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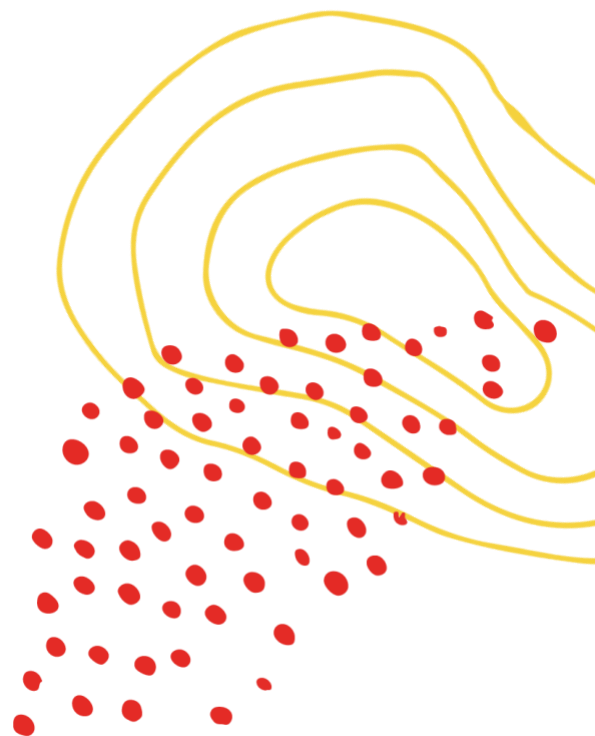
# Gira Ingoma - One Drum per Girl: The culture we want for the woman we want

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## **GIRA INGOMA – ONE DRUM PER GIRL**

### **The culture we want for the woman we want**

May 6, 2023

National University of Rwanda stadium

1<sup>st</sup> Ingoma Nshya festival

On the side of the road leading to the stadium, white buses are parked in line. Going down to the football field and the tracks, one hears the sound of hundreds of *amayugi*, the small bells that the *Intore*, the warrior dancers, wear on their ankles. That's the sound of 250 girls, some very small and some almost adult, spread across the stadium lawn, getting ready to perform a few hours later. On the microphone, the voice of Odile Gakire Katese is giving directions: "Matyazo [name of one of the schools], where are you? You need to come in line here." She's the director of the art organisation, the Woman Cultural Centre<sup>1</sup>, and the all-female drumming troupe Ingoma Nshya, created in 2004. Since 2019, she has developed the program Gira Ingoma, in which the women drummers of Ingoma Nshya train over 600 girls from age three to twenty in 11 schools of the district of Huye, Rwanda, teaching them drumming, warrior dance, poetry and juggling. Assisted by the women drummers, Gakire is coordinating the event today, the first Ingoma Nshya festival gathering the 10 schools that have been participating in Gira Ingoma



so far. All along the tracks on the right side, the women have lined up metal boxes. Some are open, revealing stacks of shields and spears, attributes of the warrior dancers, and drumming sticks. Others are closed, probably already empty. From the top of the bleachers, the view of the girls on the lawn is impressive. They are everywhere, in a constant movement, carrying drums that are sometimes their size, handing each other *imirishyo*, the drumming sticks, the older ones looking out for the younger ones. And then, when all the drums are set, while a girl is still running towards her group because she was busy reattaching her *amayugi*, it starts. The girls on the *ishakwe* (the smaller drums) make the call and everyone answers, beating the drums in unison. All of them. The power of that sound resonates right to the gut, as if one was standing in front of a subwoofer. Then their voices, the songs and the dancing all come together, and throughout the performance, one can only get swept up by their joy.

They are rehearsing for the festival that will take place in the afternoon, in the presence of their families, fellow pupils, and representatives from the district and the mayor's office. The presence of officials means a lot, since up until now, it has been difficult for the women drummers of Ingoma Nshya to be acknowledged in their own country, let alone invited to any event. Indeed, drumming was traditionally forbidden to women in Rwanda, and the warrior dance (*guhampiriza* or *imihampirizo*) and self-praise poetry (*ibyvugogo*) were also reserved to men. Where one sees joy in the girls' performance, others see



rebellion or disrespect for traditional rules. In a country that champions gender equality, nobody has stopped the women or the girls from drumming and learning those arts, but there has been some reluctance and criticism. As the new generation of female drummers, dancers and poets is emerging through the program Gira Ingoma, it is time to look back at what has been a ground-breaking initiative. For this article, the authors conducted twenty interviews: two with officials from Huye district, three with stakeholders working in culture and/or gender quality in Huye, two with school directors, three with school teachers and ten with school girls enrolled in the Gira Ingoma program. They also drew on the repertoire of poems and songs written by the girls, and recorded speeches from officials and stakeholders from the four festivals that have happened between May 2024 and April 2025.

### **An overview of Rwanda's gender policy framework**

For the past 20 years, Rwanda has built strong legal, policy and institutional frameworks to support gender equality. The Rwandan constitution of 2003, revised in 2015 and 2023, provides equal rights between women and men and imposes a quota of 30% of women in all decision-making organs (Minijust 2023:33-34). Among the many laws that promote the protection of women and their rights, some of the most important ones are the law N° 27/2016 of 08/07/2016 governing matrimonial regimes, donations



and successions, which provides for equal inheritance rights between boys and girls as well as equal property management among married couples; the law N° 43/2013 of 16/06/2013, governing Land in Rwanda, which guarantees equal rights on land access, ownership and utilization to both men and women; and the law N° 59/2008 of 10/09/2008, on the Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), which criminalizes GBV offenses that were before considered as family matters. This law was later completed by the Organic Law N° 01/2012/OL of 02/05/2012 instituting the Penal Code especially on cases of child defilement, human trafficking, marital rape and forced marriage. Other laws exist in many areas, for example to prevent gender-based violence in labor regulations, to ensure funding for gender equality in government programs, or to promote gender equality even at the level of the family.

In terms of policy, the National Gender Policy, revised in 2021, proposes important definitions such as that of gender as “a social and cultural construction, which distinguishes differences in the attributes of men and women, girls and boys, and accordingly refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women. It also refers to the state of being male or female in relation to the social and cultural roles that are considered appropriate for men and women” (MIGEPROF 2021, 9). The National Policy against Gender Based Violence and the National Family Promotion and Protection Policy have also been developed to ensure that the principle of gender equality –



defined as giving “equal conditions, treatment and opportunities” to women and men (9) – reaches across sectors. As for institutions, the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) and the Gender Monitoring Office (GMO) were brought together with the National Women’s Council (NWC) and the Rwandan Forum for Women Parliamentarians (FFRP) to form the National Gender Machinery so that the four organs can work together, each with its own mandate, to advance gender equality and women empowerment. These institutions and measures have without any doubt helped advance the rights of women and it is clear in Ingoma Nshya as well as Gira Ingoma that criticism could have been a lot harder to overcome if the general direction given by the government was not so supportive of women’s rights. Though objections are still present and felt, no one dares to overtly oppose giving women access to practices they were excluded from before, let alone forbid them to drum, dance guhamiriza or perform ibyivugo poems. At the level of the country and in politics, the effects of the legal, policy and institutional frameworks are also visible. For example, in 2018, the government had reached parity in the number of Cabinet Ministers and the Parliament was composed of 61.3% of women (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda 2019:36).

With these numbers and initiatives in mind, we want to explore the evolution and impact of the drumming troupe Ingoma Nshya and of the more recent education project Gira Ingoma. We will first look at the history of Ingoma Nshya and Gira Ingoma to show how these initiatives mirror and



push forward the country's evolution towards gender equality and inscribe women at the heart of the arts and of history. We will then examine the points of oppositions to the projects to show how the representations of traditional gender roles and what a (good) Rwandan woman should be keep hindering the emancipation of women. Finally, we will underline Ingoma Nshya's and Gira Ingoma's interventions in the debate as they build a new repertoire for women and blur the lines of gender in a way that gathers significant support from their community and the District of Huye.

### **Making space for women**

Historically, women have been present in politics and in the historical records in a number of ways in Rwanda from precolonial times to today. Politically, in the kingdom, the Queen mother was a key figure, ruling alongside her son, and some of them went down in history as fierce leaders and strategists, the most famous being Kanjogera (rule from 1895-1931), who had her adoptive son deposed to place her biological son in his place. In the arts as well, Nyirarumaga is considered the mother of poetry (Karangwa 2023). She is the one who created dynastic poetry, whose poems were meant to preserve the history of Rwandan kings and became central to the transmission of history. Among Rwandan tales and legends, one tells the story of Ndabaga, a young woman who pretended to be a man to replace her





father at war. These examples often come up when discussing the place of women in Rwandan society and in the arts, to show that Rwandan culture has always been woman-friendly. However, even these exceptional women and their positions show a relationship of subordination to men. Queen mothers do not rule directly: the king, their son, has the power. They may be influential and pull the strings, yet they need a man to carry and actualize their decisions. This places them behind, somewhat in the shadow, and exposes them to criticisms of manipulation and greediness if they take too much space or make their influence too visible and public. This is the case with Kanjogera, who, according to Sarah E. Watkins and Erin Jessee (2020), remains to this day a figure that “reveals ongoing anxieties about women exercising significant political power” (85). As for Nyirarumaga, she is the only woman poet whose name went down in history. In our interviews, the District Head of Education, the District Head of Sports and Culture and the manager of the Ethnographic Museum all mentioned Nyirarumaga to show the presence of women in traditional culture, in this case poetry, yet they could not name other female poets off the top of their heads. Moreover, Nyirarumaga invented dynastic poetry, a type of poetry that is accessible to women yet in which they do not tell their own story but that of others, mainly men. Dynastic poems are quite different from *ibyivugo*, the poems performed by the Intore warriors, in which they detail their victories. These poems, like drumming and *imihimirizo*, the warrior dance, were not performed by



women. Their exclusion from these practices is meaningful in that it keeps them away from expressions of strength and a whole set of values, as we will develop later in the analysis.

### **Ingoma Nshya (2004): bringing women in with drums**

In Rwanda, the drum, *ingoma*, played with sticks, is one of the major traditional art forms, and it is reserved for men. In precolonial Rwanda, drummers were *abiru* – the guardians of history and oral tradition – from the clan Abakaraza, with only rare exceptions. According to ethnomusicologist Jos Gansemans (1988), the abiru-drummers were second in the hierarchy of abiru, and their function was highly respected, because they lived at the court very close to the king and were under his protection (212). Drumming was an elitist art central to political power, a form of sacred language that gave rhythm to the life of the king and the kingdom. The Kinyarwanda word *ingoma* means both drum and kingdom or reign, showing the close relationship between drums and power. Only the king and the queen mother had their *ingoma* ensembles, as well as a few chiefs who represented the power of the king in the provinces (214). With changes in political power away from the rule of kings, that is, colonization by the German and then the Belgian, and the two Hutu Republics after independence, the drums evolved towards a more



popular practice. Ingoma ensembles multiplied in the hills, and each commune had its ensemble, though the training had suffered in quality from the exile or disappearance of master drummers from the court (28). Despite the democratization of the drums and the loss of their sacred code, women still did not drum.

That is until Gakire decided to offer artistic workshops – including drumming – to women in 2004, while she was the artistic director of the University Center for Arts and Drama in Huye, Rwanda. She targeted women specifically, because she found that they were “confined to traditional dance and quite absent from the arts” (Gakire 2015, 89). She thought of drumming because the university had little money, but an extensive collection of drums – about a hundred – with which it was possible to offer an activity almost for free. When she was told that it was forbidden, Gakire asked several people, including experts from the National Museum of Heritage in Huye, why women could not drum. The responses focused on the perceived weight of the drums as too heavy for women to carry (90). Later on, she heard other comments on why women should not drum and found out that the vocabulary around drumming was quite gendered and identified the drum as a woman. For example, when a drum is damaged and has a hole, one says that “*ingoma yabyaye*”: the drum gave birth (Gakire and Kamagonwa, 2023). She decided to have the workshops, and out of all of the different activities, what stuck and stayed was drumming: “From the first moment they touched



the drums, [they] loved it. They couldn't wait to come back the next day" (Gakire 2015:90). Among the workshop participants, fifteen pioneering women decided to commit to drumming and formed Ingoma Nshya.

The master drummers who trained the women are famous and the quality of their training is recognized, yet because drumming is a practice, and is therefore embodied, it necessarily changes through transmission. Gakire called on sanctioned holders of the memory of the drums, yet she only involved them at the beginning. Once the women integrated the memory in their bodies – which took several years – they continued on their own. The practice is now theirs too, and it speaks to Diana Taylor's (2003) notion of repertoire, which "both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning" (20). Transformation is an inherent part of memory, particularly when the latter is preserved through embodied performances, however precise and faithful to the idea of an original these performances may be. The women's gender twist is not a break in transmission but rather an intervention in the repertoire. By performing a traditional art that persisted through the breaks of history, yet twisting it with their gender transgression, the women of Ingoma Nshya intervene in the investigation and the evolution of traditional culture. Following Rebecca Schneider's (2011) work on reenactment and reperformance, we want to "find critical promise [...] in error, and mistake" and challenge the idea that "difference necessarily cancel[s] out authenticity" (30). Because drumming "wasn't something we were entitled to do: we had to take



it” (Gakire 2015, 92), the women were aware of their inadequacy and they returned to essential elements, some of which had disappeared before. Initially met with skepticism and laughter, they did everything they could to respect the tradition and code they were (re)inventing. Artist Dorcy Rugamba (2012), trained in traditional arts, shared in interview that, to him, Ingoma Nshya were the ones who restored the *umutagara*, the full drumming ensemble, after years of using a limited number of drummers as background rhythm for dancers. Working as a troupe, Ingoma Nshya reinstated drumming as an art in itself.

### **Writing women in Rwandan history**

In light of the strong link between drums and power, the historic exclusion of women from this practice signaled their exclusion from political life. Claiming it is a powerful way to claim agency in public life, at a symbolic level as well as a very concrete, embodied one. Indeed, drumming is more than just reclaiming an activity that was reserved for men: to Gakire, “it also has meaning at the level of helping women broaden their future prospects. It also has meaning in their own lives, learning how to hold their heads up and change their way of walking, of comprehending people, life...” (Gakire 2015:96). Ingoma Nshya’s performance of the drums makes available to women an embodied practice that can shape their bodies differently. Taylor underlines



that “it is impossible to think about cultural memory and identity as disembodied. The bodies participating in the transmission of knowledge and memory are themselves a product of certain taxonomic, disciplinary, and mnemonic systems” (86). Ingoma Nshya and Gira Ingoma break away from the “taxonomic, disciplinary, and mnemonic systems” of what is considered traditional Rwanda and bring women’s emancipation at the level of the body, opening a new repertoire of gestures and skills to women and girls. The women of Ingoma Nshya were also trained by foreign drummers and choreographers after they mastered Rwandan rhythms and ways of doing. Their performances therefore bear inspirations from Senegal, Brazil... This was the source of further criticisms from those who consider that they are denaturing Rwandan drumming (93) yet it mirrors another aspect of post-genocide Rwanda: its interaction with, and openness to, the world.

Ingoma Nshya performs a “displaced transmission,” which Joseph Roach (1996) defined as “the adaptation of historic practices to changing conditions, in which popular behaviors are resituated in new locales” (28). Here, the women adapt drumming to the evolution of women’s role in the post-genocide Rwandan society, and drumming actually seems like one more step in a de facto emancipation that has been happening for women since 1994. After the genocide, women represented approximately 70% of the population and often found themselves heads of households in the place of men (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children 1997:6). The



demographic reality of post-genocide Rwanda put them in positions they had never had before; previously women were mostly confined to the private space of the home. Ingoma Nshya translates both as New Drums and New Kingdom, and the women manage to interfere with the traditional practice in a way that restarts the dialogue between drums and political life on new, reinvented terms. Within these terms, drumming neither supports nor challenges the power in place, but it highlights and contributes to the evolution of the place of women in Rwandan society.

Gakire testifies:

*It is a particular pleasure to witness this fascinating period of transformation, and a rare privilege to be at the forefront of history. Writing history through culture is empowering and transcendent. Even if it is with a trembling, hesitant and uncertain hand. Hopefully, history will be loyal and faithful and remember that it is also made of these women. It will carry their DNA, their faces, their names, their hopes and dreams, with pride and enthusiasm...*  
(2024).

Ingoma Nshya's mantra is: "The culture we want – For the woman we want" and at each edition of the Ingoma Nshya festival, the young girls tirelessly and



creatively depict the women they want to be in the future. They are embodying with joy and talent, the promise of a drumming industry that is female, bold and successful. The Nursery, Primary Education and Adult Literacy Officer, Mrs Uwihirwe expressed it at the first edition of Ingoma Nshya Festival in May 2023: “It is a joy to see girls doing precisely what culture didn’t allow them to do before.” When Ingoma Nshya started, they were hardly 15 women and the youngest was 20. Now, Gira Ingoma starts at a very early stage, even a three years old girl has access to drumming. She will grow having in her blood the drums, the warrior dance and the poetry, writing songs to celebrate herself. At the third edition of Ingoma Nshya Festival in December 2023, the Director of Business Development and Employment Unit, Dukundimana Cassien reminded everyone that: “Laws are clear. The policies of our countries are clear. We have good policies, but we hide behind culture to deny girls their rights. Drumming should be a right for girls and not exclusive to boys. Culture needs to change and that change will come from Huye. Huye has led so many changes.” It was important to hear a male decision-maker acknowledge that Rwandan culture can actually be an obstacle to women empowerment, as even the Rwandan National Gender Policy commits to “further strengthen mechanisms addressing the persistent cultural norms and stereotypes hindering the effectiveness of gender equality and equity” (Migeprof 2021). Ingoma Nshya has faced these cultural norms and stereotypes, in the beginning especially and still today. As they were





struggling to have access to the local markets and platforms, they created their own festival in 2008, the Rwanda Drum Festival (RDF). The first edition gathered 127 women drummers. For the sake of sustainability, for the next seven years, this number was reduced to 20. Due to the precarious conditions in which they were working, with little to no funding, the number of female drummers kept dropping down. As the women of Ingoma Nshya were inviting 20 drummers from each province of Rwanda for the RDF in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012, they realized that out of 100 participants, they were the only female drummers. To this day, they remain the only all-female troupe. At the first edition of Ingoma Nshya Festival, in May 2023, the advisor to the mayor of Huye District, testified: “I have been with Ingoma Nshya for a long time as they were making important steps. One after another. It was hard. We didn’t always understand. How can a woman play drums? But some people understood, that’s why we are here today, with the youth in schools, aligning with gender policy.” His comment speaks to the difficulties and misunderstanding that Ingoma Nshya faced along the years, and how hard they had to push, despite the policies in place. In 2024, Ingoma Nshya is celebrating their 20th anniversary. It has taken almost 20 years to begin seeing a change. They have not forgotten the injustice, the discouragement, the despair and the feeling of not being in the right body, never being eligible nor fitting the system. They know that nothing is granted and the place and the future of female drummers still need to be negotiated. Today, there are



only 11 female drummers left. That is why it is still crucial to find ways to increase the number and the presence of women in the drumming sector. Gakire keeps looking for support because in the bottom of her heart, she knows they are in the right country and at the right time (2024).

In April 2018, Ingoma Nshya started to pass on the batons to their own children and girls from their communities to constitute the second cohort of drumming girls and ensure the future of women in drumming. In 2019, this training program was officially launched under the name Gira Ingoma – One Drum per Girl. The women drummers of Ingoma Nshya train over 600 young girls age three to 20 in 11 schools of the district of Huye, giving workshops over the weekends and during the holidays. In these workshops, they teach not only drumming but also the warrior dance (*imihamirizo*), the most famous traditional dance, reserved to men, and *ibyivugo*, the self-praise poetry. Under the king's rule, selected Rwandan boys and young men went to the *Itorero*, a training institution where they learned to become warriors and serve their king. They received a complete training in dance, poetry, and combat to be the future leaders and protectors of the country (INMR 2008:241). Through this process, they became *Intore*, the chosen ones (Dahlmanns 2015:124). Over time, with colonization, the *Itorero* was slowly stripped away of its military and leadership aspects to become a cultural, artistic institution (125). After independence, the symbol of the *Intore* persisted as representing courage and strength, yet it became accessible to all men. The *Intore* were no longer



warriors but dancers, and they kept being trained in imihamirizo (the warrior dance) and ibyivugo (self-praise poetry detailing the exploits of the warrior). Today the Intore has become part of the Rwandan folklore and their dance and poetry are performed in official events and at weddings. The women of Ingoma Nshya started training with a dancer from the National Museum in 2014. He taught them to dance imihamirizo, and they are now teaching the girls, adding also ibyivugo, these poems that the Intore perform to boast about their feats. On 6 May 2023, the first edition of the Ingoma Nshya festival took place, gathering 250 girls from 10 schools to perform in front of their family and officials from the district and the mayor's office. Until April 2024, four editions of the festival took place and they now have 275 girls from 11 schools performing. The story of Ingoma Nshya and Gira Ingoma is part of the history of Rwanda and it speaks to complex issues related to the notion of 'tradition' and the representation of women in Rwanda. The project cannot help but trigger and uncover "the persistent cultural norms and stereotypes" that the National Gender Policy seeks to dismantle, and a closer look at the reactions it provokes is a great indicator of how far mentalities have progressed.



## **There is always a “but”: the persistence of limiting gender roles and representation**

All our interviewees had no issue with Gira Ingoma’s program and what they saw at the festival. They were very supportive and praised the girls’ energy and performances. Yet when pushed into the details of the performance and the different art forms presented, some expressed objections. For Jérôme Karangwa, Manager of the Ethnographic Museum, it was about the warrior dance, guhamiriza. While he supported Ingoma Nshya and saw the initiative of having girls drum, as an evolution of culture, he had a different view regarding the warrior dance:

*KARANGWA: Guhamiriza, I don't think so. In fact, guhamiriza symbolizes war, war sessions. The mane perhaps symbolizes the lion's strength. And the weapons in hand. The clothes they wear, the bells, amayugi, to make a lot of noise to scare off the enemy. You can see that guhamiriza was reserved for men and young boys. Especially since guhamiriza began with Itorero. And in traditional Rwandan education, the people who went to the Itorero were young men. Young boys. While girls stayed with their mothers. They learned domestic trades, while the men learned practices and trades designed for men. [...] How are the girls going to perform?*



*They can learn, but will they have a chance to perform? Very difficult.*

INTERVIEWER: *Why do you think it's difficult?*

KARANGWA: *Because Intore goes back a long way. [...] Who's going to give her the chance to perform, since we're used to seeing Intore who symbolizes strength, vigour, vivacity and who can take a spear, whereas we know that girls and mothers are our advisors, our guardians. (Karangwa 2023)*

It is important to note that Karangwa's doubts do not concern the fact that the girls learn guhamiriza but rather the possibility for them to perform it in public. It is a relevant concern as it echoes exactly the issue that the women drummers of Ingoma Nshya have in Rwanda, where they are rarely invited to perform and never in official events. It is therefore not about their ability to learn and perform guhamiriza but about them doing it publicly and showing themselves to the world as *Intore*. Karangwa links that concern to the symbol of *Intore* as strong and vigorous, suggesting that this cannot be carried forward by the girls. The phrase "we know that our girls and mothers are..." implies a shared knowledge among Rwandans that presents an image or expected social norm of Rwandan women. In his interview, the Head of Sports and Culture at the District office also addressed his reluctance, which this



time was about the poetry, *ibyivugo*, and his comments bring elements that are relevant to this idea of a shared knowledge:

KAYITARE: *It's good that girls can do guhamiriza. And they did it well. Better even than the men.*

INTERVIEWER: *Then, ibyivugo too. It comes with guhamiriza.*

KAYITARE: *In any case, I find ibyivugo abnormal among women.*

INTERVIEWER: *Yes?*

KAYITARE: *Yes, I find it abnormal. It's reserved for men.*

INTERVIEWER: *Why is it only for men?*

KAYITARE: *I don't know, I was born with it. It's this tradition.*

INTERVIEWER: *Because what does ibyivugo mean? Are they special poems that tell something only men can tell?*

KAYITARE: *Ibyivugo is war poetry [...] It alludes to the bravery a man can show on the battlefield. So culturally, a man is a warrior. He's someone who takes care of protection. The protection of his family, his homeland. Ibyivugo alludes to this culture of protection.*

We are interested in the notion of so-called 'tradition', and the sense that some things are a certain way and are not up for debate. Traditional gender roles seem to be a set of knowledge that is transmitted from birth and never challenged. That is specifically what Ingoma Nshya and the Gira Ingoma



project seek to question. When asked why ibyivugo is for men only, Kayitare very earnestly answers that he does not know. The tradition he was born with does not need to give reasons, it is just how it is. Similarly, Karangwa is confident that “we know” that girls and women are a certain way, yet do we know? If so, how do we know it? Where does it come from? Is it still true today? Does it have to be?

### **Questioning tradition**

In his introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawn (1983) contends that any society “has a large store of ancient materials that can be used to construct invented traditions” as well as “an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication” (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983:6). Saying that traditions are invented does not mean that they are fake or fictitious. In Hobsbawn’s definition,

‘Invented traditions’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past (1).



Later on, he explains that “the object and characteristics of ‘traditions’, including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices” (2). The impulse to lock practices that may otherwise be flexible has a specific link to domination in previously colonized states. In his essay “What is a tribe,” Mahmood Mamdani (2012) underlines that the vision of tradition as something fixed and unchangeable comes from colonial rule. As the colonial power relied on native allies to rule the colonized territory, they sought to establish said allies as ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’:

Once a single chief – always a male and an elder – was exalted as the sole traditional authority, it was a short step to define tradition, too, as unitary, non-contradictory and binding. Having identified and appointed local allies in the project of ‘indirect rule’ and determined their role as ‘customary’, the colonial state became both the custodian and the enforcer of tradition (21).

While oral and embodied traditions were adaptable and ever-growing, the colonial state “set about to codify and promulgate these traditions, thereby transforming flexible custom into hard prescription” (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983:212). Rwanda was no exception and colonization by the German and then





the Belgian led to the codification of previously more flexible custom, with tragic consequences in the case of the racialization of the identities Hutu, Tutsi and Twa and their inscription on identity cards (Chrétien and Kabanda 2013: 89). Chrétien and Kabanda underline: “Here we find the familiar process of communities imagined according to reinvented traditions. The Tutsi and the Hutu had existed for a long time, but these allegiances were rethought and lived according to criteria different from those of the old Rwanda” (98). The challenge is therefore to reconnect with cultural practices that were altered by colonization and the two Hutu Republics (1962-1994) to sustain a sense of continuity with the past, yet without setting them in stone.

Since 1994, the Rwandan government has revived precolonial practices in various areas, and it has done so with conscious adaptations to contemporary realities. Their adaptation of the *gacaca*, the local tribunals, to the specificities of genocide as a crime against humanity (Minijust 2001) is well-known in the area of transitional justice. Another state-driven program, focused on nation-building and development, was created by the government and implemented since 2012: “Itorero ry’igihugu” (Dahlmanns 2015:114). Called “Itorero of the country,” it revives the Itorero tradition and adapts it to contemporary Rwanda. It is compulsory for Rwandans who finish high school and it is linked to the national service (*urugero*), yet it is also accessible to Rwandans of all ages, including children from seven years old, who wish to follow the training (Minubumwe 2011:12). It involves military



training and civic education and exalts participants to become model citizens to support their country. In her study of the program and its implementation, Erika Dahlmanns emphasizes the central use of the Intore figure and traditional values attached to them, such as *ubupfura* (nobility) and *ubutware* (heroism), which are adapted to the contemporary context to encompass values essential to Rwanda's reconstruction: "unity, patriotism, integrity, commitment, reliability" (133). In this political and patriotic aspect, it has similarities to the traditional Itorero, with the wish to train citizens and leaders dedicated to the country and community, yet it moves away from the arts, particularly dance. In the program strategy of the National Itorero Commission, none of the four training modules mention artistic practices (Minubumwe 2011:20), and Dahlmanns underlines the importance of songs, stories and *ibyivugo* poems but says nothing of the *imihimirizo* dances (136-139). This is surprising, as the dances of the Intore has remained a symbol of Rwanda as a nation from the creation of the Royal Ballet at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to today, through the many political changes and disruptions (124-125). However, in this contemporary version of Itorero, Intore is an abstraction, a set of ideal values and a commitment to protect and promote the nation. This ideal figure and the values it carries are expressed in civic education sessions and in songs, *ibyivugo* poems and stories that are "adjusted to the new political context" (139). Though the program includes women and aims to "make every Rwandan Intore" (128), this transformation into Intore remains



mostly disembodied. In that context, Gira Ingoma, though it falls in line with the government's effort by training present and future Intore, proposes a very concrete and embodied expression of the Intore. Having girls dancing guhamiriza and claiming ibyivugo means to have them be Intore, in their movements, their words, the way they present themselves to the world. The Intore, as a symbol, touch on the representation of the country itself, and that may be why it is problematic to some to see girls embody them.

Another thing worth noting in Mamdani's citation is that the definition of tradition and of authority always came from "a man and an elder", leaving out women's voices. As Ranger explains in his analysis of the invention of tradition in colonial Africa, "codified tradition inevitably hardened in a way that advantaged the vested interests in possession at the time of its codification" (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983:254). He identifies several situations in which a group who had power over another benefited from the immutability of tradition, one of which is men over women: "Men tended to appeal to 'tradition' in order to ensure that the increasing role which women played in production in the rural areas did not result in any diminution of male control over women as economic assets" (254). This is relatable to the situation in Rwanda, particularly just after the genocide, when women had to take on roles 'traditionally' reserved to men. Though the country has developed many policies to support the presence of women in politics and other key sectors and advance gender equality, it can take time for



mentalities to evolve. Justine Uvuza's research (2014) is enlightening in this matter. She has interviewed female politicians in the cabinet, lower and upper chambers of parliament, local government and from women's major groups to explore what impact their public roles had on their personal lives and careers. She reports that the female politicians who were appointed or elected in the early years of these changes found it hard to express their views, as many of their male counterparts saw them as a number that had to be there but they dismissed them in serious debates (93-94). Uvuza underlines that "women's access to politics is as essential as building the capacity of those who have accessed it to make substantial input to political process and results" (43). A woman who sat in Parliament in 2003 testified that the women who arrived in 2008 in the following elections were already more confident and brought a deeper change, also because many of them had already experienced decision-making and similar responsibilities at a lower level (95). Yet in parallel to this evolution in public and political life, mentalities seem to change at a slower pace. For the women whom Uvuza interviewed, the impact that their work has on their economic status and confidence does not match the expectations that still weigh on them at home, especially when they are married and have children (114). All of them share that they are still expected to perform a traditional role at home and take care of the domestic work, despite their heavy workload and late hours (129). Their husbands want to keep their role of decision-making and can feel



threatened by a woman who has been learning to share her views (130).

Uvuza's conclusion is that women's economic autonomy in Rwanda "has not resulted in a gender revolution. Rather, changes in gender roles and gender relations more generally, will require a cultural shift as large as that which brought women into the workplace" (28). It is precisely this cultural shift that Gira Ingoma wants to bring about.

### **Representation of the Rwandan woman**

To understand the representation of a (good) Rwandan woman, one can turn to proverbs and phrases. In his study of the social construction of gender in Kinyarwanda proverbs, Protais Niyonshima (2020) states that "proverbs indicate clearly how women are excluded from decision making within families and communities" (10). For example, the widespread "*umugore n'umutima w'urugo*" ("the woman is the heart of the home"), while the man is the pillar, suggests that women remain inside and are in charge of caring for the home and the family, while the man stands outside to watch, protect and carry the weight. Another one, "*Nta nkokokazi ibika isake ihari*," ("No hen shall crow in the presence of rooster") (11) shows the subordination of women to men. It also alludes to the fact that, traditionally, a woman could not speak in public but had to go through her father, brother or husband to pass on her word. Particularly relevant to our research "*umugore arabyina*



*ntasimbuka*” (“a woman can dance but may not jump”) (11) places the limitation on physical practices. High jump was a widespread practice in precolonial Rwanda and it was reserved to men, but one can also link this proverb to imihamirizo, the warrior dance, which is characterized, among other moves, by the jumps of the Intore dancers. This proverb therefore sheds light on the surprise, if not shock, that some may experience while watching girls and women perform imihamirizo. There are many more, and these sayings show that, despite a few exceptions, Rwandan culture was patriarchal and, as Uvuza argues, women were expected to comply to ideals of discretion, submission and endurance (15). These very expectations make it quite hard for women to be outspoken and assertive, as they run the risk of being criticized and dismissed.

Uvuza underlines that “traditionally a woman who is assertive, outspoken, and brave in the pursuit of her rights is socially considered to be “shyless”, manly and as having no respect. In Kinyarwanda, such a woman is referred to as *igishegabo* (manly-woman) or *umushiziwisoni* (shyless/uncontrollable)” (23). These are criticisms that Gakire knows too well. Since the beginning of Ingoma Nshya in 2004 to this day, she has heard them and has been called those names:

*I've realized that we talk about gender equality, empowerment, but somehow we don't allow girls or women to be transformed, to*



*change. And to become confident. Because confidence and everything that comes with empowerment was for men. Then when you become very confident, you become like a man. And they say 'no, it's not about becoming a man'. I'm not becoming a man, I am confident. (...)*

*And then they will call us indaya (prostitute), when we are not indaya. And when I defend myself, I will be inshinzi (insolent, rebellious). And I will be igishegabo. (Gakire and Kamabonwa 2023).*

In addition to the limits that traditional rules and sayings impose on women, colonization has also had its influence in disseminating a patriarchal model. Uvuza turns to Buscaglia and Randell's research on the legacy of colonialism in the promotion of women in Rwanda to suggest that it was under Belgian colonial rule that "patriarchal ideology and gender inequalities were institutionalised" (11). They may have existed before but, as seen earlier with what is considered 'tradition', the Belgian colonial administration codified it when they introduced a so-called women's promotion system in 1956 that "was based on a gendered division of labour, thus women's education was focused on educating women "fitting" for elite and male politicians but did not focus on women's rights to self-determination" (11). The influence of colonialism, and in particular the catholic church, is also apparent in a form of puritanism that is foreign to Rwandan tradition yet has been so ingrained in



culture that it is now fully integrated among Rwandans. When looking at pictures from early colonial times, one can see that the outfits were different from today. On some images women are bare-chested, on others their skirts are short, and the Intore dancers are also bare-chested. Today, Intore dancers have to wear T-shirts or shirts under their beaded belts for questions of decency. That notion of decency is at the heart of some public debates today, often around how women dress but not only, as the case of the Intore male warriors shows. It was definitely omnipresent in the feedback we received after the festivals.

A comment that we heard from all our interviewees, men and women alike, was that we needed to find costumes for the girls. So far, they have been performing in their school uniforms. It is mostly a question of budget, as costumes are not the priority, and it also shows the diversity of schools and the status of the girls as pupils. In the long run, it will be a strong option to have a common costume to bring together all the girls under the same Gira Ingoma banner. However, the comments on the costumes were not only about these considerations. One interviewee suggested that girls “jumping around like boys” while wearing skirts was problematic and needed to be fixed (Uwihirwe 2023), another proposed that “the girls also have to look for an appropriate outfit” (Kayitare 2023), and yet another wished that “they were covered” (Gakire and Kamabonwa 2023). The notion of decency emerges from





these comments, and Florence Kandimwa from ProFemmes-Twese Hamwe stated it in a very direct way:

*INTERVIEWER: And what is your personal point of view? Do you see any shocking thing about that [the way the girls dress]?*

*KANDIMWA: Yes, I see things that I really comment. You can do something good, but when you don't prepare it well, you'll find the good thing can end up being a bad thing. They'll say: she's doing a good job but she doesn't have a concern about her girls because they are dressing badly and they are just facing naked before elders. Because they have parents, they have different categories of leaders and so on (...) It's all about indecency and me, my proposal, is these leggings put inside the skirt. (Kandimwa 2023)*

The decency of the costumes is linked to the decency in character. It takes little to be seen as an indaya (prostitute) or inshinzi (insolent), be it because one shows too much skin or too much confidence. Kandimwa also points to the fact that this question might damage the reception of the project altogether. Even though, as Gakire puts it, “this is a detail, I wanted it to be a detail in this beautiful performance. Not that everyone goes on about that” (Gakire and Kamabonwa 2023), everyone does go on about it. This is about controlling women’s bodies and covering them to adapt to the gaze men put



on them. Gakire adds: “The dress that was flying last time. And now people were shocked by the pants. At a certain point, what are we going to wear?” (Ibid.) The project currently shows that there is still a lot of work to do to build a culture that is truly woman-friendly. Changing cultural representations and bias takes time, however enabling the political environment is, yet there is more to do than waiting.

### **Changing the culture**

#### **It's not just about waiting: pushing through**

Throughout the interviews and readings, time was a recurring notion: it all takes time. Policies are implemented over time and women have to be patient as mentalities are slower to change. The new generation is different and the next one will be even more open to gender equality. With time, people will get used to girls and women drumming, dancing imihamirizo and declaiming ibyvugo. Both Kayitare and Karangwa, who initially had objections to girls embodying qualities such as strength, vigour, vivacity, bravery, mentioned that people could get used to it. Karangwa for example:

INTERVIEWER: *Don't you think that today women can have this vivacity, this strength and be warriors as well as men?*



KARANGWA: *It's possible, but it's going to take time. But there always has to be a beginning.*

INTERVIEWER: *That's right. Maybe we can start with guhamiriza and then...*

KARANGWA: *We can start there and see. [...] But I think it's up to the project now, not just to train young girls, but also to focus on informal education and raising public awareness. Culture changes, culture evolves, and circumstances can arise where, though that person used to do that, it is now someone else doing it. It's not a privilege, it's not hereditary, it's learned. (Karangwa 2023)*

Karangwa brings forth the plasticity of culture yet for now, the process has been informal: until someone, like Gakire, tries something new or pushes a boundary, most people will not question so-called traditional practices. Once the interdiction is broken, there will be some criticism but, over time, as Kayitare says about women drumming: “It's understandable because it's possible. We've seen that it's possible.” (Kayitare 2023). However, these assertions sound fatalistic. Of course, time matters, and with enabling frameworks such as Rwanda’s and numerous initiatives promoting gender equality in all sectors of society, it appears to be on women’s side. But there is more to do than waiting. To Gakire, it is a race against time. She and Ingoma Nshya need to speed-up the process and it is their responsibility not only to



contribute to the general effort towards women empowerment but also to push it further (2024). That's why the Ingoma Nshya Festival is a quarterly festival: in a course of only one year, Gakire organized four editions of the festival, the latest being in April 2024. If they keep up that pace, in only three years, they will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of the festival and in six years, they will have the 20th edition. There is a need to multiply and amplify initiatives dedicated to girls and women to be able to bridge the gender gap in the creative and cultural industries. Such initiatives cannot remain in the margins and they have to reach the educational system as well as policy-making institutions. Karangwa underlined that culture is not hereditary but it is learned, and education has a crucial role to play to support its evolution. That is, in part, why the program Gira Ingoma is integrated in schools.

The Gender Monitoring Office's 2019 report on the State of Gender Equality in Rwanda looks at all sectors (education, agriculture, economy, health...) except the cultural sector. Culture and the arts as a sector of activity, with their own issues of representation and discrimination, are nowhere to be found, and there is no data on the situation of artists. Yet it is crucial, because that's exactly where changes in the way Rwandan women are represented and viewed can be made. If one doesn't want to wait for mentalities to change (slowly) on their own in the wake of political decisions, culture is where one has to intervene. Karangwa made a strong point:



INTERVIEWER: *So, it [gender equality] has to be in culture?*

KARANGWA: *In culture too, included. Not to say that culture is the preserve of men. Why? If you want to make it the preserve of men, in the end you'll come and everything we've done is nothing. [...] We go back to the culture that's frozen somewhere. You see? If the economy changes, society changes, education changes and culture stays behind, it has to go together.*

INTERVIEWER: *Yes, but it's true that I have the impression that there is something complicated about culture. For example, in Rwanda today, the majority of members of parliament are women. There are women in the army, and so on. But as you say, when you see girls dancing guhamiriza, it's a bit strange. So there's something, in the cultural milieu that it's still a bit behind compared to...*

KARANGWA: *And if we don't fight that, everything we've done here, even in Parliament, we'll say we forget about it, we change. We're going back to culture. (2023)*

As Karangwa underlines, progress in gender equality can easily be threatened. To make sure that the change is deep and lasting, it has to happen at all levels and it is time to start having it in the cultural sector to fully unravel the expectations that weigh on women.



## **Creating a new repertoire: broadening out artistic expressions for girls and women**

Women are present in cultural and artistic practices, yet they are confined to specific roles that echo the roles they used to be given in society, that is, to stay at home and in private. Their artistic expressions speak to notions of softness, modesty and beauty, while the men's expressions embody strength, pride and courage. Teaching art forms that were reserved for men to girls therefore means giving them access to those qualities. Like with female politicians who learn to speak out, express their ideas and defend them, the hope is that girls who jump and claim their feats gain confidence. This is the first thing that interviewees commented on after attending the festivals: the girls' confidence. Talking about a young girl who made a speech, Prudencienne Kamabonwa, working on women and youth empowerment with Never Again Rwanda, said: "I really liked how confident she is, how she can speak in public, how she can attract the attention of the audience. I said 'wow', that's what we really need as women, as activists" (Gakire and Kamabonwa 2023). She draws a link between their confidence and their ability to act socially and, why not, in politics. One of the girls from Cyarwa school asserts: "Gira Ingoma taught me that I can do what a boy can do because we are all human. It taught me to focus on what I do, to feel



empowered and to not pay attention to discouraging people. If no girl should play drums, me, I am proud to do it” (Cyarwa 2 2023). In addition to teaching girls art forms they did not have access to before, Gira Ingoma’s aim is to build a repertoire of poetry and songs that give the centre stage to women and celebrate them, in the same way men have been celebrated through the ages. It is not just about their presence in certain arts but also about the content that is created. Women are often praised in songs for their docility and care, for their beauty. It is time to open their perspectives and present them in a different light, including with qualities that may be considered ‘male’. The girls of the Catholic Primary School of Ngoma, for example, composed a song that goes like this:

*I will become a girl unafraid to conquer*

*Achieving the feats of Ndabaga*

*I will strive to be a heroine among champions*

*A girl who never betrays comrades on the battlefield*

*For I am now a knight among knights*

The song is in the line of the Intore’s ibyivugo, putting forward concepts that were up to now considered ‘masculine’: to conquer, the feats, champions, battlefield, knight... It echoes Karangwa’s comment earlier, when he expressed his resistance to girls dancing imihamirizo because it refers to the



battlefield, a man's domain. The girls' choice of words is directly challenging this, which is a change from strategies that try to temper and get around fears and susceptibilities.

Regarding the promotion of gender equality in Rwanda, Uvuza underlines that it is not the concept of equality that is used, but that of complementarity (*ubwuzuzanye*), so that men feel less threatened (34). Equality is somehow viewed as women becoming men and taking their place, a concern that the National Gender Policy (NGP) addresses in its definition of gender equality, specifying that “equality does not mean that women and men will become the same” (MIGEPROF 2021:9). We encountered similar concerns in the comments of our two male interviewees, who asked why the program did not include boys. The Head of Sports and Culture for the District of Huye made the following recommendation: “What I can recommend, perhaps as an observation, is to make it mixed with girls and boys. That would be better than training only girls. Maybe it's to encourage the girls, but it would be better to mix, as we're in line with gender equality. A boy or a girl should feel the same” (Kayitare 2023). In the beginning of the program, Gakire accepted a few boys because she did not want them to feel left out, and she saw that they immediately took all the space. A girl from the Cyarwa school expressed that the program specifically attracted her because it was only girls. She explains: “We feel more at ease with each other. If you don't understand something, you easily get an explanation. But if there are boys





around, I can feel ashamed. When it's just us girls, we do what we want and help each other out" (Cyarwa 1 2024). It is therefore essential to create spaces where girls can learn and grow outside of the gaze of boys and men. This is about gender equity, which the NGP defines as "differential treatment that is fair and positively addresses a bias or disadvantage that is due to gender roles or norms or differences between the sexes" (MIGEPROF 2021:9). Karangwa, the manager of the Ethnographic Museum, also suggested to include boys in the program and he underlined that it was difficult for boys to access training in traditional drums (Karangwa 2023). Yet when asked if girls were allowed to learn drumming in the summer artistic program offered by the museum, he replied that they were not. Training opportunities in drumming might be scarce for boys, but for girls they are simply nonexistent outside of Gira Ingoma. Equality and equity might be threatening to some, yet they are clearer than complementarity. Uvuza, drawing on Evans, warns that the notion of complementarity runs the risk of continuing patriarchy if it is used to perpetuate the belief that women and men need to have different roles to complement each other (2014:34). After years of trying to negotiate and temper criticism, Gakire realized that these negotiations were actually coming in the way of the freedom and emancipation she wanted: "So now I'm telling people: you know what? Yes. I want to change culture. And do you want to become a man? Yes, I want to become a man. If drumming for you means becoming a man, I want to drum." (Gakire and Kamabonwa 2023). It is



important to note, however, that even though the girls appropriate so-called 'masculine' qualities and practices in their creations, they do not leave out things that are considered 'feminine', as long as they relate to them. In a song created by the girls from the school Kabuga, they sing to the women of Ingoma Nshya, their trainers:

*Your legacy never fails to inspire*

*I long for your swift voice and soothing songs*

*I will dance for you, like Inyambo*

*Honoring the noble lessons, you taught me*

*With a smile I'll dance for you, hosting incredible shows to your glory*

*I'll dance tirelessly, a descendant of Ndabaga*

*Without fear, I will perform remarkable acts to heal wounds*

*I will be an illuminating poem*

*Unstoppable in my pursuits*

Here, some elements appeal to the traditional image of a woman: the soothing songs, dancing like an Inyambo, the majestic royal cows with very long horns – it is a great compliment for a woman to be compared to a cow in Rwanda. Other elements refer more to what was reserved to men: the reference to Ndabaga, remarkable acts, being unstoppable. The sentence: "I will perform remarkable acts to heal wounds" is a perfect example of how the



girls can bring together what is considered masculine and what is considered feminine, as the remarkable acts or exploits serve to heal, or care. They are creating their own repertoire, in which all qualities are mixed and work together, and notions of masculine or feminine will eventually no longer be relevant. Importantly, they are also claiming the legacy of Ingoma Nshya and paying tribute to their achievements and teaching.

After twenty years spent hoping for some form of acknowledgment from the authorities, Gakire decided that she was done waiting and that she would celebrate the ground-breaking work of Ingoma Nshya herself. Acknowledgment is not about pride, but about survival. If their work stays confined to the troupe, it will disappear with them. Implementing the Gira Ingoma program means ensuring the future of women in drumming by training the next generation. In the song *Umurage*, composed by Ingoma Nshya, the women sing to the girls:

*You can do whatever you want with your life*

*Continue where I left off*

*I've reached the highest level of power*

*And I left the drums rumbling again*

*I've removed the chains of taboos*

*I am taking with me the suffocating darkness*

*Now, going back is the new taboo*



To this, the girls from Matyazo school answer:

*You gifted me with a secret for the future*

*I will tear down the walls of prohibition*

*Not even heavy metal can shake me*

*I will preserve my drum, and so will my great-granddaughters*

And the girls from Primary School Saint Antoine:

*You brought light to my path*

*Because you empowered me*

*I will attend concerts and will be amazing*

*My spear and my shield*

*I will make them mine*

Through their songs, an intergenerational dialogue takes place, acknowledging the achievements of the women of Ingoma Nshya, what they passed on to the girls in school and expressing everyone's hopes for the future. Gira Ingoma sets up a whole network of solidarity that goes beyond Ingoma Nshya and the girls. A girl's mother explains:



*In one song, she sings that she's a girl who's not afraid to fight, that she's a brave warrior. I think she'll be a capable girl, freeing herself from the bad history she was born into. At just eight years old, she has already set herself the goal of becoming a great person. When she goes to school, I like to tell her: 'You sing that you'll be at the top of the power. So go and study hard to become the leader you've decided to become.'* (Cyarwa parent 1 2023)

The teachers, the school directors and the families form a strong support network. At the level of family, the girls seem to meet little resistance, even from the older generation that may be more attached to traditional rules. One of the girls from Kabuga primary school explained that her grandmother came to see her perform and loved to see her playing drum and holding a spear and a shield because her own father loved to play drums and do poetry (Kabuga 3 2023). In Matyazo, the school director found funds to buy their own set of drums so that, if the program with Ingoma Nshya stops, the girls can keep drumming. In Cyarwa, parents have decided that the girls will contribute a coin every time they go to rehearsal to have a petty cash box in case they need to replace pieces of equipment. Everyone involved supports and pushes the girls, and is invested in the sustainability of the project. At a community level, it is a success.



## **Perceived benefits of the project: transmission, education and economic opportunities**

Since the first festival, Ingoma Nshya has invited officials from the Mayor's office and the district in Huye to attend the girls' performances, as well as stakeholders from organizations that work on the issues of education, culture and gender equality. All of them were enthusiastic about the project and could only see benefits in it for the girls. After facing a much stronger resistance with Ingoma Nshya in 2004, it came as a surprise. What is it that now made this project more acceptable? There is something powerful and overwhelming in seeing 275 girls from age three to 20 beat the drums, dance, perform poetry, juggle and sing together. Their confidence and their enjoyment is wildly contagious, yet it would be naïve to think it is just that. Among the benefits that our interviewees identified for the girls and their communities, three particularly stood out. The first benefit is linked to what is considered 'tradition' and its transmission, as the interviewees supported the fact that the project trained girls from a very young age, as was the case in the Itorero. In the words of the Huye District's Head of Sport and Culture: "It's good to continue in the traditional line. What's different is that they're women, that's the only difference. The rest is in the cultural line. I don't think it's a problem" (Kayitare 2023). Gira Ingoma's regularity and focus on girls as young as three is seen as a strength, even though the performers are girls



instead of boys. The second beneficial theme from the interviews is related to education: interviewees commented on the passion and motivation of the girls, their cohesion and solidarity, and many saw it as a way to attract girls to school. The District Head of Education expressed: “I saw that the children were very interested and the parents too. And I think it can also attract children to school. To like school” (Umuhirwe 2023). Indeed, though the program is extra-curricular, it is attached to 11 schools of the district of Huye and only pupils from these schools can attend. Testimonies from the teachers, the parents and the girls themselves tend to show that participation in the program contributes to the appeal of going to school. The mother of a girl studying at Cyarwa shared:

*My daughter is one of the leaders, you can see that she's happy and I am too. She has progressed in her studies. You can see that her grades are going up. Before she started drumming, her grades were low, but now they're rising, because she's set herself goals to achieve. (Cyarwa parent 2 2023)*

Another girl used to be in and out of school and change schools regularly because her mother moved for work. Once she joined the Gira Ingoma program in Matyazo, she refused to follow her mother because she did not want to leave the school in which the program was implemented. Her mother



found a way for her to stay with a relative so that she could keep attending the same school. The third benefit that was identified was economic, as the example of the women of Ingoma Nshya, who travel abroad to perform and can make a living from their art, shows that drumming can be a source of income: “It's positive because it's part of job creation. Some people can testify that they make a living from it” (Kayitare 2023). Since the beginning of the program, some schools were invited to perform in events such as *umuganura* (the harvest celebration) and were paid for it. They are becoming well-known as skilled performers in the district of Huye and they receive opportunities. Beyond that, some girls expressed during their interviews the dream to become professional drummers or dancers themselves, which shows that these artistic practices are more and more considered as potential jobs. The strength of Gira Ingoma is that it is transversal: it touches on education, gender equality and employment opportunities.

Thanks to those positive aspects, Ingoma Nshya and Gira Ingoma have gathered significant support from the community and from officials in the district of Huye, where they are based. To fully ensure sustainability and to have the project grow beyond the district, it is necessary to involve the authorities and governmental institutions at a national level. One way to do this is to include Gira Ingoma in the Creative Arts curriculum for primary schools, so that it becomes part of the Ministry of Education national program. The Creative Arts program (Rwanda Education Board 2019) includes music,





dance, drama, fine arts and crafts. A whole unit is dedicated to “Performing Intore according to Umurishyo w’ingoma”, that is, performing the warrior dance at the rhythm of the drums. Gira Ingoma is exactly in line with that and could be a valuable input into the government’s program. Indeed, discussing the Creative Arts program and its actual implementation with the Head of Education in the district of Huye, it appeared that it was not compulsory but optional, and depended on the willingness and abilities of each teacher (Uwihirwe 2023). When implemented, the choice of artistic practices to teach also depends on the equipment available, as the schools do not receive specific funds for it. Often, when there is no equipment, what is taught is traditional dance and boys learn guhamiriza and girls gushayaya. Gira Ingoma has demonstrated the benefits of teaching artistic practices in school and offers strong arguments for finding funding for such a program. This is a way forward in which the project can reach the national level while promoting the arts in school and addressing gender within arts and culture. It can seem like a long way to get there, but it is also very close, as Gira Ingoma is gaining momentum with each festival and is explicitly aligned the National Gender Policy. Gakire and Ingoma Nshya have a strong long-term vision and an even stronger will to secure the future of women in drumming and so-called traditional arts.



## Conclusion

“Gira Ingoma – One Drum Per Girl” connects culture - understood as artistic practice in this article, education and gender. It builds on Ingoma Nshya’s work, showing that their persistence paid off and that, 20 years after they first started drumming, they managed to move the lines of gender roles in the arts and beyond. The program contributes to the transmission of what is considered tradition – though with a gender twist, it constitutes a way to attract girls to school and it creates economic opportunities. For all that it has been praised and has received encouragements from the District of Huye, various stakeholders in the sectors of culture and gender equality, and the community. However, Gira Ingoma also raises objections that uncover where the questioning of gender roles and the fight for gender equality are still encountering obstacles. The reactions to girls beating the drums and embodying the warriors Intore through their dance and poems show that values such as strength, bravery and many more still are considered masculine. Seeing girls claiming these values for themselves can be seen as taking the place of boys and men, which reveals a conception of gender equality as a threat to men. In addition, the concern around the decency of their outfits indicates a persisting reflex to control and cover women's bodies for them to remain ‘appropriate’.



In the face of these concerns, the program does not shy away from supporting and showcasing the girls' confidence, as it aims to move mentalities forward rather than wait for them to evolve over time. Gira Ingoma creates spaces for girls to learn, experiment and grow outside of the presence and gaze of boys and men, and offers them public platforms to perform what they have learnt and assert their confidence in public. In their poems and their songs, the girls bring together what is considered masculine and what is considered feminine and our hope is that, eventually, the distinction will not hold and the lines of so-called traditional gender roles will blur. The program therefore actively contributes to transform artistic practices that used to discriminate and exclude into practices of inclusion, diversity, and gender equality. It comes as a corrective and positive action in those areas (drumming, warrior dance and poetry, songwriting) where discrimination against women in fact continues to exist. And the task is titanic: to correct deeply buried cultural inequalities; to advance equity for half of the population right down to the rumbling of drums, the steps of warrior dances, the lyrics of traditional songs, the words of secular proverbs – all previously the territory of men, all now occupied by Rwandan women and, increasingly, girls. The girls proudly claim the legacy of Ingoma Nshya and inscribe themselves in a line of women who are building confidence and are unapologetic about what they do. With Ingoma Nshya, a new paradigm of female leadership has started to emerge in the cultural sector, and with Gira Ingoma, it is now



amplified by hundreds of girls, their families, their teachers, their school directors and officials from the district of Huye. This is just the start of the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup>For more information about Woman Cultural Centre, Ingoma Nshya and Gira Ingoma, please go to: <https://www.womanculturalcentre.com>

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