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From the editor

Kulu Mele in Guinea

Tatreez: Palestinian women’s needlework in Philadelphia by Nehad Khader

Do these stories exist in other families? by Linda Goss, Yvonne DeVasty & Jeannine Osayande

Building a town with dance & drum by Ruth M. Stone

Chhayam by Toni Shapiro-Phim

Does it cure homesickness? by Germaine Ingram

PFP doings
“I can look back 50 years,” says Baba Robert Crowder, founder of the Kulu Mele African Dance Ensemble, remembering the Ghanaian artist and statesman who called the group into being. And more: “Kulu Mele constantly developed and is still developing. There is value in Saka Aquaye’s words. This is for our ancestors. While we are living, we are trying to embrace the spirit of our culture.”

Truth be told: Baba is now 79, and he looks back longer than a mere five decades. Imagine him a young man—not so different, perhaps, from the student who says that his experience in our Culture Camp stopped homesickness. Each found in the practice of folk arts a path toward hope, courage, and integrity in the face of inequality and loss.

This is spirit work, Baba tells us. What does he mean? Considering the historic trip that the Kulu Mele dance ensemble took to Guinea this past December, the focus of the conversation excerpted in these WIP pages, Baba tells us not to be distracted by the movements of the body or the beat of the drum. You have to be correct, yes, but also correct inside and in relation to so many others, part of a continuum reaching far back and far forward. He directs us to feeling, motivation, and intent; matters of spirit.

Embracing the spirit of our culture requires engagement with others, awareness of our own parts in forwarding community well-being in the long term. These pages offer powerful testimonies to the challenges and joys of such spirit work: the territory of folklore. Palestinian women of three generations, described in Nehad Khader’s article (and present in her exhibition in our gallery until December 2009) stitch tatreez. This Palestinian needlework is visible affirmation of their rightful connections to particular home places—villages seized and destroyed in the catastrophe of 1948 and after, the Palestinian Nakhba. We will not be dispossessed, tatreez says: our peoplehood, our spirit, will not be taken. Stitching tatreez, women sustain relationships with one another and with generations of other women. Ruth Stone shares Kpelle (Liberian) wisdom along the same lines: it takes drummers and dancers to build a town. Think of what Kpelle people are saying. The folk arts are inherently social. They enspirit, inspire, enliven: requiring, creating, engaging people. These arts, and their practice, bring communities into being. Spirit dwells here. It is built here. Toni Shapiro-Phim offers Cambodian examples in the chayyam ensembles who lead celebrants in ceremonial processions on particular occasions. They are part of the “mind-altering multi-media” experience that traditional festivals often allow, bringing people into closer relation with one another and abiding Buddhist spirituality. Stories shared by people gathered at Linda Goss’s “In the house” workshops are reminders of the ways in which we continue to puzzle out the past, and our place in the world, by sharing stories with one another, clearing space to hear where spirit rises, lingers, is lost.

Many tragedies haunt these pages, contextualize these words. The horrors of occupation, war, enslavement, and racism lie behind the efforts of those speaking here. Radical hope and progressive visions of justice and equity provide unspoken frameworks: contexts for the expressive work described here. In these contexts, these folk arts of social change address breaks and ruptures and show how we repair them, bridge them, together.

This issue of Works in Progress goes to press in a year of many catastrophes. The wisdom in this issue reminds us of what we hold dear; how we endure, how we collectively sustain vital and healthy and just communities. Taking folklore seriously, together, we try to embrace the spirit of our culture. We stand on Baba’s shoulders, and on the shoulders of so many others.

—Debora Kodish
More than 20 years ago, Dorothy Wilkie saw Ballets Africains perform the danced drama Mali Sadjo here in Philadelphia. Inspired by the djembe drum and the dancing, she never forgot that performance. She began to dream of how the entire Kulu Mele African Dance and Drum Ensemble might travel to Guinea to learn the piece directly from members of that famed ensemble. What a dream! Forty and fifty years ago, when they began their own journeys, Kulu Mele founder Baba Crowder and elders Dorothy and John Wilkie sought out their own teachers, purposefully piecing together educations in African drum, dance, culture and meaning. Visits to Ghana, Guinea, Cuba and elsewhere profoundly affected them. Their travel deepened connections with homeland master artists, allowed immersion in particular cultural contexts—and expanded the terms through which new generations here in Philadelphia explore expressive and cultural possibilities. They have truly “passed the torch,” training hundreds of dancers and drummers. This trip extended possibilities even further.

In December, fourteen Kulu Mele members spent ten days in Conakry, Guinea, studying with M’Bemba Bangoura, Mariama Touré, and others. Producer Pam Hooks, photographer Gabe Bienzacki, and writer Clare Croft were also on the trip, and they documented the journey on a blog (www.kulumele.org). This may be the first time that an African dance ensemble from the United States has had the opportunity to travel to the African continent for intensive study.

Shortly after returning, Kulu Mele came to the Folklore Project to share travel stories with a rapt audience of community members. In talking about their experiences, Kulu Mele artists were transported back to Guinea. Completing one another’s sentences, emotion welling up—the feeling was palpable. The excerpts included in these pages and Gabe’s photos give you some idea of this historic adventure made possible by a grant from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, through Dance Advance and the Marketing Innovation Program.

Dorothy Wilkie: As soon as we came out of customs—it was 3:00 in the morning. M’Bemba Bangoura, the master drummer who worked with us, taught us, and arranged our trip, had the drummers playing.

Ama Schley: In the parking lot.

Dorothy Wilkie: And then, the Kulu Mele dancers wouldn’t stop dancing. So M’Bemba said, “It’s time to load up now. We gotta get the suitcases in the van, you come on.” I said, “Well, you’re gonna have to stop the drums, ’cause they’re not gonna stop!”
Ama Schley: Nope. If they still playing, we gonna still dance!

Payin Schley: As soon as you get off the plane, you hear drums. I’m like, “Is that a radio?” M’Bemba’s steady laughing. “I got something for you guys.” And we’re like, “Well, c’mon y’all, we gotta hurry up!”

Dorothy Wilkie: That first day they took us to the compound. They had food for us. Everybody got situated. And then, we came back around noon, ate lunch, and we started right away on meeting the choreographers and starting our rehearsals. And then we changed again, and then they took us to a dundunba, which is a festival, you know, in the community, and that was—that blew everybody’s mind.

Baba Crowder: And that’s what I was speaking about. In a dundunba, you have to play correctly; you have to dance correctly. It’s not a family that you just become a part of—you have to be a part of it. And that’s where it was. And the spirit comes out, and the dancers dance, and the drummers drum.

Amma Young: The drumming was very spiritual.

Baba Crowder: And strong! It’s unbelievable. It’s really unbelievable. ‘Cause — like I was speaking about, some of us, in our days when it

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I grew up watching my mother, Alia Sheikh-Yousef, stitch patterns into fabric on the weekends and after work. This was my introduction to tatreez—traditional Palestinian needlework. My mother’s creative works would be sewn together by my grandmother in whatever way my mom wanted. These women turned panels full of intricate tatreez designs into cushions, wall hangings, tablecloths, and dresses. Observing their pieces more closely revealed threads of all colors, chosen carefully, interweaving their way through one another to create a flower, a bird, or multiple triangles. But to me, a child, this work only represented my mother’s talents and her desire to decorate her home. I didn’t know where these patterns came from—that certain designs came from particular villages or had a long history, recognizable to their makers. Nor did I understand the reasons behind this needlework until the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, in September 2000.

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For a 15-year-old Palestinian American girl, the images of Palestinian youths—most of them my age—throwing rocks at tanks and participating in a popular resistance made a lasting and deep impression. I began searching my home, our books, even my facial features for something that would bring me closer to those youths and to my homeland. Not surprisingly, I found value in my mother’s art, a Palestinian art that she learned from other Palestinian women. I learned that my mother was stitching our heritage and history into fabric. I wanted to participate in this process. My mother taught me tatreez, and in the process I was educated in the philosophy of the art as a method of resistance, as a means to preserve Palestinian heritage, and as a contribution to the Palestinian collective memory. These processes are extremely important to us Palestinians, a Diaspora people, scattered worldwide after a forced exile.

My family is part of this exile. Both sets of my grandparents were expelled from their homeland in 1948. My father’s family comes from the village of Umm el Zeinat, just outside Haifa. My mother’s father also comes from there, and her mother from the city of Haifa. My father’s family was exiled to Iraq and my mother’s to Syria, where they lived as refugees. Neither of my parents has been to their homeland, but both are deeply connected to it and desire to return one day. It is this history that I began to explore in the last year as part of a project to find and document the work of other women who stitch tatreez in Philadelphia—a project that culminated in the exhibition “Tatreez: Palestinian Women’s Needlework in Philadelphia,” now on display at the Philadelphia Folklore Project.

For centuries tatreez has been the creative, financial, and fashion capital of Palestinian women. Long ago, a woman’s social status and
geographic origins could be identified from the stitch, fabric, and cut of her thob, the traditional embroidered Palestinian dress. As soon as she was able, a young girl was taught to stitch her own dresses. Typically she began preparing for her marriage: she would cross-stitch everything from her wedding dress to pillows for her home and personal handkerchiefs. Then, when expecting her first child, she would compete with the other women, passing the months of her pregnancy preparing with her own hands an elaborate cross-stitched wardrobe for her daughter or son.

Tatreez has changed tremendously, both in practice and in use, and this change is connected to the major structural changes in Palestinian life. In 1948, 75 to 80 percent of the Palestinian population was expelled from their ancestral homes and villages in a massive ethnic cleansing. We call this our nakba, "catastrophe." In place of our homeland the state of Israel was created, and the majority of Palestinians became refugees or internally displaced people, a complex crisis involving our identities, livelihoods, and quality of life. The community that had been held together by physical space and land became a community connected by a cause: liberation, homeland, and identity. As a Palestinian art, tatreez is an expression of identity, and thus oftentimes political: a way of publicly and visibly stating—insisting on—who we are, a way of claiming our connection to a homeland and to one another. After the nakba and to this day, many women used tatreez to support themselves, making and selling clothing for wealthier women. When I began fieldwork in Philadelphia, I had no idea whom I might find who still made tatreez. Nor did I know what uses this art might still have.

Today, for the women I interviewed, the economic uses of tatreez are less important: none of them sell their work, and all alive more
By Linda Goss, Yvonne DeVasty, & Jeannine Osayande

Transcribed & edited by Thomas Owens

“do these stories exist in other..."
This March, the Folklore Project opened our doors for a series of conversations with storyteller Linda Goss. Linda had recently undertaken research into her family history, and each session began with Linda sharing stories—and stories about tracking down stories. She talked about uncovering different versions, and about how complex meanings unfold behind “simple” tales, sometimes over the course of many decades. Those attending each session were invited to share, comment, and respond. Each session took on its own shape. People connected and powerful tales emerged. Some spoke of the uncertainty of the past, and the process of searching for—or confirming first hand—important narratives and memories. Others shared vivid recollections of times when, as children, they refused to be silenced by racism or injustice. Others spoke about what these experiences taught them about the need for reparations or the work they saw ahead for themselves. Here, we share stories offered by three women at these sessions. We’ll offer more opportunities for storytelling with Linda Goss and Irma Gardner-Hammond this fall.

Linda Goss:
Okay, well, I went to Elyria, Ohio, to visit the oldest relative in my family.1 And she is my great aunt, Alma Willmore. I went there to celebrate her one-hundred-and-one birthday. And it was wonderful because, I would say, maybe about fifty years ago was the last time I saw her. And she didn’t remember that time until we really started talking. I discovered, like most of the people in my family, she’s afraid of thunder and lightning, too. And this really started my research into my family—because of a story that my mother had told me, that had been passed on by her mother, and I wanted to know if Aunt Alma knew the same story… I can’t remember how old I was, but I know I was young—probably pre-teen. And I remember standing in my mother’s kitchen in Alcoa,2 Tennessee, and all of a sudden she started telling me this story that her mother had told her. It was about when Aunt Alma and them were young. Their father was named Pappy, Pappy Hunter, and he was a good cook. And every so often, usually on a Saturday, usually when the sun was going down, you could hear these horses coming up, ’cause they lived, like, on a farm. And it would be the paddy rollers3—and another name for the paddy rollers [...](Continued on p. 22 >)
Ethnomusicologist Ruth M. Stone has done extensive fieldwork among the Kpelle people in Liberia. She brought her expertise to the spring Culture Camp, helping with the planning, teaching afternoon sessions on the cultural traditions represented, and facilitating conversations and storytelling with Liberian elders from the Agape Senior Citizens Center. Here, Dr. Stone shares her knowledge of Liberian arts, recollections of her experiences in Bong County, and her impressions of the week-long camp.
If you build a town and there’s no drummer, it’s not a town. If you build a town and there’s no dancer, then it’s not a town.—Kpelle proverb

I first heard this proverb from a Kpelle musician in Liberia more than twenty years ago. At the time I was impressed by how vital music and dance are in West Africa. A town simply cannot be a real place without people who drum, sing, and dance together. I thought of it many times since then during the time I spent in that country recording Kpelle musicians in Bong County. It came alive in a new way in Philadelphia during the week of April 6–10, 2009, at the Philadelphia Folklore Project’s first Culture Camp on Liberian music and dance.

Background
Liberia sits near the equator on the West Coast of Africa. When one looks at the continent on a world map, this is the area that bulges out into the Atlantic Ocean. The region was once called the Pepper Coast after the hot spice that has been grown there and exported over the years. The vegetation of Liberia ranges from thick rainforest near the coast to grasslands in the north. During the rainy season, which runs from about May to October, the soil is saturated. Rice and cassava are grown by nearly everyone living in the rural area, along with sweet potato greens, collard greens, tomatoes, and peppers. Rubber is harvested and exported for cash income.

Liberia is abundantly endowed with resources, including iron ore, timber, gold, and diamonds. Yet its people have suffered greatly since civil war erupted in 1989. Many were killed or displaced during the war years; even today, thousands of United Nations peacekeepers remain in the country. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first woman elected as a head of state in Africa, is working to restore the country’s infrastructure, as well as peace and prosperity.

During the war, refugees sought safety in other parts of Liberia, in Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, and in places even farther afield, including the United States. Many now reside in the Philadelphia area. Among the students at the Culture Camp were some who had fled Liberia with their families as toddlers or infants, along with some who had never lived in Liberia at all but claimed it as their ancestral home.

The Culture Camp
At the camp, more than forty students worked with four talented Liberian artists all day for a week. At the beginning of the day, Gbahtuo Comgbaye guided them in storytelling, sometimes narrating stories from

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by Toni Shapiro-Phim

Above: Chhayam ensemble at a Bon Kathin, Phnom Penh, November 2008
Photo by Toni Shapiro-Phim

Facing page top right Chhouen Phal teaches chhayam drumming to students at PFP’s Cambodian Culture Camp.
Photo: Debra Kodish, 2009
ComiC artists wielding hand cymbals, small hanging gongs, and wooden clackers join with drummers to make up the chhayam ensemble—a humorous, semi-improvised Cambodian call-and-response drumming and dance tradition. Chhayam performers often head ceremonial processions to and through Buddhist temple compounds. A line of men (usually five or seven) set up a rhythmic base on long drums held up with straps across one shoulder. That base is complemented by their own syncopated chanting or singing, and the percussive clatter and clap of the clowns’ hand-held instruments. Clowns wear comical face paint or masks with exaggerated features. When leading a parade as part of a Buddhist ceremony, chhayam artists enliven the atmosphere and contribute to a sense of community as other participants freely stride behind or clap alongside the performers.

Khmer music scholar and award-winning composer Dr. Chinary Ung has written that a chhayam “ensemble functions as one of the components (along with other ritual preparations, costumes, martial arts, chanting, etc.) of the mind-altering multi-media that is an integral part of [certain] Buddhist ceremonial festivities.”

Though chhayam is also performed at secular events, including theatrical performances, it mainly serves as a vital aspect of Bon Phka and Bon Kathin, two Buddhist ceremonies. Bon Phka (literally “Flower Ceremony”) can take place at any time of year and involves the presenting of monetary donations by lay people to a temple for a construction or repair project or some other community endeavor. Traditionally, paper money, folded to symbolize flower blossoms, is attached to small wire, plastic, or paper “trees.”

Bon Kathin occurs in October or November at the end of the monks’ rainy season retreat. Worshippers travel to hometown temples to offer new robes and supplies to the monks. Hundreds of celebrants circle the sanctuary three times as an act of reverence, with the chhayam drummers and dancers in the lead, helping to create a feeling of togetherness and joy.

Chhayam performances (and ensembles) are not formulaic. A community’s resources and local people’s talents and interests may dictate whether the emphasis is solely on the drumming and chanting or is broadened to include comic and other dancers.

The clowns, with masks or makeup in place, wear white or pastel short-sleeved shirts and dark kben, pantaloons made from three yards of cotton fabric wrapped around the waist and pulled through the legs. They strike cymbals, tap gongs, or clap pairs of wooden sticks while dancing knock-kneed or pigeon-toed. The drummers, in the same outfits, play instruments that are often decorated with ruffled, brightly colored cloth. A female dancer—with no mask—may join in, performing the graceful steps and gestures of the roam wong, a popular social dance. Wearing a kben and a fancy shirt of lace or other fine material, she invariably attracts the attention of a drummer: A comic interlude transpires as the drummer flirts and tries to impress her by tossing his drum around his body.

He may go so far as to pick up the three-foot-long wooden instrument and balance it between his teeth. (If no woman appears, the solo drummer may instead perform a kind of duel with the cymbal-player in which they mock and compete with each other, utilizing martial arts–like movements.)

All the while the other drummers continue their spirited, at times nonsensical, singing. A lead drummer starts the chant, and the others repeat or respond to it. For example:

Krovey krovo
Ksae krovat
Lok khae bang chat
Chat bang lok khoe

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Congratulations!
The celebration of January 7th?

In Philadelphia, where a chhayam troupe has been based at Bra [Preah] Buddha Ransi Temple since 2007, the following verse has been heard on more than a few ceremonial occasions:

Kendom chhaip
Angkaep chha
Yely yely Phila
Heu haa mleh tee

[Alliterative lines that translate as “shocked” and as “stir-fried frog”]
Older women of Philadelphia
So very cool

Drums are sounded by a number of techniques, including hitting the drum head with the outer half of the palm, with just two fingers of each hand, or with a closed fist. A particularly dynamic and flexible drummer might even strike the drum with his elbows or knees during a solo routine.

Clown characters appear in a number of Cambodian performing arts traditions. In the case of chhayam, they serve as a vehicle for lighthearted community celebration. The clown in chhayam may also be related to an indigenous (non-Buddhist) child spirit, Marinh Kongviel. This tiny playful being is welcomed to homes and elsewhere through offerings of candies, fruits, and other items. Cambodian ethnologist Chan Sambath notes that the comic dancer in a chhayam ensemble is often said to represent Marinh Kongviel, bringing levity and humor to the ceremony. Such a combining of Buddhist and indigenous beliefs and practices is common, since Cambodian cultural and artistic traditions seamlessly mix local animistic, Buddhist, and even Hindu elements.

Chhayam is taught as part of the folk dance curriculum at the National School of Fine Arts. But away from the formal academy, chhayam is passed down within a community, centered at the Buddhist temple. People who grow up watching and listening to chhayam performances may make the transition from observer to participant by practicing alongside older relatives and neighbors.

—Dr. Toni Shapiro-Phim
Former Associate Director at PFP,
Toni is now on staff at the Khmer Arts Academy in Phnom Penh,
Cambodia: www.khmerarts.org

Notes
2. On January 7, 1979, the leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime, under whose rule the country was officially known as Democratic Kampuchea, were overthrown, paving the way for the establishment of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea.
3. A Cambodian audience would find this couplet amusing, since older women are generally assumed not to put much stock in being “cool” or “hip,” whereas the implication here is that they are indeed cool, and not afraid to flaunt it.
Philadelphia has had a chhayam ensemble in residence at the Bra [Preah] Buddha Rangsi Temple in South Philadelphia since Thavro Phim, a former dance teacher and performer at Cambodia’s University of Fine Arts, began instructing community members in 2007. This chhayam ensemble has led ceremonial processions through their neighborhood and was even featured in this year’s Mummers’ Parade.

Approximately ten people, ranging in age from high school students to senior citizens, practice once a week at the temple. (PFP helps to support these classes). The monks at the temple have been involved from the beginning, making sure that the proper chhayam drums were bought from Cambodia and providing resources for costumes and rehearsal space. “It was actually the monks who had the idea to create the chhayam ensemble here,” says Thavro. “They approached me with the idea once they knew about my background as a professional artist, and as someone who had performed chhayam for years.”

When they lead a procession, these chhayam performers are often joined by members of the South Philadelphia Cambodian community, both women and men, who dance around them or clap along with the drum beats.

This year Chhoeun Phal, one of the temple’s chhayam artists, taught beginning chhayam performance technique to 7 children as part of a week-long culture camp held during the Philadelphia School District’s spring break. Thavro, Chhoeun Phal, and fellow Cambodian performing artist Chamroeun Yin taught dance and chhayam to a total of 21 children and youths at the Bra [Preah] Buddha Rangsi Temple. (This first-ever intensive Cambodian Culture Camp was organized by the Philadelphia Folklore Project.) Though these students cannot participate in chhayam processionals now—they are too small to hold the drums, so they learned the rhythms while seated—there is a strong possibility that they will be involved in performances in the future.

About Chhayam in Philadelphia
A child’s simple, unassuming prose can sum up an experience in ways that overshadow all our studied and crafted methods of program evaluation. A sixth grader, an immigrant from Liberia, shared his assessment of a recent PFP program in a hand-printed note:

Over the years of my life in the U.S. I have always felt homesick. I missed my friends, family and things I loved back home. I came to the U.S. at a young age and I had to make new friends. People say kids don’t remember their past, but they’re wrong. I remember my past. I think people should pay attention to their past because the past is what makes us us. …The dance camp was the most fun I had ever in my life. It stopped my homesickness and made me feel great. If I could do it again I would… but I didn’t like the food.

The first time I read this, I caught my breath. My PFP colleague, Thomas Owens, who was sitting a few feet from where I was standing, gave me an anxious glance. Without speaking, I handed him the note, and he quickly understood my reaction. We were still feeling the afterglow and exhaustion of planning and carrying out PFP’s week-long dance and culture camps—one focused on Liberian dance, and one on Cambodian traditional dance. We were still riding a wave of satisfaction generated by strongly positive reviews from students, parents, and community members, from the accomplished teaching artists whose knowledge and skill were the backbone for the camps, from independent evaluators, and from the organizations (Folk Arts–Cultural Treasures Charter School and the Khmer Buddhist Humanitarian Association) whose support was critical to the camps’ success. But this youngster’s pure and simple comment spoke with an authenticity and profoundness that eclipsed the other reactions.

The dance and culture camps grew out of conversations at a PFP event in October 2007 following a presentation by Dr. Ruth Marie Stone. The noted ethnomusicologist had recently returned to Liberia to gauge the impact of two decades of civil war—and the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the flight of millions—on the musical traditions that she had first encountered as a child there, and subsequently made the focus of her teaching and scholarship. The audience for her talk included more than a dozen Liberian performing artists, many of whom were former members of the National Dance and Cultural Troupe, based in Kendeja before the war. They were eager to hear about the state of their homeland, and the state of its arts. The discussion vibrated with the intensity of their desire to teach young people about the traditional arts that were still central in their own lives. The idea of creating a traditional dance and culture camp was hatched, and former PFP Associate Director Toni Shapiro-Phim shaped the idea into a successful grant proposal. The Pew Center for Arts...
and Heritage through Dance Advance provided funding that allowed PFP to plan intensive week-long camps in Liberian and Cambodian traditional arts for children and youths aged 8 to 18 during the 2009 spring break for local public schools. Cambodian dance was a natural companion to the Liberian dance theme in light of PFP’s ties to cultural workers in both communities, the availability of accomplished Liberian and Cambodian teaching artists, and the two countries’ similar histories of loss and displacement through protracted civil strife. (Additional funding for the camps came from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and PFP’s members and contributors.)

Planning for the camps kicked off in the spring of 2008, a year before the main event. This was a first-time endeavor for PFP. We had a roster of exceptional teaching artists eager to be involved, but we had to build the infrastructure from scratch: instructional goals, curriculum content, lesson plans, daily schedules, closing celebrations. It was important to us to do that in collaboration with the artists—master Cambodian dancers Chamroeun Yin and Thavo Phim, and celebrated Liberian dancers/musicians Fatu Gayflor, Zaye Tete, and Kormassa Bobo. We also wanted the camps to respond to community needs and visions: nurturing young people, sustaining significant cultural practices, and making the Delaware Valley a more hospitable place for Liberian and Cambodian immigrants. Designing and developing a program driven and shaped by these values—values that reflect PFP’s core mission—required a time investment that no one fully anticipated. The project budget certainly didn’t account for all the meetings and planning hours that the artists invested in helping us to design the camps’ content and structure and tap into community cultural networks. As the project proceeded, staff hours ballooned beyond early estimates.

At times we felt as if we were planning two simultaneous weddings in different languages and cultures. The planning process for each camp had its own tempo and texture: a delicate, deliberate court dance with our Cambodian colleagues, a syncopated and sassy village dance with our Liberian colleagues. PFP staff had to adjust our eyes and ears to the nuanced messages embedded in the artists’ speech and gestures, and wait patiently for answers to emerge in response to our questions and probing about instructional goals, lesson plans, teaching aids, and such. Much of this must have seemed like senseless bureaucracy to our artist collaborators.

As with weddings, some decisions and actions had to wait until the last frantic days before the camps opened. We used several strategies to notify parents and young people about the camps—letters and e-mails to people in our database, notices to teachers and principals, phone calls to cultural and civic leaders, fliers that we handed out on weekend afternoons at community marketplaces and churches. The response was slow at first, especially for the Liberian camp. We feared that kids would not want to give up the luxury of sleeping late during spring break, or that parents would be hesitant to allow them to ride public transportation to center city. But just days before the camps started, the floodgates opened, and our challenge was no longer recruiting more students; it was deciding when to shut down enrollment, getting all the forms completed and returned before the first instructional sessions, and making sure we had enough food, supplies, and materials for a third more students than we had expected.

And then we braced ourselves for the opening day. What if kids didn’t show up, or straggled in for half the morning? What if breakfast didn’t arrive on time? What if kids refused to engage in activities or acted out, or kids from different neighborhoods and schools didn’t get along, or boys wouldn’t dance and girls spent their time preening for the boys? Or maybe some unexpected problem with the facility would arise. . . . But none of these horrible contingencies occurred—not the first day, nor any day. Kids showed up every morning eager to get to know one another; to learn from remarkable teachers, cultural practitioners, and scholars, and most of all to dance.

By the end of the week, students at the Cambodian camp were executing the precise, sustained poses of court dances from the Reamker (the Cambodian version of the Ramayana epic) and the complicated patterns of the traditional Coconut Dance, and playing drum rhythms on the chhayam. At the Liberian camp, students were distinguishing between the footwork, rhythms, and significance of dances from the Vai, Lorma, and Dan tribes, as well as finding places to inject their own improvisational flourishes. Inspired by daily storytelling presentations with Gbahtuo Comgbaye and a visit from a group of Liberian storytellers from the Agape African Senior Center, kids regaled their peers and the staff with their own stories—some based on ancient characters and themes, and some based on their own life experience—modeled on traditional Liberian style.

The closing exercises were lively community celebrations. About 125 family members and friends showed up to applaud and cheer as colorfully costumed students from the Liberian community offered dance. Parents who had not been able to attend the opening day due to work or other commitments were able to see their children perform in the closing exercises.

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comfortably than our sisters in refugee camps. For local women, tatreez is about claiming identity and sustaining collective Palestinian memory.

I worked with seven women for this exhibition, including my mother Alia Sheik-Yousef. Each one has a unique story about how she learned tatreez, what she makes, and why she makes it. However, common themes arose in our conversations. Tatreez is always communal in some way, connecting each artist with other women both within the family and outside it. All the women express pride in tatreez, a pride that stems from preserving the art of a Diaspora peoples who live with a contested identity and under perpetual occupation. It is an example of cultural resistance: we are maintaining the existence of the Palestinian people through our stitched heritage.

We, the artists, see ourselves as beacons of our heritage. We feel responsible: we have inherited this tradition and cannot stop creating. All the women interviewed expressed a hope that younger generations of Palestinian women would learn tatreez and find their own uses for it. And just as we have innovated within the tradition to suit our changing lives, we hope that the next generation will do the same. Most importantly, these artists hope that young women will preserve the art of tatreez for other generations. Older women lament that others have turned to machine-made Palestinian dresses. (In their opinion, the quality is lower, and the effort is absent.) Local women all highlight the hard work and labor that goes into each handmade piece—from design to stitching to thinking of how the piece will be sewn into the final product. Their work is an accomplishment to be proud of and to display for people to enjoy.

Seven women are featured in the exhibit, and tatreez connects them to the homeland in various ways. Some are motivated to take up this art by the idea of Palestine. For others, tatreez is important because it is about the particular people—family and neighbors—who create and sustain the memory of the homeland with their needlework. And while each woman is Palestinian and practices the same artform as the others, each has a unique history with tatreez and attributes different meanings to it.

Umm el Adeeb is from the village of Jaba’ but got married and lived in Mukhmas: both villages are between Ramallah and Jerusalem. Her hometown, on the occupied West Bank, continues to exist, never demolished by war. She learned tatreez from her mother at an early age and remembers her mother every time she sees an older woman wearing a thob. After she began having children, she stopped making tatreez until her youngest daughter went to school. Then she began making embroidered thob to wear when she returns to Mukhmas. “In your own country you look fancy,” she explains, “not like here, where people are going to make fun of you.” She embroiders panels that her mother sews into dresses for her when she visits Philadelphia.

Today Umm el Adeeb has an extensive collection of embroidered dresses. She keeps most of them in her home in the West Bank. She is particularly fond of a group that she made out of lighter and cooler material for the summer heat of Mukhmas. The women in Mukhmas love her dresses, and she is proud of her innovative ideas. When she turns over a panel to point out the details, the stitching on the back is extraordinarily neat. She no longer stitches, for lack of time, but last summer she came to the Al-Bustan Camp (a summer camp teaching Arabic culture to young people in Philadelphia) and, along with my mother, taught the young campers how to make tatreez. She showed her own work and spoke with the older campers about her homeland and family.

In the home of Wafa Ajaj I learned that this art is not public, though it is not necessarily private either. She opened her home to me warmly, and on my first visit I ate and drank tea with her nieces and daughters. When Sarah Green came to take pictures, Wafa began rearranging her furniture and bringing out all of her handmade pieces. Her three grandchildren—Talal, Aouni, and Nahid—ended their noisy play, mesmerized by the importance surrounding their grandmother at that moment, and surprised and curious about her ability to create the artwork around them, which until that moment they had taken for granted. They wanted to photograph the tatreez themselves, be photographed with them, and make absolutely sure that their grandmother, astonishingly, had produced those pieces.

Wafa Ajaj learned tatreez from her mother. She remembers gathering outdoors with her sisters and the young women from the neighborhood to make tatreez in one another’s company. They would drink tea and hold friendly competitions to see who would finish the most balls of thread, or tubba. Wafa smiled nostalgically as she remarked that the tatreez around her reminded her of family and friends in Ramallah, especially her mother and her mother-in-law. She also made dresses for her daughters when they were young, pointing out that “the young woman is proud of her heritage, she is not ashamed of it.” These gifts of time and handwork connected generations, making and sharing a sense of pride and beauty.

For Arij Yousef, too, this art is rooted in family. In her thirties, she is one of the younger artists. She was born to a Palestinian father and an Iraqi mother and lived in Amman and Cairo before settling down in the United States. She learned tatreez in 2008 while visiting her family in Jordan. Learning the traditional art
of her Palestinian family was a way of bonding with her sisters and her grandmother, Umm Hasan, who was exiled from Jerusalem in 1948 and now lives in Amman. At the age of 102, Umm Hasan still embroiders: last summer she and her other granddaughters taught Arij how to embroider as well! Arij took to this pastime with enthusiasm, puzzling out patterns from older models and enjoying the chance to creatively adapt traditional patterns.

The women have become very close to each other thanks to tatreez. Umm Hasan sent Arij home with a traditional Palestinian thob made of black cloth embroidered in red thread and a jacket embroidered front and back in a variety of colors and layers of patterns. Her grandmother told Arij that as fallaheen (farmers), women looked to the colors of nature for inspiration: the brown bark of a tree, a red bird, or the blue sky. Arij lives in the city, but she is still inspired by nature, as is evident in her colorful work.

Arij’s favorite pastime since returning to the United States is tatreez. She has taught it to several women in her family here in Philadelphia. Because the proper materials are often difficult or impossible to find in craft shops in the United States, she brought back canvas, thread, needles, and books, which she distributes generously. (Canvas is used to provide gridlines for the cross-stitches; when the artist is finished, the canvas is removed, leaving only the stitches and fabric.) When I complained about my own needle, she advised me to use a dull one, and gave me several of hers, and she gave my Aunt Ghalia, another contributor to the exhibit, a book and sewing materials to take back to her home in Norwich, Connecticut.

Ghalia Salahi is my mother’s older sister. While my mom and her younger sister, Samia, were working and studying in the Arab world (Alia in Damascus and Samia in Amman), Ghalia was obtaining a master’s degree in math education here in the United States. Aunt Samia made a dress for my grandmother in the traditional thob style—black cloth stitched in red on the chest panel, along the sides, at the bottom of the sleeve, and on the bottom of the back of the dress. I wore it for many years in my Palestinian folk dance troupe. My mother made a more modern dress for Aunt Ghalia: it is navy blue, falls just below the knee, and is stitched extensively on the chest panel in various colors. These works are treasures, ways in which our relationships to one another, to the past, and to our home villages are made visible.

Seeing the works that her sisters were producing, Ghalia became interested. She began work on a practice piece many years ago, and she still stitches on it to test out patterns. Her stitches have become visibly larger over time. Our lives and the years are traced in this work. This exhibition project inspired her, and all the women of my family, to carry their pieces around and share what they’ve accomplished, to copy patterns and search for ideas, and to finish pieces started long ago. A text message from my aunt recently showed me her most recent piece: a wall hanging for her son’s new house, incorporating the colors of his favorite sports teams. She started it months ago but completed it only two weeks after visiting the gallery as I worked on the installation.

Sisters Maisaloon and Wafai Dias are the youngest women whose work is included in the exhibit. Maisaloon is a social worker in her mid-twenties, and Wafai is a high school senior. Both women learned from their mother, a seamstress who also made tatreez. She used to embroider her own panels and sew them together into dresses, and Maisaloon and Wafai remember how she would ask them to sit near her while she worked and help her by removing the canvas between the stitches and the fabric. As the girls grew older, they became more interested in the creation of the art. Their mother gave them panels and a pattern to follow. “She did it first,” Wafai said. “She showed us how to do it, and we tried to repeat it as best as we could.” They laugh as they recall that their mother abandoned plans to make those panels into a dress when she saw how uneven their stitches were! Now they are accomplished needlework artists.

Maisaloon and Wafai’s mother never sold her own tatreez, but local women would bring their handmade tatreez panels for her to sew into dresses. Business decreased over the years, as women started to bring ready-to-wear dresses and ask her to adjust them. The sisters lament this change and were excited to find a community of women who continue to make tatreez.

I undertook this project for many reasons. Tatreez is an integral part of our lives. After the backlash Arab Americans faced after September 11, 2001, I wanted the American public to see alternative images of us that represent us more accurately. I also wanted to introduce the youth in our own community to stories of our heritage, fearing that they were too often being exposed to stereotypical and negative media images of themselves. Tatreez is accessible as a traditional artform because of its presence in our local community. The youth, girls in particular, can learn a great deal from the artists, as I myself learned from them—both about this art and about Palestinian women’s lives.

Within the first few interviews, I discovered how personal tatreez is, and how much it pertains to the home. Wafa Ajaj says that her work is beautiful art for her home: none of these women ever shared their work in a public exhibit—nor did any of them ever sell their work. Instead, patterns are traded, panels sewn on by several women, and ideas exchanged. Yet all of them agreed with the mission of the project and were happy to tell their stories. [Continued on p. 29 >]
are the nightriders—or just a group of drunken men. And they would come, and they would have him kill a fresh chicken, ’cause in those days, the best food was fresh, you know. And he would kill a chicken, take the feathers off, and he would fry it, ’cause he was known for really being able to fry good chicken. And anyway, after he would fry this chicken, after they would eat it, they would drink whiskey, and then they would actually shoot at his feet—take out their gun and shoot at his feet and make him buck dance! And then the question was—it was like a game—“Where are the women?” And he knew what to say: “The women aren’t here,” because you didn’t know, if the women were there, you didn’t know—but use your imagination. I was never told what was gonna happen. And so, most of the time, when they could hear ’em coming, the women would hide under the bed, and they would just stay there until they were gone.

Then, years later, I received a letter from my Uncle A.B., my mother’s brother, and he told me that same story. So then I wanted to know, since Alma was the last remaining, if they remember this actually happening. ’Cause this was told, let’s say, second hand, and I wanted to know the people who were actually there—what do they remember? So when I asked Alma about it, she said, “I was probably too little.” When I told my Aunt Marva, who was sixty-seven, that I was going to Elyria to find out about the story, she says, “Oh yeah, I heard that story.” I said, “Well, Marva, how come you never told it to me?” And she acted like it was no big deal. And then my grandmother, her mother, who I never met, was very afraid of thunder and lightning. So I’m wondering, is that one of the reasons? Because all of my aunts were afraid of thunder and lightning. And it made me think about when people use that word, “terror.” You know, what does it mean to be terrorized? And I wondered, “Do these stories exist in other families, stories that really don’t get told until out of the spur of the moment, you know?”

Yvonne DeVasty:
As a child growing up, my father would take us down to North Carolina, which is where he was born, every summer. And whether it was a Model T Ford, or a Dodge, or whatever, he would take us down there, and what would be down there would be a log cabin. And I remember seeing the rifle over the threshold, or the horseshoe, or the broom made out of the long straw for the hearth. But there was something about North Carolina, specifically my father’s home, that held a kind of mystery to me. Now of course, my father was some kind of a mystery, and of course he was my hero.

So the two really drew me to North Carolina, and I always wanted a piece of land. And I remember as I grew up, and went back to visit, I would talk to my relatives, saying, “I would like to buy some of this land down here,” because it didn’t come down through the hereditary route to my lap. Well, they’d always say, “Yes.” And those of you who know the South, know the South holds many mysteries, and many, many interesting ways of dealing with questions. So I wanted a piece of the land, because I felt it held some of the answers to the mysteries that I grew up in. And some of the mysteries I grew up with were: I never knew my paternal grandfather. We had glimpses of ideas of what was going on, and, you know, there were parts of our family that would go here, and then drop off. You had no way to go there, and then people were silent. And you all know there’s lots of stories like that of the South.

So, one day my cousin called me. And she had known for about ten years that I had been interested in getting some land, and so forth. So she told me that she had gotten through the inheritance about a hundred-some acres. And she said, “You know, we all talked about this, and you should get some of the land, because you never got your inheritance.” And from that moment, of that possibility of actually getting some land—of course it’s taken a very circuitous route . . . isn’t quite in place—but it started to sort of titillate my fantasies of what the land could represent. And not so much for me, but for the family coming: my grandkids, my kids.

Coming down from Philadelphia, down through Route One. At that time, I guess you went about—I can’t remember the highest speed—maybe forty miles an hour back then. And you’d finally get down towards North Carolina. Well, if we got there at nighttime, there were no lights on the road. Obviously, if there was a log cabin, it was not in the city; it was way back in the boondocks. So we get down there. If it was at nighttime, there was a fork in the road, and even my father could not quite find his way ’cause you couldn’t even see your hand in front of you. So, his nephew would be at the fork, with a kerosene lantern. And he would sit there no matter what time—don’t know when he started sitting there, and I’m not sure what time we got to that point. But he would be there, and he would shine the light. And then we would follow him, and go on through. That would be one time.

If it was in the daytime, I remember coming from the road. I would always see the log cabin with this beautiful chimney, the big stones with multicolored patinas—just gorgeous, I kept some pictures of them. In any event, we’d turn off the road there, and we’d trundle out of the car, the four of us. And here we city folks had come, and, you know, this is all country folks down here. So there would be my two aunts out in the yard. One would be sittin’ kinda like I’m sitting now, with one of the big old metallic bowls, and she’d be snappin’ beans! And then the other aunt’d be off to the side, and she’d be kinda slow-footed, like my father, and she’d be wringin’ chickens’ heads as she
came. And so we'd pull in, and of course they'd stop momentarily to come to greet us, because my father was the only one who came back to his home, from all the brothers who were around and all. I think he's the only one who went North, too. But anyway, he came back, so he was everybody's hero.

And so what happened is, we come in. We knew, over in the kitchen there, there were these smells coming out, because every horizontal surface in that kitchen was loaded to groaning with chicken, and ham, and sweet potatoes, and string beans, and greens, and biscuits, and coffee with chicory in it, and pineapple cake—layer cake, with coconut on top—and just on and on and on. So back in the yard, here we would be, and the two aunts would be asking us, “How was the trip,” etcetera. We would tell them. And then, while we were telling our experience of the trip, the chickens were getting' barer and barer, and the beans were piled higher and higher, and somebody was over here mixing biscuits. The next thing you knew, it was time to eat. And they never—you know, we were just talking away, and here they are preparing this enormous feast. And I remember one of the aunts would yell out there; tobacco was the crop in the back, and the field hands would be coming in to see these northerners who had descended down the road. And not before long, there’d be a whole long line of folk coming in to see these northerners who had descended on the place. So that’s kind of some of the memories that I recall.

**Jeannine Osayande:**

I was about eleven, and my friends were having a party. And one of the girls at school, who I was really friends with, where you just ate lunch with, you laughed ‘til your belly hurt with, it was her birthday. And everyone got an invitation but me. I was the only Black girl. That’s still when you actually wore a dress, sort of getting in the ’70s. You just didn’t wear a t-shirt or whatever. So you do the whole thing for the party, and the mom would do the invitations. Anyway, I felt like she didn’t invite me because I was Black, but I wasn’t sure, but I really felt it. But I also felt like, “She’s my friend, and everybody else is going, and there isn’t any reason why I shouldn’t be there.” So I told my mother I was invited to the party.

You know, she got the gift, and took me to do all of that. And I got dressed; she dropped me at the front door: Ring the bell. And when the mother opened the door, her jaw dropped. So then I realize, “Okay, she didn’t invite me because I was Black” [laughing]. But I’m on her step. So, she was gracious enough to open the door and let me be there. And so we had the day at the party. And then, the next day, people heard that I came, but I didn’t have an invitation. And time passes and all of that, and I got older, and I even wondered, “Did that actually happen?”

So, I’ll speed you up thirty years. And I’m visiting my father at a nursing home. And I walk in, and right across the hall, sitting in the wheelchair, is the mom. And she’s like, “Jeannine!” Well, back then they called me “Rachel,” so she’s like, “Rachel!” And I understood what happened: it was in the ’70s then, and people were coming out of a lot of things. Or maybe not even out of it, just exploring it. She was an older mom, too, so I understood where she was. Even if I was little, I understood. But still, the question was, “Was it a figment of my imagination in childhood, or did it happen?” The next thing she said was, she took my hand and said, “Remember the birthday party?” And I was like “Yes!” ’Cause I was like, “Was that a dream?” You know, sometimes you keep having dreams throughout your life. So I knew, “Okay, this happened,” and we talked about it. I didn’t say anything; she just said, “You know, it was a different time then, and we didn’t have enough money for all the food.” She kind of started to go that way, and I let her. But I knew she was giving me some kind of connection and some kind of peace. So every time I’d visit my dad, I’d be in her room. She’s telling me stories and things, you know.

But for me, the defining moment is that I look back and it made me bold. ’Cause even though people see me as bold growing up, I wasn’t really that bold. But that incident, about just standing up, even if you had to be sneaky and go to a party—but to stand up one way or another. Yeah.

**Notes**

1 Linda’s research trip was supported by a grant from the Fund for Folk Culture.
2 Alcoa is a tiny town in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. An aluminum factory town, Alcoa takes its name from the Aluminum Company of American, located there.
3 Before emancipation, paddy rollers, or slave patrollers, were organized groups of white men who hunted down African Americans escaping slavery. Later, the groups evolved into the Ku Klux Klan and other formal and informal groups, exercising their own brand of social control by terrorizing African American communities. See Gladys-Marie Fry, Night Riders in Black Folk History (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991).
started—the culture in America—we didn’t really realize what we were really about. All we knew is this is where you had to go, and the drive you had to place in it. But we didn’t realize that it’s spiritual, what it held, what it meant, you know, to do this. This isn’t just that you could do it. No! You had to go up there. Say, “I'm coming up,” you know, “I'm coming up,” and you’ll go up there.

Dorothy Wilkie: Go up there, and the spirit comes and it hit y'all! My dancers came, jumped right out, there in the dundunba. Ali got up and did the dundunba, and then Ali started doing the hip-hop stuff, and they went! That was it!

Ama Schley: Oh, that was it! Crazy!

Amma Young: Oh, that was it!

Baba Crowder: To me, it was like really seeing America in Africa and Africa in America. What the people tried so hard in America to teach each other about was being positive, and being spiritual, and then physical content. Because all this work is very, very spiritual. It has nothing to do with the body itself. It may appear that it does, but it doesn’t. And, the way we’re taught, it was hard to believe that we were speaking that, because we didn’t actually have the thought that we were doing something spiritual. We're always made conscious of the spiritual. But in Guinea we immediately realized how deeply we were in depth of the spirituality of dance and music and song. In other words—I would say hip-hop, for one. Or doo-wop, on the corner, for two. Well, the way we used to sing and verse together—well that’s the same way the drums and the voice is in there. You have to be correct. You had to do this right. And that’s what the whole trip to me. You know that once you see the true, true essence of it. How when Saka Acquaye came to Philadelphia, and Kwame Nkrumah and all of them came to Philadelphia, they taught in that drive that they dance in. And that was hard for us to accept. It really was, because we didn’t realize the spiritual ideology of it, you know, 'cause we thought of the strength and, “Hey, dig me! I'm doing it!” Yes, true, but it’s the spiritual part of it coming into you. Are you delivering it to—in that concept of—feeling? And this is what I really observed from that.

Dorothy Wilkie: I have to give a lot of credit to M'Bemba Bangoura, because he paved the way for us to go there, and he set up everything, ‘cause you can’t just go to Africa and find where you’re gonna take master classes. He set up a compound where we stayed. And there he brought a choreographer; a dance instructor; a costume designer; the drum maker; the singer—everything. Everything. He took us where they make drums. We went to the place where they made drums. They had, it looked like, acres of cows. He took us where they make bells. So, I mean, it’s hard to find a person who could set it up like that. That was a blessing for us. He knows all the ballets—the companies there. And he took us to different ballets. And we went to their rehearsals. We watched them perform. We went to festivals—dundunba festivals, where the dancers got involved, and they were dancing beside other indigenous Africans, getting the feeling of each other together. For a dancer; that’s so much for imagination for a dancer: That was very skilful for Kulu Mele dancers.

Amma Young: It was spiritual. Everything about it was very spiritual. When you say "folk and traditional artists," we’re talking about looking at regular people—regular people doing things beyond the norm, but then regular people doing things in the norm. And then, as folk and traditional artists, we make it spectacular when we put cultural arts on the stage. But then, when you see the people in their community of the people, you see: “Oh! That’s a regular part of life.” “You know, it’s a regular person; this is what they do.” “This is survival. This is what God gave me, and I’m transferring it out, and I’m recreating what’s in me.” And everything is about spirit and joy of life and appreciation and respect of life. I mean, when you look at the things that are done, and their excellence, and then you look around and see the conditions in the poorest—you know it’s only God. It’s only spirit. It’s only going deep within and bringing out, you know, from a place that only God can just touch you.

I know it just rejuvenated me. Things I thought I forgot came out. Things I hesitated to do, I saw done. Sitting with some of the greatest artists in the world. Just seeing them for years and years on video and DVD, and then going and sitting next to him. I did sketches of a flute player that I’ve seen playing when he was maybe in his twenties on VHS— And, lo and behold, we went to their workshop there, their rehearsal, and there he was! Now he’s grey haired, still playing the same flute, still doing just amazing, extraordinary things.

And then you look and you say, “But they look like my cousins and my brothers and my family and regular people.” But, oh, how they carve something out of nothing—When we say, “Oh, we don’t have this. We don’t have that.” Most of us dancers ask for wooden floors do dance on. Everywhere we went was cement—raggedy, bashed-in floors! Potholes. Places that looked like a shell. And people did splits on this ground like it was rubber; They defied gravity like there was no gravity.

At street parties, the sounds of the music just could crack the heavens. I mean, here is culture in its purest form, and these are regular people doing what's in them and saying, “Oh, this is us. This is what makes us great, and this is what we’re proud of. And this is how we survive. And this is how we communicate with one another and give back to God and say we love each other. The music was like an engine running, taking you higher and higher. Oh well, I just lost my mind. I just lost my mind. It’s so many things. There’s no words to just tell the whole story. People just touch your soul. People—you can
just carry them in your spirit forever.

**Ama Schley:** I was home. I felt like I was home, you know.

**Payin Schley:** Being around a bunch of sisters and brothers that I never thought I had.

**Amma Young:** Because you can see yourself in them, right? You can see yourself—

**Ali Wilkie:** It's so—it's just like there's so much love over there. It's not like over here.

**Payin Schley:** There's a whole lot of love over there.

**Dorothy Wilkie:** We had vigorous rehearsals.

**Payin Schley:** Every day.

**Ali Wilkie:** Practice. Practice.

**Tamara Thomas:** In the beginning, our feet were hurting and our ankles, and our calves—

**Dorothy Wilkie:** We had to soak them. But now, the story is about a hippopotamus: Mali Sadjo. Well, it starts off with a couple, and the woman was promised to take care of the hippopotamus when she got a certain age. And so, that was her job. So, she had a relationship going on, and her job was to take care of Mali Sadjo. Her boyfriend was jealous of her job.

**Tamara Thomas:** And, the Mali Sadjo is a hippopotamus, but it was a treasured entity for the community. And so, the woman was—not necessarily a sacrifice—but she was promised to the Mali Sadjo when she came of age. And I guess you could say she had a boyfriend: she had a lover; an interest. But because she was promised to the Mali Sadjo, to take care of the Mali Sadjo, there was somewhat of a rift. Her boyfriend became jealous and eventually, out of that fervor, killed the Mali Sadjo. But the Mali Sadjo also allows rain. It's a protector; right? So the people, they honor the Mali Sadjo, to ask for rain to come and to protect the community and the village. So, the lover, he shot the Mali Sadjo—but out of passion.

**Dorothy Wilkie:** And that caused—

**Tamara Thomas:** Chaos to ensue.

**Ali Wilkie:** A lot of drama.

**Dorothy Wilkie:** The company had to learn how to do theatre. You know, that's something that we—most of the time, we just do dancing and drumming and singing, but it's drama, so we had to get into it, and they did well.

**Ali Wilkie:** I'm not an actor, and I really had to turn into an actor down there.

**Dorothy Wilkie:** And Ali is one of our hip-hop dancers, and, so he's learning African dance, and this was a step up for him. He developed a lot from going on this trip. His skills have developed tremendously with the African dance, learning African dance moves.

**Ali Wilkie:** I'm more humble. I'm more humble now, too. And freer; now.

**Amma Young:** Because, before, you guys had a little somethin' with African dance that you don't have no more. They just got out there and did it. They were trying everything.

**Ali Wilkie:** Before, it was like, "Eh, I ain't gonna do that." Now it's like "I appreciate this!"

**Dottie Wilkie:** And see, Ali is my son. We were at a dundunba. I was sitting there at the first dundunba we went to and I was sittin' there, and all of a sudden I see him run across the ground, and dust kick up, and start dancing. I say, "Is that my son?" What happened?! He just bust open! "This going to be something."

**Ali Wilkie:** I just don't take a lot of stuff for granted no more. I just appreciate a lot more things.

**Dottie Wilkie:** And they went into the community. They were hanging out. These people would go out every night, and they would go to the clubs and just hang out. They got into the community, into the people. And you know, they speak a different language, but it was a common thing that they communicated.

**Tamara Thomas:** It was the ultimate sharing. And I've been to Africa on several occasions, but this is the first time I traveled with my Kulu Mele family And so, that was a profound experience: to have shared experiences, to have busted toes, to be sick, to have late-night whatever; to be up early, you know. I mean, hurting, but somehow, you rise. It's no longer about the body—it's about a larger mission, about a shared experience, about love, and making it transcend—continually, working with Mari Touré and Yamusa and honoring their legacies, honoring Baba's legacy, honoring Mama Dottie's legacy and giving 100 percent. I couldn't have done anything else. It just wouldn't make sense. We were all put there for a reason. And, it's palpable—the experience and the energy that has kind of come and effervesced from it.

I applied for a Leeway grant to travel with the company and also to specifically look at the intersections between hiphop and traditional Guinea music. And I looked up with a group called Methodique, and I went to one performance. I didn't know what I was gonna see, but those experiences kept coming, where you didn't know what was gonna happen to you. And everything that you needed to know happened—at that moment. And on the stage there was someone playing the kora, there was someone playing the djembe, and then they're rapping. And you see how African American culture has gone there, and there's this complete give-and-take. You see how spoken word—the oral tradition, how it's unlocked, born and bred in Africa, has made its way to the Americas, and made its way back. And how this just keeps going back and forth. And so it was amazing, I mean, to say the least. And I just think the beauty is that the seeds have been planted, and now it's just about watering it, and making it continue to grow.

**Baba Crowder:** Thank you, thank you. I'm glad you said that, because that's exactly what it is—exactly what it is. You think it's something else, but it's not.

**Tamara Thomas:** If you leave yourself open, it's really about entering. Emptying the cup, so it can be filled up again. And it kind of happens when you—when everybody gave gifts. You...
don’t go with the expectation, like, “How much can I get, how much can I get?” You give, so whatever comes your way, comes your way. And that just got reinforced over and over and over and over and over again. I mean, I got kind of sick on the trip at one point. We all kind of got touched at some point. But, it was just so amazing. I felt ill, but I didn’t wanna not do my part. And everybody was like, “You’re good! What do you need, what do you need?” And then we each had a chance to kind of watch over each other. And those moments are given to us as tests, to kind of see how strong these bonds are, and how strong the family can be.

Ama Schley: This trip brought me more close than, you know, than how I already felt or how I was to these members here.

Tamara Thomas: We take so much for granted. I mean, sharing ourselves, emptying ourselves to be filled up again. I mean, from the beginning to the end, we take so much for granted. You know, for me—the idea of it being spiritual—it’s because it was real. On the last day, when we went to the airport, it was kind of emotional kind of separating from the master teachers, from Mari Touré and Yamussa. And, so some of the people who we befriended when we were there accompanied us to the airport. And our flight wasn’t until 3:00 in the morning and I think Ama came outside and was like, “Yamusa.” And he’s—how old is Yamusa? He’s probably in his seventies. But he has a spirit of a young man. He rides a motorcycle; he doesn’t wear a helmet. He moves! I mean, his energy—he would dance, and you wouldn’t even believe it, because you can see his youth, his vigor. He got out of his bed and came to the airport to wish us a safe journey. It was that important. We had no idea he was coming, you know, because we had said our goodbyes earlier that day, and it was hard, you know, “See you next time,” you know. “This is not it.” But for some reason, it is one of those memories that really stuck me, that we were his children, we were his family. That was a remarkable moment.

Ama Schley: He was filled up. He was out there with tears in his eyes. Of course I was crying.

Amma Young: You didn’t want to leave. You didn’t want to leave them there. We know they don’t have much, but they all gave us gifts! They found a way to give us all gifts.

Ali Wilkie: We have to go back!

Dorothy Wilkie: Yeah, we have to go back. Because, well, we didn’t have enough time to do the whole play. We got an excerpt from the play. And so, hopefully we can go back to get the other half. But we have enough to present the beginning. You’ll see the story in the dance and the music. It was a trip of a lifetime. And it is just the beginning.

To learn more about Kulu Mele and their trip, visit their blog http://blog.kulumele.org
locally in Liberia, sometimes letting the young people practice storytelling themselves. Fatu Gayflor, Zaye Tete, and Kormassa Bobo then taught dance-drama and led students in varied choreographies. The young people bonded, learned, and explored.

As a student wrote: “The teachers were really interesting to me because they were very proud, pleasant, and kind. Most Liberian people would not want to tell others about their culture. They would say they are too civilized for their own culture. But one thing I learned from these teachers is that it does not matter who you are, you should always respect and own your culture.”

Each group spent an hour at a time with a teacher. Zaye Tete trained her group in a dance that depicted childrearing and childcare while her husband and son provided drumming backup. Fatu Gayflor taught a dance that she had learned as a member of the Liberian National Dance and Culture Troupe while residing in Kendeja, on the outskirts of the capital, Monrovia, using her voice to produce the rhythms of the drums and gourd rattle. Kormassa Bobo’s dance portrayed the farming cycle: clearing bush, planting and harvesting rice. Her daughter served as her able assistant.

At the end of each day was a period for cultural reflection. All the students gathered together for conversation and discussion. The children were asked the first day, for example, what they knew about their family’s origins in Liberia. Some replied that their families came from the Loma, Vai, or Krahn areas, among others. Some young people could not name the languages of their ancestral areas, but went home that day to discuss this with their families. I told the students about how I first came to live in Haindee, Bong County, as a three-year-old because my parents worked there as missionaries. I learned to speak Kpelle as I played with Liberian children after I had finished my home schooling each day.

Music and Song
Many Kpelle people believe that instruments, like people, have voices. A master drummer may give his goblet drum a woman’s name. One drummer I worked with in Liberia called his drum Gomaa (“Share with me”).

Many Kpelle people believe that instruments, like people, have voices. A master drummer may give his goblet drum a woman’s name. One drummer I worked with in Liberia called his drum Gomaa (“Share with me”).

rangling from side-blown wooden or ivory horns to flutes, are frequently believed to represent the voices of spirits or supernatural beings. Camp instructors introduced the students to various instruments and helped them develop a list for each category.

During our cultural reflection periods, we focused on the types of musical performance found in Liberian communities. Work songs accompany all the stages of farming—clearing, planting, harvest, rice pounding. Entertainment songs tell stories, some of great length and complexity. The epic known in Kpelle as woi-meni-pele displays the wealth of knowledge of local people. Plants, animals, and objects are named as the storyteller narrates the adventures of the superhuman Woi, moving with his family, encountering obstacles, and overcoming them. As one Kpelle musician in Liberia told me, “If you know the woi-meni-pele, then you know the Kpelle people.” He regarded the epic as a kind of encyclopedia of Kpelle life, an oral repository of knowledge, passed on from one musician to another and even supernatural, as when a tutelary spirit comes to make their sound especially fine.

Among the Kpelle, instruments are classified as struck (ngale) or blown (fee). The struck instruments include goblet drums, two-headed cylinder drums, hourglass drums, and xylophones, as well as plucked string instruments such as the koning, struck bow, and the multiple bow-lute. Hollowed-out wooden logs are used to accompany workers cutting bush for making rice farms. The struck category also encompasses gourd rattles, which a number of the musicians used in the Camp to lead the dancers and indicate when to change step patterns. The blown instruments, poured out in the evenings in village life.

I told the students how in 2007 I recorded an epic-pourer in Totota, Bong County, who knew a wealth of episodes. Sometimes he narrated the story; sometimes he responded to the mare-kee-ke-nuu (questioner) who sat directly behind him; sometimes he directed a chorus of audience members who helped create the background of song that was the foundation for “pouring the epic.”

The Feel of Liberian Music
Motion and action feature prominently in Liberian music. During my fieldwork among the Kpelle, I was vividly impressed by the pervasiveness of precise and subtle metaphors in their descriptions of music and dance moves. Dancers’ movements might be called “trembling” or “sharp.” A drummer described his improvisation on the goblet drum as “Kwa woo tono siye, ku bene, pene” (“We take one sound and turn it, turn it”). The singer Feme Neni-kole layered metaphors of motion and action as she sang, “Ngei ya e pu gata, gata yee gbai gbang su gbai” (“My tears fell gata, gata like corn from an old corn farm”). Kulung, an epic performer; depicted the jealous wife of the superhero Woi, forced to earn her living by carving bowls with her voice. The visual-kinesthetic action of her carving was portrayed by words, each sound conveying a different action and a different effect:

Bongkai, kpolor, kpolor, kpolor, kpolor
Mono, mono, fee laa.
Kalu fee laa, kalu mono, mono.
Bongkai—the sound of carving a bowl with a large interior space: kpolor—small adze strokes; mono, mono—shiny blackness; fee laa—a flat bowl. Each word evoked a different gesture. As we listened, the bowl, with all its distinctive features, took shape.

The Kpelle have a rich array of performance contexts where motion and action are essential components of music performance. The result is a creative, constantly evolving tapestry of sound and dance. This, in turn, is at the heart of the rich world of thought, movement, and music to which Philadelphia students were introduced during their week at camp.

Greedy Father Spider
In the storytelling that constituted the first hour each day at camp, Gbahtuo entertained and educated the group with folktales,
including stories about Nansii or Father Spider, a greedy trickster who is always getting into trouble as he tries to fill his stomach. Some of those stories were accompanied by songs that the children learned.

One of my favorites is about Nansii’s love of feasts. One day he went to a village where the people were getting ready to have a feast. Nansii became excited and asked them to let him know when the feast was ready so that he could join them and share the food. To make sure that he would be informed, no matter where he might be, Nansii tied a rope around his waist and left one end in the village. He instructed the villagers to pull on the rope when the food was ready.

Several days later Nansii was in another village where people were also talking about an upcoming feast, and how they were going to butcher a cow and set out a spectacular array of food. Nansii’s eyes got big and his stomach grumbled as he thought about eating wonderful rice dishes piled with meat. So he tied another piece of rope around his waist and asked the townspeople to be sure and pull on it when they were ready to serve the feast.

Days went by, Nansii thought he felt a tug at his waist from the first village. He started to walk toward that village, anticipating the abundance of food that was going to be served. But not long afterward he felt a tug from the opposite direction. He staggered on his feet as he started to walk toward the second village. Each village pulled the rope, more and more insistently, first from one direction and then from the other. Father Spider dragged first one way and then the other, couldn’t move very far in any direction. The tugging became more and more intense, and Nansii’s waist became thinner and thinner. He was stuck in one spot, with the ropes around his waist pulling harder and harder in opposite directions. And that is why, when you see spiders today, you will notice that they have very thin waists. And this is a reminder of why one shouldn’t be greedy.

Gbahtuo explained to the campers that these morals are an important part of the stories, meant to teach young people about values and ways to behave.

One afternoon a group of elder Liberian storytellers from the Agape Senior Center, who work with Dr. Mary Hufford, a folklorist from the University of Pennsylvania, joined the students to share stories. Benjamin Kpangbah, Ansumana Passawee, Martha Carr; and Napaa Byepu took turns telling stories to the fascinated students. I was touched to learn that Napaa Byepu, whose husband was a pastor in Parkawelee, had known my father when he lived in Liberia. She wanted to tell her story in Kpelle, so we formed a partnership that afternoon. She narrated in Kpelle, and I translated—line for line—into English. I realized that my tone of voice and rhythm needed to match hers in order to convey the pace and tone of the story.

These Liberian elders remembered stories told by their families and friends in the evening by the village fires, after the meals were over and the chores completed for the day. The afternoon with the elders was particularly wonderful for the young people. As one of the students reflected: “When it came to the storytellers, Teacher Gbahtuo and the elders were really given the gift of storytelling. You could imagine yourself in the story because of the way they told it. This brought back memories from my grandfather. He was a storyteller. He always told his grandchildren stories every evening.”

Several of the students present displayed their own storytelling skills during the final program, a community gathering, on Saturday.

Community Gathering

On Saturday afternoon, friends and families gathered in the cafeteria area of the Folk Arts – Cultural Treasures Charter School, the site of the Camp. Two drummers set the stage. The students danced, synchronizing their movements to the patterns of the drum and gourd rattle. Each of the teachers showcased a group of students, who performed the dance-dramas they had rehearsed. At the end of the performance the whole group came forward for a bow and more dancing, as the drums kept the energy high.

A Liberian feast was spread out, and the audience and performers ate the rice delicacies and various soups for which the country is well known. Families thanked teachers and camp organizers for their efforts, while students mingled with new friends. Most significantly, people could reflect on the richness of the culture that had been shared that afternoon and the week that led up to it—a rare and important chance to learn about the wealth of a country that could not be destroyed by the recent war.

Postscript

The Philadelphia Folklore Project’s Culture Camp testifies to the power of the arts to persist, to sustain, and to bind people together. Liberian artists may have lost land, houses, country, and material wealth. But cultural wealth in the form of the arts continues in their minds and limbs. They remember the dances they were taught at Kendeja, the national music and dance center once situated on the beach outside Monrovia. By teaching these arts to young students living in Philadelphia, they cultivate Liberian music and dance in new and previously unanticipated ways. Returning to the Kpelle proverb quoted at the start of this article, these drummers, dancers, and storytellers taught young Philadelphians how to build a town through art.

—Dr. Ruth M. Stone, Indiana University
stories to the public and display their work. The exhibition became a new means of sharing with one another and becoming visible—as artists and makers of beauty and community—to a wider public. They were generous with their time and their tatreez, and for this I am grateful.

The women involved, including myself, range in age from their teens to 102, so I can proudly say that this art is not dying. Nor are the identity issues tied to any Palestinian traditional art diminishing. Far from home and heritage, we can insist, with these stitches, on our right to name ourselves in connection with the places and people we come from. Thanks to my work on this first exhibition project, my American-born cousins Nehad, 15 years old, and Dania, 13, have taken canvas and string and are currently learning tatreez by stitching their names. This is how I myself learned tatreez at the age of 14. These new settings encourage us all to imagine many kinds of future for this art.

Traditionally, a woman learned tatreez from her mother and passed it on to her daughter. But my mother learned it differently. Her mother never made tatreez because she comes from the city, and only village women made tatreez. Even the women of my father’s village never wore tatreez. However, when my mother lived in the Yarmouk Refugee Camp for Palestinians in Damascus, she organized exhibits of tatreez and helped women in the camp to sell their work. Her passion for everything related to her homeland led her to ask these various women to teach her. It became her favorite pastime, “because tatreez is mobile,” she points out. “You can pass it around among people, and that way you preserve it.” In a different setting, I too find myself creating a new context for showing, sharing, respecting and learning about this tradition.

I am very happy about the support I’ve received from the Palestinian community for this project. During the jam-packed exhibition opening, Alia, Arij, and Umm el Adeeb graciously answered questions, responded to interested and enthusiastic attendees, explained the process, and talked about individual pieces. They are now also looking forward to leading workshops and teaching the art. Our hope is that we can forge a new and lasting space for tatreez in Philadelphia and continue to build community and understanding around the art. Most importantly, we want young Palestinian women to learn about their heritage and history through tatreez and find pride in their identity.

—Nehad Khader

 Attendees at the tatreez workshop. Photo: Thomas Owens

“…”“It stopped my homesickness…”
My eyes water each time I read it.

—Germaine Ingram

Attendees at the tatreez workshop. Photo: Thomas Owens

camp told stories with musical and dramatic flair and performed the dances they had learned, accompanied by a battery of drummers. Their teachers offered short performances, and everyone enjoyed lively talk over a feast of traditional Liberian foods prepared by the mothers of some of the students. A day later, in the courtyard of a beautifully ornate Khmer Buddhist Temple, Cambodian camp students performed their dances and drumming in the bright sun and brisk breeze of a Sunday afternoon. The Chief Monk, members of the temple, and residents of the surrounding South Philly community—merchants, seniors, kids out riding their bikes—joined parents and grandparents for the demonstration and an open-air buffet of Cambodian fried rice, noodles with curried chicken, and spring rolls prepared and served by the temple’s food committee.

By all the conventional measures, the camps were a success. Kids, parents, artists, and staff were happy with the experience and looking forward to the next one; there was demonstrated growth in students’ skill and knowledge; no emergencies or mishaps occurred; PFP made new friends and contacts in the Cambodian and Liberian communities; and we brought the project in on budget (well, almost). Then a hand-scrawled note from a sixth grader arrived, evaluating the camps according to a different, profoundly personal standard.
Have you stopped by PFP’s West Philadelphia rowhouse? Monthly workshops, open houses, salons and exhibitions, offer chances to experience the region’s folk arts. For example…

* Our “Folk Arts House” season began with a December reunion of tap dancers who participated in in PFP’s “Stepping in Time” concerts and “Plenty of Good Women Dancers” documentary project in the 1990s. Viewing the “Rethinking Plenty of Good Women Dancers” exhibition on display at PFP, people shared photos, appreciated one another’s company, traded experiences as entertainers and friends, and remembered great artists now passed: LaVaughn Robinson, Henry Meadows, Edith Hunt, Libby Spencer, Hortense Allen Jordan, Michele Roberts Webster, Delores and Dave McHarris.

* Over the years, neighborhood Artist Christina Johnson has documented African diaspora quilt and textile arts while developing her own work. She invited like-minded artists to “Tea with Christina” in December. Sharing needlework and the stories behind them, craftspeople stopped by to show and tell. Viewing one another’s beautiful work, people talked technique and motivation, history and practice.

* Every corner and chair was occupied at a June embroidery workshop, as a half-dozen Palestinian women taught a diverse group—beginners to experts, all ages and backgrounds—to stitch tatreez, the needlework displayed in PFP’s current exhibition (and described in the magazine article here).

* More Folk Arts Education: More than 490 young people studied folk and traditional arts this past year at Preah Buddha Rangsi Temple, Patterson School, and the Folk Arts-Cultural Treasures Charter School (FACTS) which PFP co-founded in collaboration with Asian Americans United. Check out the new Culture Tools website (www.culturetools.org) to see work by artists, students, and activists. Culture Tools was developed by AAU, PFP and FACTS as part of a Scribe Video Center initiative.

* PFP’s redesigned website also features (www.folkloreportject.org) more media and documentation of the work of local traditional artists, lots to read, hear and watch, and plenty of resources for people working in (or interested in) folk and traditional arts.

* Looking forward: looking back In the coming year, Germaine returns to a role as featured artist with the latest PFP “Dance Happens Here” initiative, The President’s House Project, a multi-disciplinary collaboration between her (doing tap/choreography), jazz musician Bobby Zankel and visual artist John Dowell. The project aims to commemorate the nine Africans enslaved in the President’s House (Philadelphia’s White House during George Washington’s presidency), reflect on the contradictions, ironies, and present-day resonances of slavery’s practice in America’s first seat of government, and explore using traditional arts to spark meaningful questions and thoughtful conversations about African/African American traditions, freedom of expression, and social responsibility. The first public discussion of their work is scheduled for December 11 at the African American Museum in Philadelphia. Full details are on www.philadelphiafolklore.org.

Germaine Ingram has made tremendous contributions to PFP over the years, as a long-time board mem-
ber; through her leadership of projects on African American tap dance (“Plenty” and “Stepping”, mentioned above), as a featured artist, and much more. From February 2008 through August 2009, she served as Associate Director, where she directed our folk arts education program and the Culture Camps described in these pages.

* Welcome to ethnomusicologist Abimbola Cole, who will coordinate our new program, the Community Folklife Documentation Workshop (CFDW), supporting local people in documenting the cultural traditions and folklife of their communities. PFP works with people from diverse communities who face hard issues everyday—newcomers impacted by harsh anti-immigrant policies, neighbors fighting for decent work and fair treatment, artists striving to create usable cultural traditions drawing on sources from sometimes distant times and places. We aim to use tools of folklife and ethnographic documentation to understand and address the forces that buffet us all. We see this new program as a means for diverse constituents to build connections with one another by investigating folk arts and social change: the historic responses and resources that communities make for themselves. Questions of displacement and place-making will be central. The project will culminate in a “Home Place” exhibition at PFP and online in June 2010. We’re grateful for funding for planning and piloting this year from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, through its Heritage Philadelphia Program, PNC-Arts Alive, and Artography: Arts in a Changing America, a grant and documentation program of Leveraging Investments in Creativity, funded by the Ford Foundation. Stay tuned for more news…

* For information about current programs, visit our website (www.folklorepoject.org) or give us a call: 215.726.1106. To join and support these efforts, use the form on the back page, or donate through our website.
Folklore means something different to everyone—as it should, since it is one of the chief means we have to represent our own realities in the face of powerful institutions. Here at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, we are committed to paying attention to the experiences and traditions of "ordinary" people. We’re a 22-year-old independent public interest folklife agency that documents, supports and presents local folk arts and culture. We offer exhibitions, concerts, workshops and assistance to artists and communities. We conduct ongoing field research, organize around issues of concern, maintain an archive, and issue publications and resources. This work comes out of our mission: we affirm the human right to meaningful cultural and artistic expression, and work to protect the rights of people to know and practice traditional and community-based arts. We work with people and communities to build critical folk cultural knowledge, respect the complex folk and traditional arts of our region, and challenge processes and practices that diminish these local grassroots arts and humanities. We urge you to join—or to call us for more information. (215.726.1106)

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