

A Rope of Words: Storytelling, Ritual and Healing in a Namibian Youth Group

by Dorian Haarhoff

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WALVIS BAY, Namibia -- "Let's take hold of the rope."

I am in a workshop with 23 teenagers. A long rope links us as we sit in a circle. Whenever I tell stories, we all hold on to the "story rope." It symbolizes our being bound together in ritual space, because storytelling has to do with ritual and community.

We are in a Namibian coastal town, Walvis Bay, along the southwestern coast of Africa. These teenagers are from a registered Place of Safety for children in need of care in nearby Swakopmund and from Walvis Bay's townships. My friend, Petro, a social worker with a deep intuition about youth, has gathered these teens, 12 to 14 years old. Some of them are AIDS orphans. One had been raped by an uncle. A few have been living partly at home, and partly on the streets.

In 2004 the Swiss Carl Schlettwein Foundation which focuses on Namibia, granted me support to work with these teenagers. The nature of the work? To encourage the use of storytelling as a creative way of coping with
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