

# Dancing for Peace in Angola, Africa: Using Movement-Based Expressive Arts Therapy as a Tool for Social Action

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## Abstract

This article describes 'Dance for Peace', a five-day workshop and performance in Luanda, Angola, facilitated by the author and a colleague, working with Canadian-based non-government organization Development Workshop. Fifty young people who had an association with Youth Ambassadors for Peace, an organization formed by Development Workshop, participated in the project. 'Dance for Peace' was designed to improve participants' psycho-social well-being and to provide opportunities for exploring issues of peace, and creative tools to manage their differences. This article will describe how the dance and expressive arts were used successfully in this cross-cultural context to promote social awareness and community bonding on a group and individual level.

**Keywords:** Dance for Peace, expressive arts, peace, Angola, Tamalpa Institute, Youth Ambassadors

## Introduction

I lived in Luanda, Angola as an American expatriate between 2003 to 2007. During that time I watched the city and its people struggle to recover from a thirty year civil war following independence from Portugal. After seven years of 'peace' in Angola, the capital city of Luanda continues to suffer from severe overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, staggering infant mortality rates, and various health issues, including malaria and bouts of cholera, typhoid, and other deadly viruses.

At that time I was also studying movement-based expressive arts therapy at the Tamalpa Institute in Marin, California.

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Anna Halprin, the impetus and co-founder of the Tamalpa Institute along with her daughter, Daria Halprin, have historically used dance and movement in the United States to engage communities in many social issues including race relations, HIV/AIDS, physical illness, and aging (Halprin, 1995). Anna Halprin created the first Dance for Peace in 1981 in response to the murders of five women on Mt. Tamalpais in California. Since that time, the dance has been performed annually in California and has been performed in 35 other countries throughout the world. It was my belief that the methodology used by Tamalpa in the U.S. to create community development and bring awareness to social issues could also be applied cross-culturally: not in lieu of another country's cultural practices and beliefs, but as a tool to enhance, express, and explore those beliefs.

Furthermore, I believed that because Angola is a culture steeped in the arts as a form of expression particularly through dance, song, and drama, it was possible that members of that society would be receptive to creating and participating in a workshop that would use these art mediums to

explore their current reality. However, I also believed that I would need to find a partnership within the Angolan community that could help facilitate and support the endeavor, and that could help to ‘translate’, both literally in terms of language, and also in terms of cultural context and application of the art methodologies.

That partnership came in the form of Eunice Ignacio, director of the non-government organization Development Workshop. Eunice Ignacio has previously been nominated for the Nobel Peace prize for her peace and conflict resolution work in Angola. One of her activities was the creation of the organization ‘Youth Ambassadors for Peace’. These youth ambassadors were young people, generally between the ages of 12–25, who worked within their communities promoting peace in different ways: promoting registration for voting, holding conferences and workshops to talk about political differences, and educating young people about HIV/AIDs, to name a few. When I proposed this project to Eunice she was very supportive, and allowed me to work with her colleagues to organize it.

The partnership with Development Workshop was essential to the success of the project. Development Workshop assisted with recruiting the Youth Ambassadors for the project, in securing a high school as a venue and with translations and general organization. ‘Dance for Peace’ worked in alignment with Development Workshop’s ongoing goal to ensure that the rights of young people in conflict/post conflict situations in Africa are respected and fulfilled through their active participation in the social reconstruction of their societies. The project would also not have proceeded without funding, all of which was provided by the Chevron Corporation. In addition

I had the continuous support of Anna Halprin, Daria Halprin, peers at Tamalpa, and my colleague, Joy Packard, who came to Luanda from England to co-facilitate the workshop and performance with me.

### **Design of the ‘Dance for Peace’**

The project began with a five-day workshop, culminating on the sixth day with a live performance. During the workshop, the group explored their own issues about peace through the mediums of drawing, movement, and poetry, along with group discussion and self-reflective journal writing. Their drawings were unique, and their dances were a melding of the existing structure of the ‘Circle the Earth’ dance created by Anna Halprin, incorporating their unique and cultural dance style and ideas. Collective creativity in the choreographic process illuminated areas of disagreement, and allowed for ‘on-the-spot’ conflict resolution in a safe holding environment. Dance became a metaphor for real life peace and conflict issues.

This dance performance also invited the audience to participate as active witnesses to a dance ritual. From the beginning audience members were led through the dance space, indicating that they were not passive watchers of an event, but playing an important role in holding the space for the performers, and at certain times throughout the dance, becoming part of the ritual themselves. The dance was not only powerful as a result of the performers, but also because of the active relationship between the audience as witness and the performers. The majority of witnesses were family members or close friends, those who had a stake in the dance ritual. They had an emotional connection to the dance already by knowing someone in the performance.



*'Dance For Peace' participants*  
Photo: Joy Packard

The dance was structured around the Five-Part Healing Process, the healing modality identified and utilized in the Halprin Life/Art process (Halprin, 1995). These healing stages are: Identification of Issues, Confrontation, Release, Change and Transformation. The structure and names of the dance segments were based on Anna Halprin's 'Circle the Earth' concept, but the content of the performance was unique to the young people of Angola.

Different sections of the dance focussed on parts of the healing cycle. For example, during the first workshop day, we focused on naming the issues and situations that were blocking peace in the society, and named the part of the dance that dealt with these issues as Beginnings and Blessings and Vortex Dance.

### **Identification of Issues**

The first step in creating the 'Dance for Peace' was to identify the issues about peace that the young people experienced in their lives. In this way the young people created their own themes for the dance, and they brought to public awareness the issues they were facing. We also added their wishes and hopes for their community, so they had positive goals and a vision to strive for, so that their concerns did not become overwhelming. Issues identified

included guns, poverty, lack of sanitation, food and education. Once these issues were identified, we worked on using dance to bring the group together.

The 'Vortex Dance' was a way to bring the youth together as a dance community. Beginning as single dancers doing their individual dance, eventually and spontaneously they came together as a group, and formed an archetypal sacred symbol that had meaning in their culture. The youth decided this would be the baobab tree, which has sacred meaning in many countries in Africa. In Angola, people meet at the baobab tree to hold meetings, gather families, and hold prayer circles and sacred ceremonies. Participants used this symbol to build their sense of unity and foundation in the Vortex dance.



*Mirror Dancing*  
Photo: Joy Packard

### **Confrontation**

Once that unity was formed, the dance group could symbolically confront the issues they had identified. Confrontation was not about fighting with the identified issues, but encountering and working with them. Some of these issues were personal, while others were social. As Daria Halprin states, 'confrontation is the act of metaphorically or symbolically becoming it [*the issue*] or going into it' (Halprin, 2003, p. 125). In the workshop the young people did this through drawing, journaling and

*The Bridge*  
*Photo: Joy Packard*

group discussions. This dance segment was the Monster Dance, named so because some issues had the potential to feel like monsters or the aspects of society that were unpleasant to look at.

To make this symbolic confrontation feel emotionally safe, the young people tapped into their individual and collective strength through what we called the Warrior Dance. The performers danced collectively as warriors, a well-developed archetype in their culture, to create a container that allowed the space for the monsters to come out and be confronted. Through the creation of the Warrior Dance, with its steady, rhythmic movement of steps and voice, the performers and the community of witnesses were prepared for the monsters to break through the line of warriors, finally being allowed to metaphorically express the hidden, denied, or suppressed aspects of the culture.

### **Release**

The release aspect of the healing process and the restoration song gently incorporated the monsters back into the community. This part of the dance was a crucial moment for allowing the expression of grief, integration and compassion. On a physical level, this dance helped release tension in the muscles, and from emotions and mental images or memories. It was also a time for forgiveness, and the theme of forgiveness, while not part of the original Dance for Peace, appeared spontaneously in a later section of the dance.

I have come to believe that forgiveness is an essential step in the healing process for individuals and for social groups, and can be useful in communities who have experienced mass violence and destruction through war (Luskin, 2002). The Release dance was also a symbolic rite of passage, something Paolo Knill refers to as 'rites of restoration' (Knill,



Levine and Levine, 2005). Knill says '...we can look for restored cultural binding without necessarily presupposing a complete healing' (p. 77).

### **Change**

The Change section of the dance embodied the transition zone of moving to a new place both psychologically and physically. This healing corresponded with the Bridges and Passageways section of the dance. Participants used their bodies to create a bridge that acted as a physical metaphor for their transition from confrontation and release, and into Change. It was also metaphorically referred to as a 'rite of passage'. Participants sang about the restoration of their bodies, their families, their country, their earth. The last of those to go through the bridge escorted the witnesses/audience members through the bridge as well, so that metaphorically the witnesses also had an embodied sense of the change the performers were experiencing.

Next was the Earth Run in which each young person dedicated their run to issues of peace that had strong meaning for them. For example, some young people ran for the women of Angola, for the children who couldn't afford going to school that year, for adequate health care, or for the eradication of HIV/AIDS.

Perhaps because of the steady rhythm of the drum, the formal announcement of the intention of the run by each performer, and the steady, focused pace of the run, this section of the performance seemed to have

held the deepest sense of a ritual, sacred dance. Later, the performers sat back to back on the ground. Here they could talk about their experience to each other, and, if they wanted, out loud to the witnesses. Two young men who had a rivalry going during the workshop spontaneously spoke out a prayer: one asking for forgiveness, and the other granting his forgiveness. It was an authentic, unrehearsed moment, a tribute to the power of the dance as not only an expressive force, but as a healing force as well. Forgiveness naturally and spontaneously appeared as part of the dance, and I believe as part of the healing process.

The Earth Run was the part of the dance that most easily stood alone as its own performance. The youth ambassadors wanted to take this part of the performance out to members of their own community, to teach and share the power of voicing their wish and commitment to change. In this way the young people felt that the issues of their community would not only be talked about, but would become an embodied experience of a commitment to peace expressed both individually and as a collective community.

### **Transformation**

As a way of bringing home all that they had learned, the young people created their own final segment for the dance. As expected in this process of collective creativity, there were intense debates and some conflict. It was the perfect opportunity for the performers to see clearly their own ways of handling or not handling conflict well. After they unsuccessfully attempted to resolve their creative differences through language, it was suggested they move their conflict without words. In a very short time, through blending two different movement sequences and two different points of creativity, they had created a third option, and a third dance

movement that became integrated into their closing ritual. This non-verbal movement work enabled them to work through their conflicts and blend opposing views into a single performance section. The results in performance were original and stunning.

### **Qualitative analysis and continued transformation**

The Tamalpa Institute employs some valuable tools to help measure results. Value-Action is one of the most important as a tool for questioning and analyzing every dance experience, and contextualizing movement and the powerful emotions and insights movement and the arts can ignite. At the conclusion of the ‘Dance for Peace’, we used the Value Action tool to ask important questions of both the performers and the witnesses, such as:

- *what did you learn after performing /witnessing this dance?*
- *as a performer, what would you have done differently?*
- *in what ways will you take this experience into the world?*
- *has your relationship to questions about peace in yourself and your community changed?*
- *what will you do differently in your everyday life as a result of doing /witnessing this dance?*

The young peoples’ responses were gathered up and collated, and we were able to notice some significant trends. For example, the witnesses were strongly moved by the humbleness of the beginning of the dance, and also by the growing power and their eventual participation in the performance. The performers themselves saw peace very differently, and they wanted to bring this dance into their community. The performers saw the possibility to bring the dance to their church communities, youth communities, neighborhoods, and outlying

rural areas that had become disconnected from the main city.

Two weeks later, I invited all fifty of the performers back to do a Value-Action check-in session. This was a way to re-connect to the experience, and to assimilate it in hindsight. It was also a way to talk about what was different in their life experience after the process, and to offer opportunities to take what they had learned and experienced to their communities. Almost all the performers attended this discussion. In Angola, where most communication is by word of mouth because telephones are unreliable and most people do not own a computer or have internet connection, this level of attendance showed an impressive amount of commitment and interest on the part of the young people.

There were a number of comments made by the performers during the workshop and at the Value-Action debriefing that highlighted some key areas of learning and some surprising discoveries. At the end of the day during the workshop process, we did a check-in to see how people were feeling. A comment I heard on several occasions from various young people was that on the first day of the workshop, they were not sure how they felt about the process of moving, talking, drawing, and dancing. After the second day they said that they understood it, and that it gave something back to them from which they had been disconnected in their own culture.

This was a surprise to me. In further discussions, it appeared that many of the young people felt cut off from their traditional African roots and culture as a result of the long civil war. During the war many family members had been separated. Many moved to the capital city of Luanda to make money to survive. Others stayed in more rural settings. Because of the mines

that were laid in the ground, families were literally cut off from one another.

During an entire generation of war, during which large numbers of an entire generation died in war, the people of the city lost touch with many of their cultural traditions, and the young people longed for a reconnection. Young people from the city were very modernized. Often the dances they did on the streets were hip-hop, rap, or dance moves from MTV (Music Television). There was traditional dance as well, but the feeling of this group was that some of the meaning of the traditional dances had been lost to them. The dance we created together felt closer to what they imagined their ancestors and relatives had done, because the movements themselves were the creative outcome of their own experience. Interestingly, several of the performers wanted to take the dance into the rural settings as a way of bridging the cultural barrier they felt existed between themselves and their rural neighbors.

This was an outcome not necessarily repeatable in other cultural environments in other parts of the world. One possible explanation of this result is that although the facilitation tools of working with the body, art, and performance came from a western cultural context, the bodies, the art, and the performance were created in an Angolan cultural context. Art, dance, and performance and use of imagination are universal as well as cultural. While the young performers worked within a western structure of organization and facilitation, what came from their muscles, their bones, their hearts and their minds was all their own. And part of what was theirs to be rediscovered and re-imagined was their connection to dance within their own cultural heritage.

Another key learning was that the young people began to see violence in less overt forms. They saw violence as verbal abuse,

particularly with regards to women. They saw violence in poverty, and in the fear of publically speaking political views. And while they could have been overwhelmed by this awareness, they moved into a state of action around it: they wanted to spread the news and awareness about what they had discovered by facilitating the dance in other places. In this way, the Halprin-based five-part healing process would begin anew, with noticing and becoming aware of the situation being part of the first stage of Identifying the Issue. Young people moving into action related to the second stage of Confrontation.

Considering this process from another theoretical expressive arts approach, creation of the performance might have allowed for a decentering of the material, moving out of what Paolo Knill calls the helpless situation (Knill et al, 2005) and increasing the range of play by engagement of the imagination (Knill et al, 2005). Rather than the focus on the issues creating non-peace directly, the engagement in creativity, play and movement as a decentering attitude helped to feed a solution-oriented, action-oriented and self-empowering outcome.

Currently, the Youth Ambassadors have expressed their interest and commitment to doing another 'Dance for Peace', this time with young people from Rio de Janeiro. There are many cultural connections between Angola and Brazil. Historically, both countries were colonized by the Portuguese, and many slaves in Brazil came from Angola. There are cultural similarities also in dance (Angolan Semba / Brazilian Samba), martial arts (Capoeira), music, visual art and of course, language. The young people also have much in common through their shared experiences of violence and peace issues.

## Conclusion

The Youth Ambassadors for Peace, under the tutelage of Development Workshop's youth

capacity building approach, took responsibility and initiative for their own development and that of their communities. Their participation and enthusiastic engagement in the workshop and dance, and their thoughtfulness and willingness to engage in future community dance activities, speaks to the potency of the workshop and dance, and to the expressive arts as a cross-cultural tool of mediation, facilitation and exploration. With an enhanced level of awareness about issues of peace in their community, these young people can impart ideas and knowledge formally and informally to many members of their community.

Because they work specifically as youth leaders in many modalities, including politics, health awareness, issues of religious and social diversity, and education, they are empowered to take that learning into their current reality as agents of change. The movement-based expressive arts approach used in the Dance for Peace assisted in artfully exploring and addressing issues of peace with these young people, so that in their capacity as youth leaders, they were and are able to share what they discovered with others, and were empowered to creatively imagine the change they would like to see in their future.

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