full participation of all.

Loman (2005, 69) discusses the power of music, dance, and drama to "intervene on a nonverbal level" and, as Chace claims, to "lift moods." Of course, integral to dance and music is rhythm, long known for its powerful healing capacities. Gorelick (2005, 121) claims that "[people] who are . . . isolated from feelings and sensations, can return to their body via rhythm." Emerson (1997, 16–17) posits that regular rhythm not only "invigorates" but also facilitates rest. Attridge (1995, 1) claims that rhythm is *the heart of poetic experience*. As Sacks (2007, 244) observes, "Rhythm turns listeners into participants, and synchronizes the brains and minds of all who participate." This leads to a shared communal group experience which can be healing in itself. Drawn into dance and movement, a person is quite literally "no longer . . . alone" (Yoder 2005, 77).

Along with rhythm, songs are also a therapeutic tool, as they "provide a containing and transforming function" (Robarts 2003, 3). This is due in part to the use of metaphors and musical forms (processed in the right brain) which facilitate the verbal expression of feelings and thoughts (processed in the left brain). In this way, the verbal and nonverbal functions are integrated, while keeping the emotional content at a manageable level (Gantt and Tinnin 2009, 148–53). Defense mechanisms are thus not prematurely dismantled. As Jennings and Minde (1993, 154) note, "Words alone, without artistic structure and form are unable to achieve the paradox of both containment and expression of some of our more shocking and painful experiences." The addition of melody, however, makes a significant difference. "Songs are ways that human beings explore emotions. They express who we are and how we feel," and even more, "they bring us closer to others" (Bruscia 1998, 9).

With regard to drama, Landy (2005) notes that the human ability to dramatize is inborn and offers people the opportunity to see themselves in a new way. "Drama allows people to stand outside themselves and view themselves as a separate entity" (Landy 2005, 90), permitting them to express their individuality through their own unique voices (Robarts 2003, 2), opening doors for them to use their imagination for creative expression. Moreover, "by playing out [their] inner lives and outer realities [through drama], order emerges" (Landy 2005, 114). Thus, along with song and dance, drama is another art form that provides a pathway to healing.

Biblical literature as a tool for therapy

Various scholars (O'Connor 2002; Stulman 2014) have shown that literature can promote healing when it provides an experience the sufferer can identify with and which introduces an element of hope. Ballaban (2014, 238) notes that scholars now recognize and respect the role biblical texts can play in trauma healing. Groenewald (2017) argues that such texts "continue to be a resource for people throughout the ages [as they] turn to these ancient texts in an effort to process their own experiences." Those suffering the ravages of war have found prophetic literature to be very helpful, since these texts assist sufferers to "re-order values, reconstruct meaning, and create new symbolic and social worlds in the aftermath of war and community dislocation" (Stulman 2014, 189).

Those who have been traumatized can also find comfort in writing out their own experiences through journaling or writing a story or a poem. Fink and Drake (2016, 179) assert that trauma sufferers who express themselves in these ways show improved psychological and psycho-physiological outcomes. Poetry promotes healing by providing

a safe medium and space for individuals to express their pain (Fraser 2011). While this “writing” component was not part of our program, composing or singing songs, especially in the mother tongue, provides a good alternative for oral-based peoples (such as the Bete), allowing them to express their feelings through a poetic medium.

Expressing oneself in words allows people to enter into a conversation with themselves and others in an environment that is both safe and enriching (Lengelle and Meijers 2009, 66). These “dialogues” satisfy the need for a “sense of autonomy and control,” the first step in trauma healing (Herman, 1992, 155), as well as creating a feeling of belonging, “being part of a wider community” (Griffin and Tyrrell 2002, 9). Both of these steps are necessary for true recovery and some level of happiness (Osho 2004).

Herman (1995) notes that those who have experienced trauma are helped when they are able to express their pain in some form, be heard, and have a community with whom they can identify. This underlines Yoder’s (2005, 77) key principle in trauma healing: the need to recognize that “we are not alone.” Letting Scripture speak is one way people can realize this. Swenson (2005, 6, 128–29) notes:

Reading [psalms] is to discover that what may seem to be unprecedented suffering actually has company and sympathy in a shared human condition. Listening to these ancient poems may round off the cruel edge of loneliness that pain can bring. . . . The Psalms articulate a wide range of uncensored sentiments and thinking before God. . . . [using] language that desperate people can relate to.

In planning our seminar with Bete women, we chose the book of Ruth because we felt it would provide opportunity for them to identify with the experiences of others who had undergone traumas similar to their own. We hoped this would help the women feel they were not alone, by bringing them to realize that (i) people before us (in the biblical world) have experienced pain similar to theirs and (ii) others in their community have similar hurts.

Several scholars interested in the effects of trauma read the biblical text through “the lens of trauma” (Frechette and Boase 2016; Becker et al. 2014; Garber 2015). However, we have been interested in the converse: using the trauma conveyed in biblical text (narrative and poetry) to provide *resonance*⁴ for sufferers, a connection with others that can lead to healing.

Focus of our approach relative to other similar approaches

The Oral Bible Storying movement has successfully used the telling of Bible stories as a wonderful means of educating the church, evangelizing, and bringing healing into difficult situations. Janet Stahl (2016) reports on many positive results from her work in Southeast Asia and parts of Africa. She has also used the story of Ruth, finding that women identified greatly with the two principal women characters. For example, many women in the audience were convicted to reconcile with their mothers-in-law (Stahl 2016, 99).

The Trauma Healing Institute (associated with the American Bible Society) also uses various stories or biblical texts to address particularly difficult issues. We have both had some training in these areas (Zogbo has participated in “Healing the Wounds of Trauma” training, and Dickie in “Story-based Trauma Healing”). The latter is most similar to our approach, although most of these proposed sessions use two different stories in each session, which are usually “told” (sometimes with props) rather than being acted out. Typically, only the storyteller is involved in the “enactment,” whereas in our approach *all* participants are part of the story, and in *every* session. The original “trauma

⁴ *Resonance* refers to identifying with the emotions of the characters in the story.

healing” method tends to use a number of verses (in Session 1, for example, six passages are used, along with a number of other Scriptures which are referenced), while in our seminar, we chose to stick to one text (Ruth), although each day we added carefully chosen psalms to reinforce that day’s main theme (see below).

Another movement, Contextual Bible Studies (West 2008, for example) focuses on a particular biblical text with which a traumatized people will identify (the crises of Job, say, or the rape of Tamar) and uses details in the story to provoke discussion as a means toward healing. June Dickie has been part of such a study and, as with the other methods mentioned, has seen significant success with this approach.

Our approach takes elements of each of these other methods and serves to support their findings. But we wanted to explore the benefits that might accrue from focusing on *one book* (or a small unified selection⁵) of Scripture, for an extended time, to deal with difficult issues the women had faced. We wanted to see if encouraging the women to express the emotions of the characters through performance would help them engage their bodies and minds and truly *enter* into the content at an emotional level. This seemed like a viable opportunity, given the women’s delight in performance. We realized that although neither of us are highly trained in music or drama, if we gave the women opportunity to express themselves and shared with them a story with which they would readily identify, promising results might ensue.

Method of empirical study

Building on the notions described above, twenty-four Bete women were invited to participate in a six-day “Ruth workshop,” held in Daloa, Côte d’Ivoire.⁶ Local pastors selected women from their communities according to the following criteria: they are leaders able to teach others,⁷ and they show a particular talent or interest in singing or composing songs. Seven of the women came from the town of Daloa, and the others came from surrounding villages. Their backgrounds were mixed: young and old, poor and better-off, educated or not, but most knew French. Several were able to read in French, and a handful were able to read in Bete, although three of the women were actually Bete literacy teachers.

The daily schedule included “classroom sessions,” going through the text of the book of Ruth in Bete, the language the women understood best.⁸ Although each woman had been given a printed copy of this book, the emphasis was on listening to the biblical text and responding orally through oral discussion and performance. First, a gifted storyteller told the entire story of Ruth twice (in Bete), and then for each of the next four days, a portion of the story was brought in focus. The theme for the first day was “Sadness and mourning” (Ruth 1:1–14: famine, exile, death); the second day, “Wise believing women look for a plan to survive” (Ruth 1:15–22; 2:1–23); the third day, “Men of good faith do the right thing” (Ruth 3:1–18); and the fourth day, “Celebration: God is faithful and brings blessing out of hardship” (Ruth 4:1–11).

Along with ensuring that the women understood the narrative details, we also gave attention to spiritual lessons

⁵ Zogbo (2007) has written a trauma booklet (for victims of civil war in Côte d’Ivoire) based on the suffering of David. David’s cries of anguish and for justice help readers know they are not alone in their suffering.

⁶ Daloa was one of the regions particularly affected by civil wars and unrest (2000–11).

⁷ The Bete project is sponsored by the United Bible Societies and the Bible Society of Ivory Coast. As such, all activities are required to be strictly inter-confessional.

⁸ Although the learning experience was essentially oral, each woman was offered a diglot version of the book of Ruth in Bete and French, with illustrations, which had been checked by a translation consultant and published by the Bible Society of Côte. While the biblical text was read in Bete, many of the explanations were in French (translated into Bete).

to be gleaned from the text.⁹ (Has God seen our suffering? What characteristics did Naomi, Ruth, Orpah, Boaz, and the kinsman-redeemer exhibit throughout the story?) Also, many cultural aspects of the text were discussed with lively participation and great interest. (What would Betes do in such circumstances? Do Betes know and practice gleaning? How are widows treated in the Bete community? Do Betes have “redeemers”?) There was opportunity for the women to tell their personal stories during these discussions, sharing with as much detail as they felt comfortable. As the women got to know each other better, evenings provided an opportunity to continue sharing.

Each day, these one- to two-hour classroom sessions were followed by an extended group time, as the women were asked to recreate the story and message of the daily text and present it through performance (song, dance, drama, or a combination). All songs and drama were composed from scratch, mostly from recollection of oral teachings of that day. Then, after each working session (morning and afternoon), each group performed for the “audience” (the other group of women and the facilitators). Once the different parts of the story had been worked out in detail, the two groups put their performances together, with each section first presented in drama and then in song. One day was given for consolidation of the story, serving as a dress rehearsal. The next day, the final complete performance was presented before an invited audience, using costumes and props, and followed by refreshments.

Thus, this seminar differed from “classic” trauma workshops, as the underlying biblical text was not a compilation of isolated Scriptural references, but rather a single coherent biblical story. Day by day, participants were able to enter into the experiences and emotions of the characters as they “journeyed through” the varied events, as they “relived” the story of Ruth. While there was a narrative flow which made it easier for the participants to remember the story, we tried to avoid participants thinking they had to memorize the story line, paying more attention to the emotions portrayed and the deep messages conveyed in the text.

Results

It is hard to measure the results of the workshop in quantitative terms, but from the level of participation in the various activities, the testimonies gathered, the quality of both the songs composed and the drama produced, and the community’s response to the “end product” presented at the closing ceremony, the seminar appears to have been a success, significantly affecting the lives of all who participated.¹⁰ Though our main goal was to allow the women to connect with the story and characters in the book of Ruth and thereby receive emotional and psychological comfort and spiritual direction, there were other positive results.

Impact in terms of trauma healing

Certainly the biggest result of this seminar was social and spiritual healing. Through the week, the women (most of whom did not know each other at the beginning of the seminar) began to open up and share freely (with the group, individually, and with facilitators), verbalizing pain and finding healing by sharing and receiving healing messages from the story of Ruth.

Below are testimonies¹¹ of seven participants (five women and two facilitators):

- “To know the book of Ruth (now by heart!) is a wonderful thing for me. Today I can teach my brothers and

⁹ We also worked orally with the group on Psalms 1, 13, 133, and 145 which underlined particular themes we focused on each day. We believe this biblical intertextuality and connectedness played a significant role in making the seminar a success.

¹⁰ Although this is anecdotal evidence, such data are appropriate and valuable in a qualitative study as this.

¹¹ Zogbo translated the testimonies from French.

sisters this book without hesitation. I have understood that we must not leave the God of Israel to worship idols. What I learned from the book of Ruth is that we need to be faithful to God despite suffering.”

- “I arrived at this seminar with a tortured heart. I was ready to leave my husband. But during these teachings, my life changed. I learned to love human beings more, whatever their nature. Today my home life is restored.”
- “I thank the Lord because I was sick when I arrived at the seminar on Ruth. It was there that the Lord healed me. The program did me so much good, due to the harmony which could be felt among us all. The Lord opened my spirit and strengthened me through his Word and in my devotion to him.”
- “The teaching on the book of Ruth did me so much good. I learned so many lessons from it. I also learned to be courageous.”
- “I thank the Lord for what he did for me during the seminar on Ruth. Before coming, I had lost two nephews. My heart was broken. I was not at peace. I had insomnia, but the Lord consoled me through the experience of Naomi.”
- Bete pastor–translator: “The seminar on the book of Ruth was amazing to me because of the Bete singing. I had no words, my eyes filled with tears when I heard the deepness of the songs. Heaven came down upon us!”
- Bete exegete: “Using the book of Ruth in a trauma healing context, linked to Bete songs, has many benefits:
 - We see that songs are therapeutic, as sadness is expressed in poetic language which seems to soothe the suffering of Naomi. The singer Solange put into the mouth of Naomi these words: ‘How can the one who went looking for happiness find suffering? The Lord, is he not King? (*Elimelek*).’ (This little song was not presented at the final ceremony but I overheard it being composed while the women were preparing their presentation.)
 - The drama permitted the audience to *imagine* a little of what Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah lived through.
 - [A study like this] could also help the people of God to think how to face poverty. It may help some to develop precise plans that take into account the realities of widows today.”

Other positive effects

A few women reported that they now understand the value of the Bible translation project in Bete¹² and have a new burden for it to be completed. Clearly, the Bete translation team was encouraged, and the seminar seems to have given new life to a long dormant project.¹³ The exegete (who has been very interested and active in song creation and trauma healing) received a real boost to his vision, as he and his wife plan to hold trauma workshops among other peoples in other parts of the country.

Although no particular effort was made to teach the women to read Bete, some women reported picking up this skill during the seminar. This was the result of the fact that they already knew how to read (in French) and had

¹² Many of the participants knew the story of Ruth through oral presentations or readings in French but during the seminar realized what a difference it makes to hear the Word of God in your mother tongue. The story of Ruth came alive to them as they processed it in the language they knew best.

¹³ This is due to extreme difficulties experienced by the Bible Society of Côte d’Ivoire, a situation which is now in the process of changing.

repeated, intensive, daily exposure to the text.

Lessons learned

This approach explored several new ideas, and many lessons were learned or confirmed which could be of use to others.

1. Different genres (telling the same story) can complement one another

As the story of Ruth begins with exile and three unexpected deaths, we had anticipated that this part of the drama would be sad, accompanied by beautiful lament songs. However, it became immediately clear that there was a mismatch between what we had anticipated and what was actually produced. While the songs composed by the one group were powerfully moving, the drama performed by the other group of women was received as amusing entertainment. Nevertheless, the humor highlighted the stark emotion of the incidents portrayed, enabling them to be viscerally experienced, thereby making them more memorable. The drama excerpts helped the women internalize story details and reflect on how their own culture would have handled these events, providing light relief between the more intense, emotion-stirring songs. Thus, both art forms complemented one another, but in ways we had not expected.

2. Participants want to have a choice in the art form they use

Initially we simply divided the classroom in half, arbitrarily assigning groups to produce drama and song. This evoked strong emotions from some of the women, however, and we realized many had definite preferences in art form. We then asked participants to choose their preferred genre and participate in that group.

3. Community involvement is crucial even when it is a “women’s event”

The main Bible translator (also a pastor), who selected the participants, went to many villages to get a representative sampling of the Bete community. He requested that church leaders in each place (Catholic and Protestant) choose women who are (i) leaders who would impart their newly gained knowledge to other women and (ii) have an interest and demonstrated talent in performance (especially song composition and actual singing).

The translation team (translator and exegete) also requested that each participant invite her pastor or priest who had “sponsored” her to the closing ceremony, thus ensuring feedback to the sending church community. It was felt that the attendance of these church leaders enhanced the credibility of the women as leaders and teachers of the Ruth story as they returned to their communities.

4. Visual versus performing arts

Although Bete women love to wear colorful garments (*pagnes*), and take great care in their dress, especially in a seminar setting, visual art is not highly prominent in Bete culture. Thus, the use of pictures to help the women internalize the story was not very successful with this particular set of women, even though it had proved very useful in other African contexts—for example, with Zulu participants.¹⁴ The women did not seem to recognize line-drawn characters in the printed pictures we shared and struggled to put the pictures in chronological order. Although

¹⁴ This exercise was carried out by Dickie during a four-evening Easter study (2017) at the Anglican Cathedral in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa (led by Gerald West). Visual art is highly prized in Zulu culture—as can be seen, for example, in their brightly coloured beadwork.

performing arts is a strength and treasure within Bete culture, using visual arts in trauma healing seemed less appropriate and effective than in other African contexts.¹⁵

5. Instrumental accompaniment

We had not planned on instrumental accompaniment for the seminar, but one of the participants realized the lack and brought her nephew to provide drum accompaniment. This greatly enhanced the level of participation and emotional investment by the women.

The Betes also traditionally use a stringed gourd filled with seeds to accompany their singing, but participants opposed the use of this instrument in the workshop, as it is associated with spirit worship.

7. Finding equivalent genres

Among the Bete, the Christian community is trying to adapt their own cultural musical forms to express Scriptural truths, while at the same time trying to avoid any genre that seems inappropriate to their Christian faith. Concerning the genre of “lament,” for example, the Bete women were not willing to compose a lament that could be “Naomi’s lament for her husband.”¹⁶ They explained that this is because when a Bete woman “laments” her dead husband, it is assumed she is singing *to him*—that is, the spirit of a dead person (a practice, of course, condemned by the Christian community).

8. Cultural matches and mismatches

As the group of Bete women listened over and over to the story of Ruth, a significant number of cultural “matches” emerged. In both cultures (Hebrew and Bete), the following are true:

- 1) Respect by the young to the elderly is sacrosanct.
- 2) Polygamy traditionally has no negative connotation.
- 3) Both communities plant grain, and people are free to glean; grains are left for the poor to gather in order to be able to survive. (For the Bete, it is grains of rice.)
- 4) Both cultures have the notion of a “kinsman-redeemer” (*goel* in Hebrew). For the Bete, it is the brother (or closest male relative) of the deceased who intervenes to care for (and, in the past, marry) the widow.

Nevertheless, surprising mismatches also became apparent. The most significant of these was that, among Bete Christian women today, the notion of a “redeemer” has negative rather than positive connotations. In the past, the brother truly “married” the wife of his deceased brother, bringing her into his fold and group of wives. He cared for her and “raised up descendants” to save the name of his brother. But in the current culture, the practice of redeeming has been compromised. The women report that many men, citing this custom, expel their current wife to marry the deceased brother’s wife. Many misdeeds connected to this practice were mentioned. Thus, for Bete readers today, notes or introductions to the biblical text are critical, to explain the gap between the two practices.

¹⁵ The Betes are part of a bigger culture, the Kru language family, where traditional visual arts seem rare. Masks, where they exist, are known to be borrowed from neighbouring cultures. Carved statues are often unknown. Some geometric forms were identified as Kru and used in the Zogbo trauma healing booklet in French, however, especially written for the Western region, home to many Kru peoples.

¹⁶ In the Minianka culture of Mali (Diallo and Hall 1989), for example, women might sing about their late husband as they worked in the fields. Similarly, in Zulu culture, a deceased chief (such as Shaka) is still praised in oral praise-songs.

It was also interesting to note in a formerly highly polygamous culture (as is the Bete¹⁷) that many of the women participants assumed that Boaz (the rich landowner) was single. They thought that he was taking Ruth as his first (and only) wife, when the text says nothing to this effect. Although background information would suggest the contrary, their perception of the text as “biblical” prompted them to assume this was a monogamous relationship.¹⁸

Other interesting cultural or anthropological information surfaced through a close examination of details in the drama. For example, when Elimelech and his family were forced to move to Moab, the actors went to a chief to ask permission to live in his territory. Again, when the sons wanted to marry Moabite women (after their father died), they went to Naomi and asked her permission. Further, in conformity to Bete culture, interactions were not carried out directly. Thus Boaz (as in the text) goes through his headman to give certain instructions, but this use of an intermediary was also extended to the activities “at the gate.” The fact that these cultural elements were naturally included in the performances showed that the women were really “living out” the story in their context. It was also interesting to note that in performance (both song and drama) the common Bete greeting (*a-ayoooh!*) was used frequently. Greeting is central to Bete systems of politeness and social exchange, and thus the naturalness of the performance was highlighted.

Performance also highlighted the important role of gesture in Bete communication. These representations of distress, frustration, disappointment, and even love, cannot be expressed in words, but they are an important part of communication and highlight again the value of performance (as against reading a text). It is worth noting that there was a good degree of stability in the use of gestures, indicating that many of these features are integral to the way the Bete communicate. This would constitute another important area for further research.

In the end, we came to realize that although the women did resonate with the biblical story on the basis of cultural matches, they were much more impacted by the identification they felt with the characters (their personalities, actions and reactions) and the way God acted and interacted in this narrative. Also, it was interesting for us to note that the Bete women were filtering their understanding of the Old Testament (and the practices described there) through Christianity and the teachings (as they perceive them) of the New Testament.

9. Metaphors are powerful and can be powerfully expressed.

The women particularly enjoyed the part of the story where Ruth promises Naomi to go where she goes and even to be buried where she will be buried. Some recognized this as a song sung in French at Christian weddings. While normally we would have expected repetitive parallel lines (as occur in both Hebrew and Bete songs), in their song the women chose to use a Bete proverb to portray Ruth’s commitment to Naomi: “Two ants caught in the same bark of a tree: when fire comes, they will die together.” This was convincing evidence that the women were truly processing the poetic language of the biblical message and giving it “local clothes.” When asked which was more powerful, poetic lines or the proverb, the latter was strongly preferred.

10. The audience is part of the story

Audience participation was a delight to observe in both the singing and dancing and the drama versions. In the former, audience members (those in the other group) would often be drawn into the song and within a short time

¹⁷ Most of the participants were from polygamous families, if not in the last generation, certainly in their grandfather’s generation.

¹⁸ This may be due to the fact that only the New Testament is available in Bete. The Old Testament is drafted but not yet published, and thus OT texts where polygamy is common are not very well known.

be up on their feet and joining in the dance. Cries of *ayo* and *ayokakaka* would often resound. We also noted (in the final public performance) cultural expressions of great applause. In this culture, when someone in the audience is happy with the way a performer is dancing, this person may enter the dancing arena (with dance steps) and wipe the perspiration off the forehead of the dancer. Audience members may also dance to the front and press money into the hand of the lead singer. This happened several times, including the response of a nonagenarian dignitary who danced forward with his gift, to express his pleasure. This evoked even more cries of joy from the crowd.

11. Seminar leaders need to understand the context and goal of the workshop

It is important that all those leading such a workshop understand and follow a *modus operandi* which encourages participants to freely express themselves without censure, and which facilitates both privacy and intimacy. At some points, some male leaders within the community (present as observers) wanted to step in to amend a retelling of the story or a response to a discussion question. These interjections were not necessary for accurate understanding and reduced the women's sense of safety and opportunity to exercise agency. Clearly this important concept needs to be understood by all, from the start.

12. Media issues

It is vital to consider in advance the products which will be most useful to have as outcomes of the workshop and to take special care in their production. The particular content that would be helpful for research purposes should be determined beforehand. Further, if one hires professional photographers or videographers, the quality of their work needs to be objectively verified in advance. (We made the mistake of blindly accepting the recommendation of a local pastor, but the professional's videorecording was of such a poor quality that it could not be used.)

Another significant lesson learned involves media storage. For future workshops, an external hard drive would be helpful to store media data. It is also advisable to record an audio note¹⁹ at the beginning of each recording, particularly of songs, to identify the biblical text being used.

Finally, we were not quick enough to "set the rules" as to the use of phones during filming. Consequently, the early videos showed several women using their cellphones to record themselves and others as they were dancing. This compromised our own data base and these sections had to be edited out of the videos. Clearly an early establishing of ground-rules could have prevented this.

Conclusions

When the women arrived, they were strangers, and when we asked them to share on the first day (in the big group or in pairs), this was met with silence. Through the week, however, the women became more comfortable with one another, and on the last day, when they were asked to share one personal problem with their neighbor, all the women responded.

We feel our attempt at helping the women experience some healing through exposure to a book of the Bible reached its goal. But we could have been more direct in our interactions with the women during times of testimony. When several women said "I am Naomi," we could have asked them to explain the similarities and then encouraged

¹⁹ That is, a spoken description of the material about to be recorded—"Psalm 1, Group 3"—to help identify data later. Such a note can easily be removed during editing.

them to share in more explicit terms how they, like Naomi, had experienced God's *hesed* (loyalty and love) in their lives.

However, we purposely chose to address issues arising from trauma by allowing the women to identify with the traumas of the characters in the story rather than having to focus immediately on their own problems. As time progressed, they were able to share personally, but no one felt uncomfortable addressing personal issues before they were ready. Further, the focus on song, dance, and drama provided a light and happy atmosphere which seemed especially appropriate to Bete culture. Thus, positive outcomes arose from the focus on group participation and creative activity.

The spiritual lessons of the book of Ruth clearly accomplished the goals we were aiming at. Through internalizing the story and expressing it outwardly through appropriate art forms, some level of healing (or at least comfort and strengthened faith) did come about among the majority of women.

Of course, for this ethnic group, it became clear that one art form, song, was the major means by which spiritual healing could be addressed. Although there was a lot of verbal interaction, in the end it was the song compositions that appeared to effect significant change. In particular, they came to recognize the following:

- (i) Unfortunate things can happen to believers, but God's presence and plan (seen and unseen) are very real.
- (ii) Women can trust God and rely on their own capacity to think of ways to meet their needs.
- (iii) Women can entrust themselves to the "community of the righteous" (trustworthy God-fearers known for their integrity in the community) for solutions to their problems.
- (iv) God's faithful love and loyalty (*hesed*) to his own (his faithful ones, *hesedim*) never falters or fails.
- (v) God's people are rewarded when they show loyalty and love (*hesed*) to one another.

For the Bete women in the workshop, these truths resonated in a way that was profound, aesthetically pleasing, and culturally appropriate. Although this workshop didn't break new ground, by combining various aspects that have proven successful in other contexts we were able to see the positive effects that can be realized in a relatively easy way. The great creativity of the local community was an incentive to explore the potential for healing. We are grateful for the experience of seeing the women come alive in new ways through the power of God's word "digested" in their lives.

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