

# articles

## Within the Box: Cross-Cultural Art Therapy With Survivors of the Rwanda Genocide

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### Abstract

*This article discusses the creative making of boxes as a cross-cultural art therapy intervention in Kigali, Rwanda, with survivors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The box as an art form is particularly applicable with young adult survivors, given the nature of their prodigious trauma and the possibility of posttraumatic stress disorder, as well as their cultural mode of emotional expression. Physical and metaphorical characteristics of the box are examined and discussed with corresponding aspects of the Rwandan culture. Three case examples from the art therapy group demonstrate how the metaphor of the box resonated with young adult genocide survivors and functioned as a catalyst for expression, healing, and reconnection with the self.*

### Introduction

In 1994 Rwanda garnered international attention for the tragic and infamous genocide that occurred from April to June of that year. The scale of devastation in the country was immense: Within 100 days over 10% of Rwanda's population of 7.7 million people was decimated and a large portion of the country's infrastructure was destroyed (Pham, Weinstein, & Longman, 2004). More than 4 million people were displaced, half of whom deluged neighboring countries as refugees (Melvern, 2000).

Over a decade later, although the country is politically stable, its society and people still carry scars from the genocide. Rwandans bear not only the indelible physical marks on their bodies, but also deep psychological scars from being confronted with horrific trauma, continued poverty and deprivation, and high unemployment and infant mortality (Muligo, 1992; UNICEF, 2009; Veale, 1997).

Over the course of five summers, from 2004–2008, I volunteered in Kigali, Rwanda, with a faith-based commu-

nity development organization working with children and adults who are affected by HIV/AIDS, as well as with people who were orphaned or widowed as a result of the genocide. Upon beginning art therapy studies in 2005, I learned about the effectiveness of art therapy with people who have experienced trauma and I became interested in exploring whether art therapy could be shared cross-culturally in Rwanda to facilitate healing. Despite a growing emphasis on cross-cultural art therapy, most of the professional literature is a product of the West (Hocoy, 2002). Thus the attempt to bring art therapy across cultures is a potentially fraught process. In order to proceed with appropriate care, I consulted the Rwandan leadership at the community development organization and explained art therapy concepts to various leaders and staff. Upon their enthusiastic reception to my ideas, I was able to design a series of pilot art therapy projects and was given access to work with some of the children, youth, and adults the organization served. The groups were exploratory in nature with many variables unknown at the time. This article reviews the use of a specific art therapy intervention involving the creation of "self-boxes" with groups of young adult genocide survivors. I found that the use of the self-box was particularly applicable with these young adults, given the nature of their prodigious trauma as well as their cultural mode of emotional expression. Three case examples of boxes made by the members of one art therapy group demonstrate how the metaphor of the box resonated with these individuals and functioned as a catalyst for expression, healing, and reconnection with the self.

### Literature Review

#### Trauma and the Genocide

In her landmark work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Herman wrote that traumatic events devastate because they overwhelm an ordinary person's way of adapting to life. At the moment of trauma, an inability to take action often grips people with intense helplessness and fear, breaking down their systems of self-defense. Trauma challenges one's view of safety and basic assumptions of innate order in the world, which affects one's sense of self. This shaken belief

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brings about feelings of alienation from the rest of humanity, disrupts attachments and relationships, and negatively affects one's ability to trust others.

One year after the 1994 Rwanda genocide, a study by Dyregrov, Gupta, Gjestad, and Mukanoheli (as cited in Schaal & Elbert, 2006) found that as many as 79% of the survivors they interviewed suffered moderate to severe effects of posttraumatic stress. Ten years after the genocide Schaal and Elbert (2006) conducted a study on young people orphaned as a result of the genocide and found extremely high rates of exposure to traumatic events. In their sample of Kigali orphans, 97% had seen dead or mutilated bodies, over 80% had been the victims of some form of attack, and an equally high percentage witnessed another person injured with a weapon. A large majority (88%) had to hide during the genocide, often under dead bodies. Orphans also frequently reported being in situations where they felt that their own life was in peril. As high as 44% of the respondents fulfilled the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; American Psychiatric Association, 2000), and all respondents disclosed experiencing at least one symptom by which traumatic events typically are reexperienced. Having distressing thoughts about the traumatic experience and preferring to avoid talking or thinking about the event were frequently reported symptoms. Rwandan youth who were living in child-headed households at the time of the study rated significantly higher on PTSD diagnosis as compared to children who were living in orphanages. The researchers surmised that such youth faced more significant struggles in meeting their basic survival needs, such as finding food, shelter, and medical services. This especially would be the case in a harsh psychosocial environment where the responsibility to support an entire household was a burden placed on them.

Schaal and Elbert (2006) noted that despite frequent reports of emotional problems among genocide survivors, psychological support appeared scarce. For over two thirds of the youth in their sample, the study's interview was the first time these youth had talked about their traumatic experiences with someone else. This observation partially reflects the paucity of traditional mental health support available to many genocide survivors. It is also the case that concepts of counseling, therapy, and mental health are not well understood or accepted in current Rwandan society (M. Kamanzi, personal communication, July 8, 2006). Coupled with the natural Rwandan disposition to avoid open displays of personal emotion (Pham et al., 2004; Waugh, 2004), it is possible that many people have not had the opportunity to process their traumatic experiences.

### Recovery, Resilience, and Art Therapy

Herman (1992) delineated three important aspects to the process of recovery: establishing safety, remembering and mourning, and reconnecting with life. All three aspects can be addressed through the therapeutic use of art. In art therapy, art expression can generate energy for change and growth when people look within themselves and allow internal material to surface (McMurray, as cited in Baker, 2006). For those who have been traumatized and who have

had their sense of identity fragmented, art making can provide focus in a process of self-exploration and dialogue with others, enabling these individuals to reconnect with their lives, to rebuild trust, and to restore a sense of self (Baker, 2006; Wertheim-Cahen, van Dijk, Shouten, Roozen, & Drozdek, 2004). Because traumatic memories are often stored in the mind in the form of imagery, creating images through engaging in art therapy can be effective in reducing symptoms of posttraumatic stress (Appleton, 2001). The provision of a nonthreatening environment in which traumatized individuals can experiment with art materials allows them to gain the confidence to express what might have been inexpressible before; eventually they can work through and reintegrate their experiences into their life narratives (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 1999). Furthermore, the use of art materials can offer a novel alternative to counter the repetitive nature of trauma response (Appleton, 2001). According to Rankin and Taucher (2003), art making can help individuals access and identify their personal strengths, which serve as a means of self-care to combat aftereffects of trauma such as feelings of helplessness and loss of control. In addition to the creative process, the artwork itself has tremendous power: It stands as a concrete reflection of the maker's worldview and acts as an expression of feelings with or without accompanying verbal explanations (Arrington & Yorgin, 2001).

### Rwandan Culture and the Self-Box

According to Pham et al. (2004), Rwandan culture does not encourage open displays of personal emotion. Waugh (2004) observed that Rwandan society favors discipline with regard to individual expression. According to Bagilishya (2000), Rwandan proverbs traditionally are used to locate an individual's experience within the larger context of human experience, allowing a person to confirm and to participate in another's life experience. Proverbs also provide a framework for regulating intense emotions, part of which includes introducing distance between experience and action. Those who experience strong feelings have to adhere to strict codes of behavior within Rwandan tradition, which dictates restraint, prudence, and patience.

Given the Rwandan disposition toward containing one's emotions, I considered whether Rwandan participants in my art therapy group might connect to the art form of boxes, which are powerful and frequently utilized in art therapy. In his discussion of cross-cultural art therapy, Hocoy (2002) emphasized that certain Western constructs are valid cross-culturally only if they have a conceptual and functional equivalence in the other culture. In my experience, the box metaphor had such functional equivalence in Rwandan culture. The simple attribute of the box as a container connects with the larger, important role of containers within Rwandan culture. The basket in particular is central to many Rwandan rituals, such as the holding gourds that are used for good luck and blessings for newlyweds (Twagilimana, 1998). Even in death, the body is arranged in a fetal position, which is referred to as "lending to death the form of the basket" (Bagilishya, 2000, p. 344).

Within the Rwandan cultural tradition, there are proverbs that are used to refer to the body as a container, for example, “The sorrow of a cooking pot is understood by he who has scraped its bottom” (Bagilishya, 2000). In this particular proverb, the cooking pot is a metaphor for the body and the pot’s contents refer to the person’s emotions. Thus, as opposed to a piece of white paper accompanied by a foreign directive to translate some aspect of the self onto the page, the box container as a metaphor for the self was familiar and more easily grasped by the art therapy group participants after a simple explanation.

As a concrete, substantial object having pragmatic value in Rwandan society, the box is especially significant during conditions of deprivation. In a place where people do not own much and often have strong desires for simple material possessions, they may place stronger emphasis on the material world as opposed to abstract concepts. Therefore, creating boxes filled with important items—which participants can then keep as their own possessions—can be a highly meaningful activity.

Kaufman (1996) pointed out further that the box has a tangible, physical structure, which “holds within fixed limits” (p. 237). Similar to the function of Rwandan proverbs that provide a framework for regulating a person’s intense emotions, the physical form of the box can offer a reassuring structure within which group participants may express themselves. Given the societal expectations of discipline with regard to expression (Pham et al., 2004; Waugh, 2004), Rwandan group members did not have to fear emotions or expressions spiraling out of control; what they expressed would be held and regulated by the box form. They could literally “put a lid on it” to secure its contents.

As illustrated by their proverb “the tears of a man flow within,” Rwandans often believe that deeply felt emotions should remain inside a person rather than expressed outwardly. Thus, the box’s capacity to enclose contents may have had special resonance with the Rwandan art therapy participants. Along with the idea of enclosure, the box also has a function of concealment (Farrell-Kirk, 2001): The outside eye does not see what is enclosed inside without the maker’s permission. The box offered a strong element of safety for participants to express emotionally significant material within and provided them with a sense of control when sharing the contents of the box with others.

In addition, whatever the box enclosed became imbued with special significance because it had been set apart from the surrounding space (Kaufman, 1996). Even the most mundane object, once placed inside a box, could take on an added importance. In addition to signifying what was important, the box had a memorializing and preserving function (Kaufman, 1996). Participants could use this function of the box to help them preserve specific memories by placing objects inside that represented those experiences.

The dialectic function of the box that allowed for multiple facets to remain integrated into one object (Farrell-Kirk, 2001) also helped group members communicate different aspects of themselves and their community while integrating the fragments of their traumatic experience as individuals. The interaction of self with others is particular-

ly important in a collective society such as Rwanda, where the self is usually understood within the context of a community. This attribute of the box as an art form allowed participants to express connectedness with important others, an aspect of the reconnection that is necessary in recovery from trauma, as discussed by Herman (1992). This aspect was especially crucial in light of such horrific interpersonal trauma sustained in the Rwandan genocide, where attachments and relationships were brutally disrupted.

## Method

### Rwanda Art Therapy Project

I conducted a series of exploratory art therapy groups for young adult genocide survivors in each of 3 summers from 2006–2008. The participants at the time were attending a vocational training school run by a local faith-based community development organization in Kigali. The groups were conducted in consultation with the organization’s leadership, with whom I had established positive relationships from my previous two visits to Rwanda (in 2004 and 2005). This article focuses on the self-box project, a specific intervention I utilized within the art therapy groups.

Ranging in length from 3 to 8 weeks, the majority of the groups met twice weekly for approximately one and a half hours. With the addition of an interpreter, each art therapy group consisted of 8 participants who were 18 to 25 years old. All students had limited education; none had completed secondary school and most had the opportunity to attend only a few years of primary school. In the vocational training school, the students learned job skills such as carpentry, construction, and sewing. Many of the participants had lost parents and family members during the genocide. Some were heads of their households, whereas others lived with relatives in great economic hardship. Some lived entirely on their own as orphans. The students’ teachers determined the students’ participation in the art therapy groups: They selected students who they observed were having emotional difficulties and needed psychological support. For some students, the teachers were aware of their traumatic past experience. Others were observed to be isolative in class and showed depressive affect, a lack of interest and ability to concentrate on their school work, and often had particularly challenging home lives.

The art materials provided were basic and mostly limited to things that were available in Rwanda, such as scraps of local fabric, crayons, markers, paper, scissors, glue, and magazine images. However, due to economic hardship and lack of access to all but the most basic survival resources, many participants had not ever had the opportunity to use even simple drawing materials. With this knowledge, I introduced a few items at a time throughout the course of the group so that participants could familiarize themselves with the art materials gradually.

In each of the groups participants created a variety of artwork based on different directives, but the self-box project was conceived to be the culminating project. A fairly open directive was used: Participants were given plain

boxes with lids (constructed from found cardboard) to decorate in whatever manner they wished. I gave them the option to think of the boxes as a symbol of themselves and to consider both the interior and the exterior of the box. Participants were always given the choice to discuss their work with the group at the end of each session but were not pressured to do so.

Through group art therapy, the young adults were able to explore their experiences and mobilize their internal resources for coping. As seen in the works of Margaret, Noah, and Rosa (pseudonyms) in the following case vignettes, the self-box project produced particularly rich culminating work. I believe that the power of the box art form lies in its particular characteristics that paired especially well with Rwandan culture and style of cultural expression, and gave the participants a means for restoring their sense of self.

### Margaret

Margaret was a young Rwandan woman in her early twenties studying sewing. Slender, with large, doleful eyes that exuded almost palpable melancholy, she was very quiet in the beginning of the group sessions. Margaret often sat with hands folded in her lap and with her eyes glancing down. She was orphaned as a result of the genocide and survived tremendous physical and emotional hardships, having witnessed killings and violence as well as betrayal by people she knew. She also experienced starvation and the cruelty of strangers in the face of her plight, and continued to struggle with loneliness and great sadness.

Margaret's artwork in the early sessions of the group was characterized by faint line pressure and the limited use of color. Later, when working on a bookmaking project, she directly asked in the text of the work profound, existential questions that related to the death of her mother. She said that it was difficult for her to hear others' stories because they painfully reminded her of her own. However, she also expressed that her Christian faith was a source of strength and resilience for her.

Pointing to an image of a boy studying a plant on the lid of her self-box, Margaret explained that it reflected her experience in the group (Figure 1). It seemed to express her feeling that she had gone through a process of looking closely, whether at herself or with others in the group. Art therapy allowed her to see and connect with each person in a deeper, more intimate way than was usual in the context of the students' vocational classes.

On the exterior of the box are images of the tools used in Margaret's vocation, including scissors, razor blade, and pencils, as well as an image of working women. Margaret also placed a hand-drawn image of a sewing machine inside her box. The sewing machine was the most prized possession for sewing students because owning one was directly related to their ability to support themselves. These images on the different sides of the box captured the intersection of Margaret's life with society through work, reflecting her career aspirations and hope for financial security. On the inside of the box, Margaret placed the



Figure 1 Margaret's Box



Figure 2 Margaret's Box: Inside of lid

images of two women, one of whom is reminiscent of Margaret with her intense gaze. It is possible that Margaret chose this image because she longed for the sense of friendship and social relatedness between the women that is expressed in the picture.

For Margaret, the most poignant part of the box was the image of a mother with children on the inside of the lid (Figure 2). To someone who lost her mother and experienced trauma on many different levels, the image held considerable significance. It depicts great intimacy and closeness, with a child seated securely on the mother's lap and another child close by, and with all three engaged in a private moment. The circular image is bordered by a square frame, creating the impression of a womblike environment surrounding it. Margaret explained that she chose this image to represent her experience in the art therapy group; it was clear that she found a deep sense of holding within the group's accepting environment and used the image to memorialize that feeling.



Figure 3 Noah's Box

In the beginning, Margaret was quiet and isolated from others in the group and her affect was frequently sad. Her artwork early on was meager and restrained; she did not use the table and preferred working protectively on her lap. Throughout the course of the group sessions, Margaret gradually emerged from her shell. For the final self-box project, she was able to work confidently on the table with others and she was even able to discuss her work openly. Her voice had grown steady and she described her images in great detail without any prompting. She relished the opportunity to talk about her creation with fellow group members whom she had befriended and grown to trust. Making use of the dialectic function of the box, Margaret was able to express and reconnect with different aspects of herself, her life in connection with society and others, and her private desires—all within the same self-integrating object. The box truly captured her blossoming development within the group and provided the channel for her to express deeply emotional and personally meaningful material in a safe environment, aiding in her recovery.

### Noah

Noah was a young Rwandan man in his mid twenties who had lost both his parents during the genocide. In the group art therapy sessions, he shared that his life was difficult and lonely, especially because he lived by himself as an orphan. However, like Margaret, Noah drew great strength from his Christian faith and religious themes surfaced often in his artwork.

Noah's self-box was a labor of love with meticulous handiwork and focused effort (Figure 3). Accentuated on the exterior of the box was a house image that he created with glittery magenta paper. Noah explained that it represented his wish to live in a brick house one day. The house image was a prominent feature in many participants' artworks; a house that was constructed with bricks (rather than with mud and straw) represented security and financial well-being to many Rwandans. The shiny house encapsulated Noah's desire for a place in society and represented a coveted sense of security, which was particularly impor-



Figure 4 Noah's Box: Interior view

tant for an orphan who existed on the bottom rung of Rwandan society.

Once the lid of Noah's box was lifted, the interior revealed an intimate world (Figure 4). Noah rendered an outline of a guitar with multicolored cord and placed an image of a man playing an instrument below it. He explained that it was only when singing and playing music that he was able to relax and not dwell on the magnitude of his problems and his past traumatic experiences. It was apparent that the guitar and music were sources of comfort to him. Symbolizing these aspects of his life within the box was Noah's way of providing self-care in the midst of his struggles. On the inside of the lid, Noah included a picture to represent himself. As he shyly pointed out his enjoyment of rest and sleep, one could infer their importance in a life that was filled with struggle. To him, the chaise lounge in the picture might have represented ultimate comfort and relaxation—something he perhaps rarely enjoyed.

Noah also pasted an image of a book beneath the guitar picture. He explained that what he learned in the group had been recorded and deeply imprinted in his heart much like words found in a book. It is possible that his greater traumatic experiences were "recorded" in his book as well and that he was beginning to reintegrate both good and bad memories into his life narrative, which is another aspect of trauma recovery promoted by art therapists Kalmanowitz and Lloyd (1999) in their work with survivors of war.

When we consider all the elements in Noah's box, it seems evident that these items held deep significance for him as they helped him cope with the hardships of his reality. The exterior of the box expressed Noah's wish for secure dwelling and socioeconomic security as he contemplated his future. The interior reflected Noah's inner life, where he was able to integrate both difficult memories as well as



Figure 5 Rosa's Box

memories from significant interactions that he treasured, along with his desire for rest, relaxation, love, and enjoyment. Every time Noah looked inside the box, he said that he felt strengthened to face the challenges that confronted him each day.

### Rosa

Tall, with a gentle demeanor, Rosa was a young Rwandan woman in her early twenties. She was sweet spirited and often smiled bashfully with her eyes averted. She had a few caring relationships in her life that I believe served as support but, due to unknown difficult circumstances, she was living alone in poverty. She said that she often felt lonely and struggled with sleeping at night in her home, fearing intruders.

Rosa's self-box was wrapped in red and adorned with paper strips and ribbons (Figure 5). This was a common way of decorating box exteriors for many group members. The colorful papers and ribbons were reminiscent of pre-decorated gift boxes that could be purchased from small stores in the Kigali market for gift giving. Presenting her box in gift form implied a warm, giving relationship between two people, something that Rosa may have yearned for. Her self-box also could be thought of as a gift to herself and as a way of reaffirming her own value.

The color of the box held religious significance for Rosa as she pointed out that it represented Jesus's blood. This red covering served a protective function; "covered by the blood of Jesus" is a phrase frequently used in Christian contexts and it also signified Rosa's identity as a Christian. Inside the lid, Rosa further expressed her love for Jesus. Through the creation of her self-box, Rosa was able to affirm her beliefs in a loving and powerful God and tap into her faith as a source of strength. This was important especially in light of the fear she felt each night.

Inside the self-box, Rosa included many items that she associated with me, the art therapist. Although her demeanor was always very reserved, Rosa used her artwork to express her affection toward me. Like several others in the art therapy group, Rosa included in her box a picture that she chose to represent me. The use of my representation, as



Figure 6 Rosa's Box: Small notes inside

well as written notes that read, "I will never forget you" (Figure 6) spoke of the importance of memory for Rosa. These objects represented the significance of our relationship; with her choice to write in her limited English rather than Kinyarwanda, she wanted to communicate clearly that message to me.

Reconnecting with life and others is an important aspect of recovery from trauma (Herman, 1992). As an orphan with traumatizing past experiences who lived alone in fear and poverty, Rosa was able to utilize the box creation to symbolize her strong desire for connection and also to memorialize the important and loving relationships in her life. This helped strengthen her to face her fears and difficult circumstances. The box expressed her religious faith and her connection with God, her special experience of being in the group, and her memory of our relationship. The box reaffirmed and strengthened her sense of connectedness with others, both human and transcendent.

### Conclusion

Within art therapy, the box is a complex and multifaceted art form. As evidenced in the works of Margaret, Noah, and Rosa, the box's myriad qualities reached across cultures in ways that allowed these young Rwandans to express their internal world within a safe and private space, while remaining self-controlled and self-contained as dictated by their culture. Within the special universe of the box as delineated by its frame, art therapy group members were able to cherish important experiences, articulate what was valuable, and, ultimately, express who they were in a concrete form. Group participants told me that they valued and enjoyed the experience. Despite the cultural norm of keeping their emotions within themselves, when given the option all participants agreed to have the images of their artwork disseminated to a wider audience beyond Rwanda. It is possible that they found empowerment in having their stories and lives shared with others, as is the case with many genocide survivors whom I encountered in the course of my travels.

In consideration of Herman's (1992) study of the importance of rebuilding a sense of self, autonomy, and con-

control in the process of recovery from trauma, I found that the box fulfilled these same functions for Rwandan genocide survivors. The structure of the box art form provided them with a sense of control and safety, as did the fact that they were active agents in determining what their boxes would look like. Because the participants were able to connect with the box as a metaphor for the self and utilized its various qualities for the purpose of expression, they were able to nurture their own sense of being through its creation. In conditions of severe deprivation, they benefited from a variety of materials to which they could avail themselves freely and use in a manner that only they could determine. Although the box was an individual, self-contained object, the participants used it to express a sense of connection with others, whether through images that reflected career aspirations, transcendent faith in God, or important relationships with loved ones. Through this process, they could situate themselves within the context of community and find the strength to face their difficult lives. By making art in a non-judgmental, therapeutically supportive environment, the participants celebrated who they were, expressed their intensely personal desires and longings, remembered valuable connections, and mourned their losses, as well as conveyed their hopes for the future.

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