- African song / Fatu Gayflor
- War and wealth: song in Liberia
- Music for liberation: Seku Neblett
- Adeeb Refela: Egyptian oud
- All that we do
From the editor

African song / new contexts: An interview with Fatu Gayflor

War and wealth: music in post-conflict Liberia
By Ruth M. Stone

Music as a tool for liberation: Seku Neblett’s work in Philadelphia
By Elizabeth Sayre

The freedom to feel whatever you feel: Adeeb Refela
By Elizabeth Sayre

All that we do
By Toni Shapiro-Phim and Debora Kodish

Front cover: Fatu Gayflor teaching at the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School. Photo: James Wasserman
Last night was our annual “Dance Happens Here” concert. The culminating program of our 20th anniversary year, it included premieres of great percussive dance: new and challenging work by local artists who are deeply engaged in shaping vital vernacular art forms. The two featured groups, Flamenco del Encuentro and tap artists Germaine Ingram and Ensemble, have pushed themselves to find their own places, voices, and sounds while respecting and remaining responsible to very particular great traditions (and teachers). On stage, they were spectacular and inspiring; the pairing helped people to hear and see them differently and better. Such occasional concerts are one strand of PFP’s work. We work in partnerships to create times and spaces where people can be fully who they are, speaking, dancing, and playing in artistic languages that allow deep histories to be fully present. And we invest in people’s capacity to sustain such processes.

There is nothing like the magic of great art happening in public: people can be transformed through such moments. And these highly visible events get attention, building public knowledge of diverse forms of great, culturally meaningful art happening here and now. But behind these events stands something even more significant: what these events and genres allow, the relationships and knowledge they build, the new pathways and possibilities they open.

This issue of our magazine directs you to some of these behind-the-scenes matters. Three artists included in these pages—Anna Rubio, Antonia Arias, and Fatu Gayflor—have been featured in earlier Folklore Project concerts. Anna and Antonia were part of the December “Dance Happens Here” concert just mentioned. Fatu was one of the artists performing in our “African Song / New Contexts” concert last spring; Ruth Stone’s essay was first presented in an artist salon this fall, part of an effort to contextualize that concert.

Anna, Antonia, and Fatu can be seen again in our current documentary photography exhibition, “All That We Do: Contemporary Women, Traditional Arts.” James Wasserman’s photographs invite you to look more closely at some women in our region who retain a commitment to folk and traditional arts, truly against all odds. We invite you to look again because we believe that these artists and these vernacular traditions require—and repay—close attention. Arts and artists like these often seem to hide in plain sight, an advantage when they carry dangerous or minority perspectives, but a disadvantage when they are overlooked and dismissed. In the labels for Wasserman’s photographs, the artists’ own words begin to suggest some of the values, motivations, challenges and struggles that are part of the particular kinds of art-making in which they are engaged.

Musicians Adeeb Refela, and Seku Neblett, also featured in this issue, have been participants in PFP’s technical assistance (TA) program, which has served 68 artists in the last three months alone. In gatherings and workshops at PFP, artists share their dreams and visions, their needs and issues. They consider how to explain who they are and what they do. And they are coached in the necessary work of finding the material resources to realize their dreams. Over the last 20 years, more than 368 traditional artists and cultural workers have participated in this free program, raising more than $2.73 million dollars for locally based folk and traditional arts projects. Often these have been the first outside dollars to be invested in cultural heritage programs in particular communities of color. Ideas and common projects first mentioned at our TA workshops are often early steps on a road to highly visible public programs, staged under PFP’s umbrella or independently.

For 20 years we have used our long-running programs—public events, technical assistance, arts education, this magazine and other documentary projects—to help keep local vernacular traditions accessible and sustainable. We continue to be inspired by the seriousness of purpose of local artists working in discrete cultural forms, by the power and continuing relevance of “minority” traditions, and by the lively presence and significance of diverse alternative artistic legacies in our neighborhoods. We are privileged to be on this road together.

— Debora Kodish
December 9, 2007
“Our songs, heard far from home, carry us back with memories, but they also inspire us and give us courage to go forward with our lives.”
Over the past year, the Philadelphia Folklore Project has been marking our 20th birthday by paying close attention to how local communities and artists sustain diverse and significant cultural traditions. In April, we presented three noted local African immigrant musicians—Fatu Gayflor, Zaye Tete, and Mogauwane Mahloele—along with their ensembles in a concert performance. All of the featured artists are now practicing music in contexts that differ greatly from those in which they learned and performed in their homelands. They are making music that maintains a continuity with what came before, but also requires, inspires, and challenges people to open up to previously unimagined possibilities.

Each participating artist has experienced exile as a result of war and social and political violence. Each has met stark racism and other prejudices in the process of carving out a life here—even while doing things that others might take for granted, such as buying and settling into a new home, or sending one’s child down the street to school. Each has had to figure out the complex systems involved in getting one’s artistic accomplishments acknowledged as valuable far from the original contexts in which they were nourished. And each knows—through personal experience or that of friends and relatives—the daunting barriers to family reunification, full citizenship, and rebuilding a life. Part of PFP’s mission is to address issues of concern in the field of folk and traditional arts, and a just immigration policy is of paramount importance to the lives of many who practice these traditions and revitalize city communities. Our concert drew attention to the significance and artistry of local immigrants; tables from activist and service organizations provided information; and the artists themselves used the occasion to share some of their own perspectives.

Now living in New Jersey, Fatu Gayflor is a renowned singer and recording artist from Liberia. A singer and dancer from a young age, she performed often in community contexts, including the ritual Moonlight Dance, in her home village of Kakata. Later, as a member of Liberia’s National Cultural Troupe, which is based in the national artists’ village of Kendeja, she was given the title “Princess” in recognition of her exquisite renditions of songs in most of the languages of Liberia’s sixteen ethnic groups. (She herself is of mixed Vai and Lorma ethnicities.) As a young adult, she went out on her own, founding the successful Daughters of King N’Jola dance and music ensemble in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia. She has recorded three CDs and was showcased in Italy by the United Nations World Food Program to bring attention to the plight of Liberians caught in civil war. In the United States since 1999, she has performed at Liberian weddings and other gatherings, has taught through the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts/Arts in Education program, and is currently teaching Liberian music and dance at the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures School in Philadelphia. “It is important that artists be heard,” she says: “Our songs, heard far from home, carry us back with memories, but they also inspire us and give us courage to go forward with our lives. Each traditional song has a long, long history.

[Continued on next page >]
“Each traditional song has a long, long history, with complicated meanings. It is so hard to describe. Each is part of our whole way of being. The songs can add to the world’s understanding of Liberia.”

With complicated meanings. It is so hard to describe. Each is part of our whole way of being. The songs can add to the world’s understanding of Liberia. I hope that, one day, more local traditional artists will be recognized for what they give all people, as well as what they give their own communities.”

In last spring’s concert, artists presented songs that reflect the beauty and the pain of moving forward in new and sometimes unwelcoming surroundings. In other songs and other arts, immigrant artists’ experiences are less visible, but no less present. Gayflor, for example, closed the concert with a song she composed, “Awoya.” This is a plea for an end to war. Sung in the Vai language, “Awoya” speaks of the suffering of innocent people who were simply going about their business when war broke out and destroyed their lives. Gayflor wrote this while living in exile in the Ivory Coast after the death of her baby during the early days of Liberia’s civil war. Singing it was, she says, a way of focusing her grief, and releasing her tears.

—Toni Shapiro-Phim

The following interview with Fatu Gayflor was conducted by Timothy D. Nevin in the dance studio space of ACANA, Inc. (African Cultural Alliance of North America), in Southwest Philadelphia, on August 11, 2006.
**AN INTERVIEW WITH FATU GAYFLOR by Timothy D. Nevins**

**Tim:** Fatu, if you don’t mind me asking, how did you get the title of “Princess”? Does this mean that you come from a royal family and that your father was a king?

**Fatu:** Actually no, even though my father was a chief in a Vai village, I don’t consider myself to be actual royalty. I received the title of “Princess” when I was crowned Princess of Liberian Folklore Music in 1984, during the time of President Samuel K. Doe. I was given that title for being the first woman to learn to sing folksongs in most of the sixteen national languages.

**Tim:** That is really interesting. So what was your first experience in the recording studio, recording that famous “golden voice” of yours?

**Fatu:** Well, before 1980 no recording studios existed in Monrovia except for the tiny “ABC Studio” with its two-track recording device in the crowded Waterside Market. This set-up was very rudimentary and exploitative. Recording artists were only given a very small amount of money in a lump sum after recording a song, and there was no such thing as a recording contract. It was pretty bad. The situation improved a little bit a few years later when a second recording studio, called “Studio 99,” was opened by a Lebanese man named Faisal Helwani. Studio 99 was located on 5th Street in the residential Sinkor neighborhood.

**Tim:** I am curious, what was your biggest hit song during this early period?

**Fatu:** My biggest hit song, “Si Kele We,” was recorded in 1984 with a total of only 25 vinyl records being pressed! These records were given as gifts to visiting foreign dignitaries. The rest of the recordings were only released on cassette tape and promoted by the state-run radio station, ELBC. Other Cultural Troupe members, such as Nimba Burr, did not record in the studio until much later, in the 1990s.

**Tim:** Did any of those early vinyl records survive the war? Do you have any of them with you still?

**Fatu:** Unfortunately, no, none survived that I know of.

**Tim:** How would you compare your music at the time to the funky hit songs of the “doyen diva” of Liberian music, Miatta Fahnbulleh?

**Fatu:** Well, we both have a Vai ethnic background, but her music was “modern” and mostly sung in English, while ours was “traditional.”

**Tim:** So tell me, what was it like living as a young teenager in the National Art Village at Kendeja before Charles Taylor’s rebel invasion and the civil war destroyed the campus at the beginning of 1990?

**Fatu:** I left the campus in 1985, so fortunately I was not there when the war reached the campus in 1990. My memories are from before the war came. One striking feature at Kendeja were the various examples of indigenous architecture. Traditional houses were built at Kendeja, including homes in the Vai, Kpelle, Bassa, and Mandingo building styles, all of which are different. Many were built with the same materials, including thatch roofs, but with vastly different designs. It was important that the Mandingos were included there because many Liberians didn’t consider the Mandingos to be “true citizens” of Liberia even after living several generations in the country. They were a group that was misrepresented through history lessons and generations of storytelling. People forget that all of us are from somewhere else. The way African nations were carved up [by European imperialists] had little to do with what ethnic groups were living on what land, and which groups had good relations with each other.

**Tim:** Who was the director of the Cultural Center when you arrived?

**Fatu:** Peter Ballah was the director of the campus, and Mr. Zumana was the stage director.

**Tim:** Fatu, how did you support yourself financially while part of the Cultural Troupe?

**Fatu:** At that time I received a monthly salary from the government—the Department of Information, Cultural Affairs, and Tourism (ICAT)—as did other members of the troupe. There was also a school, a dormitory, and a cafeteria on the campus.

**Tim:** I was surprised to learn that while you were living in the National Art Village at the Kendeja Cultural Center, there was also a Sande “Bush” School set up nearby that initiated young girls into the ways of their elders. I normally associate Sande “Bush” Schools with rural areas in the Northwest of Liberia, not with metropolitan areas such as Monrovia.

**Fatu:** Yes, there was a Sande Village called Kenema for the instruction of the young women. It was within walking distance of Kendeja. One of the prominent instructors there was an older woman named “Ma Gbessay” (Gbessay Kiazolu). I personally was never involved in the actual training aspects. Remember, the Kendeja Cultural Center was not located in downtown Monrovia; we were in the country area to the south of the city, on the beachfront.

[Continued on p. 25 >]
I left Liberia in the summer of 1989 knowing that the political situation was shaky at best. The dictator Samuel Doe had jailed many relatives of the Kpelle singers I worked with in Monrovia, and these musicians often stopped by to relay stories when they returned from visiting family members in prison. In December 1988 my husband and I had filmed the funeral of James Gbarbea where singers covertly protested political oppression with song lyrics such as “Ku kelee be lii ee, Doe a pail ii, ee” (We all are going, Doe is going). Gbarbea, a former government minister, had fled to Charlotte, North Carolina. He returned in death to his homeland. After a funeral in Monrovia, his family brought him back to Sanoyea, some 90 miles in the interior.

The 14 years of war and destruction that followed are well known to the world. Vast numbers of people were killed; many more fled to other parts of Liberia, or the neighboring countries of Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, or Sierra Leone. Other Liberians went farther, including some who are living in the Philadelphia area. Philadelphia has been fortunate in that several fine singers, including Fatu Gayflor and Zaye Tete, were among those refugees. And their talents were featured in a wonderful concert here last spring. I wasn’t able to join you for that event, but I’m thrilled to share a few thoughts about my recent research trip to Liberia.

Although the country was devastated by war, and reports often focus on the resulting damage to the infrastructure, I want to tell you what has been preserved—what has actually flourished—during the 18 years I was absent. To an ethnomusicologist the vitality of the music was impressive, a cause for celebration for all who know Liberian music.

Before I tell you about the music I experienced in June and July this past year, let me say that...
I visited Liberia for the first time when I was three years old and my family went to live in Bong County. After being home-schooled in the mornings, I accompanied Kpelle people to the fields, went fishing with them, and sat with them by the cooking fires. My parents, who were missionaries for the Lutheran church, took me and my brother to Liberia, where we lived in Bong County until we left to obtain our high school and college educations.

I returned in 1970 as a graduate student and lived there on and off until 1989. I planned this last June and July to visit sites where I had recorded before the war and to research the performers and their music. I began my work at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Monrovia, where we had worked with the Kpelle choir—that bold group of women singers and male instrumentalists who sang about injustices in the late 1980s. I knew that many members of the choir had fled to the Bunduburam refugee camp in Ghana during the war. They had written me a letter from Ghana describing the music that they were performing even in those difficult times.

As I walked into the church on a Saturday afternoon, when I knew there would be choir practice, I looked for Feme Neni-kole, the dynamic female soloist who had been the choir’s sparkplug. As various choir members saw me, they came up to welcome me, hug me, and relay the news that Feme was gone—she had traveled to Utah to visit her daughter.

The good news was that there were now three dynamic young singers who could lead the singing in the choir. We were thrilled to record a choir still bound together as a tight social group and greet some members who had been in the choir since the 1980s, such as Tono-pele.

The horror of the massacre of 1990, when soldiers of the Armed Forces of Liberia killed more than 600 people in St. Peter’s, seemed far away as the women sang in their tight call-and-response arrangements accompanied by their gourd rattles. This is how musicians communicate and build community. Kpelle people say, “Kwa faa ngule mu.” (We respond underneath the song). This same technique is used by both Fatu Gayflor and Zeye Tete in their music.

In the summer of 2007, the St. Peter’s choir was no longer emphasizing protest against the government, as they felt they had to do in 1989. They proudly sang the Liberian national anthem in Kpelle and requested that we record it.

Even more tightly coordinated were the transverse horn ensembles we encountered in the Gbanga area of Bong County, some 120 miles interior. We recorded one group in Baakole, near Gbanga. In the Baakole group, each horn played only one or two notes, and each player timed his notes to create a part of the whole. A drummer added another rhythmic layer to the richly textured sound. The women dancers created visual rhythms that amplified the excitement of the players. This Baakole group has been playing together since the 1960s and continues today, often getting invitations to play for the county superintendent. While in earlier years they might have played in the chief’s official ensemble, in the twenty-first century they are more like freelance musicians.

In nearby Suacoco we found a group that had added a struck metal instrument to an ensemble containing four horns and one drum. The musicians told me that they had painted their horns light blue, the color of the UN troops, because they had played at several functions for the Bangladeshi contingent now resident nearby, helping to keep the peace. The
artist profile

Adeeb Refela.
Photo: Elizabeth Sayre
Adeeb Refela is an ‘ud (oud) player and violinist from Cairo, Egypt, resident in Philadelphia since 2003. Understanding his musical world means crossing wide spans of time and space. One of his two specialties, the ‘ud, is a short-necked, pear-shaped, fretless lute; it dates from the seventh century. Some of the melodies and types of pieces he plays on it are more than a thousand years old. His other instrument, the violin, was introduced into Egypt and other Arab areas in the late nineteenth century during the British colonial period. Most importantly, Refela grew up in a dynamic, urban environment. Cairo is a regional cultural capital, where musicians continually adapt older genres and incorporate new ideas into their work. Including old and diverse roots, representing complex and cosmopolitan understandings, his music is very much born out of the moment in which it is played. Virtuosic melodic and rhythmic improvisations are characteristic of Arab music.

Of his family, early life, and first experiences with music, Refela says:

“I was born on the 22nd of December, 1957, in Cairo. My father was in the military. He had artistic inclinations. My mother, too. My mother was a housewife, and she used to sing as she was doing anything, washing dishes, or whatever. She sounded good. I have nine siblings; I’m number eight. [They all have] musical inclinations—they love music so much! My younger brother, he’s a singer. He started after me. He’s a singer in Egypt, and he has some albums. His name is Ameen Samy.

I was introduced to music by my [older] brother buying a guitar. By the age of 16, I had figured out how to play. I didn’t know how to tune it at that time, and I asked one of my friends, he was a musician, how to tune it. I got it very quickly. And I practiced. After that I played the ‘ud. The ‘ud is the national instrument in our country. I used to listen to it on the radio; I used to like it very much. So I decided to try it. When I started, I used to go to some friends in the music field. They encouraged me; that’s why I kept going. Otherwise, I would have stopped. I was stuck in the second year of college for three years. I didn’t finish because I was distracted by music too much, because I love it! Whoever goes on in this field has too much struggle with the culture and everything…and with their parents. If it wasn’t for love, they wouldn’t go on.”

Growing up, he heard records, radio, and TV broadcasts, and quickly developed an interest in instrumental music:

“I used to know songs, but not the lyrics. I don’t know why. The music was more interesting to me than the lyrics. Sometimes the lyrics didn’t mean anything to me. That’s what I thought when I was young. The composer of music is deriving the feeling from somewhere else, not writing to the lyrics, anyhow. That’s all over the globe. They derive the feeling, or the picture of unity of the composition, from somewhere else. So the lyric is something to fill in.”

Nonetheless, one of his major inspirations was a vocalist who reinvented art song in the Middle East and who drew much of her authority from childhood
training in Qur’anic recitation
(an important verbal/vocal genre
governed by very specific rules of
pronunciation):

“I used to listen to Umm Kulthum. She’s legendary. She had fans from all
over the Arabian countries, even the Turkish people, even in Persia, Iran.
She passed away in 1975. So I didn’t have the chance to… I was too young
to go to concerts, you know? My favorite composer’s name is [Muhammad] ‘Abd al-Wahhab.”

It would be hard to overestimate the
cultural impact of Umm Kulthum,
“unquestionably the most famous
singer in the twentieth-century Arab
world.” She and singer-composer
‘Abd al-Wahhab were of the same
generation, born in the early 20th
century, and were media stars, direct
competitors, and eventually
collaborators in the 1960s and 1970s.
In some ways they represented
opposing trends in Egyptian music.
‘Abd al-Wahhab was known as a
modernizer who borrowed from
Western styles in his compositions,
while Umm Kulthum, always a
savvy judge of her audience as well as
a spectacular performer,
positioned herself as an authentically
Egyptian traditionalist. 4

Both Umm Kulthum and ‘Abd al-
Wahhab lived at a time when Egyptian
music, particularly music performed in
highly visible public venues or
broadcasts, was undergoing a
transition in the uses of Western-style
staff notation. Until the mid-twentieth
century, many great Egyptian
performers had little use for Western
musical notation. 5 Umm Kulthum, for
example, was famous for teaching new
pieces to her accompanists by rote—
that is, by ear, through repetition.
Although many musicians trained in
Western classical music develop a bias
that elevates the ability to read music
over aural skills, musicians who play in
other styles recognize the advantages
of learning by ear. Refela comments
about his own process as a student:
“I started by ear. Actually… if you
want to learn music, and get the best
out of yourself, the logical way is to
learn by ear, because it’s like language.
We spoke before [we] invented
written language. You get the feeling
and you get the ideas. Anyway, I
started by ear, but afterward I taught
myself how to read and write by
reading method books. By reading, and
asking somebody if it’s right or wrong,
some musician. It was too much work,
but it’s more engrained in my brain
than [if I had been] led by somebody.”

In Egypt in the mid-twentieth
century, highly visible professional
ensembles became more and more
used to playing from written scores,
which also meant that the sound of
instrumental ensembles became
increasingly uniform and less
heterophonic. 6 This change, in part due
to the creation of music
conservatories with fixed curricula and
the resulting standardization of
repertoires and styles, also meant that
educated musicians had to be
increasingly literate, in addition to
aurally skilled, in order to manage both
traditional and Western-influenced
musical jobs.

While in college, Refela made an
important connection with
a brilliant Cairo musician
who exemplified the aural and
improvisational skills necessary to play
Arab music well. Abdo Dagher (b.
1936) did not read or write music or
any language, yet he is famous and
widely admired for his brilliantly
structured compositions (many of
which have been transcribed by
admiring students). At Dagher’s
salon-like gatherings, Refela learned
these pieces, as well as more about
the art of creating melody.

In 1976, Refela began performing in
public, and in the early 1980s he
moved to the United States, joining
family members in California. Early on,
he experienced the typical mishaps of
negotiating a new environment in a
foreign language:
“I had difficulty when I came first to
America. I lost my luggage, and I had
to deal with a worker in the airport. It
was difficult for me to describe. I told
her, ‘I lost my bags.’ She asked me,
‘Your luggage?’ I didn’t know what the
hell is ‘luggage.’ I thought she was
talking about something else. But,
anyway, they sent me the luggage on
the second day. I was successful in
giving them the address.”

Working many different kinds of day
jobs, for more than six years he played
three nights a week in nightclubs and
other venues in the Los Angeles and
San Diego areas. In 1988, in order to
comply with U.S. immigration rules,
Refela returned to Egypt.

In the early 1990s, two
opportunities arose that were
important for his music career. The
first, in 1993, was an international ‘ud
competition in Cairo; his sister read
about it in the newspaper and
suggested that he enter. Refela won
second place (but, he notes, the first-
place winner told him he should have
won). Second, and just a few weeks
after the ‘ud competition, he joined
the National Ensemble for Arabic
Music at the Cairo Opera House, a
cultural institution somewhat like
Lincoln Center, with many different
subdivisions and ensembles. One
hundred members strong, the National

[Continued on next page >]
Ensemble played “the classical stuff, serious compositions,” says Refela, on a variety of instruments, both Arab and European. The European bowed strings play Arab music: “The base of our group is the violin. You can add as many as you [like], because they sound good together. We have the violin, and the cello, and the double bass; we don’t have the viola. The ‘ud is usually a solo instrument; you can have only one, or two at the most. And we have an instrument made from reed, it’s called nay. Like a flute. They [make the holes] in it in a certain way [so] that they reach our tunes, with the quarter-tones. The nay is solo, too; you have only one. We have the qanun. The qanun is a zither, you pluck it. You hook picks to your fingers with, like, opened thimbles. And a percussive section—you have the tabla, and we have something like a tambourine, we call it ‘riqq.’ And we have a bigger size [of frame drum]; we call it ‘duff,’ so we have the bass sound of it.”

He remained with this group for ten years and also traveled with smaller groups to Austria and Germany and countries in the Arab region: Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, and Tunisia. In 2003, however, facing economic difficulties despite these prestigious performance opportunities, Refela made the decision to return to the United States. This time he came to Philadelphia, where one of his brothers lives, and where he found that it is easier for a newcomer to make a living than in California. Refela very quickly connected with local Arab American musicians:

“The first week I came here, my brother told me, ‘Why don’t you go to a place called The Nile?’ It was at 2nd and Chestnut in Old City. I grabbed my violin and went there Saturday night, and talked to the group performing at that place. I told them, ‘I do this and this.’ And they said to me, ‘Why not? Why don’t you join us?’ I performed the whole night with them. Not for five minutes or ten minutes, I performed the whole night with them, because we got…engaged. They knew what I did. They’re American, second-generation Lebanese. Joe Tayoun was the first person I knew. He played the drum and his brother played the second drum, and there’s an ‘ud player, his name is Roger Mgrdichian. So I joined them, and from that time, I used to perform with them regularly. That was 2003, January. I performed with them for six months. I had to go back to Egypt; because of my visa, I had to leave after six months. I went back to Egypt and I came back after two months. Not even two months. And started performing with them again.”

He has found performing for American audiences to be creatively stimulating:

“Americans, by culture, look for what’s new. It’s not that they get bored easily, it’s because they’re looking for progression, improving all the time. So they look for something else. Since this [music] is completely different from what they’ve heard, they find it very unique. They interact with us more than anyone else. That’s how I feel it. They get it more than other foreigners, our music. The audience back home, they know the stuff… So we have to be relevant to whatever they know. You [can’t] go too far from what should be played. So they won’t be like, ‘Oh, what are you doing? You’re out of your mind!’ But here it’s more free. You can come up with different things because of the audience here.”

A permanent resident of the United States since 2005, Refela has readily joined in others’ educational performance projects. Alongside Jewish, Greek, and Lebanese American artists Bruce Kaminsky, Bill Koutsouros, and Michele Tayoun, Refela works as a violinst in the Spice Route Ensemble, one of the musical groups affiliated with Musikopia (formerly Strings for Schools, an organization that presents local musicians in school residencies and performances). He has been an instructor at Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture summer camp in Chestnut Hill, an organization that educates youth of all backgrounds in Arabic language and culture (“Al-Bustan” means “the garden”). He also participates in “Intercultural Journeys,” a Philadelphia non-profit organization that promotes cross-cultural collaborations, particularly between Arabs and Jews—the artistic director is Israeli cellist Udi Bar-David of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Nonetheless, Refela is eager to expand his teaching and sharing of Arab music; he would like to take his wealth of knowledge to university students who want to know about the inner workings of Arab music.

Refela is known as a specialist in a genre called taqasim, a solo instrumental improvisation that combines “traditional understandings of the Arab maqam system with the present-day performer’s individual creativity.” “The word ‘taqasim,’ it’s an Arabic word and they used it afterwards in Greece, [where] they call it ‘taksimi.’

[Continued on p. 29 >]
all that we do:
contemporary women, traditional arts

On display at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, 735 S. 50th Street, Philadelphia through spring 2007, after which it is available as a traveling exhibition for rental. Call for details: 215. 726.1106.

The full exhibition text is included here. Text and all photographs may also be viewed online at http://www.folklorepject.org/programs/exhibits/wedo/index.cfm

Yvette Smalls.
Photo: James Wasserman, 2007
(For more detailed caption, see exhibition text).
Introduction

The women pictured in this exhibition choose, against all odds, to learn, practice and teach cultural heritage—folk and traditional arts—in the 21st century. Here are nine exceptional artists, caught in moments that hint at the complexity of their lives and arts: Antonia Arias, Fatu Gayflor, Vera Nakonechny, Ayesha Rahim, Anna Rubio, Yvette Smalls, Michele Tayoun, Elaine Hoffman Watts and Susan Watts. Art forms represented include flamenco, Liberian song, Ukrainian needlework, African American crochet/crown-making and hair sculpture, Middle Eastern dance and song, and Jewish klezmer music, a small sampling of the vital contemporary practice of traditional arts in Philadelphia today. Some of the women pictured were featured in recent Folklore Project concerts, salons or exhibitions; others will be featured in concerts this coming year. This exhibition takes viewers behind the scenes, suggesting some of the ongoing work behind polished performances and exquisite craft, reminding us of the depth and breadth of relationships in which these women work. Here are artists honoring responsibility to family and broader communities (and to cultural practices and their lineages), all while enmeshed in the fast-paced global shifts that impact us all. And all while producing exquisite and important art.

In her own way, each of the featured artists is groundbreaking: juggling a push at conventions (artistic and social) while respecting canons, or balancing a life-long dedication to learning a cultural practice while isolated from other such practitioners, or insisting on constructive, positive self-imagery in the face of racism and inequity.

Nine women, out of hundreds of artists with whom the Folklore Project has worked over two decades: this 20th anniversary exhibition reflects ongoing and shared commitments to widening public knowledge about what counts as culture, to grappling with the continuing significance of heritage in a fractured world, and to creating (somehow, and together) systems and structures supporting meaningful cultural diversity.

Responsibility and Balance

Come into their homes! Like the arts in which they excel, these are women with many places they consider home. With roots in Liberia, Lebanon, Spain, Ukraine and elsewhere, they create and perform on many more stages than an outside public can know, or than a conventional biography might reveal. Their balancing acts, whether improvised or well-planned, reflect responsibility to family, community, heritage, artistic traditions, social justice, and more.

1. Yvette Smalls does hair: she is a master braider and a hair sculptor, revealing the beauty within her clients. Here she welcomes the photographer, and us, to her home in West Philadelphia, 2007.

2. Saturday morning breakfast for Liberian singer Fatu Gayflor and family (husband Timothy Karblee and daughter Fayola Thelma Karblee) at home in Sicklerville, New Jersey, 2007. Because of work schedules, the family can enjoy a morning meal together only once or twice a week.

3. Anna Rubio (center) and fellow flamenco dancer Gigi Quintana stretch before a rehearsal in the Rubios’ South Philadelphia rowhouse. Anna’s son David is on the left, 2006.

4. Ukrainian needlework artist Vera Nakonechny, wearing a traditional embroidered shirt, lights candles for Easter dinner.

[Continued on next page >]
“Spirit comes and spirit talks. Spirit tells you where to put this color, this shell. So that’s basically how the hats were made…” — Ayesha Rahim

About the photographer

James Wasserman began his photographic career covering the life of the city, shooting for a Philadelphia weekly. Over the 20 years since then he has worked regionally, nationally and internationally. His photographs have appeared in Newsweek, Time, The New York Times, Far Eastern Economic Review, Le Nouvel Observateur and other publications. He has had one-man exhibitions at the Painted Bride Art Center, Old City Coffee, and Nexus Gallery. He has recently relocated to China, where he is exploring the impact of the changing landscape on peoples’ lives.
“I weave tradition, creativity and love into my tapestry of natural hairstyles; especially since generations of Black women have been taught to wage war on their coil…”

— Yvette Smalls

L-R: Ayesha Rahim, Yvette Smalls, Anna Rubio and Antonia Arias, Anna Rubio and Michèle Tayoun, Elaine Watts. Photos: James Wasserman. (For detailed captions see the exhibition text).

5] **Yvette Smalls** in her home, doing Patricia Green’s hair, with Karima Wadud-Green (right) socializing while waiting her turn, 2007. Her studio is itself a work of art, filled with culturally and personally significant objects. The copper plate on the wall, a girl braiding hair, from Tanzania, is Yvette’s favorite image. She bought it at an African Liberation Day festival in Washington, D.C. “Patricia comes up from Maryland so that I can do her hair. I give her a choice of hair oils, all of which I’ve mixed myself. We take a tea and zucchini bread break (or whatever else I’ve made), and when she’s back in the chair, someone else comes in. My sanctuary is my studio, and a gathering place.”—Yvette Smalls

commitment

Minority traditions—discrete and particular forms of artistic and cultural expression—continue to have meaning because people make a commitment to them, within families, over generations and also across boundaries and borders. Anna, Vera, Fatu, Susan and Elaine are actively teaching technique and larger meanings about these arts, whether they are in performance, in an intimate setting with one cherished student, or in a classroom. As well, they model lessons about the rewards and values of lives devoted to preserving and re-imagining a heritage.

6] **Anna Rubio** with student Samantha Hogsten during a lesson in Anna’s basement studio, 2007. “My friend [flamenco dancer] Fibi got these shoes from Spain for my wonderful student, Samantha. In this picture, I’m explaining the features of professional flamenco shoes. I call Samantha ‘La Joyita’ because of her amazing smile, and because she’s a gem, a jewel.”—Anna Rubio. “I don’t have the words to describe what Anna has meant to me. She’s my teacher, but also a role model, and, in some ways, a mother.”—Samantha Hogsten

Commitment

We take a tea and zucchini bread break (or whatever else I’ve made), and when she’s back in the chair, someone else comes in. My sanctuary is my studio, and a gathering place.”—Yvette Smalls

7] **Vera Nakonechny** examining details of traditional Ukrainian patterns with her student, Melania Tkach, 2007. In a context far from Ukraine, Vera figures out how to explain the meanings and designs to someone who may continue to practice and pass on the tradition.

8] **Fatu Gayflor** teaching Liberian song and dance to a sixth grade class at the Folk Arts - Cultural Treasures Charter School in Philadelphia’s Chinatown, 2007. Young people previously unfamiliar with Liberian arts have their world expanded through this exposure to songs, dances, and stories shared by teacher, but also a role model, and, in some ways, a mother.”

9] **Fatu Gayflor**, with J. Blamoh Doe on drums, 2007. Fatu and Blamoh worked together in Liberia. Coming from an ensemble tradition, and now somewhat isolated from a pool of Liberian artists with their skills, Fatu, Blamoh and local peers have had to adapt to smaller-group community and concert performances.

“I really like the expression in this picture. I’m telling the audience that I am giving everything through my song. I can’t be distracted; my message and my art will come out loud and clear. There’s always so much to think about, to worry about: relatives in Africa, work schedule, my young daughter at home. I’m just doing my own thing in this picture. That’s the only way to take control from the stage.”—Fatu Gayflor

10] Klezmer musician **Susan Watts** (center) with sister Eileen Siegel and father Ernie Watts, at a family Hanukah celebration, Eileen’s basement, Havertown. 2006. Other generations of this musical dynasty aren’t pictured, including Eileen’s son, Bradley, who takes drum lessons from his grandmother Elaine. “I call this ‘Family Portrait, With Chair’: I love the diagonal connecting my dad to two of his daughters—me, the youngest, and Eileen, the oldest. We’ve continued
in the family business: klezmer.”
—Susan Watts


12] Klezmer drummer Elaine Hoffman Watts teaching Curran Browning at Rosemont School of the Holy Child, 2006. “This is a great picture. I’m showing Curran how to use his hand and wrist, not his arm. I’m teaching the kid. That’s the whole point, passing on the art.”
—Elaine Hoffman Watts

13] Anna Rubio sewing costumes in her basement. She sews flamenco dresses as well as costumes for the Kulu Mele African American Dance Ensemble and other dance troupes.


15] Middle Eastern dancer and singer Michele Tayoun (left) rehearsing with the Herencia Arabe Project, which combines Arabic music and dance with flamenco, St. Maron’s Hall, Philadelphia, 2005.


17] Yvette Smalls doing the hair of Estan Wilsonus El in her sanctuary at home, 2007. Through her hair sculpture and her documentary film, “Hair Stories,” Yvette actively opposes racism and negative self-image: “Some of the techniques I employ are over 10,000 years old… I weave tradition, creativity and love into my tapestry of natural hairstyles; especially since generations of Black women have been taught to wage war on their coil.”


19] Ayesha Rahim, crocheting at her home in North Philadelphia, 2006. Her hats and “crowns” are widely prized in the community now; it took years to find her way, to push past institutions that diminished her gifts. “My art is like spirit work. I was over at Temple University selling the hats and I was impressed because they were telling me what part of Africa they were from. I had no idea! Spirit comes and spirit talks. Spirit tells you where to put this color, this shell. So that’s basically how the hats were made… I used to say, ‘Whose hands did they give me?’ because they are so big! Lord God! Whose hands are

Vision

What do we see and hear in public performance of folk arts? So much is likely outside the immediate experience of the onlooker. Yet, what we don’t notice has been part of the artists’ vision as they work toward a concert, festival, or ritual event. The intensity of performance carries within it the passion of rehearsal, long histories of knowledge of a particular piece or rhythm, and the devotion to pulling together all the elements that go into the spectacle the audience will take in. Color, shape, sound, and movement coalesce at a certain moment, in a certain place, after extensive time and effort beforehand, creating beauty, magic, and meanings. And paths for a next step…

Courage

The myriad aspects of behind-the-scenes art-making are often unknown, or invisible, once a hair sculpture, crocheted hat, embroidered shirt, or musical piece is presented to the world. Lock-by-lock, stitch-by-stitch, note-by-note, and then over again (sometimes starting completely over again): the process is part of the artistry. Also often unknown or hidden are the histories of these particular arts, and the women who practice them.

[Continued on p. 20 >]

Vera Nakonechny in her special embroidery corner at home, 2007. Vera embroiders designs and practices rituals that were banned for decades in the 20th century, while the Ukraine was part of the Soviet sphere. A whole generation lost touch with these arts. “I think I’ve been given two gifts, the gift of healing and the gift of my art, the embroidery. I remember when I was young I was always trying to make people feel better. Eventually, I became a masseuse, after studying in Europe. With my embroidery, I am also healing in a way. I research patterns and rituals in which the embroidered cloths were used, and try to give that back to my community, before all this vanishes.” —Vera Nakonechny

Elaine Hoffman Watts playing drums as part of a family Hanukkah celebration in the basement of her daughter Eileen’s house, 2006. As a young klezmer musician, Elaine was often excluded from performances because she is female. Nowadays, thanks to the perseverance of Elaine and others, women are seen and heard in klezmer bands across the country.

Joy, perseverance, friendship: these artists and artistic traditions thrive on the interplay of shared wisdom, talent, and interpretation. Traditions evolve from such interchange. Relationships between and among artists deepen; and artistic and personal understandings emerge anew, keeping the arts dynamic.

Antonia Arias (vocals) and Tito Rubio (guitar) accompanying Anna Rubio’s flamenco dance class, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, 2007. “The moon and dots on my tattoo reflect the Muslim influence on flamenco. The polka dots you see on so many flamenco dresses are actually called ‘moons’ in Spanish. Also, this grouping of smaller dots is a symbol used by sailors to represent travel. I’m a traveler, too.” —Antonia Arias

Susan Watts (left), Ben Holmes, Elaine Hoffman Watts and Frank London practicing (in the hall, on a table) for a faculty concert at KlezKamp, an annual gathering of klezmer musicians and Yiddish culture enthusiasts in upstate New York, 2006.

Michele Tayoun (singing, with raised hand), Roger Mgrdichian (oud), Antonia Arias (vocals) and Tito Rubio (guitar) rehearsing for the Herencia Arabe Project which combines Arabic music and dance with flamenco, at St. Maron’s Hall in South Philadelphia, 2005. “This collaborative experience is unique. And we can’t, we shouldn’t let it go. Everyone has strengths they bring to it. I love working with this group of people.” —Michele Tayoun

Michele Tayoun (right) with dancers Anna Rubio (left) and Mariah del Chico, and Tito Rubio (guitar), Joseph Tayoun (drum), and dancer Hersjel Wehrens (seated), as part of the Herencia Arabe Project, St. Maron’s Hall, in the heart of Philadelphia’s Lebanese community, 2005.

Camaraderie

Cultural anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson writes about “life as an improvisatory art, about the ways we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations, following an underlying grammar and an evolving aesthetic.” Skilled in particular arts, the women pictured on these walls have each been improvising in the face of conflicting loyalties and responsibilities (to family, work, art, community and more). Some have faced exile and war. Others dealt with racism, disparagement, lack of resources, and cultural isolation. They have fought old boys’ networks. They have endured, resisted, and sometimes outlasted people who have questioned their innovative approaches to tradition, or their particular (regional, ethnic, local, personal) synthesis of tradition. As they make art, they also make, of their lives, works of art—stitching, composing, braiding, and choreographing the disparate elements—emerging with deepened wisdom and beauty. Their lives are as inspiring as their arts.

Biographies of the artists

Antonia Cruz Arias, flamenco cantaora (singer), was born in 1988 in San Francisco. Her paternal grandmother was California-born Spanish singer Elena Acevedo. Antonia was raised in the world of flamenco, but began her formal music and dance training in the classical tradition at age four. She studied classical and jazz technique at the Catholic Institute, flamenco cante at the Fundación Cristina Heeren de Arte Flamenco in Seville, Spain, and flamenco dance in Jerez de la Frontera, Spain. She has also studied intensively with Jesus Montoya, Gypsy singer from Seville. Antonia has sung with many important artists such as Antonio Hidalgo, Nelida Tirado and Edwin Aparicio, and has shared the stage with other singers including Rocio Soto from Jerez, Spain, Alfonso Cid from Seville and Marcos Marin.
and has been the singer for the classes of La Chiqui de Jerez. Antonia sings for all performances of Flamenco del Encuentro and the Herencia Arabe Project. She is a student at St. Joseph’s University. She performed in the Folklore Project’s Dance Happens Here program in December 2007.

Princess Fatu Gayflor is a renowned recording artist from Liberia. A singer and dancer from a young age, she performed often in ritual dances in her home village of Kakata. Later, as a member of Liberia’s National Cultural Troupe based in the national artists’ village of Kendeja, she was given the title, “Princess” in recognition of her exquisite renditions of songs in most of the languages of Liberia’s sixteen ethnic groups. (She herself is of mixed Vai and Lorma ethnicities.) As a young adult, she went out on her own, founding the successful Daughters of King N’jola dance and music ensemble in the capital city of Monrovia. She has recorded three CDs, and was showcased in Italy by the United Nations World Food Program to bring attention to the plight of Liberians caught in their civil war. In the U.S. since 1999, she has continued performing at Liberian weddings and other community gatherings, and has taught through the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts/Arts in Education program, and at both the African Cultural Alliance of North America and the Folk Arts—Cultural Treasures Charter School in Philadelphia. Having lived in the Ivory Coast and in Guinea, she sings traditional songs of many places. She has performed in Folklore Project programs including “Philly Dance Africa” at International House and in the spring of 2007 at World Café Live.

Vera Nakonechny came to the United States as a teenager, and continued studying the various techniques of Ukrainian embroidery her mother had taught her as a young girl. She soon became a part of the strong Ukrainian-American community in Pennsylvania where she expanded her skills as an embroiderer. After the Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, Vera was able to return to her homeland where she conducted archival research about folk art traditions, and studied with master craftspeople. She has researched and taught embroidery, beadwork, weaving, and other traditional forms related to textiles and adornment, and volunteers as a teacher of these arts at community sites and at the Ukrainian Heritage Studies Center at Manor College. Vera is also a professional masseuse, having studied in Europe where, she explains, “Massage is integrated into people’s idea of how to take care of themselves, of how to prevent illness. Doctors even refer their patients to massage therapists.” Her work has been displayed in recent exhibitions at the Down Jersey Folklife Center, and at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, in our 2006 “Community Fabric” show.

Ayesha Rahim made clothes when she was a school child, and continued to grow and develop as an artist. She saw images in her sleep, spirit-driven, crediting her inspiration: “I had not a clue. I am just figuring out how images are in the atmosphere and they come from God. How else could they come? I see them in my sleep. I was a designer and I made the clothes that I saw in my sleep. I didn’t have the money to make the outfits that I saw and I would go to my cousin. It only took a dollar for fabric. And all I ever needed was a measuring tape and pins. I never made a pattern. And I came out of High School being ‘Best Dressed,’ Gratz High School, 1955. I got scholarships to Moore College of Art.” Concerned with social issues, wanting to make a difference, and already an active designer for artists, musicians and performers, Rahim found art school an inhospitable place and turned down the scholarship. Eventually, she returned to art, figuring out how to crochet. She had models around her in others, but most of her craft was hard-won, self-taught. She was wearing one of her hats when Charita Powell, from the stand Amazulu, in the Reading Market, saw it and asked for another. That was the beginning. She has been making hats for decades now, and they are prized within the community. She was a featured artist at a salon at the Folklore Project in 2006.

Anna Rubio began her training in dance and music at age four. After studying ballet at the Pennsylvania Academy of Ballet, she started modern dance in her early teens with Joan Kerr and Susan Hess. Anna moved to San Francisco in 1982, continuing her modern training with several teachers, including Lucas Hoving and Ed Mock, and commencing flamenco studies with Rosa Montoya (of the important Montoya Gypsy clan) and with the late Maestro Cruz Luna. By 1986 she was a member of Theatre Flamenco of San Francisco under the direction of Miguel Santos. In 1991 she returned to Philadelphia and became a member of the Flamenco Ole company under the direction of Julia Lopez. Anna and her husband, flamenco guitarist Tito Rubio, spent two years in Spain before returning to Philadelphia, where they now teach at the University of the Arts and perform with their groups Flamenco del Encuentro and Herencia Arabe. Anna was awarded an Artistic Fellowship for the year 2001 from the Independence Foundation and a Leeway Grant for 2004. Anna and Tito return regularly to Spain, where Anna continues her studies with La Chiqui de Jerez, Javier Latorre and Juan Polvillo. She performed in the Folklore Project’s Dance Happens Here program in December 2007.

Yvette Smalls is a master braider, hair sculptor, and emerging filmmaker. She says, “Hair is my artistic medium and became my mission.” She began braiding, dressing and sculpting African American women’s hair in the late 1970s, to put herself through school. She was part of a movement of African American women rejecting...
Seku Neblett, 2007. Photo: Elizabeth Sayre
A few minutes of conversation reveal Seku Neblett’s grace, good humor, and deadly serious sense of purpose as activist and artist—not to mention his wealth of life experiences. Ever since he came to Philadelphia in 2006 to teach at the renovated Cecil B. Moore Recreation Center at 22nd and Huntingdon, Neblett has contributed to cultural and political organizing here. His life story and his Pan-Africanist politics shed light on the challenges facing artists in African dance and music in Philadelphia and North America.

Music has always been part of Neblett’s life and work, and his art has always been intended to inspire political unity. He and older brother Charles Neblett, along with Bernice Johnson Reagon and others, were original members of the Freedom Singers, created in 1961 in Albany, Georgia. (His brother still coordinates the group today.) In the 1960s, the Freedom Singers toured the United States to raise money and organize support for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a key organization in the Civil Rights / Black Freedom movement. Years later, in 1991, a chance encounter while performing with the Freedom Singers led Seku to play the bougarabou, the signature drum of the Jola people in the southwest of Senegal and the Gambia. Performing traditional African music forms as they were taught to him, he has joined the ranks of the twentieth-century “African Cultural Renaissance”—men and women like Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Chief Bey, Nana Dinizulu, and Philadelphia’s own Baba Crowder, who have researched African music and dance and put them to creative use in the American environment. In Philadelphia, Neblett’s passion for creating unity through cultural work has found a rich, historical environment in which to continue growing.

Mr. Neblett was born in 1943 in Simpson County, Kentucky, the fifth of six siblings in a sharecropping family. Of his early life and early experience with music, he says:

“We lived in the country without electricity, without any of the utilities. Our primary crop was tobacco, but we grew everything that we ate. We only had to buy at the store spices, sugar, salt, pepper, that kind of thing... During the day, the work was very hard. We didn’t have tractors, [or] mechanical tools at first. I actually learned how to plow with a mule and to cultivate the crops with animals. I think it was about 1956, ’57, when we got our first tractor... There was a lot of music in my home. My father played the guitar and the rhythm bones. The rhythm bones [are] cow’s ribs put in the fingers back to back, and with your wrist action you get a polyrhythm that’s traditionally African. My oldest brother played guitar. My mother sang common meter hymns in church and in the home. My second-oldest brother played the trumpet and the trap drums. My second-oldest sister played the French horn, and is a tremendous singer... When my family moved to southern Illinois, still sharecroppers, in about 1956, the high school that we went to was segregated, but it was the only school in the county that had a band. The band director, Mr. Stanley F. Thomas, whom I will admire forever, actually taught us music theory, which was unheard of for a high school student in those days in a rural setting like that. So my brother played trumpet; we organized a little dance band. I was trying to play the trap drum set, which I never quite mastered. I played a little saxophone. I didn’t really come into my own until I started to play the traditional African drum, much later in life. But we had a wonderful experience with music. And the music

[Continued on p. 26 >]
evening we recorded in Suacoco, the horn players gave way to chante fable or story songs (meni pele) as people laughed, joked, and sang. One performer even presented an episode from epic (woi-meni-pele).

I was surprised that anyone could still perform this complex genre. Many Kpelle people will tell you that woi-meni-pele is the essence of Kpelle life. Eighteen years ago, it had been hard to find a performer capable of singing it, and I thought that this rich aspect of culture might have faded with the war. But I was surprised to discover several performers within a 40-mile radius in just two short months in Liberia. Woi epic appeared to be even more alive than it had been before the war.

Woi epic, featuring the superhero Woi, is emblematic of some of the most important aspects of Kpelle society. And people proudly point to it as a kind of encyclopedia of Kpelle life, an index to “a wealth in knowledge.” This wealth in knowledge in turn is related to what Jane Guyer and Samuel Eno Belinga have said of Equatorial Africa as a whole: “The study of growth in Equatorial Africa in the pre-colonial period might be seen as, in part, a social history of expanding knowledge, and the history of the colonial era as one of loss, denial and partial reconstitution. That much of this must remain inaccessible should not deter us from creating the space to envisage it.”

The Woi epic demonstrates a tremendous wealth in knowledge. The episodes that I recorded in 2007, and in the years before the war, are embedded with rich details of animals, plants, and domestic objects. These are details that are much more extensive than required for simple existence. One performance of a Woi epic included the spider, tuutuu bird, anteater, poling bird, squirrel monkey, tsetse fly, beetle, bat, bull, and bees. Plants too played roles in the battles—the bele tree, koing tree, pumpkin, and koong leaf—as did objects like a bow and arrow, a bag containing implements to help Woi, an axe, a cutlass, and a double-edged knife.

As the historian Jan Vansina has said: “Local communities knew much more about their local habitats than they needed to know,” and “such scientific knowledge for knowledge’s sake was an essential ingredient” of social life. The essential discovery, which I made several years after first recording the Woi epic, is that this epic symbolically represents the migration of the Kpelle people, beginning in the 14th century from the grasslands area of the kingdom of Mali to the forest region of the coast. Through allusion and metaphor we can see the traces of this history, which is detailed more literally in oral narratives.

The Kpelle, as one of many branches of the Mande people, responding to various pressures, left the grasslands and started toward the coastal rainforest. They encountered other people on that long migration and fought small-scale wars to defend the areas where they settled for a time, as their oral histories tell. Peter Giting, a member of the famous Giting family of chiefs from Sanoyea, told of battles in the Kpelle area of what is today Bong County. Peter narrated how each warring side had a musician who played before battle to increase the warriors’ courage and pump the troops up for battle.

When the fighting began, musicians were immune from attack by either side. Following the battle, the winners had the prerogative of taking the musicians belonging to the losing side. Through this practice, the musicians became a kind of prize of war.

In the Woi epic, the hero alludes to the migrations: Woi is constantly moving his house as battles are brewing:

“Woi is ready. He said, ‘You singing that, Zo-lang-kee, the war is ready.’

And I was in the house. I said to him, ‘Ee.’ I said to him, ‘Woi?’ He said to me, ‘Mm.’

I said to him, ‘What war is prepared? You yourself see the Sitting-on-the-neck crowd here. Why is the war being prepared since there is no one equal to you?’

‘Fine, when Kelema-ninga has pumped my bellows and they have sewn my clothes, then we will start on the war.’

The moving house, filled with the extended family, symbolically represented the Kpelle people as a whole migrating toward the coast. Woi stood for the greater aggregate of Kpelle people. When knowledgeable Kpelle hear the epic being performed, they frequently comment on this connection, noting how the Woi epic indexes the coming of their ancestors to the area in Liberia or Guinea that they occupy in the present.

In the wealth of performances that I found in Liberia in 2007, I was most surprised to find several people capable of performing this quintessential form. One epic pourer we were able to record in Bong County performed in Totota. He sang of the familiar characters, including the hero Woi, the spider, and many others. But he also sang of body parts, reflecting the reality of a people working through the horrors of war. While all of this will require much more study, it’s abundantly clear that music is flourishing, thriving, and healing people in Liberia.

In Philadelphia too, music, whether performed by Fatu Gayflor or Zeya Tete or others, has helped to underscore people’s humanity and transport them home, if only for a few moments.

I left Liberia on August 1st, convinced that music has been [Continued on p. 23 >]

[Continued on p. 23 >]
vital to Liberians wherever they have been and wherever they live. And the richly layered rhythms, tone colors, and allusive texts continue to build that rich legacy that is grounded in expressive culture.—Ruth M. Stone

Notes
1 Guyer and Belinga 1995: 94-95
2 Stone 1988: 94
3 Vansina 1990: 89, 225 as quoted in Guyer and Belinga 1995: 93
5 Stone 1988: 13-14

Resources for further exploration

The Liberian Collections Project: http://onliberia.org/history.htm

Ruth M. Stone is the Laura Boulton Professor of Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, where she has served as chair of the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Director of the Archives of Traditional Music, and a member of the African Studies faculty. Professor Stone has written and published significant books, articles, and multi-media publications on musical performance of the Kpelle in Liberia, West Africa. She has edited Africa, a volume in the Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, which is the first comprehensive reference work in ethnomusicology. She has also pioneered research, publication, and presentation of ethnomusicological analysis through digital electronic formats. A leader in her discipline’s professional organization, she has served as president of the Society for Ethnomusicology. She has also been the president of the Liberian Studies Association. She visited the Folklore Project this past fall as part of our African Song / New Contexts project.

Tim: Did you ever personally meet (Liberian) President William R. Tolbert, who, as head of state, was sort of the patron of the Kendeja Cultural Center?
Fatu: In fact I did! I was part of a select group of members of the Cultural Troupe who were invited to dine at the President’s table in 1979 when Liberia hosted the annual meeting of the continent-wide Organization of African Unity at the “OAU Village” [next to the Hotel Africa in Monrovia]. In fact, I met President Tolbert a few times. As members of the National Cultural Troupe we were frequently close to the corridors of power but never real “insiders.” I felt that President Tolbert supported the arts, and that he was basically a good person.

Tim: Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk to me!
Fatu: You are very welcome!

Timothy Nevin was born and raised in Chicago, but recently lived for three years in Senegal and Ghana, where he was a caseworker with Liberian refugees. He is currently a PhD candidate in African History at the University of Florida. His dissertation will be about cultural production in Liberia during the 1970s and early 1980s. His wife, Zakpa Paye, is a Liberian nursing student at Santa Fe Community College, in Gainesville, Florida.

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always reflected what was going on around us. We would do that hard work and come home in the evening and just play music and sing and do a lot of wonderful things as a family. The neighbors would come and join in. It was glorious!

Although he was accepted to Southern Illinois University at Carbondale on a music scholarship in 1960, Seku was drawn to the Civil Rights movement and soon dropped out of school to head south, joining the effort to register voters and organize political resistance to racial discrimination and violence. Television reports turned him on to the movement, and also exposed him to an inspirational figure who would change his life forever:

“TV news was one of the things that really put me on that path. I was still in high school in 1957, when an event took place on the African continent that actually changed my life. I was watching in 1957 when Ghana became independent. I was watching television, black and white TV, and I see this African walking into the United Nations, dressed in traditional African clothing. [Kwame Nkrumah] stood up before the world, and said, ‘I am an African! And I have something to say to the world!’ And that just had a tremendous effect on my life, because all I’d seen about Africa up to that point, with a few exceptions, was Tarzan. I was never satisfied after that.”

Neblett joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). One of his many assignments was the Southwest Georgia Project, where he was sent to help register people to vote:

“I was sent to a county named Terrell County. Its nickname was ‘Terrible Terrell.’ I was told that there was a fear factor that was very strong. There [were] absolutely no Africans registered to vote in that county. I was determined, the first morning, to be out and getting somebody registered to vote before the rest of the people got up. I jump up early in the morning, I wash up in the back of the house, and I hit the streets, little dirt streets in Dawson, Georgia. I go to the first house and knock on the door, and the lady came and moved the little curtain behind that window in the door. She saw I was a stranger, because they had been warned about the Freedom Riders, and she disappeared. I could not raise her. I go to the next house—the same thing happened. That was repeated a couple of more times. Then I knocked on one door, and there was no answer, but I heard some noise in the back, so I walked in the back, and there was a lady doing her washing on a washtub. I said, ‘Ah, I got one!’ That lady was so frightened...of me and of the situation. She told me that she had the pneumonia, and she couldn’t go down there to register to vote, it would turn into the double pneumonia. I mean, she was just talking crazy! I go back to the house with my ego in my big toe, said, ‘Oh, my God! What am I going to do?’ So I took the attitude: I can’t blame the people. I’m doing something wrong. I think it was the first time I seriously criticized myself. I kept going out, and coming back, and evaluating what I was doing, and kept getting knocked down, until I got it right. I knew when I got it right because people started to listen, and we started to get some work done in that area.”

Back home in Illinois, he was part of an effort to desegregate a local swimming pool, an experience that led him to compose a song that became famous later in a different form:

“We came back and joined the struggle in Cairo, Illinois. In the desegregation effort, we were demonstrating at the local public swimming pool, where Africans could not swim. Our people had to swim in the river. We were arrested, jailed, and put on trial. While the trial was going on, one of the young men who was on trial, his brother drowned in the Mississippi River. So I wrote my first song. It said, ‘If you miss me in the Mississippi River, and you can’t find me nowhere, come on down to the swimming pool, we’ll be swimming down there.’ As that song became popular across the South, the people changed the name of the song to ‘If you miss me at the back of the bus...’”

In 1964, Neblett and other movement leaders were invited by President Sekou Touré to visit Guinea in order to learn about liberation politics in Africa:

“In 1964, President Sekou Touré of Guinea, West Africa, sent us a cable saying, ‘Your movement has captured our attention,’ and he invited some of us to come to Guinea. That experience was overwhelming. We came through immigration, someone gave us a copy of the constitution, a portion of it, that said any person of African descent, no matter where they’re born, as soon as they set foot in Guinea, is an automatic citizen with all the privileges and responsibilities of a citizen. I was overwhelmed, and I just fell down and kissed the earth. I had never had that kind of feeling before, a feeling that I actually belonged somewhere. I was actually comfortable and could feel safe. I had never had that feeling before, and that’s a feeling that I never want to let go of. Never.”

In 1966, like many fellow activists, Neblett was drawn to the Black Power movement (he worked closely with Kwame Ture [formerly Stokely Carmichael] for many years), and later to Pan-Africanism as articulated by Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Touré. Moving from the Black Panther Party, he eventually joined the All African Peoples’
Working with Badiane in 1994–95 in Nebraska led Neblett to travel to the Casamance, Senegal, to study further with master drummer Bakary Dhedhiou, and to obtain his own instruments.

“To collect the bougarabou, I had to go from village to village, deep into the interior, to find these drums. You don’t just go and buy a bougarabou in that area, because this is the home of the bougarabou. You have to go through a series of rituals. People have to investigate you, know something about you. They have to be satisfied that you’re going to maintain the integrity of these drums and the traditions. At the end of the ceremony, you go through another ceremony called ‘the blessing of the hands.’ So it took me a while to accumulate [the drums], because you couldn’t find all of them in one place.”

Unlike its famous cousin/neighbor the djembe the bougarabou remains relatively unknown. In its traditional form, the bougarabou is a wooden drum with a cowskin head attached to the body with pegs and rope. Many other African drum traditions have one person per drum in multi-instrument ensembles. Currently, the bougarabou consists of a three- or four-drum ensemble played by a single musician. One source suggests that this innovation was introduced in the 1970s, possibly due to the influence of Cuban dance music in West Africa. Over the course of the 20th century, Afro-Cuban conga drummers began using two, and later three, four, and five drums in their set-ups. The bougarabou has been translated into new contexts as well: it has been played in the Senegalese National Orchestra and the National Ballet; its characteristic bubbling rhythms have been transferred to the djembe ensemble; and a modified version of the drum, strung like a djembe, has made it into world percussion catalogues in the United States and Europe.

The four drums of the modern Senegalese bougarabou are placed on a wooden stand, with the lowest-pitched drum (the “ancestor bass”) on the far right; next to it sits the highest-pitched, then the next highest and the third highest-pitched (the contra-bass) drums. This is the set-up for a left-handed player (Neblett, although right-handed, learned from a left-handed teacher and plays like a left-hander). The highest-pitched drum solos over the constant texture of the other three drums, the jingling of iron peapod-bell bracelets worn by the drummer, and, in traditional settings, the clacking of palm tree sticks and singing. The bougarabou accompanies dancing—all life occasions for the Jola, whether serious or fun, call for dancing. Neblett says:

“The bougarabou goes back to about the 10th century in the south of Senegal. The people who played the bougarabou were griots, oral historians. These people had such command of history that they were commissioned to be advisors to the rulers. In those days, the women were not allowed to play drums, but the relationship, the woman to the drum, was a crucial one. All the rhythms of the drums came from the activities of women, in the fields...

The tuning of these drums is a ritual unto itself. The solo and the accompaniment drum are tuned with fire. In Africa we built a fire on the ground and tuned them. The contra-bass rarely has to be tuned. The bass is tuned with water and the earth. [Put] water on the cow skin, and turn it upside down on the ground, and it creates a deep bass. Some of the people who play the bougarabou in the United States are beginning to cheat a little bit. They’re making the bougarabou look like a

[Continued on p. 28 >]
djembe with strings on it. And they’re telling me, ‘Seku, you have to convert your drums, put the strings on it. Because if you have to do a job real quick, you don’t have time to get the fire.’

I’m saying: they’ll have to wait, because I’m not giving up any of the elements of these drums. People will be patient and wait till they’re tuned properly, because even though an audience may not realize the difference, I need that spiritual connection that comes out of that fire and water, and that history. I [will not] present to an audience something that’s not quite right. I want to be responsible to those who blessed my hands in Africa, and to the ancestors, to present it properly.”

Neblett uses the bougarabou as a solo performer, and the djembe-dundun ensemble to teach, while he continues his own drum studies with Philadelphia djembe player Ira Bond. In his beginners’ class at the Cecil B. Moore Rec Center, the young players are engaged, respectful, and disciplined, interpreting Koukou and Lamba (rhythms from Guinea) with enthusiasm. Seku hopes to add dance to his drum classes and create a youth performing ensemble in the near future. Of his current work in Philadelphia he says, paraphrasing Ture:

“I’m a cultural artist, and I try to be responsible. The artist uses the people’s culture, the people’s creation. The songwriter didn’t invent words, the poet didn’t invent rhyme, the musician didn’t invent the instruments, the people did. We’re using the people’s culture, and we have to be responsible to represent the people’s culture in our art form. Those of us from an oppressed people, our art must be the art of resistance. So, the artist has a responsibility to represent the people’s culture with dignity and honor. This is why we hear thunderous applause at the mention of Paul Robeson, Miriam Makeba, Bob Marley, Sory Kouyate, etc. So, I use the instruments to encourage unity of thought. We already have unity of action, but what is lacking is unity of thought, and respect, which is paramount in African culture. We have to listen to one another. I can teach those principles with djembe. With the djembe, you do the polyrhythms with a number of people. For community organizational reasons, it’s better to use the djembe [than the bougarabou] because you have more participation.

The artist must represent the people’s culture, and we must resist attempts to commercialize or to compromise the people’s struggle. We are struggling for our very liberation, and our art form must encourage that struggle, and it must tell the story of that struggle, it must enhance that struggle and keep it alive, and make that struggle grow. The pinnacle or the highest form of culture is liberation. And this is what I use my instruments and my art to try to help accomplish.”

—Elizabeth Sayre

Notes
1 From Neblett’s biography, available for download at www.seku.com.
2 The djembe drum, originally from Maninka areas in present-day Mali and Guinea, is the most globalized of West African drums. See Tang 2007 and Charry 2000, pp. 193-241, for detailed information on neighboring West African drum traditions.
3 Badjie recording, liner notes.
5 Ibid.

Resources for further exploration

Books:
Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Recordings:

Online:
Seku Neblett’s website: http://www.seku.com/
Taqsim is division, how you divide what you're doing. Taqsim is representing the maqam, and the beauty of the maqam. There are some notes that are stronger than others that you reveal by playing. It depends on your own point of view. So everybody is different from [each] other [in] representing this. The factors are your experience, your emotional state of mind—you might be different from yourself in a different state of mind, representing the same maqam. Taqsim means division. You divide the pronunciation of the music [according to] the way you feel at the time. Sometimes it's prepared; sometimes it's not. Sometimes you prepare those divisions beforehand. Me, I don't prepare. Wherever I perform, there's vibes from the audience. They might like this, or not like that. It's not that I'm intelligent. It just comes automatically. By the energy of the audience, I feel it should be this way, or that way, or some other way. So I'm a specialist in this, performing differently all the time. It's interaction between the people and the performer.”

Spontaneity, flexibility, and an openly expressed, reciprocal, emotional connection between audience and performer are all part of Arab music. Ultimately, for Refela, the importance and uniqueness of music lies in its emotional impact and the diversity of responses it permits:

"Music in general is something to help you cheer up or to express [yourself]. It might not always be [for] cheering up, but you need it. Sometimes you feel mellow, or you want to be crazy? Music helps in this. That's why music is a beautiful art.

The highest level of art is the abstract. You reduce everything to some point. You reduce it so it means more. If you have ten people performing the same music in the same moment, you're going to have twenty different opinions about the music. That's what's good about music, in general. It's abstract. It gives you the freedom to feel whatever you feel. You play the same music for ten people, you get different opinions. Maybe even the same person is going to tell you something else about what they heard. That's what's good about music, that's how I look at it.”

—Elizabeth Sayre

Notes
1 Marcus, p. 45. “The 'ud is the direct ancestor of the European lute both in name and shape.”
2 As in India, where it became a virtuoso instrument in local art music styles, the violin fits easily into Arab musical schemes due to its ability to play melodic slides and reproduce shades and degrees of pitch beyond the twelve fixed pitches used in most European music. One of the most well-known characteristics of Arab music is its use of “quarter tones,” also sometimes called half-sharps or half-flats—pitches that fall in between the notes, so to speak, of Western scales.
3 Danielson, p. 1.
5 Ethnomusicologist Stephen Blum suggests that Middle Eastern music was, in fact, too rhythmically complex to make notation an effective tool for transmission: “A major reason why most Middle Eastern practices never came to rely on musical notation is the complexity of the rhythms to which verse and prose are appropriately sung or recited.” (Blum, p. 9).
6 A typical small-ensemble texture in Arab music is heterophony, in which each of several instruments interprets the same melody somewhat differently, according to the particular techniques of each (see Marcus, p. 16). In contrast to much European music, traditional Arab music, like Indian music, does not stress or use much harmony—different instruments playing different musical lines, which simultaneously creates note-against-note, “vertical” relationships (chords). Rather, both Arab and Indian music involve the art of “horizontal” development of melodies.
7 “Tabla” in this context is not the North Indian pair of hand drums, but rather the single goblet-shaped drum also called dumbek or darabuka in other areas.
8 Musicians from the Eastern Mediterranean find collaboration easy due to regional commonalities. Musical similarities across national, linguistic, and religious differences are characteristic of the Middle East. “The model of national music histories is more misleading than helpful when applied to the Middle East, where the norm has been cultural interaction among speakers of two or more languages and among practitioners of several religions.” (Blum, p. 12)
9 Marcus, p. 114. The maqamat (pl.) are the melodic modes used in all types of Arab music. They are not only sets of pitches (like Western scales), but also have characteristic turns of phrase, specific orders for the introduction of notes, and, if rendered properly by skilled musicians, should put audience and performers alike in states of ecstasy.

Resources for further exploration

Books:

Online:
Educational site on Arabic melodic modes, the maqam: http://www.maqamworld.com/
National Arab Music Ensemble at the Cairo Opera House:
http://www cairooperahouse.org/english/about_cairo_opera_house/about_music_ensemble.asp
Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture website:
http://www.albustanseeds.org
The Spice Route Ensemble:
http://www.animusmusic.com/spiceroute/
Intercultural Journeys:
http://www.interculturaljourneys.org >>
Adeeb Refela’s website:
http://www.adibsaaman.tk/
definitions of “bad” and “good” hair based on European standards, and reclaiming African traditions of beauty. Her mother always told her, “Beauty is as beauty does,” and the saying inoculated Yvette against some of the negative self-image she saw in others (from ages nine to ninety, she says) and set her on a journey of self-discovery. She went on to school herself in intricate and varied hair braiding, wrapping, coiling and weaving traditions used in her own extended family across the American South, and across the African Diaspora, from Egypt to South Africa, Senegal to Kenya as an important form of creative expression representing both the individuality and social status or role of the wearer. In her own work, she draws on a wide range of styles and techniques, approaching each person’s hair as the ultimate wearable art. In 1998, she completed a documentary “Hair Stories”, recently broadcast on WYBE-TV. She has been a featured artist at ODUNDE and appears at hundreds of TV. She has been a featured artist at Stories”, recently broadcast on WYBE-TV. In 1998, she completed a documentary “Hair Stories”, recently broadcast on WYBE-TV.

Michele Tayoun was exposed to numerous forms of Middle Eastern dance and music growing up as part of an extended Lebanese American family that ran the famous “Middle East” nightclub and restaurant in Philadelphia. Michele had formal training in ballet, modern dance and jazz, and learned Middle Eastern dances from performers at the family’s restaurant. Her dance vocabulary combines both Lebanese and Egyptian styles. She has been singing Arabic music at community festivals as well as professionally for the past several years, and continues to enhance her knowledge of Arabic music and song by performing with accomplished regional performers, and participating in workshops with the internationally renowned composer Simon Shaheen. She performs as a dancer and singer with the Spice Route Ensemble and with the Herencia Arabe Project. She was a part of the Folklore Project’s Dance Happens Here program in 2005.

Elaine Hoffman Watts is a third-generation klezmer musician. Her grandfather, Joseph Hoffman, a cornet player, came to Philadelphia at the dawn of the 20th century. Hoffman taught other family members the klezmer music he learned as a child in Eastern Europe. Played by the Hoffman family and other musicians at certain times in Jewish weddings, and in the parties that followed, this music became part of a distinctly Philadelphia klezmer repertoire. Ms. Watts’ father was Jacob Hoffman, a great klezmer drummer and xylophonist, and a versatile musician who knew many styles of music; he also played with the Philadelphia Orchestra. He had come to Philadelphia with his father and followed in the family tradition, making influential recordings in the first half of last century with the Kandel Orchestras, a well-known Philadelphia klezmer group. Elaine Watts was the first woman percussionist to be accepted at Curtis Institute, from which she graduated in 1954. She has performed and taught for more than forty years, working in symphonies, theaters, and schools. Now performing with an ensemble called the Fabulous Shpielkehs, she is featured on a CD, “I Remember Klezmer,” which draws on and documents her amazing family musical tradition. As well, she is on the klezmer CD, “Fidl,” with Alicia Svigals of the Klezmatics, teaches and performs annually at KlezKamp and has been accepting invitations to play nationally. In June 2000, she was awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts. In 2007, she received a prestigious National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship—one of the top honors for traditional artists in this country. She will be performing in a Folklore Project “Musicians in Residence” concert in the spring of 2008.

Susan Watts, trumpeter, represents a younger generation of the important Hoffman Watts klezmer dynasty. Susan currently plays klezmer with her mother in the Fabulous Shpielkehs. Susan has recorded and performed with noted klezmer artists from around the world, including Hankus Netsky, Mikveh, London’s Klezmer All-Star Brass Band, and others. She has taught at klezmer festivals and privately, and performs in a diverse range of trumpet styles. She was a featured artist in the Philadelphia Folklore Project’s Women’s Music Project for 2001-2003. She tours Europe regularly, and performed in China in 2006. Also in 2006, she received an award from the American Composers’ Forum. She will be performing in a Folklore Project “Musicians in Residence” concert in the spring of 2008.

All that we do: contemporary women, traditional arts was curated by Toni Shapiro-Phim and Debora Kodish, with Antonia Arias, Fatu Gayflor, Vera Nakonechny, Ayesha Rahim, Anna Rubio, Yvette Smalls, Michele Tayoun, Elaine Hoffman Watts and Susan Watts. Installed by Kim Tieger.

This project is funded by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, The National Endowment for the Humanities, The National Endowment for the Arts, and PFP members.
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