



## PROGRAMMING

# 9. CULTURAL PROGRAMS

## 1. CULTURAL EDUCATION DANCING PROJECT WITH SHAN YOUTH, BURMA-THAILAND

Like other ethnic groups from Burma, the Shan people have fled the repression of the Burma military government. Unlike most other ethnic groups the Shan Nation does not have refugee status in Thailand. This means that they are not eligible to live in the refugee camps. Dance training was provided for Shan young people living in a border village on the Thai border. Although the course was not able to cover the costs for the costumes, it did give these young people the opportunity to learn the steps of their traditional dances.

**Q. Why is it important for the Shan to have special cultural education programs?**

**A.** We are much more separated than other groups. We do not have the opportunity to easily organize programs to maintain and promote our culture, as in the camps. Because we are in Thailand, not inside the environment of our culture, we have to make a special effort to hold it. So the Shan need specialized programs for this.

Traditional dancing is an opportunity for us to be active, it is a mechanism to learn about our culture. If we lose our traditions, we might lose our identity, not know who they are.

**Q. When you speak of “cultural identity issues” what do you mean?**

Two things are important. First you need to have a deep understanding and confidence in your own culture. But coupled with that there needs to be an awareness of the cultural identity for others as well – to understand their reality and view of the world. It is not enough to simply recognize that they are suffering as well. You have to also understand their reality, to have the respect and awareness of other cultures, other ways of being.

Our ethnic identity has been abused for many years. We have had no rights. For example when we wanted to go to school if you wrote your name in your ethnic language you would get in trouble. You had to write your name in Burmese. So we had identity problems. But as well our basic human rights were also violated. We know we have to work on our understanding and cooperation with other ethnic groups in order to ensure a good future. But we also have to keep our identity as a people. We do not want our identity to be lost – it would be like losing ourselves, who we are.

## 2. CULTURAL HEALING WORKSHOP, RWANDA

Nyamata is a town of approximately 100,000 people located approximately one hour's drive from Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda. Before the genocide its population was largely Tutsi, so many people were killed. The church was closed because it was the site of a massacre - 25,000 people are buried in a crypt behind the church.

The cultural work was divided into two parts. It began with research on Rwandan proverbs, significant places, symbols and cultural traditions. This was followed by different cultural expressions to acknowledge and honour the past but also to affirm Rwandan traditions for peacebuilding.

In the research phase, youth were given basic training in research and asked to conduct interviews with friends, elders and family members. This included research on proverbs, sayings, symbols and traditions in Rwandan society that promoted peace or war. They also researched the significant places in and around Nyamata - sites of peace as well as war.

This community based research revealed Rwanda's huge wealth of cultural traditions, sayings and symbols. Even more important was the youth's enthusiastic participation in this work and their rigorous debates on the meaning of the different cultural symbols. For instance, the group had a heated discussion over the symbol of the church and whether it should be seen as a symbol of peace or war. Community maps identified meeting places as well as sites of genocide. In fact, most of the traditional places were bloated out because they were sites of mass killings.

In the second part the youth debated the next steps. It was decided that they would divide up into small groups to create sculptures to honour the people who had been killed at the different sites. Each group created their own designs. They also created a large blanket for peace which included the cultural symbols the group decided represented a peaceful, happy community.

On the final day the group created an exhibit of its work to show the community. There was a large and attentive audience as the youth spoke of the need to reconcile, to find resources to honour those who had died but also to move on towards a more peaceful way of being. And, as they noted, this should be based on Rwandan culture.



*Workshop participant with sculpture*