

RESILIENCE IN AFRICA: MYTH OR REALITY



Gladys K. Mwiti, PhD

Consulting Clinical Psychologist, Trauma Specialist & Team Leader

Oasis Africa Center for Transformational Psychology & Trauma

Nairobi, Kenya

glmwiti@oasisafrica.co.ke; www.oasisafrica.co.ke

+254725336614/733366614/admin@oasisafrica.co.ke

RESILIENCE IN AFRICA?



Purpose: To explore factors that contribute to a resilient Africa in spite of her calamities.

- What are the factors linked to resilience in Africa?
- Explore them in research.
- Incorporate them in mental health policies
- Use them to inform trauma interventions for psychological training and formulation of sustainable mental health outcomes

AFRICA – A Continent in Turmoil



- Historically, Africa has suffered massive trauma that would have annihilated her population many decades ago.
- However, in the face of slavery, colonization, rape of resources, pandemics, drought and famine, terrorism and civil wars, Africa has been described as the next civilization; with vibrancy, youthfulness, and a positive outlook to life.
- What are Africa's **protective factors**?
- What are the **psychological processes** attached to this resilience?

Why Exploration of Resilience in Africa



- Western psychology models have often ignored strengths and coping of indigenous peoples especially in Africa.
- Our exploration might influence future research in the field of trauma in Africa;
- Inform the need for more governmental mental health policies;
- Influence training of psychologists in the area of trauma with regard to the inclusion of indigenous coping skills; and
- Enlighten planning and carrying out of trauma interventions related to various calamities on the African continent.

Psychological Resilience



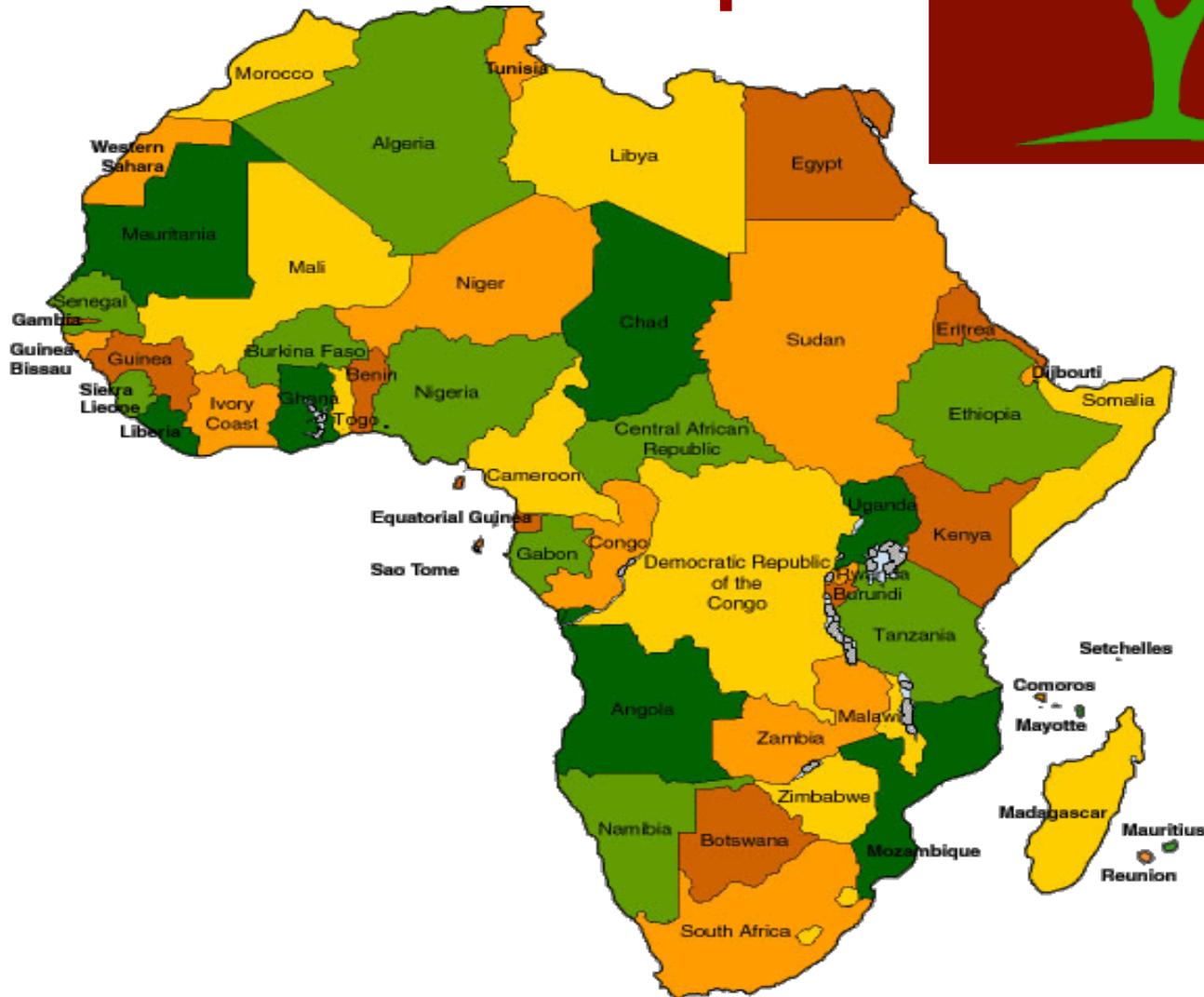
- **Psychological resilience: the capacity of an individual or community to recover and adjust or even flourish following adversity or disaster ([Garcia-Dia et al., 2013](#)).**
- **Resilience is multifaceted, multi-dimensional and dynamic.**
- **Can also be found in individuals, communities, institutions and societies.**
- **Understanding of trauma and resilience is much more than the western medical model that often presents with a narrow focus on pathology, symptoms and individualized treatment sorted out through therapy, most of it, individual, or at most family and group.**

Appreciation of Indigenous Resilience



- Pupavac (2001) argues that there is significance in a new type of trauma psycho-social intervention that appreciates indigenous and locally-conceptualized resilience and does not jeopardize native coping strategies.
- Failure to appreciate indigenous modes of resilience is likely to result in political, social and psychological consequences of the pathologization of traumatized communities (Wessels, 2008).
- Part of this pathologization results in the decontextualization of collective suffering reducing the same to individual terms and so minimizing not only the socio-historic causes of trauma but also diminishing positive coping strategies and resilience factors inherent in the indigenous community (Lykes, 2001)

Africa: 53 Countries, over 1.2 Billion People



Africa – Her Resources: People



- **People:** At present there are 1.2 billion people in Africa, more than five times the population in 1950.
- **Double:** By 2050, Africa's population will double to 2.4 billion, eventually reaching 4.2 billion persons by the end of the century.
- **Youthfulness:** By 2050, about 40 per cent of all children globally will be in Africa, up from about 10 per cent in 1950;
- By 2050, 20% of the population will be young people between 15 and 25 years of age (UNICEF, 2014).

Africa – Her Resources: IT Technology – Mobile Services



- **Mobile Industry:** In a 2014 report, GSMA, a global association of mobile service providers, revealed that mobile industry is driving explosive economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa.
- **Connections:** Over the past five years, the region is the fastest growing area for both connections and unique subscribers.
- **Highest:** By June 2014, there were 608 million connections representing the **highest proportion of mobile versus fixed line connections in the world** (GSMA, 2014).

Africa – Her Resources: IT Technology: Smart Phones



- **Smartphone Connections** : Over the next six years, Sub-Saharan Africa will witness the highest growth of any region in the number of smartphone connections with 525 million links in the region by 2020, growth that will account for more than half of the total global connection base.
- **GDP**: The GSMA report states that mobile industry growth could also generate a **Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increase** of \$40 billion, representing 0.54 per cent of total GDP in the region by 2016 (GSMA, 2014).

Africa – Her Resources: IT Technology – Mobile Money



- Renzenbrink (2012) notes that 75% of the world's poor do not have bank accounts.
- For Sub-Saharan Africa, the answer is mobile money. Kenya leads the world in mobile money transactions (The Economist, 2013).
- **Mobile Money:** *Safaricom*, Kenya's largest mobile-network operator launched M-Pesa or mobile money in 2007. Currently, this platform is now used by over 17million Kenyans, a figure equivalent to more than two-thirds of the adult population. About **25% of the country's gross national product** flows through M-Pesa.

Africa – Urbanization



- Rapid urbanization leading to unraveling of indigenous communities poses challenges for sustainable mental health is realized.
- In 2010, only 36% per cent of the African population was urbanized. Projections indicate a rise to 50% by 2013 and 60% by 2050 (Ncube, 2012).
- Outcomes: Change the Continent's landscape and challenges through proliferation of slums and urban poverty as well as increased inequality. With inequality, there may be a rise in crime and insecurity that will raise the level of traumatic stress already present among most of the population.

Trauma in Africa – Historical and Current Burden



- Africa has experienced massive calamities and traumas.
- Historical traumas – oppressive colonialism, genocide (Rwanda, Darfur), civil war – the Sudan, apartheid - South Africa, famine – Ethiopia.
- Recent critical incidents have held the Continent hostage to the after-effects of trauma, loss and violence.
- Here, we shall consider three examples to create a background of examining resiliency and coping: bereavement and loss, refugees and internally-displaced people, and terrorism.

Trauma – AIDS Deaths and AIDS Orphans 15.1 million



Trauma – Refugees: Over 2,561,564



Terror attacks – Nairobi Westgate: 67 killed, many injured



Africa and Resilience: The Spiritual Foundation



- Africans access treatment through the lens of their culture and spirituality.
- Spirituality expressed as religion and faith in an all powerful God: an expression of existential ideology – acknowledgement that someone bigger than me holds the world together.
- Acceptance of individual finitude and vulnerability.
- Many Africans believe that the psyche and the spirit are one meaning that their thought processes are informed by their faith in God and his promises especially from the Bible.
- From Cog B perspective, beliefs inform perception and impact coping.

**Foundation of Africa's
Resilience– Worship of God and
Trust in his Presence and Care**



Africa and Resilience: The Pastor and the Child



Resilience: The *Umntu* Factor – Used as basis for community- based interventions



- Besides choosing to walk with a present God, in times of trauma, Africans choose to walk together (1998 - NBO Bombing, Mwiti, 2004)
- This choice is present in Africans' idioms, folk tales and proverbs. For example: *"If you want to travel quickly, travel alone; If you want to go far, travel together with others."*
- Africans' believe in *Collective Umntu* and humanness, that each person's wellbeing is dependent on the other: *I am because you are.*
- Bond ensures resilience and survival post disaster (Gade, 2012). creates community and sharing. People cherish freely discussing their problems with one another and seeking solutions together.

**Resilience:
The *Umntu* Factor –
Foundation for Orphan Care:
I'll take in one more ...**



Resilience: Africans' Value for Life and Continuity



- The population of Africa is currently projected to quadruple in just 90 years, with a growth rate that will make Africa more important than ever to global economy.
- Why this growth? Africans' love and value for children. Only South Africa and Cape Verde Islands have legalized abortion.
- Africans believe that **protecting the life of the unborn is a moral community obligation and abortion is justified only if the life of the mother is in danger.** Every baby has a divine purpose as well as an earthly responsibility, even if it is for the eventual care of the older members of the family: ***"The old woman looks after the child to grow its teeth and the young one in turn looks after the old woman when she loses her teeth,"*** ~ Akan (Ghana) proverb.

Resilience: Africans' Value Family



- Collective sensibility means that in times of trauma and disaster, families pull together. Many African proverbs uphold the value of family connections: *“A family tie is like a tree, it can bend but it cannot break,” ~ African proverb*, meaning that the bonds that unite family members can withstand disaster and other challenges, individual or communal.
- Family conflict is prevented at any cost. *“If I am in harmony with my family, that’s success, African proverb.*
- Families support even the weakest among them: *“There is no fool who is disowned by his family, ~ African proverb*, and helping one another enhances resilience: *“If relatives help each other, what evil can hurt them?~ African proverb.”*

Resilience: Cultural Support Systems



- Cultural support systems in Africa have been challenged especially with community breakdown in the face of the AIDs pandemic.
- The *Ameru* people of Kenya for example, do not have the word *orphan* in their vocabulary. There is widow but no orphan. However, with the loss of many parents through AIDS deaths, this social fabric has been shaken but not broken. (Chirwa (2002))
- In Malawi, for example, alternative forms of social relationship for orphan care are evolving, and each is determined by the material ability of care givers, nature of integration of the orphans in the new set-up, age and gender of the orphans, the condition of the family receiving the children and the degree of vulnerability of the children themselves. This leaves resiliency intact.

**Resilience:
Celebration informs
Mourning – Burial Service
after calamity**



Resilience: Celebration informs Mourning



- Spirituality and perceptions of life after life inform mourning and communicate hope. As much as there is mourning, there is also celebration of life.
- Africans believe that life is cyclic; there are the unborn, the living and the dead who still live on in our memories. These are people we shall see one day in another life. Brief separation calls for mourning their loss from this life, celebrating their existence however brief, and anticipating uniting with them in another life.
- Therefore, bereaved people do not mourn alone. They are surrounded by friends and family as they prepare for burial. At such times social support and spirituality become major coping mechanisms in times of trauma and mourning (Mwiti, 2004).

Resilience and Hospitality



- Africans exercise hospitality. The stranger among them is treated like a long-lost brother. Even in the midst of abject want, a farmer with one goat will kill it and prepare it for the stranger. Sharing is Africa's way of taking care for the poor and needy.
- Africans welcome visitors from anywhere. Always cook extra food because a stranger may pass by while we are eating. It would be bad manners to eat alone in the presence of a visitor so prepare food in anticipation of feeding more mouths than those under your roof (Ozumba ___).
- In times of trauma, pain is shared over meals and the wounded find care sitting around the fire, eating and sharing together. Those too traumatized to cook eat elsewhere and bring ready food with them

African Wisdoms – Proverbs, Metaphors, Idioms and Respect for the Wisdom of Elders



- Elderly people restore peace and emotional wellness and mentor members of the community using age-old wisdom as expressed in proverbs, metaphors and idioms.
- The grey hairs on the head of an elderly person are respected as a symbol of wisdom. Among the Efik, it is said: *"The words of one's elders give protection,"* and the Igbo of Nigeria believe that *he who listens to an elder is like one who consults an oracle.*
- Respect of the elders begins at home with parents exerting authority and mentorship on their children. In times of trauma, elders take authority in helping restore resiliency. They will bring warring factions together and help them seek reconciliation with one another (*Markwei, 1979*).

African Wisdoms – Proverbs, Metaphors, Idioms and Respect for the Wisdom of Elders



African Wisdoms – Proverbs inform the Psyche



Proverbs that encourage people to hope, and other sayings are used to remind people that they can overcome:

- ***“A regular fighter who discords peace is bound to be fought by his own anger.”*** Meaning: Even if you’re so angry with your enemy, seek peace or your anger will destroy you, because ***“To agree to have dialogue is the beginning of a peaceful resolution, ~ Somali proverb.”***
- At the end of the day, ***“Peace wins over wealth,” ~ Algerian proverb***, meaning that wealth without peace is useless, and ***“He who runs after good fortune runs away from peace ~African proverb.”***

African Wisdoms – Proverbs inform the Psyche



- Africa has many tribes, people who speak different languages and have different cultural practices, but have to co-exist in one nation. For example, Kenya has 42 different tribes, various religious alliances, as well as people from all parts of the world.
- To encourage unity in diversity, proverbs are used to inform people's perceptions about one another: "*Milk and honey have different colors, but they share the same house peacefully, ~African Proverb.*"
- People who live together are reminded to uphold peace because conflict will destroy them: "*A fight between grasshoppers is a joy to the crow,*" ~ Lesotho proverb

African Wisdoms – Folk Tales to teach Mutual Care in Times of Trauma: The Mbura Clan



Must Pull Together in Drought and Famine – The RAIN WILL COME



African and Trauma: Challenges and the Future



- Trauma in Africa – **historical and cyclic**. With rapid **urbanization**, immediate need to address gaps in trauma care and other.
- **Universities to create curricula** that includes Africa's strengths and other indigenous variables in trauma diagnosis and coping.
- **Mental health programs need to integrate** indigenous coping aspects with orthodox systems. Avoid humanitarian neocolonialism.
- Need for East-West **collaborative research** partnerships **and funding** to inform integration.
- National **mental health** policies to inform and support mental health care in Africa, esp with regard to massive trauma in the Continent.

Resilience in Africa – Truth not a Myth



- Religious faith
- Belief in a present God
- Umuntu
- Value for Life – the unborn and the baby
- Continuity of Living – all bound together in a web – the unborn, the living and the dead
- Value for Family
- Community Support Systems
- Celebration of Life
- Hospitality
- African Wisdom – Proverbs
- African Wisdom – Folk Tales
- African Wisdom – The Wisdom and Respect of the Elders

Africa: I am the dream and
the hope of the broken ...
and, **“Still I Rise”** (Maya
Angelou)



Africa
The Rising Giant

ASANTE – THANK YOU!

