

The Power of Arts and Culture for Healing

A Dialogue and Exchange for Artists,
Culture-Makers, and Activists

WHEN

Wednesday, May 14 – Sunday, May 18

WHERE

The Social House, Nairobi, Kenya

Assembly 25: Nairobi

The Power of Arts and Culture for Healing: A Dialogue and Exchange for Artists, Culture-Makers, and Activists

Welcome

Welcome to Nairobi and our dialogue and exchange program on arts, culture, and healing with a focus on East Africa and the Horn of Africa.

Today, there is an evolving idea of healing that seeks overall well-being, fostering inner peace, and personal growth, and not just treating symptoms of problems. In a world of multi-crises, impending climate collapse and social upheaval, humanity is in need of grounded and meaningful responses for healing the many fissures that we face.

"The healing of a community begins when its songs remember not only the glory, but also the pain that shaped its journey." --Okot P'Bitek

As is foundational to many traditions in societies across the African continent, arts and culture are vital to healing. African countries face a range of complex and interconnected challenges, including but not limited to the most urgent and damaging effects of climate change and the need for healing and reconciliation in post-conflict and post-colonial contexts. There is much work to do. Fortunately, there is a growing recognition in our communities that artistic and cultural practices are intrinsic to an African conceptualization of healing. We are here this week to deepen and interact with this idea.

During the course of our time together we hope to move in concentric circles from the individual and ideas of self-care and healing to the role that communities can play in reconciliation and societal healing to looking at the environment and nature as sites of resilience and strength. If artists and changemakers in Africa can begin to build bridges between each other, secure resources for projects with larger constituencies, and begin working with civil society and other changemakers, then they can have a larger role to play in the healing of our societies. There is great potential for artists from Africa and its diaspora to more meaningfully contribute towards a peaceful and equitable future for the continent in which its people have a real voice in addressing such key issues as reconciliation and climate justice.

Although the challenges are real, there is a generation of artists, culture bearers, and other healers who are helping to transform grief and trauma into resilience. This is why we are so pleased that you are here with us this week. **You are a source of inspiration and hope for us, and we are thrilled that you have joined us in Nairobi.**

As experts and practitioners, you hold enormous wisdom that will help AFSC deepen our own trauma healing work in Somalia, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and in new places. We also hope that this third convening in our Assembly arts and culture series (Casablanca 2022, Amman 2023, Nairobi 2025) will create the kind of synergy for you to learn from each other, creating new relationships, networks, and knowledge that can serve you as you implement healing in your own communities and countries.

A number of key themes have emerged in our research and will inform our program. Each area has a connected element of artistic and cultural practices. We will look at:

- The central role of incorporating culturally relevant approaches in addressing trauma and enabling healing
- The significance of community support and collective action in the healing process
- The power of storytelling and (personal and collective) narrative in processing trauma and fostering resilience
- The recognition of long-lasting effects of historical trauma resulting from events like colonization, slavery, and genocide
- The therapeutic potential of creative and expressive arts modalities as valuable approaches for working with trauma

This event, part of our global dialogue and exchange program, is made possible in part by the generosity of *Brot für die Welt* and *Quäker Hilfe-Stiftung*, foundations based in Berlin, Germany, and individual supporters of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). We also want to give thanks to our research team from Andani.Africa — Molemo Moiloa and Phumzile Twala — for their guidance and counsel throughout this process and our facilitator Rashida Bumbray. We are grateful for their contributions.

--Kennedy, Zaina, Moses, Mercy, Jason (AFSC staff)

"Healing begins when we create space for our wounds to speak their names and be acknowledged in the light of day." --Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

Our Time Together

The arts and creativity have a special and important role in bringing people together, moving hearts and minds, and helping populations develop methods of self-expression and resilience. Likewise, art and culture may play an essential role in healing—at the personal, community, societal, and planetary levels. This is particularly true for the colonial-imposed borders of the African continent and in the context of cyclical conflicts.

Participants will have the space to connect authentically and share case studies of innovative work that demonstrates the importance of arts and culture work connected to healing trauma and fostering resilience. The week includes plenaries, case studies, artistic presentations, cultural visits, and interactive sessions. We welcome you to engage deeply with us as we know that there is enormous insight and wisdom in the space we will create together. Our program this week is a “design experiment.” Committing to participatory and inclusive facilitation, we encourage you to let us know throughout the week if there are ways in which we can improve upon our time together.

About the American Friends Service Committee

Founded in 1917, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that promotes lasting peace with justice, as a practical expression of faith in action. Drawing on continuing spiritual insights and working with people of many backgrounds, we nurture the seeds of change and respect for human life that transform social relations and systems.

AFSC in Africa

AFSC has been present in Africa since the 1930s when the organization led a delegation of U.S. Quakers to South Africa to push back on nascent apartheid. AFSC would ultimately be the first organization to divest from South Africa in the 1980s. AFSC's work on the continent has since evolved to include housing and educational support in the 1960s (Zambia), famine relief in the 1970s (Mali), community entrepreneurship development in the 2000s (Zimbabwe), and our current emphasis on research and advocacy grounded in building a world of safe migration and sustained peace. This is embodied in the Samala Hub in Ethiopia, conducting African-led peacebuilding research and capacity building for over fifty community and faith-based organizations.

Today, AFSC promotes community cohesion and peacebuilding in Burundi; fosters trauma healing in South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia, along with transitional justice; and works with displaced people and migrants in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Recent humanitarian support has focused on Sudan. AFSC's U.S. office also focuses on changing American policy toward Africa. For nearly a century, AFSC has built sustained ties and consistently invested in a brighter vision of Africa.

Assembly

Art and culture are an essential and positive unifying force, especially in places and times of hardship. AFSC hosts artists and creative leaders in dialogue and exchange forums, conducts research on best practices, and works to integrate arts and creativity into its ongoing organizing and

advocacy efforts. Recent forums have taken place in Casablanca (2022), Amman (2023), and Nairobi (2025). For more information about our convening series and access to reports, podcasts, and other relevant content, please see www.afsc.org/assembly or contact Jason Drucker at jdrucker@afsc.org.

Venue

The Social House Nairobi
154 James Gichuru Road
+254 709 216000

Local Transportation

If we booked your flight or you have shared your travel information with us, we have arranged to pick you up at the airport in Nairobi. Questions to Mercy Maneno at mmaneno@afsc.org. Please go to the area just outside the international terminal. **Our driver is Mary and she can be reached at +254 722 388943.**

Exploring Nairobi

We plan to have some afternoons and evenings outside of the Social House. On Friday, May 16 we will travel to The Go Down Arts Centre and have dinner off-site. On Saturday, May 17 we will go to Unseen.Nairobi, a film and culture center and restaurant. All of our days have been programmed. **For security purposes, if you need to leave the Social House or depart from one of the excursions, we recommend that you let a member of the staff know where you are going and to only take a recommended travel service from the hotel.**

Health and Wellness

Your health and wellness are very important to us. We also will be creating space to discuss how to stay grounded and inspired in the context of the many challenges we face. If at any point you feel sick, unwell, or need assistance, please contact Mercy Maneno, Kennedy Akolo, or any member of the AFSC staff.

Contacts and WhatsApp Group

We will create a WhatsApp group so participants can stay in touch during the program. Please make sure that Mercy Maneno has your phone number when you arrive at the hotel.

For local contacts in Nairobi and in the case of emergency:

- Kennedy Akolo +254 722 849 500
- Mercy Maneno +254 799 895 446

For other questions related to hotel, transportation, or logistics, please contact Mercy at mmaneno@afsc.org.

Social Media, Photography, Media, Funders

Safety and security are extremely important to us. For this reason, we ask that you refrain from posting about the event on social media. **Please do not tag the hotel, location, or the names of participants at our event during the course of our time together.** Please only post *after* the event has ended, and only post the photographs of participants with their explicit permission. Thank you. We will be joined by some researchers and writers who are developing case studies and stories about various activities and our discussion topics. They will not develop any content without your explicit permission. Any recordings or photographs will be used only with your permission. If you have a particular concern or wish to change your initial indication of permission on our video/photography model release form at registration, please speak to Jason Drucker.

At present, we have no plans for journalists or the media to be present, should this change, you will be notified well ahead of time.

There may be some funders or funding intermediary organizations present at our event. This is a no-solicitation space, and we ask that you please refrain from requesting philanthropic support during our time together.

The Program

Wednesday, May 14

15:00 Welcome Desk and Hotel Check-In

You are welcome to check in to the hotel any time after 15:00 in the afternoon. AFSC staff will be in the lobby to welcome and assist you at a Welcome Desk - please check in with the team to get your final programme and to register. Please also bring your questions or if you have thoughts about your presentations, we will be available to discuss with you.

19:00 – 21:00 Welcome Reception and Dinner (The Other Room on Ground Floor)

Please join us in Social House for an informal buffet dinner. Remarks by Kennedy Akolo, AFSC Regional Director for Africa.

Thursday, May 15

8:00 – 9:30 Breakfast in The Other Room

9:30 – 10:00 Welcome and Introductions – Floor 5 Conference Space

AFSC colleagues will share the agenda, including the overall themes and topics of our dialogue and exchange program, and we will introduce the team. There will be an introduction to our background research.

10:00 – 11:00 Morning Circle

Rashida Bumbray will host an interactive session for participants to meet each other. A brief exercise will cover the “group norms” for our time together to help ensure we create a collaborative, safe, and inspirational space.

11:00 – 11:15 Health Break

11:15 – 12:45 Session 1: Talking Healing and Context Setting

Moderator: Zaina Kisongoa

Speakers: Hope Azeda, Rafa Altayeb Alfatih Mohieldeen, Shabu Mwangi

Healing is a word of many meanings, informed by context, history and practice. Our panelists' work engages historic and contemporary challenges with varied practices of resilience, expression and collectivity. This panel begins to map the range of issues creative work is responding to in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, to discuss - what do we face, what parts of us need to heal, and how do we begin? What is healing, is it the right word to refer to our work, and what other words might bring meaning for our practice? Distinguished practitioners will discuss how they seek to create safe containers for processing trauma, fostering resilience, and rebuilding community bonds. The discussion will highlight practical applications of artistic practices conceptualised as responses to urgent need and long-standing challenges, while honouring the diverse cultural frameworks that inform how we speak our pain, share our stories, and collectively journey toward wholeness.

12:45 – 14:00 Lunch in The Other Room

14:00 – 15:30 Session 2: Workshopping Healing

Facilitator: Phumzile Nombuso Twala

Participants: World Café (5 groups), with 60 minutes of small-group work and 30 minutes of report back

This interactive session invites participants to collectively explore and reimagine healing paradigms through critical inquiry and collaborative dialogue. We'll engage in a dynamic workshopping process to unpack some of the themes and questions that emerged in our first session this morning - examining underlying assumptions, cultural contexts, and ethical considerations. The session creates space to challenge conventional approaches while co-creating frameworks. The intention is for participants to set the framework of the coming days by offering a collective working definition of healing, scoping out the limits and potentials of our conversation, and proposing core questions we will want to address over our time together.

15:30 – 16:00 Coffee and Conversation

16:00 – 17:30 Encounters

Hosted by Moses Chasieh

Presenters: Mahad Mohamed, Fadumo Mohamoud Muse, Sharon Ong'ayo Liboi, Michael Tsegaye

Our participants come from a rich diversity of artistic, cultural, and healing traditions. This afternoon, some of our guests will share short informal introductions to their work, inspiration, and unique perspectives. In this way, we develop collective understanding and appreciation of each other, and spark rich conversations.

19:00 – 20:30 Dinner at Cooper Restaurant (Ground Floor – The Social House)

20:30 – 22:00 Encounters (Cooper Restaurant)

Hosted by Moses Jr. Kiboneka (Uncle Mo)

Presenters: Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud, Bowandundu Musafiri Master

Our participants come from a rich diversity of artistic, cultural, and healing traditions. This evening, some of our guests share short introductions to their work, inspiration, and unique perspectives. In this way, we develop collective understanding and appreciation of each other, and spark rich conversations.

Friday, May 16

7:30 – 8:30 Yoga with Salim Rollins (place to be determined)

8:00 – 9:30 Breakfast in The Other Room

9:30 – 10:00 Morning Circle and Debrief: Emerging Themes and Questions

Hosted by Rashida Bumbray with Participants and Staff

This is our collective time for sharing personal and collective insights from the prior day. We discuss the day ahead of us and check-in on our well-being.

10:00 – 11:15 Session 3: The Power of Storytelling and Narrative in Processing Trauma and Fostering Resilience

Moderator: Rashida Bumbray

Speakers: Rehema Chachage, Meron Sisay Abey, Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, Margret Kowarto

Sharing personal and collective narratives are a vital tool for healing across contexts. Storytelling has the capacity to facilitate the reprocessing and reframing of negative cognitions. In many communities on the African continent, storytelling is an effective healing intervention, a tool for confronting oppression, and a means of restoring cultural identities. Dramatherapy also utilizes storytelling and reenactments as methods for trauma recovery.

This embodied approach allows individuals to physically experience how narrative reconstruction helps integrate difficult experiences into one's identity, creating meaning from suffering while building the capacity to endure and transform through the dual power of personal sense-making and communal understanding.

11:15 – 11:30 Health Break

11:30 – 13:00 Session 4: Holism - Interdisciplinary, Interspecies, Intersectional

Moderator: Molemo Moiloa

Speakers: Brian Otieno Akoth, Tosin Oyebisi, Darlyne Komukama, Rock (Kodzo) AHAVI

This round table examines how African social practice artists navigate the complexities at the intersection of politics, environmental concerns, and community engagement. Participants will discuss the practical challenges and conceptual frameworks of creating work that addresses multiple systems simultaneously. The conversation will explore whether truly effective social healing requires holistic approaches that recognize the connections between ecological sustainability, political structures, and cultural contexts rather than isolated interventions within a single domain.

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch in The Other Room

15:00 The Social House Lobby

Please gather on time for our excursion in Nairobi.

15:30 – 17:00 Visit to The GoDown Arts Centre

Conversation with Michelle Coffey and Joy Mboya

The GoDown Arts Centre is the home to Kenyan creativity in arts and media. Established in 2003, the centre has contributed significantly to the growth, recognition, and visibility of local artists. Please join our conversation on culture in a changing city, making home, and belonging through arts and culture practices. What can arts spaces offer as space for healing and building resilience?

17:00 – 18:00 Encounters

Hosted by Freddy Sabimbona

Presenters: Meron Sisay Abey, Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja

Our participants come from a rich diversity of artistic, cultural, and healing traditions. This afternoon, some of our guests share short introductions to their work, inspiration, and unique perspectives. In this way, we develop collective understanding and appreciation of each other, and spark rich conversations. We will stay at The GoDown Arts Centre for this session.

19:00 – 21:00 Dinner in Nairobi at Crafty Chameleon

Saturday, May 17

8:00 – 9:30 Breakfast in The Other Room

**9:30 – 10:00 Morning Circle and Debrief: Emerging Themes and Questions
Hosted by Rashida Bumbray and Staff**

This is our time for reflection on personal and collective insights from the prior day. We discuss the day ahead of us and check-in on our well-being.

10:00 – 11:45 Session 5: Community as a Foundational Element of Healing and Recovery

Moderator: Molemo Moiloa

Speakers: Adam Chienjo, Suzanne Mieke Thomson Wambua, Ebere Onyekachi, Freddy Sabimbona

Community serves as an essential foundation for healing and recovery by providing supportive networks that validate lived experiences, foster belonging, and counter isolation through collective wisdom and shared resources. By embedding recovery processes within communal contexts, individuals gain access to diverse perspectives, accountability structures, and cultural frameworks that strengthen their resilience, while simultaneously contributing to a regenerative cycle where their own healing journey enriches the community's capacity to support others.

Many sources highlight the significance of community support and collective action in the healing process. A number of approaches advance the idea of community as an agent of change in addressing trauma and healing. The emphasis on understanding causation and remedies as rooted within the group or community is also noted in traditional African conceptualizations.

11:45 – 12:15 Coffee and Conversation

**12:15 – 13:30 Session 6: Workshopping the Future of Healing
Moderated by Jessica Horn and Phumzile Nombuso Twala**

Jessica will offer reflections, starting with the quote of author Audre Lorde on healing and self-care: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." She will offer some closing thoughts on the various modalities of healing practices in Africa where artistic and cultural elements are intrinsic; how great art can challenge power and create better balance to our world; and the transformative role of healers at the personal, community, and societal levels.

This session will then move into a fuller, co-led conversation about our collective insights, our needs moving forward, and what we each have to offer. Our larger goal is to co-create healing paradigms that support individual wholeness, collective well-being, and environmental justice. How do we build toward those ends?

13:30 – 14:30 Lunch in The Other Room

14:45 – 15:30 Closing Session: Checking in to Check Out

Moderator: AFSC Team and Research Team

This is an opportunity for our guests and participants to reflect on the program as a whole, provide constructive feedback, and to offer gratitude and thanks for those in the community and space we have co-created over the last three days.

15:45 Lobby of The Social House

Please gather on time for our excursion in Nairobi.

16:30 – 18:30 Unseen.Nairobi

A screening of short films that interact with practices of social and individual healing.

An Ode to a time I loved Bread (2021) (11 minutes)

A memory trip of juvenile sentiments about Neema, the filmmaker's time at a colonial legacy boarding school.

Credits: Directed by Neema Ngelime

Kujiona (23 minutes)

This film is part of *Kujiona*, a series of artworks by Arafah C. Hamadi that explores the artist's relationship to Swahili culture through a deeply personal lens. Originating from Dar es Salaam, Hamadi has spent time living in various towns along the Swahili coast. This movement prompted a process of unlearning and relearning their sense of home, culture, and community. *Kujiona* emerges from that journey, bringing together the conversations, reflections, and creations that have accumulated along the way.

The titular meditative film follows the progression of a protagonist in two unfolding conversations. The first is with a scavenged dhow, transformed into a sculptural artwork; the second is with Kevin Mwachiro, a queer Swahili writer who, like the artist, has found a sense of self through his engagement with the coast. These dialogues are presented through interwoven visual fragments, layered with familiar coastal soundscapes, evoking the ongoing and intimate conversation the artist holds with their home.

Credits: Directed by Arafah Cynthia Hamadi

Katope (2023)

As the young child, Katope, struggles to find their place in the village, a mythical rain bird appears and sets them on a journey to discover the secret of their strange origins and a chance to end the drought that is devastating their community.

Credits: Directed by Walt Mzengi Corey. Produced by Rebecca Yeong Ae Mzengi Corey. Produced as a part of the Netflix/UNESCO "African Folktales, Reimagined" Anthology

The Salon (2023) (25 minutes)

‘The Salon’ is the story of a unique beauty salon in Khartoum which hides a secret; it doubles as an underground space for women in danger. Run by the charismatic Abeer who herself fled domestic abuse, the salon is a space where women who are ‘on the run’ arrive from across Sudan seeking advice, sanctuary and pathways. It also does fabulous hair and nails.

Credits: Directed by Rafa Renas

19:00 Dinner at Unseen.Nairobi

Please join us on the rooftop of the venue for our farewell dinner.

Sunday, May 18

6:30 – 11:00 Breakfast in the Other Room and Departure

Breakfast is open for those who have not already departed on flights home or to a next destination. For those that have not yet departed, we invite you to continue your networking and socializing. Please let us know how we can assist you in your travel plans. We will be in touch!

Participants

Meron Sisay Abey (Ethiopia)
Rock (Kodzo) AHAVI (Togo)
Brian Otieno Akoth (Kenya)
Hope Azeda (Rwanda)
Rehema Chachage (Tanzania)
Adam Chienjo (Kenya)
Jessica Horn (Kenya)
Moses Kiboneka (Uganda)
Sharon Ong'ayo Liboi (Kenya)
Margret Kowarto Odong Mario (South Sudan)
Ibrahim Ahmed Mahmoud (Sudan)
Bowandundu Musafiri Master (Democratic Republic of Congo)
Rafa Altayeb Alfatih Mohieldeen (Sudan)
Fadumo Mohamoud Muse (Somalia)
Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja (Namibia)
Shabu Mwangi (Kenya)
Ebere Onyekachi (Nigeria)
Tosin Oyebisi (Nigeria)
Freddy Sabimbona (Burundi)
Michael Tsegaye (Ethiopia)
Suzanne Mieke Thomson Wambua (Kenya)

AFSC Partners and Consultants:

Molemo Moiloa (South Africa)
Phumzile Nombuso Twala (South Africa)
Rashida Bumbray (United States)
Kemi Ilesanmi (United States, Nigeria)
Michelle Coffey (United States)
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Moses Chasie (Cameroon, Ethiopia)
Pauline Kamau (Kenya)
Mercy Maneno (Kenya)
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