



## **Body Mapping with Survivors of Human Rights Violations: The Experience of Kenya's Nyayo House Survivors and Lessons for Others**

Body maps are life-size self-portraits made by tracing our bodies onto canvas or paper and painting our stories on our bodies. Body maps portray our life experiences and the ways they are embodied—our beginnings, our memories, our strengths, our experiences of pain or trauma, our scars, our healing, our hopes, our joys, our regrets and our desires.

Body maps were first done in Uganda with a women's HIV organization and then adapted in South Africa by Bambanani Women's Group as part of their Memory Box Project, work designed to help women dying of AIDS to leave legacies for their children after they are gone and to change the ways that positive people are treated.<sup>1</sup>

The first body maps are stories of stigma and suffering, courage and illness. They are beautiful and filled with pain. TICAH wanted to use body maps to also tell stories of healing that we were finding in HIV communities in Africa and Asia. So, we adapted the original body mapping approach so that it also encouraged the sharing and painting of strategies for treating illness, keeping hope alive, living positively, and finding support from others.

TICAH began hosting body mapping workshops in 2005 with HIV-positive women's groups in Kenya, India, and Thailand. This work, called "Our Bodies, Our Stories," gave birth to many subsequent workshops, performances, and exhibitions, some at international HIV/AIDS conference, others at museums. Our goal was to provide a chance for learning and healing, and for sharing the experiences of HIV-positive women in ways that would improve AIDS treatment and programs that largely neglected them and ignored the realities of their lives.

Since 2005, TICAH has hosted many more body mapping workshops and exhibitions around the world—each with a population experiencing health or human rights challenges, hoping to heal and recover their dignity while sharing their experiences beyond their circle of peers.

The group process TICAH uses to paint body maps is a five-day residential workshop designed to build community and trust by creating a safe place for

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<sup>1</sup> See *Long Life: Positive HIV Stories*, Jonathan Morgan and the Bambanani Women's Group, Double Storey Books, South Africa, 2003.

sharing, reflection, truth-telling, healing, and artistic expression. If the group desires it, the body mapping workshop can also be a catalyst for activism.

In 2012, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience invited TICAH to co-host a workshop for twelve Kenyans who have survived torture in the notorious Nyayo House, maintained by Kenya's second president, Daniel arap Moi (1979 – 2002), and instigated by the practices of Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta (1964 – 1978). All but one of the participants in this workshop were imprisoned after being detained in Nyayo House. Several served more than one jail sentence.

The Nyayo House workshop was held in April 2012 at Lenana Conference Centre in Nairobi. One woman and eleven men attended. The twelve participants were selected by the coordinator of an informal Kenyan group of torture survivors named Wachira. Wachira was engaged by PeaceNet, the Coalition's designated partner in this project. Some of the body map participants had been part of the joint lawsuit seeking reparations for their torture from the Government of Kenya. Some had not.

Eight facilitators worked with the group—five from TICAH (including one partner from Art2Be), two from the Human Rights Media Coalition (HMRC) in South Africa (invited by TICAH), and one from PeaceNet.

During the first day of the workshop, one participant dropped out. The remaining eleven stayed together for five days, worked together, shared their experiences, supported one another, and created beautiful paintings of their lives. On the last day of the workshop, we hosted a small private exhibition in which we hung the maps and each person told the story of their map to the group. No one else except a representative from the Coalition who had joined the workshop was invited to attend. The group elected to leave their maps in the care of TICAH to make it possible to use them for educational or exhibition purposes in the future. It was agreed that nothing would be organized and the maps would not be shown unless the group took the lead.

Over a year later, in July 2013, the Coalition invited TICAH to again work with group to conduct an evaluation of the 2012 body mapping work and to support their efforts to work together toward the goals of establishing Nyayo House as a memorialization site, and of sharing their experiences (and their artwork) with the larger Kenyan public in meaningful ways.

This report is designed to glean the lessons from our experience and help others who might wish to use body mapping for similar purposes with other groups who have survived gross human rights violations. It is not meant to take the place of deeper preparation and training, but as an introduction to body mapping as one way to create safe spaces for healing, reflection, sharing, and activism.

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## **Body Mapping – Who, What, Why?**

### Who should participate in body mapping?

Body mapping is art, but it is also group therapy. This means that the group who will be together for the five days of the workshop must be carefully chosen. The best way to assure this is to work with self-selected groups who have some previous experience working together, but are not so close that the group already feels closed. It is good if some participants do not know one another, but that everyone knows someone else.

The group is a group of peers. They are connected by a single shared experience—being pregnant, being HIV-positive, having been raped, having experienced torture, being gay in a society that criminalizes them, having survived cancer, having been abused, having been an abuser. Because all of us embody our lived experiences, each of us has a body that could be “mapped” in this way, so anyone could participate in a body mapping workshop. These workshops are different in the fact that the common thread in the lives of the participants is something they want to heal around, to reflect on together, and to instigate action of some kind. It is important that the body map participants not be reduced to this one aspect of their lives, but this work is only successful if the members of the group want to come together to deal with this fact of their lives. They want to be there and they know why they are there.

Body map participants need have no artistic training or experience.

### Who should facilitate a body mapping workshop?

Body mapping workshops require almost one-to-one facilitation. The ideal size for a group is ten to fifteen participants. The ideal size of the facilitation team is eight. The facilitation team should include one or two convenors who hold primary facilitation responsibilities-- establishing the group dynamic, overseeing the rituals chosen to create a safe space for the workshop, keeping time, making adjustments to the agenda.

The team should include two or three artists or art teachers, people comfortable with the materials, with mixing paints, treating canvas or paper, cleaning brushes, etc. They are on hand to help individuals when they are working on their body maps in any way asked—mixing paints, sketching, etc., not directing, but supporting, the choices they are making.

The team should further include someone with counseling skills and experience relevant for working with the kinds of trauma experienced by participants. This person can be one of the primary facilitators or an additional team member. S/he will be available during emotionally-challenging conversations, to observe the group and offer suggestions as the workshop takes place, and to offer support in the group and with individuals during their five days together. This person should ideally be available to the group after the workshop is over.

The team should also include a note-taker, a photographer, others who support the workshop and its participants in practical ways. These people are introduced at the beginning of the workshop and attend each day.

The facilitation team members do not all have to share the common experience that brings the group together (having been tortured, being HIV-positive, etc.), but it is best if some of the facilitation team do share this experience.

Everyone in the room has a role. No outside visitors are invited in as observers at any time during the workshop without group approval. On the last afternoon, if the group decides to host a small exhibition and invite others to join, they decide together who is to be invited. Anyone in the group can veto an invitation. Everyone must feel comfortable for this final exercise. Some groups elect not to invite outsiders, or to only invite a few trusted friends, family members, or colleagues.

### What does it mean to create a “safe space”?

It is essential that participants in a body mapping workshop know that they are safe and that their confidences will be kept within the group. This can be challenging in a situation like the Nyayo House group whereby their torturers leaked false information about their confessions and disclosures under torture in order to ferment mistrust and destroy alliances. Even after over twenty years had passed, many participants were afraid to talk about their past political activities. They had been part of different movements in different parts of Kenya over a stretch of many years. They did not assume agreement then or now. They were more comfortable discussing their harrowing ordeals in detention than the activities that landed them there in the first place. We had to be sensitive to this and to build our workshop accordingly.

We take great care to create a safe space for the body mapping and for anything that follows from it after the workshop is over.

A ritual is used to clearly delineate the rules of interaction during the workshop as different from “normal” life. This ritual should include something that is wordless, like a smoke smudge, the ringing of a bell, lighting of a candle, a chant or movement. It should also include the very clear establishment and reinforcement of ground rules, in the form of an oath of confidentiality and mutual trust that follows open discussion. Stories told and fears exposed during the workshop are not shared outside the workshop. With anyone. They are not discussed over dinners or breaks during the workshop. They are not shared outside the group, even by the facilitators, without prior discussion and permission by the participants. No one is to tell the story of another, only his or her own story.

Everyone in the workshop has to reinforce these rules and live by them.

At TICAH, we have found that a simple cleansing ritual done at the opening and closing of each day helps to establish the specialness of the agreements we have made. We light a candle that remains lit throughout the day. We burn a dried bundle of leleshwa (“African sage”) leaves or sweetgrass or white sage, an aromatic plant that burns slowly like smokey incense. The facilitator carries the lit aromatic bundle of leaves around the circle so that each person can use his/her hands to “wash” in the smoke, cleansing themselves and marking their agreement. Sometimes, they say their names out loud as they do this.

If this ritual is not possible or does not seem appropriate, you can ring a bell, sing a song, light a candle— something that the group accepts as establishing the ground rules of confidentiality and sacred trust. It is important to have another ritual at the close of each day.

With the Nyayo House torture survivor group, we used a candle and a leleshwa smudge each morning and a song suggested by one of the participants at the end of the day to represent these agreements.

### Materials

The body maps can be painted on canvas or on heavy paper. We prefer canvas, but some groups find paper to be an easier medium as you can draw, sketch, and glue things onto the paper more easily than on canvas. If you elect to use paper, substitute materials more appropriate in the following list for a workshop of ten to twelve participants using canvas:

- Canvas: 2 meters x 1.5 meters per participant
- Primer for canvas: 2 liters of wood glue or 8 liters of white emulsion paint
- Plastic sheet to cover the entire work space
- Paints: 1 liter of basic (blue, red, yellow, brown, black, white, green)
- Brushes: 10 each of small, medium, and large size
- Box of colored pencils and ordinary pencils
- Sketch pads or plain white paper (1 ream)
- .5 liters of wood glue
- Box of oil pastels (24)
- Box of charcoal
- Wide masking tape – 1 roll
- Buckets – at least 4
- Small containers (used yogurt or milk containers)
- Hand held mirrors (for self portraits, optional)
- Anatomical chart of human body (optional, but useful for scale)
- Name tags
- Access to water
- Materials for opening ritual (leleshwa or sage, candles, bell, etc. See above.)
- Bell for keeping time

## Who owns the body maps?

Unless an agreement has been made at the beginning of the workshop, the painters own their body maps at the end of the workshop. They can decide what they want to do with them. At TICAH, we always mention this at the beginning of the workshop, also telling the group that they will have the option of loaning their work to TICAH or another group of their choice if they wish to use them for educational or exhibition purposes. Because it is impossible to know how we might feel about our body maps before we have actually painted them, we always return to this conversation once or twice during the workshop to underscore the fact that they will be able to do what they want to with their own maps. We bring this up again when they are deciding whether to sign their real names to their work or to use symbols or pseudonyms. Careful to keep the door open to exhibition or other more public uses after the workshop, we lead the group to realize their own decisions in this regard. We tell them that one option will be to take away photographs of their maps, leaving the originals to be stores for future use. We ensure that everyone knows that they can take their own maps with them at the end of the workshop even if the others elect to leave theirs with TICAH or another organization of their choice. We tell them that we will not exhibit, reprint, or market their work in any way without their permission. We live by those agreements.

## Use of photographs

We are similarly careful with any photographs we take during the workshop. At the beginning of the workshop, we ask permission to take photos, assuring them that none of the photographs will be shared without our first deciding the ground rules for this. We decide if participants should be allowed to take photographs themselves and, if they are, what the rules are for these.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the workshop, we decide together how and if photos can be used or shared. Some participants ask that only their hands show, not their faces. Others want completely open access to photos of their participation and their body map.

## **Agenda of a Body Mapping Workshop**

Each body mapping workshop is different, but all workshops should create a mix of discussion, quiet painting time, sharing, sketching, listening, and ritual that make it possible to learn from one another, to share experiences, to support one another, and to work separately and together. After initial ground rules and introductions take place on the first morning, the workshop aims to enable participants to reflect on their lives and the scars and wounds they carry, to

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<sup>2</sup> We have found that it is best to ask that participants do not take their own photos if we promised to give a CD of the pictures we have taken to each participant at the end of the workshop.

become aware of their strengths and the support they have from others, to acknowledge their special gifts and their dreams for the future, and to create a work of art that is about their experiences and their lives.

During these five days together, each day includes some time on the floor with the body maps, and some time in plenary discussion. The best workshops move from one to the other with careful and responsive planning and collective agreement.

Once introductions are made and some basic instruction on the mixing of paints and the cleaning of brushes, etc., has taken place,<sup>3</sup> the group works in pairs to help their partners lie down on the canvas in the way they feel best expresses themselves and trace the outline of their body onto the canvas. Once the outline of their body is on the canvas, the rest of the workshop is a series of additional sketches, symbols, and words painted inside the lines of the body and in the background space outside the body. (In some workshops, people also glue material, herbs, photographs onto their maps.) The order chosen for this can be tailored to the special needs and interests of the peer group itself. The goal is to fill the canvas with details that express the life journey that has challenged, hurt, encouraged, or healed each person. Some symbols on the body maps may remain private; some will be shared.

It is important to spend time grounding the experience the group shares within the specifics of their larger lives so that this life story acts literally and symbolically as the canvas on which to represent the more difficult memories, trauma, or current challenges. The first drawing and sharing in the workshop should be of a positive experience or memory. The lifeline exercise—where we are born, milestones that shaped our lives—should begin before we directly address the more difficult and scarring aspects of our lives, and should be returned to throughout the workshop. With the rape survivors' groups, we wait until the third day to talk directly about the rape and share our rape stories. With the torture survivors group, we brought the bad memory of being captured into our discussion at the end of the first day, setting a rhythm that moved between the good and the bad throughout the discussion and painting exercises.

It is best if, during the first day, you talk about color, do some sketching and painting individually and/or together, to get all participants comfortable with being artists and with using color and symbol to express themselves. Create an environment where people feel free to help one another with sketching, mixing color, even lettering. Many body mapping workshops are very collective in feeling and action, with one participant asking for help from another or from a facilitator to render an idea onto his or her body map. All of this is fine. While each body map is the story of one individual's journey and has one artist in charge of what goes onto the canvas, the workshop is a collective experience and some individuals want help with their paintings from others. The important

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<sup>3</sup> The group can prime their own canvases at the end of the first day or this can be done by the facilitation team before the workshop begins.

thing is that they alone remain in charge of determining what goes onto their body map.

Usually, tracing bodies on the canvas or paper, and moving to the floor to begin work on the body maps happens on the second day, after some shared experience sketching, mixing color, working with symbols has loosened up the group on the first day.

From this point on, the workshop moves from working on the body maps and moving to a circle in another part of the room set up for discussion, sketching, notes, meditation, etc. The room must be large enough that the body maps can remain on the floor for the duration of the workshop. It is best if the room is available in the evenings (with an artist present) if participants want more time to work on their paintings.

A body mapping workshop should include all items listed below. The attached agenda outlines the order of activities during the five day Nyayo House torture survivors workshop.<sup>4</sup> Each group is encouraged to find the order and emphasis most appropriate to their group. We suggest the following check list of essentials:

Opening ritual – establishing a confidential space, repeated each day

Establishment of ground rules and continuous reinforcement of these ground rules

Clarification of expectations and an agreed-upon way to share responsibility for meeting these expectations

Self introductions – it is best to find an artistic way to have participants introduce themselves. One way is to provide paints or pens and ask that they draw or paint a symbol that represents themselves. Another is to design name tags with colors that represent how they are feeling, or who they are. This helps break down any barriers they may have about not “being artists.”

Lifeline exercise – describes the pivotal experiences from birth to the present and into the future. These can be separated into “best memory from childhood, best memory from adulthood, worst memory from childhood,” or as one exercise prompted by questions like these. The lifeline exercise places the torture, rape, illness, etc. within the larger context of each person’s life. A lifeline can literally be painted on the body map in the area around the outline of the body, with our birth or early childhood at the lower left corner of the canvas moving across along the bottom edge and up along the right side to the top right where we paint our hopes for the future. Or, the elements of the lifeline can be placed in any order on top of the body or around the body. The important thing is to

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<sup>4</sup> TICAH is also happy to share our body mapping agenda for working with female survivors of rape, which has more meditation and ritual work than the Nyayo House agenda shared with HRMC.



incorporate the larger story of each person's life into the body map and into discussions.

Support – Provide a space on the map to acknowledge those people, ideas, actions, foods, music, or beliefs that have helped us in our lives, and through our difficulties. This can be done by tracing a second “shadow” body on the canvas and filling it with names and symbols, or by encouraging each person to find his or her own method for placing this support on and around their body in their painting.

Strengths – One important exercise is to ask participants to think about and sketch symbols of their strengths or their special gifts, and to think about what area of the body these symbols would most appropriately be placed. Then, move to the body maps and paint them there.

Scars and unhealed wounds – At least one discussion should focus on the physical and emotional effects of trauma and how to show these on the body map. You can bring in an anatomical model of the human body for these discussions. Most body maps have both literal renderings (of broken bones or missing teeth, for example) and symbolic renderings (like barbed wire around the heart or genitals).

Hopes for the future – It is important not to limit group discussion or painting on the body maps to the past and the present, but to also find ways to include our hopes and dreams for the future.

Exhibition and story-telling – At the end of the workshop, reserve time to hang the body maps and invite each painter to introduce his or her body map, explaining it to the group and sharing how they felt painting it and now sharing it with others. If the group wishes to invite outsiders to this small exhibition and discussion, they may do so. If the group prefers to keep it private, this is also fine. Good notes should be taken of the explanations that each artist gives for his or her body map. If the works are later exhibited, it is best to include the artist's own description of the body map next to the paintings.

Action moving forward – The group must decide if photos of the workshop can be shared, and, if so, how. They should decide any follow-up activities they wish to undertake, and reinforce their agreements not to share the details of other people's stories with anyone under any circumstances without permission. The group should discuss whether or not they want to leave their body maps with the workshop facilitators for possible future exhibitions. If they wish to take their maps with them, they should be allowed to do so. If they wish to leave them stored for future use, the details of this should also be discussed and agreed upon.

Evaluation – Clearing the Way Forward

Our evaluation of the Nyayo House torture survivor body mapping project took place 14 months after the first workshop. During these 14 months, TICAHA had stayed in contact with the group. We invited them to TICAHA events, sent occasional emails asking how people were, mailed them our 2013 calendar. As none of the body mapping participants live in Nairobi, our meetings during this time were never as a whole group, but were with individuals and with Wachira, the man who initially put the group together for PeaceNet.

The fact that we had remained in contact with everyone made it easier to bring the group back together a second time to evaluate the project when resources from the Coalition were available to do so. The only person unable to attend was a man who lives in the United States. If we had had funds to support his travel, he would have liked to join us.

The purpose of our second gathering was to evaluate the body mapping workshop, to learn about how and if their experience had made a difference in their lives, to solicit their ideas about how to improve the workshop, and to provide the opportunity for them to decide how and if they wished to grow this work further.

The notes from this three-day meeting are attached. The group was able to participate in additional healing group process (Basket of Goodwill), to revisit their body maps and revise their descriptions of them, to talk about how this work had helped them (or not) and to talk about their own leadership within the group and the way they wanted to build this work further. We learned that almost every participant felt profound change in the ways they could talk about their experiences with their families after the body mapping experience.

From their deliberations, we elected to bring the group back to Nairobi a third time for a full day of events on October 10. Working with the group, we were able to gain access to the Nyayo House basement. Our day began there with a candle ceremony to “Bring Light into Darkness” for ourselves first. We did our usual cleansing ritual with African sage smoke, then each person took a taper candle through the dark and miserable rooms where they were held. We did not talk, but we all walked through the 12 or so rooms in the basement, some of them unchanged and others nearly destroyed in an earlier government effort to erase this history. After then ten minutes of silence, we returned to our makeshift altar where we had placed fatter candles, one for each person participating. We then used our taper to light the second candle. This symbolized bringing light or healing to others. We lit this candle for anyone we wanted to, for the whole country, for our families, our torturers, our choice. Some elected to say out loud who this candle was for. Others said only a little. After lighting these candles, the group stood in a circle around the table blazing with light and sang two songs—a Kenyan freedom song and the national anthem. After this, we left.

We next travelled to the National Museum where TICAHA has built a Peace Path, a stone labyrinth made from stones brought in from throughout Kenya. We had hung the body maps at the Peace Path to create a small exhibition and to have

our stories with us as we walked. We divided into two groups and walked the Peace Path. Labyrinth walking is a way to meditate, to walk in harmony, to reflect. There is a three-step process to walking: first, as we walk towards the center, we release what no longer serves us. As we stand in the center, we receive or reflect. Then, we walk back, returning, remembering. It is a simple yet powerful silent ritual. The group loved it.

Third, we visited Tangaza College where they hosted a roundtable discussion that we called "Healing and Justice in Kenya." (Flyer attached.) This was an incredibly moving exchange. Graduate students and faculty from several countries in Africa attended. (Five Tangaza student representatives had participated in the first two activities of the day with the group, as well.) For many of the survivors, this was the first time a respectful audience of younger Africans had listened to their stories and discussed ideas about Kenya's present and future.

We feel that this Evaluation exercise and the third gathering were essential to ensuring the effectiveness and depth of the body mapping as a means of reflection, healing and action. Should the group also have the aim of establishing a memorialization site or project, the follow-up is absolutely essential to move the conversation back from individual coping strategies and experiences to group organizing and action.

Each group would use this follow-up in their own ways, but investing from the outset in some follow-up activities renders the body mapping workshop much more valuable to all than it can be as a stand-alone effort.

Questionnaires we used, stories about their experiences recorded from their notebooks, and photos of the interactions are all attached to this report.

One noteworthy unanticipated result of our visit to Nyayo House has been the way in which the government representative responsible for the site has reached out to us. Initially very difficult to work with, this was the direct result of the peaceful nature of our visit. Even after we arrived at Nyayo House at the appointed hour, they were deliberating whether or not to let us inside. Administration police and GSU were there to intimidate and watch us throughout. Afterwards, they have been calling us at TICAH to learn more about our work and how we might continue to play some role there. The group will decide if and how to continue this relationship.

On October 29, 2013, the Nyayo House group again returned to Nairobi to participate in the Opening of the TICAH Peace Path. Again, we hung the body maps at the Peace Path, as the group was now happy to share them more widely. During the ceremonies, blessings, and testimonials, several of the Nyayo House group shared their experiences painting the maps, returning to Nyayo House, and walking the labyrinth. It was very moving.

