

THE DINKA INITIATIVE TO EMPOWER AND RESTORE: DANCE AS MOBILIZATION IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR¹

by David Alan Harris

In a world beset by such human-wrought calamities as “ethnic cleansing,” “low-intensity conflict,” and “scorched earth tactics,” how can dance play a part in the recovery process of survivors of brutality and war? With the body itself at the center of discourse on human rights and the integrity of the person, this question may prove a surprising gateway to meaningful investigations.

For the dance/movement therapist, the integration of mind and body is fundamental to theory and practice, particularly in a fragmented and fragmenting world. The ethics of this therapeutic modality as a mode of socially inflected, collective transformation mirror those of community development. Mobilizing and rebuilding communities affected by war and organized violence invariably involve recognition that the afflicted population is made up of active agents capable of self-determination and change. Like an effective community organizer, the dance therapist works to join clients on their own terms, respecting their autonomy, encouraging their self-esteem and empowering them to trust in a body—or a community—that likely carries within it what is needed to ensure integrity of self.

On an exceptionally hot autumn afternoon for a southeastern Pennsylvania village, some two dozen South Sudanese youth have gathered in a graciously cool Mennonite church to celebrate the launching of the Dinka Initiative to Empower and Restore, or DIER (meaning *dance* in Dinka, their tribal language). It is a month to the day since the crashing of hijacked airliners and the collapse of things heretofore presumed invincible—events cruelly reminiscent, for these young people, of the late 1980s when “holy war” ripped them as children from their homes and families. As unaccompanied minors, some 30,000 such children—90% of them male—then set out alone, or in groups, on a journey that led them to Ethiopia, back to Sudan, and eventually to Kakuma, a refugee camp in northern Kenya. Along the way thousands were slain by soldiers or taken as wild animals’ prey; many died of starvation or disease. Among those who survived the thousand-mile ordeal and nearly a decade following in Kakuma, approximately 3,500 have been resettled as refugees in the United States since late 2000. Of these, 70 adolescents under age 18, and about 30 “majors” up to age 24 find themselves in Philadelphia or its vicinity, all with sponsorship by the local Lutheran Children and Family Service. It is through LCFS that I have founded DIER.

Song and dance, like initiation rites and cattle herding, are pivotal to traditional Dinka culture. The 20 young men and 4 young women who have joined me, as facilitator, for DIER’s inaugural event are all fully committing their bodies, their energy, to the dancing and

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drumming. No one is excluded; no one merges with the wallpaper. Smiles and laughter all around speak of the contentment of reclaiming the familiar in a foreign land, of the safety borne of reviving a form that is older than their “grandfather’s grandfather’s grandfather,” as a former South Sudanese client described a sacred dance he taught me in the course of our individual therapy process. For me, all of these dances now are new, yet the circling procession draws me in without judgment. Gently progressing in hopping steps forward, it seems for a suspended moment that, one behind another, we have always belonged here together in this eternal present. The circle holds us, provides what we therapists, echoing Winnicott, refer to as a “container”—resilient enough to accommodate the emotions that these my young teachers may have carried in their bones for a thousand miles and more. A young woman, her joy in moving evident even in the uplift in her brow and the tiniest reverberation of her head, tells me she has not danced since Kakuma: She has found again a kind of home.

Several young men form dyads, partnering one another in a rhythmic clapping game on a repeating four-count. A cheerful 15-year-old calmly teaches me the sequence, and soon we share an exuberant intimacy that comes with a pair of linked palms and a pulse that has us slapping the free hand over our heart every fourth beat. Performing this with hands raised high, we form a wall by joining shoulder-to-shoulder with other facing pairs. The architecture of our arms creates a roof, under which runs first one pair, then the next, of the dissolving and reassembling fortress. My partner pulls me through, and emerging quickly we reset to resume our part in sustaining this simple chapel of clapped rhythm.

As this accordion-like structure serpentine around the church’s fellowship hall, a published report of a very similar game, called *The Tunnel*, comes to mind. Mirroring the gross motor activities facilitated by dance therapists in the West in their interventions with young trauma survivors, *The Tunnel* afforded the boys playing it—all between 9 and 16, and recently demobilized soldiers in Sierra Leone—a means of revisiting human connection and hope. At a UNICEF-sponsored camp in a country that like the Sudan has been torn asunder by a seemingly interminable civil war, these youngsters were said to rebuild trust by dancing together and joining in energetic, organized games. The facility, exemplifying perhaps the best in international efforts to respond to the needs of children of war, nonetheless, itself succumbed to a resurgence of hostilities. In the wake of the camp’s demise, the correspondent describing their play, reveling still in the boys’ enthusiasm, could not say what had become of them.

For the resilient young Dinka exile—resettled in a comfortable bedroom community amid the rolling Pennsylvania hills, and immersed now in an ancient rhythm, linked to a vibrant community of peers—hope is aplenty. With dance as a potent tool for sustaining group cohesion and the ritual order of things, there is every reason to anticipate fulfillment of the twin themes of our therapeutic intervention. Through this initiative, and the reliance on the collective that traditions of dancing and drumming can support, these young refugees surely will find rekindling in themselves the ancestral spirit that both empowers and restores.