

Missouri Folk Arts Program

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In my transition from Uganda to Mizzou as an international graduate student, I brought my own traditions, and my own folk arts, with me to feel closer to home. I brought music, some foods, folktales that I tell my five-year-old son at bedtime, and material pieces that decorate our home here. These traditions have helped me carve out a Ugandan-ness in Columbia. What my folk arts have done for me during transition closely relates to the role of the folk arts for communities and individuals experiencing “forced” transnational transition.

When I started an internship with the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP) in 2014, I keenly became aware of and understood the relevance of folklore outside academia; more strikingly, I understood the role of the folk arts for communities and individuals in forced transnational transition—that involuntary movement of individuals and communities across several national borders. Typically, these individuals and communities are in flight from disasters and threatening situations affecting their country of origin.

Since its inception in 1985, the MFAP has funded several folk artists in forced transition over the years in Missouri’s Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP). The first artist of the kind to participate in TAAP was Saengphet Louangphom, a 1987 master of Kaen, a reed-made instrument used in Laotian traditional music. More artists in forced transition that have participated in the apprenticeship program include: Vanxay and Mone Saenphimmachak, 1989 and 1992 masters of Laotian loom building and Laotian embroidery who first resettled in St. Louis, Mo., from Laos. Haregewoin Kinfu, 1988 master of Ethiopian needlework, from Addis Ababa, and Mahmoud Conteh, 2006 master of *Mandingo* tied fabric dyeing from Sierra Leone, are both now



The author meets Kuku artists at the 2015 Big Muddy Folk Festival in Boonville, Mo.

resettled in St. Louis, Mo.

At the MFAP, I personally was privileged to learn about and meet some recent folk artists in forced transition from southern Sudan who have since resettled in Kansas City, Mo. Two southern Sudanese ethnic groups from this resettlement have participated in TAAP: the Dinka (comprising many sub-tribes) and the Kuku (a much smaller group). Generations of civil unrest in this region have typically evolved from fights for religious-inspired political control, conflict over management of natural resources, and control of political power between warring parties. One adverse effect of this long time civil unrest has been massive emigration out of this region. Whole communities and individuals have been forced to move *through* surrounding countries like Kenya, Uganda, Egypt and other parts of the Sudan in pursuit of safe

spaces. Some of these South Sudanese immigrants were eventually resettled in Kansas City, Mo.

Like the traditional arts that I love, music is a very important cultural tradition to the Dinka and Kuku. Through their transition experience, they may continue to communicate, celebrate, transmit and preserve their cultural identity through song, dance and drumming – traditions that have been handed down to them long before their forced transition. As we have observed at MFAP, displaced and resettled Sudanese continue to share and pass on their vital traditions to community members who were born before, during, and after transition and resettlement. So far, the apprenticeship program has funded three masters from the Kuku tribe and two from the Dinka tribe. For instance, Oliver Kenyi is a master of *murye* traditional dance and drumming;

Mary Kemir is a master of *bola* dance; and Mulu Evans Wani is a master of *kore* drumming. All three are Kuku by tribe and are formerly from Kajokeji County in South Sudan. Additionally, two master artists from the Dinka tribe have participated in TAAP: Akec Dut Bak is a master of Dinka Ma-Lual song and dance from the Aweil region, and Asunta Bol Arop is a master of Dinka Twic Mayardit songs and dance. All of these master artists tell us that singing, dancing, and drumming have helped them carve out a sense of belonging in every transnational space they have transitioned through, and to.

Traditional songs and dances are usually accompanied by drumming and are performed at celebrations and gatherings of the tribe, such as weddings and festivals. Each tribe has its own kind of songs, dances and drums. When master Kuku *kore* drummer Mulu Evans applied to TAAP in 2014, he explained that within the refugee camp in Kenya, the “Kuku were a much smaller group” compared to other tribes like the Dinka. Singing, and dancing helped unify the Kuku; they “danced *kore* because it reminded [them] of who [they] are” as a tribe; and *kore* helped “keep hopes up.” He also said that they “danced *kore* a lot because there was nothing much to do” in the refugee camps as movement outside the camp was often restricted by United Nations guidelines.

Similarly, Asunta Bol Arop, a 2008 master of Dinka Twic Mayardit songs and dance who is now resettled in the Kansas City, Mo., area, told MFAP Folk



Kuku artists perform in Kansas City, Mo.

Arts Specialist, Deb Bailey, through a translator, that “songs recount our history and tell us about our ancestors and how we came to be (origin myth)... nothing is written down. Songs also tell us about past events and people from long ago, the good deeds of our ancestors...we sing songs to remind [our children] of who they are so they don’t forget [they] are Dinka Twic’Mayardit.” Her apprentice Adet Bol Arop also told of her personal experience of keeping tradition in transition: she “grew up in the refugee camps,” and she “remembers dancing in the camps even though it was a very hard way to live. It was our culture so we needed to do it otherwise we might stop living.” However, despite their best efforts, Oliver Kenyi sums up the efforts of the South Sudanese noting that “the challenge to maintain [our] traditions is real.”

From my own observations, and from

interacting with TAAP artists, I know that forced transnational transition can be very disruptive and damaging to cultures and traditions. The transition experience of the Sudanese in the Kansas City, Mo., area underscores the role of folk arts in helping communities and individuals reconstruct cultural normalcy, continuity, and cohesion during transition. By providing them an avenue and resources to perform and share these arts in their new contexts, the apprenticeship program contributes to the peaceful and healthy acculturation of these communities into their new world. In addition, the program enables cultural exchange through showcasing their art at festivals, like the Big Muddy Folk Festival, and helps preserve their cultural identities in such deep and profound ways. On her website www.newcomerarts.net, anthropologist Amber Dodge stresses that “newcomer artists”—her term for newly resettled refugees and immigrants—participate in public folklore programs and collectives that facilitate smoother integration into their new world. Folk arts help newcomer artists create and sustain a bond between their lived past and their new world—they keep them connected to the beautiful memory of their past while bonding them to a powerful hope of a new future. ■

Photos: Deborah A. Bailey and Heather Rhodes Johnson

Three different styles of traditional drums used by Kuku artists for their dances.

