Müller, I 2026, 'The Role of Art, Music, and Drama in Trauma Counselling in the Christian African Context', *African Women in Theological Scholarship: Emerging Voices and Perspectives : African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 7, no. 2 pp. 162-188

The Role of Art, Music, and Drama in Trauma Counselling in the Christian African Context

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Abstract

Traditionally trauma counselling in the African church has not been afforded the attention that it deserves. Some qualitative research studies on trauma counselling in the African context reveal that traumatised people are often merely advised to read their Bibles, pray, and participate in religious rituals to deal with their traumatic experiences. Stigma, untrained pastors and counsellors, as well as a lack of financial resources often prevent people from receiving effective trauma counselling. Recent literature further highlights the concern that although effective Western trauma counselling modalities, such as cognitive behavioural therapy and narrative therapy, have demonstrated positive results, the unique contextualised needs of traumatised Africans in their non-Western contexts are not always sufficiently met. This article presents art, music, and drama as part of an accessible counselling approach and method to facilitate emotional and spiritual healing from trauma in the African context. Creative non-verbal expressions through art, music, and drama form part of everyday life in African communities. These familiar creative expressions have the potential to merge traditional trauma counselling approaches with more contemporary innovative counselling methods. A significant implication of this research is making trauma recovery more accessible to African church communities by equipping Christian counsellors to address trauma safely and effectively within the scope of their training. The research employs a literature-based methodology to explore secular and

Christian scholarly literature and studies on the application of creative expression in counselling to promote emotional and spiritual healing from trauma. The article explores how creative expression facilitates the empowerment of trauma survivors to reconstruct their narratives as they discover renewed meaning in Christ. The research offers practical recommendations for implementing creative counselling modalities in the African church context and identifies potential challenges and areas that require further research.

Introduction

Africa is rife with violence. Persistent warfare, political and social injustices, and slavery have left millions of Africans impoverished, diseased, and traumatised.[1] Conditions are exacerbated by cycles of rampant corruption that contribute to the increasing burdens of poverty and lack of access to many life-enhancing resources and services. In many instances, the church continues to be a beacon of hope and a conduit of mercy and comfort. Research identifies the church as a community resource and agent of change.[2] However, the church is increasingly compelled to engage more intentionally and substantively with individuals and communities affected by trauma, rather than remaining a silent or complicit bystander.[3] Despite the urgent need for trauma intervention, financial constraints and the shortage of trained pastoral, clinical, and medical personnel within many African church contexts have resulted in the neglect of trauma care and the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

There is a tendency to over-spiritualise suffering and mistreat trauma survivors in the African church context instead of dealing with the effects of trauma holistically.[4] Traditional ways of dealing with trauma include continuing with life as though the person is unaffected by the traumatic experience and forgiving offenders without processing feelings. The effects of trauma that has not been dealt with can manifest as mental issues which are mostly misunderstood within the church due to stigma.[5] Religious practices that

[1] Musisi and Kinyanda, 'Long-Term Impact', 20-21.
[2] Knoetze and Black, '"Sinawe"', 1.
[3] Knoetze and Black, '"Sinawe"', 3-4.
[4] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 3.
[5] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 5.

reinforce judgment and shame often re-traumatise survivors and cause them to withdraw and remain silent.

This research provides an overview of the historic and current state of trauma counselling in the African church. The research motivates the need for trauma counselling in the African context, and demonstrates how art, music, and drama can potentially contribute toward addressing trauma in the African church more effectively. The advantages of using creative modalities in the African context lie in their accessibility, affordability, and applicability for untrained professionals. Furthermore, creative forms of expression hold significant potential to facilitate healing from trauma due to their prominent role in the daily lives of many Africans.

This study explores the gap in research regarding the application of artistic expression (art, music, and drama) in trauma counselling in the African church. The research explores: The historical foundations of trauma counselling in the African church, what is currently being observed regarding trauma counselling in the African church, the potential value of art, music, and drama in trauma counselling in the African church, and how artistic expression can be implemented in trauma counselling in the African church. The research concludes with practical suggestions, potential challenges, areas for further research, and recommendations. The research follows a literature-based methodology and engages secular and Christian literature.

Overview of Trauma Counselling in the African Context

Historical foundations of counselling

Research on the use of trauma counselling modalities in the African church is limited.[6] Historically, indigenous healing traditions and the influence of Western Christian missionaries have primarily shaped pastoral care and counselling in the African church.[7] Traditional counselling practices in the African context are rooted in a collective approach to addressing and resolving problems. This is based in a traditional African philosophy and worldview,

[6] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 86.
[7] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 102.

typically referred to as *Ubuntu* ('I am because we are').[8] A person exists through their interconnectedness with others and thus one person's problems affect the entire community.[9]

The African collective counselling approach typically includes the traditional counsellor, client, family, and other prominent community members who give advice and guidance for living and making decisions.[10] African traditional counselling is grounded in respect for cultural norms, practices, and spirituality as it draws on generational knowledge and wisdom throughout the counselling process.[11] Dealing with problems remains within this familiar and trusted sphere. However, traditional counsellors often lack specialised training to adequately understand the complexities of individual problems and traumatic experiences.[12]

A key strength of the traditional African counselling is its reliance on rich verbal forms of communication, such as folklore, which serves as a catalyst for fostering interconnectedness throughout the counselling process.[13] The elderly pass on traditional knowledge and instructions regarding living as responsible members of society. The aim of teaching problem-solving, and behavioural or attitudinal change is to benefit the whole society as cultural traditions are established.

However, twenty-first-century lifestyles, marked by rapid social change and increasing individualism, place significant strain on the communities' coping mechanisms in the face of trauma.[14] The African scenario begs the questions, How do African communities effectively deal with increasing mental health challenges in response to being exposed to continuous traumatic events? and What is the role of the African church in this context?

[8] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 3.
[9] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 27-28, 39.
[10] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 29.
[11] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 29-30 .
[12] Olabode, 'Traditional Counselling', 3-5.
[13] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 27, 32, 34. .
[14] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 102.

There is a significant need for culturally relevant pastoral care and Christian counselling that can address psychological and spiritual needs of traumatised African communities.[15] There has been increasing efforts from numerous African institutions, such as theological seminaries, universities, and specialised institutions, to provide training in this regard.[16] However, Western models of pastoral care and counselling have often been applied without considering the African context.[17]

Unrealistic expectations that African clients should conform to Western counselling norms, such as specific modes of engagement or the disclosure of deeply personal information, have hindered efforts to address the complex needs of traumatised individuals.[18] Despite the value placed on verbal communication in African cultural contexts, the open verbalisation of deeply personal matters is generally discouraged.

Since 1993, indigenous psychology has advanced steadily in its examination of human behaviour across diverse cultural contexts.[19] There is a renewed recognition of the importance of developing and applying culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches. Literature acknowledges the value and efficacy of Western counselling approaches to trauma counselling[20] while also advocating for the application of a relevant African approach to understanding, assessing, and treating trauma more adequately in the African context.[21]

African psychology offers a distinct framework for understanding human behaviour, community, spirituality, and well-being as part of interconnected dimensions of life.[22] An integrative approach to counselling that addresses psychological, spiritual, and physical dimensions of trauma holds significant potential in the African context to facilitate healing for individuals as well as

[15] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 102-103.
[16] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 104.
[17] Goss and Adebowale, 'Counselling and Guidance', 354.
[18] Goss and Adebowale, 'Counselling and Guidance', 354.
[19] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 2.
[20] Connolly and Saka, 'Brief Trauma', 162; Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 1-2.
[21] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 39; Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 4-5.
[22] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 16.

their communities.[23] In contrast, reductionist counselling models that focus on only one aspect of lived experiences, tend to overlook the cultural richness of African contexts and thus potentially compromise holistic wellbeing within African communities.

Trauma counselling in Africa

The nature of the experience of trauma is highly individual, meaning that each person perceives, processes, and responds to a crisis event differently. As rural African communities live in close proximity, behaviour and actions of individuals are closely monitored, and social deviances are dealt with through communal shunning or punishment.[24] Due to the active involvement of community members in each other's lives, it is believed that traditional counselling is effective in dealing with issues, such as struggles with isolation, poor adjustments, sleeplessness, nervous disorders, and suicidal ideation after experiencing a crisis event.[25] Despite communities' faith in these traditional practices, there is limited research on how effectively these traditional counselling methods address all the emotional, psychological, and physical manifestations of trauma, particularly PTSD.

There is a lack of documentation and scholarly material on traditional forms of counselling and their effectiveness, especially in the field of individual and communal trauma counselling.[26] The effectiveness of Western psychotherapy to address psycho-socio-spiritual wounds, damages, and stresses in a post-colonial Africa is uncertain.[27] Rather than focusing on the individual's experience of trauma, African psychotherapy is broadly applied to the general social system and aspects of clients' backgrounds in their communal contexts.[28] While it is important to address the collective processing of trauma, individual trauma counselling remains equally significant for the wellbeing of the community. More research is required regarding how Western counselling

[23] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 16.
[24]Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 29.
[25] Olabode, 'Traditional Counselling', 3.
[26] Olabode, 'Traditional Counselling', 3.
[27] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 3.
[28] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 3.

approaches might be adjusted for specific African cultural contexts to address individual and collective trauma.

The use of rituals in the healing process might be a culturally significant way to address individual and collective trauma in African communities. Rituals focus on the holistic worth of the person extending outward to their community, considering the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of being.[29] In the case of collective trauma due to loss, meaningful rituals are effective in dealing with grief.[30] The use of rituals is integral to African culture and might be a challenging concept for Western counsellors to grasp, as they might not have an in-depth understanding of communal African traditions. By developing cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills, pastors and Christian counsellors can cultivate an environment of respect and trust to empower individuals within their unique cultural and spiritual values.[31] The narrative component in African rituals is an effective tool through which to facilitate emotional and spiritual healing from trauma.

Cultivating an environment of emotional safety for traumatised Africans is the first step to addressing trauma contextually and effectively. Emotional safety that includes non-judgmental acceptance is crucial to reduce the stigma attached to receiving counselling for severe emotional stress and debilitating manifestations of PTSD.[32] The over-emphasis of the spiritual aspects in traditional healing could overlook the neurological effects of trauma due to lack of scientific training,[33] limited Gospel-centred theological training,[34] and the lack of a uniform code of ethics[35] which is important in trauma counselling– knowing when to refer clients who have developed mental conditions from prolonged trauma is an ethical requirement that is often overlooked.

[29] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 16.
[30] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 104.
[31] Odeleye, Afolaranmi, and Ojo, 'Training and Education', 105.
[32] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 106-107.
[33] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 106-107.
[34] Schiessler, 'From "A Theology of Genocide"', 9.
[35] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 19.

Counselling resources in Africa are often limited,[36] hindering extensive trauma counselling training for pastors and Christian counsellors. Using traditional healing rituals and narrative components as a framework for implementing more creative trauma counselling strategies could potentially eliminate restrictions placed on counselling, such as financial constraints, inaccessibility to trauma counsellors and counselling, and cultural contextual ignorance.

The church possesses significant potential to address trauma in a safe and ethical manner. Churches can be catalysts for fostering trusting relationships and paying attention to deeper issues, such as forgiveness, inner healing, and spiritual transformation.[37]

Unaddressed Trauma in the African Context

There is inadequate access to comprehensive medical trauma care in Central Africa, West Africa, and conflict regions of East Africa, especially in rural communities due to underdeveloped trauma systems in sub-Saharan Africa.[38] South Africa is believed to have the most mature medical trauma systems available, but trauma access is highly restricted by socio-economic factors accounting for high health disparities in general.[39] These measures include disparities before, during, and after medical trauma care.[40]

Together with inadequate and restricted access to medical trauma care is the lack of trauma counselling as part of holistic trauma care in Africa. There is an acute shortage of psychiatrists to attend to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of trauma patients in Africa,[41] resulting in the processing of various types of traumas, such as sexual trauma, war-induced trauma, trauma due to displacement, and grief-induced trauma, being left unaddressed. The most vulnerable are women and children who have little to no access to formal trauma interventions in poverty-stricken and war-torn areas.

[36] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 102, 104, 106-107.
[37] Schiessler, 'From "A Theology of Genocide"', 9.
[38] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 66-67.
[39] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 66.
[40] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 72.
[41] Alyande et al, 'Disparities in Access', 82.

Most Western medical and psychiatric viewpoints regarding trauma are based on an egocentric approach and thus the generalised definitions of trauma do not represent the African perspective.[42] The egocentric view regards psychological function as a purely internal process,[43] disregarding the importance of social origins which is an integral element in the lives of Africans. As Africans view their identities as interwoven with their original close-knit communities, trauma is understood to affect the whole person and the entire wellbeing of the community.[44] In the context of social, political, and economical instabilities in Africa, redefining trauma is critical to effectively and holistically diagnose and treat the complex symptoms of trauma in the African context.

In Africa, the diagnostic term post traumatic stress syndrome is not commonly applied to survivors of repeated trauma, including torture.[45] Many trauma survivors continue to struggle to process traumatic experiences, even up to fifty years after the events. Due to inadequate expertise available in the African context to assess and treat traumatic experiences, survivors are left to cope with debilitating emotional, psychological, and physical wounds, often in isolation.[46] One example is the impact of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 that has left countless individuals still traumatised today.[47] The church, a complicit actor in the Rwandan genocide,[48] abandoned severely traumatised survivors who had nowhere else to turn for emotional and spiritual support or trauma counselling. Trauma counselling for survivors in war-torn African countries is severely limited in general.[49]

Despite numerous humanitarian interventions across Africa to relieve starvation, political violence, displacement issues, and other social crises, there are limited reports on available trauma counselling for affected communities that are affected by large-scale trauma.[50] There is limited research on the

[42] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 1.
[43] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 2.
[44] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 1.
[45] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 4.
[46] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 7.
[47] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 5.
[48] Schiessler, 'From "A Theology of Genocide"', 1.
[49] Connolly and Saka, 'Brief Trauma', 161.
[50] Connolly and Saka, 'Brief Trauma', 162.

African church effectively assisting traumatised survivors of war toward inner healing and spiritual transformation.[51] The lack of research and data confirm the general perception that emotional and psychological trauma are mostly left unaddressed in the African church context.

There is a mandate for more active church involvement in addressing trauma in communities and to engage in resolving the effects of trauma and grief, as well as tending to physical and spiritual needs of the traumatised.[52] The church is in an ideal position to implement creative methods that resonate with the African context to address trauma effectively, safely, and within the framework of how trauma is understood in African communities.[53] Exploring the effectiveness of various art therapies to address trauma in African church communities could allow for more accessible treatment for trauma that is free from stigma and less influenced by Western approaches that might be ignorant of African contexts.

The Role of Art Therapy in Trauma Counselling

Traditional counselling methodologies view communication as the primary medium of dialogue between counsellor and client, enabling the exchange of meaning within family, community, and therapeutic contexts.[54] Communication serves as a catalyst for human connectedness, extending beyond verbal interaction. Artistic expression offers an alternative mode of communication that reflects the inner world of its creator–art thus becomes a language.[55] Expressive forms, such as visual arts, dance, movement, dramatic enactment, creative writing, imaginative play, and music, provide non-verbal means of conveying emotions and perceptions.[56] Creative art therapies serve

[51] Schiessler, 'From "A Theology of Genocide"', 9.
[52] Knoetze and Black, '"Sinawe"', 1.
[53] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 7.
[54] Chiboola, 'Theoretical Perspectives', 27.
[55] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[56] Malchiodi, *Trauma and Expressive Arts*, 1.

as a gestalt language that enables symbols and imagery to transcend the limitations of verbal expression[57] and cultural barriers.[58]

Regulating persisting sensory experiences linked to trauma remains challenging in traditional psychotherapy because therapeutic interventions might not effectively address recurring manifestations of trauma.[59] There has been an increase in implementing creative art therapies that are informed by recent neurobiological research in response to verbal psychotherapeutic methods that are lacking more effective biological, mental, and psychological integration toward social well-being.[60]

Regardless of how long ago traumatic events occurred, an individual often experiences ongoing mental and emotional distress.[61] An example, as previously mentioned, is prolonged PTSD in survivors of war.[62] Creative art therapies can help trauma survivors to safely deal with the ongoing symptoms that keep them anchored in past traumatic experiences. According to research, creative expression facilitates post traumatic growth that is characterised by progressing from merely surviving to discovering renewed purpose and meaning in life.[63]

Trauma survivors can utilise creative art therapies to narrate traumatic experiences through spatial perception and bodily movements that express emotional and cognitive interpretations of trauma.[64] Creative writing and expressive drawing provide opportunities for survivors to verbalise their traumatic experiences and so reconnect fragmented emotions and thoughts.[65] Individuals also connect to their artwork and the therapist in a meaningful way.

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[57] Kakungulu, 'Art as a Form of Communication', 6.
[58] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[59] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[60] Kakungulu, 'Art as a Form of Communication', 7.
[61] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[62] Connolly and Saka, 'Brief Trauma', 161; Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 5.
[63] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[64] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385-386.
[65] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 386.

The potential for art as a therapeutic tool in trauma counselling is therefore evident.

Art offers a safe, collaborative environment in which survivors are free to explore their traumatic narratives without prescription or unrealistic expectations. This accepting environment aligns with *Sinawe*–an African approach originated from the Zulu meaning 'We are with you'–that signifies unity through community and communal support and understanding.[66] This aspect of communal unity aligns with Scriptures that encourage the church to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2) and to demonstrate selfless compassion to those who struggle in certain areas of life and faith (Rom 15:1). The concept of communal togetherness can be extended to 'God is with you' (Ps 46:1) as the survivor is invited to collaborate with God during the healing process.

It is in the safety of a familiar collaborative environment that the application of art can foster reconnection with self, others, and God. The community of believers can enhance collective and individual healing, as well as encourage survivors to actively participate in rewriting their life narratives.

Art provides a safe pathway for restoring connection to lived experiences, internal equilibrium, and communication, all of which have been fragmented because of trauma.[67] Trauma often disrupts connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain which is rarely addressed in traditional African counselling due to ignorance.[68] Artistic expressions have been found to promote the reintegration of brain hemispheres without medical intervention. For lay and pastoral counsellors in the African context, the challenge lies in effectively engaging survivors 'perceptions and cognitive processing of trauma using art in trauma counselling.[69]

Art in trauma counselling aligns with the holistic African worldview of human existence, as it serves as a psychological and cognitive processing tool, an emotional outlet, and a conduit for spiritual healing.[70] In a Christian

[66] Knoetze and Black, '"Sinawe"', 5.
[67] Schnetzer, *Creative Arts*, 233-234.
[68] Kakungulu, 'Art as a Form of Communication', 6.
[69] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 1.
[70] Motsi and Masango, 'Redefining Trauma', 2.

therapeutic space, the Holy Spirit is invited to offer spiritual insight into survivors' trauma-saturated perceptions of self, God, and the world, and to provide opportunities for survivors to reconnect with God. As survivors participate in artistic expression to explore their trauma-saturated narratives, God's redemptive and restorative narrative emerges through themes of hope, compassion, and healing for the broken (Ps 34:18; 147:13; Mt 9:36).

Easily accessible art forms in the African context include drawing and writing, which require minimal resources. Other art forms associated with African cultures that lend themselves to symbolic representations of trauma and the healing process include painting, weaving, beading, and wood or clay sculpting. Engaging in various artistic expressions stimulates dialogue that facilitates the processing of traumatic experiences and memories. The focus is not on the art as a finished product but on enjoying the creative process and fostering a trusting therapeutic relationship.[71] One does not have to be artistically inclined to participate, which makes art therapy accessible to all people of all ages.

Art also functions as a form of storytelling in group trauma counselling sessions that allow participants to share individual and communal experiences while relieving anxiety and emotional pain.[72] When words fail to express, art communicates survivors' understanding of God and his presence in their suffering and enables the survivor to discover God's perspective and purposes despite past traumatic experiences.

The Role of Drama Therapy in Trauma Counselling

According to the South African Arts Therapies Association (SANATA), drama therapy involves the intentional and systematic use of drama and theatrical processes to promote symptom relief, emotional, cognitive, and physical integration, and personal growth.[73] Drama therapy can be conducted individually or in groups. Drama enables the exploration of experiences and symbolic and metaphorical reflection through techniques, such as role play,

[71] Kakungulu, 'Art as a Form of Communication', 8.
[72] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 20.
[73] SANATA, 'Drama Therapy'.

improvisation, enactment, ritual, storytelling, miming, puppetry, mask work, drama games, and text-based exercises.[74]

Trauma survivors often struggle to verbalise their experiences and may become withdrawn or even mute.[75] For some individuals, no amount of prompting will elicit discussion of their trauma. In such cases, artistic expression through drama or play provides a means to 'tell without talking,' allowing survivors to convey somatic dimensions of their experiences non-verbally.[76] Dramatic expression bypasses dissociative mechanisms, facilitates self-reflection, and enables the articulation of unconscious conflicts, thereby promoting verbal expression.[77]

Traumatic events overwhelm a person's boundaries, autonomy, and capacity for action, as the body is the primary site of impact.[78] Traumatic memories are stored in the body and are expressed through symptoms, behaviours, and body language when the nervous system is triggered into a state of hyper-arousal. The cortical midline regions of the brain–medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, lateral parietal cortices, lateral temporal cortex, hippocampal formation, and precuneus–are disrupted, and the accurate integration of information is impaired.[79] Imaginative dramatic re-enactment promotes the reconnection of the brain's cortical midline and supports the restoration of physical, emotional, and cognitive self-regulation. Imaginative re-enactment of traumatic experiences through bodily expression facilitates the brain's reinterpretation of past events and memory consolidation.[80]

Bodily expressions provide significant insight into trauma survivors' coherence of traumatic experiences.[81] Survivors' active participation in the healing process through bodily expression fosters awareness and reintegration between body and mind. This deeply personal process reflects the individual's

[74] SANATA, 'Drama Therapy'.
[75] Malchiodi, *Trauma and Expressive Arts*, 3.
[76] Malchiodi, *Trauma and Expressive Arts*, 6.
[77] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.
[78] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 14.
[79] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 15.
[80] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 15.
[81] Lev-Wiesel and Kissos, 'Using Creative Arts', 385.

unique interpretation of their traumatic experience. For example, collective trauma, such as a bomb explosion, is expressed differently by each affected individual through unique dramatic re-enactments. These divergent bodily expressions provide valuable insight regarding the personal coherence of their experiences. To avoid hindering effective processing and healing, facilitators must guard against imposing expectations that trauma be expressed in a specific way.[82] There is no right or wrong when it comes to dramatic expression of trauma. Participants should feel comfortable, safe, and accepted throughout the process.

Dramatic expressions give voice to traumatic experiences that might otherwise have remained unaddressed. Storytelling through imaginative dramatic expression enables safe exploration of traumatic sequences as the participant and counsellor are transported to a different time and space. The survivor engages with their unconscious thoughts related to the traumatic experience and gradually deconstructs complex emotions as they emerge into conscious understanding.[83]

In African cultures, drama has played a central role in religious rituals and tribal ceremonies. Collective village experiences of cultural history are re-enacted through role play and miming, often accompanied by music and dance. Dramatic expression as a cultural practice utilised for psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing, holds significant potential for trauma recovery within diverse cultural contexts. Dramatic expression facilitates post traumatic growth as survivors engage and process their traumatic experiences, and develop renewed competence, agency, empowerment, connection, and self-insight.[84] Participation in dramatic expression of traumatic experiences allows participants to freely re-enact their understanding of God's presence and comfort during suffering, engage their restoration process, and develop a deeper spiritual connection with God.

[82] Goss and Adebowale, 'Counselling and Guidance', 354.
[83] Schnetzer, *Creative Arts*, 87.
[84] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 18.

The Role of Music Therapy in Trauma Counselling

Music therapy is highly effective for treating trauma.[85] Improvisation, singing, instrument playing, and active listening are ways through which informal engagement with music can be incorporated into therapy or counselling.[86] Research indicates that music improves concentration and creativity, reduces depression, anxiety, and stress, and benefits overall physical, emotional, and cognitive health.[87] The enjoyment of performing or listening to music lowers cortisol levels and stimulates the release of endorphins, which counteract painful and complex emotional responses to trauma. Playing background music has a calming effect and promotes inner peace and well-being.[88]

Vocal and instrumental music facilitate communication beyond language barriers.[89] Music is a medium for emotional reflection, expression, and recreation that fosters insight into self and relationships, particularly in group contexts.[90] The non-prescriptive nature of improvisation provides freedom to explore personal and shared interpretations of traumatic experiences as participants engage with one another. As a central part of African music culture, improvisation can be effectively integrated into music therapy to address collective trauma.

In African societies, music is an integral part of storytelling, communicating messages, and celebration of life events.[91] Music and dance are associated with social and religious rituals, means of communicating with nature and God. The healing properties of music are recognised and applied to facilitate healing of children and adults suffering from mental deficits in African schools, hospitals, and churches. Although music therapy is not specifically linked to the healing of trauma, music therapy is often utilised as a tool to help communities deal

[85] Nwobu, 'Possibilities', 101; Swart, 'From Trauma', 195.
[86] Nwobu, 'Possibilities', 101.
[87] Nwobu, 'Possibilities', 101.
[88] Nwobu, 'Possibilities', 102.
[89] Jones, *The Arts*, 41-42.
[90] Jones, *The Arts*, 45.
[91] Nnamani, *The Role of Music Therapy*, 455.

with traumatic communal calamities, such as the death of family members or natural disasters.[92]

Due to the imbedded practice of music, singing, rhythms, and dance in religious expression, the therapeutic value of music for the healing of trauma is often overlooked in African cultures. This might be connected to interpreting trauma manifestations as tormenting evil spirits[93] rather than understanding the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of traumatic experiences. Using music and singing to communicate inner experiences and perspectives helps the trauma survivor to reconnect with their true sense of self as a valuable created being.[94] Spiritually speaking, music and singing are pathways to expressing worship, lament, prayers, and declarations of God's faithfulness, which have profound positive healing effects on the human soul (Ps 30:11–12)

In contexts of societal violence, such as South Africa, improvisational music therapy enables survivors, especially children, to reimagine and transform painful experiences.[95] Music interaction between therapist and child fosters control, normalises engagement with trauma, and aids healing by integrating imagination and play.[96] Music conveys stories of trauma without complicated words, reducing stress, fear, and hyper-vigilance, and allowing emotional release without re-traumatisation.

Music can be used as a creative expression of painful stories and promote holistic healing.[97] Studies show that pitch, rhythm, and timbre of music produce specific emotional effects on people, linking those to the reduction of stress, fear, hyper-vigilance, and other symptoms related to trauma.[98] Instrumental music can facilitate the expression of emotional pain as well as faith and trust in God (Ps 92:1–2).

[92] Nnamani, *The Role of Music Therapy*, 457.
[93] Okpalaenwe and Odigwe, 'Healing Technique', 20-23.
[94] Swart, 'From Trauma', 203.
[95] Pavlicevic, 'South Africa', 111.
[96] Pavlicevic, 'South Africa', 112.
[97] Gouk, *Musical Healing*, 171.
[98] Gouk, *Musical Healing*, 181.

Different aspects of music offer opportunities for survivors to express traumatic stories, and release trauma-associated emotions. Music and song are ways in which to communicate one's deepest despair in moments when God seems far away (Ps 13:1–2), and to express hope, joy, and adoration to God (Pss 13 5–6; 100:1 –2; Hab 3:17–19). Music becomes the storyteller and healing agent that provides insight into the inner world of the survivor without the stress of harsh confrontation and re-traumatisation.

Music can be integrated as an additional expressive narrative tool for healing alongside drama and art therapy. However, the potential of addressing trauma through these culturally familiar forms of creative expression has not been fully explored yet.

Suggested Practical Application

The practical application of the arts in Christian counselling in the African church offers trauma survivors the opportunity to experience Christlike non-judgmental compassion while they make sense of their traumatic experiences. Creative arts are helpful in Christian counselling to connect trauma survivors to God in their individual faith journeys and in cultivating resilience. Practical guidelines will follow to demonstrate the application of creative expression in relation to Christian counselling within the African context.

Practical guidelines

To create a sense of safety, Christian counsellors can invite trauma survivors to participate in familiar activities of their choice, such as beading, drawing, clay work, or basket weaving. Counsellors must emphasise that there is no prescribed way of creating art to relieve unrealistic expectations to please the counsellor. The counsellor invites survivors to share their traumatic experiences while engaging in the creative activity and use the art materials to represent emotions and thoughts related to their experiences. Spiritual meaning enters the activity as participants use specific materials to represent Scripture passages, such as Psalm 23, that speak of God's goodness, faithfulness, and love. The activity becomes deeply personal and prophetic by applying Scripture to the healing process. The assurance that God is present,

even in one's darkest hour (Ps 23:4) becomes a concrete reminder that fosters resilience as the participant creates a tangible object, like a bracelet.

Another example is moulding clay into shapes that represent specific traumatic experiences–survivors concretise and interpret their experiences by making abstract metaphors tangible. Clay figures figuratively 'speak' to help survivors verbalise their inner thoughts about what happened to them. The counsellor prepares a clay figure in the middle of the room that represents God. Each participant is given the opportunity to merge their own clay figures into the central figure (God) as a prophetic act of surrendering their trauma into God's hands. The counsellor avoids promising survivors that all consequences of their trauma will disappear. Instead, survivors are invited to read or narrate relevant Scriptures about God's presence and comforting love during those experiences, such as Psalm 56:3–4. The survivor's perspective regarding God's presence during times of trouble is transformed through the activity as they discover the truth of God having been present all along (Heb 13:5).

Basket weaving can represent carrying the burden of trauma by placing various objects inside the completed basket. Objects can represent negative emotions, such as fear, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and grief. These objects could include broken pieces of pottery, crumpled balls of paper, torn clothing, or damaged items. By replacing these objects with elements that symbolically correspond to scriptural truths, participants 'foci are directed toward hope in Christ and God's comfort and faithful presence. This process represents transformation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Each item may be replaced with different fresh foliage like flowers, green leaves, or uniquely shaped small stones of different colours, each representing truths from Scripture. Examples are crumpled paper (fear) replaced by lilies to represent Isaiah 41:10, and torn clothing (hopelessness) replaced by a small shiny black stone to represent Psalm 27:1. Symbols are uniquely interpreted by the participants instead of the counsellor assigning meaning to symbols and colours. The goal is for participants to apply learned insights from Scripture to their experiences of suffering, and to connect with the emerging message from the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:26–27).

Participants embody their survival narratives through dramatic enactment of traumatic experiences. This process might be emotionally charged for

participants, but it facilitates the processing of trauma and integration of healing. God's protection can be dramatised in response to initial trauma re-enactments and so reinforce the truth of God's constant presence (Ps 34:18; 46:1; Is 43:2). Group interaction in this instance is valuable as participants play different roles and engage in each other's narratives.

Dance and movement within the cultural contexts of participants are powerful tools for expression. The spontaneous, improvisational nature of dance and movement in African cultural traditions eliminates the issue of rigid choreography. Survivors can freely express their interpretation of traumatic experiences as those memories and related thoughts come to mind in real time. Instrumental music facilitates free-form dance and expression, and participants choreograph their own movements while processing their trauma. The enjoyment of free-form dance helps alleviate anxiety and stress related to the trauma.

Singing worship songs in participants' native languages promotes community cohesion. Painful stories are communicated through call-and-response songs, and collectively, the group responds to affirm God's compassion, goodness, and love, thereby reinforcing emotional and spiritual healing as well as joy (Ps 42:5; 71:23; 95:1–2)

The extensive variety of African traditional music instruments enables survivors to tell their stories through music in a non-verbal and enjoyable way. While one participant is providing a steady drumbeat, others may take turns playing different instruments spontaneously and improvise to the drumbeat. Sitting in a circle during the activity provides a sense of togetherness and enjoyment that release stress and suppressed emotions.

The safety of a familiar, culturally communal environment promotes artistic expression as a means of processing trauma collectively instead of in isolation. The collective reinforcement of biblical truths about God's presence during times of suffering binds the community of trauma survivors together, fostering enhanced understanding of and compassion for one another.

As Christian counsellors journey alongside the traumatised through their journeys of discovery and healing from trauma, the rest of the church

community is positively influenced. Communicating one's pain in a safe environment through various artistic expressions fosters renewed connections to self, others, and God. Survivors gradually develop empathy for other survivors and discover their individual and communal purposes as they grow in confidence and faith through their healing process. As a result, the mental, psychological, and spiritual health of the church benefit significantly.

Christian counsellors can facilitate informal trauma workshops and invite leadership to participate in experimenting with what might work effectively in their unique church context. Facilitating artistic expression does not require formal training which makes it accessible for pastors and ministers, whereas psychotherapy requires training. Collecting art materials from church members and the environment is an inexpensive suggestion that involves the church community preparing safe spaces in which to address trauma ethically and free of judgment and stigma.

This research addresses the gap regarding how pastors and Christian counsellors can address trauma within the scope of their training and apply easily accessible cultural contextual tools to give voice to emotional, spiritual, and psychological pain due to trauma. Churches in Africa possess great potential to assist in the process of making meaning of traumatic experiences through facilitating art, drama, and music as powerful healing tools that promote holistic wellbeing to the community. However, there are also potential challenges to consider.

Potential challenges

The implementation of creative counselling modalities in trauma counselling poses some challenges. Various forms of art therapy is a predominantly Western idea that might be viewed as a white practice[99] that could cause distrust, skepticism, and fear in participants. Counsellors may need to adapt activities and techniques to align with African sociocultural practices and symbolic meanings which differ significantly from those of mainstream European traditions.[100]

[99] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.
[100] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.

Facilitating connections between past traumatic experiences and present realities to reconstruct personal narratives requires the use of culturally relevant metaphors that participants can meaningfully identify with.[101] Counsellors might face challenges regarding avoiding culturally biased counselling approaches that might hinder trust and respect between counsellors and participants. When counsellors adopt an open and playful stance, a welcoming environment is created through which participants are encouraged to explore and experiment freely with artistic expression.[102]

Pertaining to the use of art, music, and drama within trauma counselling, there are important ethical implications to consider. Informed consent must be obtained from participants and their spiritual leaders.[103] This aspect is often overlooked by Christian counsellors due to lack of training.[104] Maintaining strict confidentiality is a significant ethical challenge due to spiritual leaders often insisting on accessing participants' privately shared information. Ethical boundaries regarding confidentiality and when referral is warranted should be communicated clearly before therapy begins.

In war-torn countries, counsellors might experience significant practical challenges, such as access to art resources, lack of safe environments for meaningful participation, and participants fearing emotional risk-taking.[105] Participants might struggle expressing themselves freely and processing activities afterward because basic safety needs are overwhelmed. Counsellors must be sensitive to the cultural, spiritual, and political contexts of traumatised participants to facilitate and foster the process of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and meaning-making.[106]

Conclusion

This research highlighted the value of art, drama, and music in trauma counselling within the African church context. The research explored the role

[101] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.
[102] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.
[103] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9843.
[104] Olabode, 'Traditional Counselling', 3-5.
[105] Trigun, 'Art Therapy', 9844.
[106] Haen, 'The Imagined Body', 18.

of creative modalities as familiar forms of creative expression that enable trauma survivors to safely express their experiences and emotions. The church can create opportunities to de-stigmatise trauma and its manifestations, and address the profound psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects of trauma non-judgmentally and compassionately. This study explored the gaps in research regarding the application of art, drama, and music in Christian trauma counselling and include the facilitation of trauma survivors' narrating their stories, processing their complex emotions, and discovering redemptive meaning from their traumatic experiences through engaging with Scripture and fostering an embodied awareness of God's presence in their suffering.

This research explored how creative modalities in Christian counselling promote holistic healing through a non-confrontational approach that transcends psychological, cultural, and spiritual barriers that often prevent recovery. Art therapy is effective in facilitating emotional and psychological processing of trauma; drama therapy facilitates a non-threatening exploration and embodiment of traumatic experiences; and music therapy creates the opportunity for renewed collective meaning-making by strengthening communal emotional and spiritual expressions. The study explored innovative ways to apply these creative modalities practically and within ethical boundaries while respecting African cultural contexts.

This research contributes to the call for the African church to support their traumatised communities in more creative ways that could foster communal resilience and spiritual growth. The research encourages the African church to create safe, compassionate, and non-judgmental healing environments for traumatised individuals. Through the use of creative modalities in Christian counselling within the African church, trauma survivors may reclaim agency over their trauma narratives and experience holistic healing in Christ that promotes meaningful participation in their faith communities.

The researcher recommends that trauma education regarding the nature, manifestations, and effects of trauma be prioritised for Christian counsellors in the African church. Understanding trauma and its debilitating effects promote deeper compassion toward those who struggle with persistent symptoms, especially PTSD. Church leaders are encouraged to demystify and de-stigmatise their church community's understanding of traumatic experiences.

Pastors and Christian counsellors may initiate expressive art workshops and guided conversations while participants engage in one artistic expressive activity at a time. Collaboration between leadership and Christian counsellors creates trust, church unity, and reflects the biblical call to carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Christian counsellors are encouraged to remain culturally sensitive and ethical when using artistic expression as a tool for addressing trauma.

Further research is required to evaluate the practical implementation of creative modalities and their effects on the mental, emotional, and spiritual health of congregations and communities. Suggested research includes potential development of structured training programmes for Christian counsellors and pastors within culturally sensitive frameworks, ongoing evaluation regarding their effectiveness on trauma survivors, and establishing policy guidelines for ethical practice.

Future research is also needed to examine the possibility of trauma survivors serving as peer facilitators for other survivors on their journey toward healing in Christ through creative expressions.

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