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## Reclaiming Our Wellbeing: Conversations Rooted in Context, Care, and Collective Power

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS SESSION #2: *Decolonising Wellbeing:*

In recent years, wellbeing has gained momentum globally as essential to self-care. Things like yoga retreats, mindfulness apps, therapy sessions, and corporate wellness programmes have become products of a booming wellness industry worth billions.

**Those things have their place. But they're scratching the surface. Real, sustainable, transformative wellbeing isn't something you buy, it's a powerful collective act of resistance.**



That was the provocation at the heart of the second session of Vuka Coalition's Wellbeing Dialogue Series, moderated by Nyachomba Kariuki-Schofield, with Nyamal Tutdeal and Latifah Namutebi bringing lived experience from South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda, and practice supporting women peacebuilders across Africa and Asia.



**Nyamal Tutdeal**  
The Armah Institute of  
Emotional Justice



**Latifah Namutebi**  
Women's International  
Peace Centre



**Nyachomba Kariuki-Schofield**  
Open Briefing

Where Session #1 established that wellbeing is political infrastructure (see the Highlights Report [here](#)), Session #2 went deeper: **If wellbeing is infrastructure, what does it look like when we build from our own soil, with our own hands, using ancestral knowledge?**

The conversation surfaced three provocations:

1

### **The colonial wound is the diagnosis**

Displacement, war, slavery, racism, patriarchy, Christianity weaponised against indigenous belief are symptoms of the same wound that severs communities from ancestral healing practices.

2

### **Ancestral wisdom is the treatment**

Indigenous knowledge isn't "informal education", it's formal education that Western systems many times refuse to recognise.

3

### **Moving at the speed of trust is the practice**

Funders demand frameworks, but sacred practices can't be frameworked. The tension between reporting requirements and protecting indigenous rituals is where civic actors live – and where creativity becomes survival.



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## Who Are You? Whose Are You?

*A Step Back Before We Move Forward*

Nyamal invited a different kind of introduction – by essence and lineage rather than job titles. She posed two questions:

- **"Who are you?"** – The true sense of you. Not everything you've acquired, but who you are at your core.
- **"Whose are you?"** – Who are your people? Your ancestors? Who's behind you, pushing you forward?



This was an invitation to name the self beneath credentials, and the ancestors and communities we carry with us.

The responses revealed a different kind of power:

I am the daughter of my mother, a granddaughter of a woman who brought babies into the world, I am a writer, a nurturer and a daughter of the mountain.

I am my ancestor Mother Glennell's daughter and my ancestor daughter Ashley's mother. I carry their healing and hospitality energies with me.

I am a good listener. I am Sherpa Indigenous woman. I care about people when I speak to make sure I do not hurt – which character came from my holy father.

My name is a reflection of my parents' love for each other and me. A daughter of a dressmaker, a dreamer, and of a carpenter and house painter, the most compassionate.

I am the light of the world, highly favoured by God and guided by the wisdom of my ancestors.

This wasn't small talk. This was grounding. A reminder that before we were workers, advocates, defenders – we were daughters, sons, community members, keepers of stories.

**The work of decolonising wellbeing begins with remembering who we are when no funder is watching, when the framework falls away.**



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## Naming the Colonial Wound

*What Has Interrupted Your Community's Ability to Heal?*

For centuries, communities across the world practised wellbeing through ancestral wisdom – rituals passed down through elders, healing knowledge embedded in ceremony and story, collective care woven into the fabric of daily life. But for many communities, that transmission was violently interrupted.

Nyamal Tutdeal, a South Sudanese-Ethiopian healing justice practitioner, opened the conversation questioning:



**What wounds have been inflicted upon your cultural practices?  
What has interrupted your community's ability to heal?**



The chat filled quickly. Displacement and war. Slavery and racism. Patriarchy. Christianity weaponised against indigenous spirituality. Environmental degradation. Occupation.

These weren't abstract historical events participants were analysing from a distance. These were active, ongoing interruptions – collective intergenerational trauma that severs the lines to traditional healing and community care that sustained people for thousands of years.

**For Nyamal's people – the Nuer of South Sudan – the deepest wounds were displacement and war. They don't just cause physical harm, they also create knowledge gaps that ripple across generations. When elders die in war or displacement, they take knowledge with them. Not the kind of knowledge written in books, but the kind lived and practised, passed through ceremony and story.**

These losses show up in unexpected ways – even in language itself. In many indigenous cultures, there are no single words for concepts like "trauma" or "postpartum depression" because the conditions those words describe didn't exist in the same way. Communities had collective care systems that prevented isolation, that held mothers after birth, that processed pain together rather than individually.

This language gap isn't academic, it's what activists face when they seek support. The therapy available, the frameworks funders recognize, the "evidence-based" programs institutions fund – they're all built on Western assumptions about individual suffering. But the wounds being addressed, and the healing practices that were interrupted, were always collective.



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## **Wellbeing Redefined:** *Beyond Commodified Wellness*

Before we can reclaim ancestral wisdom, we need to understand what we're actually reclaiming. What does real wellbeing look like when it's not packaged, commodified, or filtered through Western frameworks?

The Women's International Peace Centre defines wellbeing as:

**“The ability to live a life with dignity, balance, rootedness, and connection to yourself, others, land, spirit, and history.”**

More specifically:

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The ability to breathe without fear</li><li>• Being held with unconditional support and safety</li><li>• Naming your pain in your own language</li><li>• Resting without guilt</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Laughing from your belly</li><li>• Being in rhythm with your body and your land</li><li>• Remembering your ancestors</li><li>• Being felt in your community</li></ul> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

This stands in sharp contrast to commodified wellness: meditation apps, individual counselling, staff retreats. Those tools aren't inherently harmful, but **they're designed for stressed professionals, not people navigating state repression, constant surveillance, systemic criminalisation.**

As Latifah put it: "We don't want to be celebrated for surviving. We want to be supported in living."

Support in living means practising what we know. As Latifah reminded us, we've done collective care before – through Positive Women in the 1990s AIDS response, and movements like Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement. Latifah also pointed to two African philosophies that anchor this ethic:

- **Harambee** (Swahili, Kenya): "all pull together" – a community ethic of mutual aid and collective effort (e.g., fundraising/build-days where everyone contributes labour or resources).
- **Ubuntu** (Nguni Bantu philosophy, Southern Africa): "I am because we are" – a worldview that identity and dignity are realised through relationship, shaping practices of reciprocity, care and accountability.

**"We don't need to build capacity on how to live with one another, how to greet our neighbour," Latifah said. "As Africans, we exist as communities. We are always together." She added that if you find yourself feeling individualised or apart from community, question whether that's a foreign imprint displacing what you inherently know.**



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## The Treatment:

*Reclaiming Ancestral Wisdom*

If the diagnosis is the colonial wound, and wellbeing means connection to land, spirit, and history rather than individual self-care products, then the treatment is the active, intentional reclaiming of ancestral wisdom. It's bringing ancient, time-tested knowledge into the present as a vital, living source of healing.

This requires a fundamental shift in how we understand expertise. In the West, expertise equals degrees and certifications. But what Nyamal described is indigenous formal education – knowledge passed down from elders, embodied in rituals, learned through deep connection to land.

### Example 1: Nuer Postpartum Hot Water Therapy

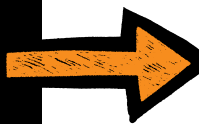
When Nyamal's cousin gave birth in South Dakota, far from elders, Nyamal called her grandmother for guidance on the traditional hot water therapy – massaging the baby with oil, shaping their head, building immunity. She adapted: olive oil instead of traditional butter. The baby fell asleep in her hands. Her grandmother called afterwards: "You've now become a grandmother."

Performing this ritual elevated Nyamal's standing in the family. When Western institutions asked for certification, she answered that the "evidence" is lived: herself, her cousins, her siblings, her grandmother – knowledge that exists even if it hasn't been documented.



#### The wound:

Systems that only recognise knowledge when certified by institutions that never honoured your people.



#### The healing:

Adaptation without betrayal. Olive oil instead of butter. The ritual continues. The baby is strengthened. The mother recovers. Community bonds are reinforced.

### Example 2: Ethiopian Buna – Coffee Ceremony for One

In Ethiopian culture, the coffee ceremony takes three hours. It's not about caffeine, it's therapy, community news, gossip from the aunties, time to strategise. Three cups, three rounds. The room thick with smoke and laughter.



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Nyamal wrote a poem about performing this ceremony alone in Ghana after displacement. The coffee ceremony was built for community, but now she makes it for one. "The loneliness sits across from me like a ghost at the table, taking up all the space where my people should be."

This isn't romanticising solitude. It's adaptive resilience. When collective rituals can't happen as designed, how do we maintain their essence whilst acknowledging the wound of their breaking?

The coffee tastes like grief. But still, she lights the incense. Still, she says the prayers. Still, she honours what was lost by holding it close.



These examples show ancestral wisdom in practice – knowledge that can't be measured in clinical trials, rituals that resist neat categorisation, healing that happens outside Western timelines. Which is precisely why civic actors face an impossible tension when they try to bring this work into institutional spaces that demand frameworks, metrics, and evidence-based proof.

### The Challenge:

*You Can't Framework Healing*

Here's the contradiction civic actors face: **fundors demand evidence-based frameworks, but indigenous healing practices resist standardisation by design. They move at the speed of trust, not the speed of donor reporting cycles.**

Practitioners who work with ancestral knowledge constantly navigate this tension. Organisations awkwardly label this work as "healing facilitation with a decolonised lens" because Western frameworks have no language for knowledge passed down through practice and observation rather than classroom instruction. When asked to framework rituals that happen over tea, through relationship building, in three-hour ceremonies – the request itself misunderstands what makes the healing effective.

**This isn't an individual problem. It's a structural tension facing every civic actor trying to reclaim indigenous practices whilst operating within Western institutional requirements.**

Latifah named the deeper problem: **When you're forced to translate your healing into frameworks built by people who never honoured you, you lose the essence trying to prove the evidence.**

The act of documentation itself can become extractive. Western institutions want to know how indigenous healing works so they can replicate it, scale it, monetise it – stripping away the relational foundations that made it effective in the first place.

So practitioners are learning strategic refusal. "We're learning to withhold information," Nyamal said. "To not share our rituals, how we connect with each other. Because it's not supposed to be frameworked."



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## What This Means for Civic Actors

The dialogue surfaced practical wisdom for activists, defenders, organisers, and movements:

1

### **Name Your Wounds Before Prescribing Treatment**

You can't heal what you won't acknowledge. Map the specific harms – historical and ongoing – that have interrupted your community's ability to care for itself. Only then can you determine whether Western interventions, indigenous practices, or both are appropriate.

2

### **Balance Both Worlds When Necessary**

Genocide, displacement, and knowledge loss mean we don't always have access to full indigenous practices. Adaptability isn't betrayal, it's survival. Find indigenous teachers where you are. Honour the essence, adapt the form.

3

### **Protect What's Sacred**

Not everything needs to be reported. Not every ritual should be frameworked. Strategic withholding is a decolonial practice. When funders demand explanations that would commercialise or demonise your healing work, find language bridges – or refuse.

4

### **Build Relationship Before Transaction**

Healing moves at the speed of trust. Circle work, tea ceremonies, coffee rituals – these aren't inefficient, they're how connection happens. If your organisation demands fast frameworks, question whether it's structurally capable of supporting decolonised wellbeing.

5

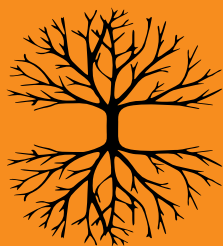
### **Connect to Land, Even in Displacement**

For activists living in exile or displacement, grounding becomes complicated. How do you connect to land that isn't ancestral? How do you maintain spiritual practices when your people aren't physically present? The answer: honour the land where you are and trust your intuition to guide you to teachers.

6

### **Rest as Rebellion**

Radical rest. Stopping everything. Finding pleasure. These aren't luxuries. They're infrastructure. Movements that don't rest don't last.



The dialogue didn't offer ten-step plans or evidence-based frameworks. It offered something more valuable: **Permission to remember. Courage to reclaim. Language to name what's been stolen and strategies to take it back.**

Wellbeing isn't a luxury. It's not an individual concern. It's the infrastructure of resistance. And **when we build that infrastructure from our own soil, using knowledge our ancestors protected, we don't just survive – we return home.**

