

Climbing the Gyero Tree
A personal perspective of the 'Tree of Life' project at Gyero Care Centre,
Plateau State, Nigeria

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The children at Gyero orphanage, situated on the outskirts of the city I currently live in, are often asked to 'tell their stories'. Their problem saturated stories are intriguing, tragic, and often illustrate aspects of a culture very different to that of the listener. No one lives in an orphanage without a story about how they came to need to be there. These are the stories that secure overseas funding.

I hadn't worked with young children before, and it hadn't been my intention to do so in Nigeria when I came. However I would challenge anyone to visit this basic yet vibrant facility, ignore the need and not want to return! Because of my existing commitment to counselling at an HIV/AIDS clinic in Jos, I agreed to visit one day a week and see as many children as I could.

The few children I was able to work with stood out to me as resilient, strong, creative and intelligent individuals. They all had memories of experiences and meaningful relationships left behind. I was frustrated that others weren't hearing the same stories. I was also frustrated that I could see so few children. One-on-one attention is unusual for these children, the Nigerian culture is very communal, and individual counselling is foreign.

I looked on the Dulwich website to look for ideas to work with children. My narrative tutor from New Zealand, Donald McMenamin had suggested I investigate the Tree of Life material. What I found first though was the advertisement for a 'Narrative Responses to Trauma' workshop in Rwanda. I was never going to be closer to Rwanda, and I wondered if this would help to put what I already knew and loved about narrative therapy into an African context. Certainly the 'responses to trauma' related to what my work involved.

The week in Rwanda was inspiring on many levels. Rwanda itself was a tranquil retreat after the hectic few months we had had previously moving our family to the not-so-tranquil Nigeria. David Denborough's 'Collective Narrative Practice' book was brought to me the day before I travelled, so I had the best of in-flight reading. I spent a week in the company of narrative therapy experts from around the world, and was privileged to meet and hear stories from survivors of the Rwandan genocide.

I came home excited about the possibility of using the Tree of Life at Gyero. I ran a one day workshop with expat staff involved in the ministry, as well as two nationals that I hoped would be the beginning of a team of facilitators that would take this work beyond my limited time here. It was a great day, and my first 'look' at how the trees worked. We all learned a lot about ourselves and each other. Everyone agreed it would be ideal for the children at Gyero too.

We divided the children into groups depending on age and gender as much as we could. At a Gyero staff meeting, I presented what I wanted to do and asked

permission to have each child miss one day of school to participate. The smiles on the faces of the Gyero staff is a picture I will never forget. They quickly announced they would like their own children and themselves to be included!

We began the programme late January. Two days a week I travelled to Gyero, along the notoriously rough road and through areas prone to troubles. One other person from our original training group came with me each time. We were keen to get through each group before the national elections began, but knew any security concerns could prevent this. Gyero itself has borne the brunt of severe sectarian violence recently, and the presence of a 'baturi' could bring unwanted attention, and add to the difficulty of keeping the children safe. I knew my mission agency would not allow me to travel if it exposed me to unnecessary risk. I also wanted to get through the programme before the rainy season totally destroyed the road! We were blessed with dry safety for the entire three months. Within those three months the staff had time in Jos where they spent a rare day together outside of the care centre and did their own trees. "There is room for more love, now that we know each other better".

Uncle Bawa became my right hand man, and attended every session to help. English is a second language for most of the children, so his Hausa translating was invaluable. On the first session he did his own tree, and willingly shared this with each group. He quickly became an enthusiastic advocate for the Tree of Life, and several people complained to me that this is all he will talk about now!

The Gyero staff were instrumental in thickening the plot of the children's alternative stories. The certificates that detailed each child's skills and abilities, their hopes and their dreams became tools for conversations long after I had left for the day. Many of the staff are illiterate themselves, but have shown genuine pride and interest in the new stories. "I had no idea my children had dreams like this. I am getting to know them for the first time!"

For many of the children, this had been the first time they had been asked about what they are good at, what they hoped for their future and how these came about. I noticed they often copied each others ideas, until the concept caught on and they came to life with ideas and desires of their own.

Some of the children opened up easily and spoke of the storms they had experienced in their short lives. I loved that they could question, express anger, cry and laugh in the shade of confidence their trees had given them. Some of them wrote beautiful letters to loved ones whether they still had contact with those people or not.

It was a constant process of learning and shifting to make it work for the children, particularly with the language used. Trees here are sparsely spread out. Some of the children have not seen a forrest, so talking about individual trees brought forth more conversation. A tree has a stem, not a trunk. Dreams are a valid method of spiritual communication in the African context, so we sometimes got details of a literal dream if we asked the children about their hopes and dreams.

Finally, we arranged to have a celebration of all of the trees. There were over 130. Visitors came from the mission that oversees the care centre, the mission agency we

are a part of, the children's school teachers and the Gyero staff. When we ran out of food too soon, we realised we had several children visiting from the village too! We planted four trees throughout the centre. I read to them 'their' document. It was the first time I have experienced a group of Nigerians be so still and quiet! They listened intently, and gave a resounding "Yes!" when I asked if it was okay, and if it could be shared. We read to them the document from the Ltyentye Apurte community in Australia too. We had photos on display of each group. These and the documents have now been made into a book for the school library.

If I leave Nigeria after two years and the only thing I achieved was facilitating the Tree of Life project at Gyero, it would have been worth every minute. I 'notice' trees now, with metaphor and life analogies running through my mind each time we drive through the countryside here. My husband has resigned himself to stopping for tree photo shoots regularly! I am indebted to those that put this material together, David Denborough's 'Collective Narrative Practice' book, and online encouragement and supervision from David Denborough at the Dulwich Centre, Adelaide and Donald McMenamin in Auckland, New Zealand. Thank you!

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