

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

In partnership with Syracuse's Somali Bantu community, an SU folk arts initiative seeks to preserve the culture's traditions and provide opportunities for learning and understanding for participating students and Bantu

BY HUSNA HAQ | PHOTOS BY STEVE SARTORI

Cilaan, a traditional art, is worn like jewelry by Somali Bantu women in Syracuse. It adorns the hands, arms, and feet of Somali Bantu brides.



After his people endured centuries of institutionalized discrimination at the hands of the Somali majority and months of violence following the collapse of the Somali government in 1991, Sadik Yaqub, like many other minority Somali Bantu, was torn from his home when civil war came to his village a year later. With the arrival of armed soldiers demanding money and taking lives, Yaqub and his family began the long, arduous journey to a refugee camp in Kenya. For 25 days they walked, with no food and little water, “eating leaves like animals” to stay alive, Yaqub says.

When they arrived at

an overcrowded refugee camp near Kiunga, Kenya, they were depleted. Soon, they were transferred to another camp, Kakuma, where an age-old Bantu folk art brought them a first glimmer of hope. The camp received regular supplies of dried reeds that Yaqub’s wife, Habiba Hassan, weaved into traditional Somali Bantu baskets. Soon, Hassan had a buzzing basketry business within the camp, a contained city of sorts. Besides bringing in income for food, Hassan’s basketry would become a vital part of her transition to America.

Today, Yaqub and his family are among more than 500 Somali Bantu who make Syracuse their home. And thanks in part to an initiative spearheaded by anthropology research associate and public sector folklorist Felicia McMahan, they are reviving their traditional folk arts here in Central New York. As part of the Folk Arts Initiative at the Department of Anthropology, the Refugee and Immigrant Collaborative for Traditional Arts (RICTA) introduces Syracuse University students to the Somali Bantu community in an intercultural learning exchange that promotes the preservation of Bantu folk arts and the mutual sharing of cultural traditions. With its emphasis on reviving folk arts and promoting student engagement with underserved communities in Syracuse, RICTA has given members of the Bantu community a



means to preserve their culture, share their traditions, and improve their English language skills through student interactions and University-sponsored events. In this way, McMahan says, the practicing and preserving of folk arts brings the communities together. “There is no better way to learn about another worldview than through living, cultural practitioners, the folk artists who are our neighbors,” she says. “As a folklorist, I

Habiba Hassan, community master basket maker, poses with her husband, Sadik Yaqub, and children in their Syracuse apartment.



After *ashindi* (palm strips) are dried, Habiba Hassan “cooks” them on her stove, adds dyes, and dries them once again before weaving. Suldana Adbulkadir (below right), master *cilaan* artist, creates *cilaan* for Maria Kontos ’13, an Honors student.

know the performance of traditional art bonds members of a community and provides a bridge to other communities.”

The learning, McMahon is quick to point out, isn’t one way because the Bantu have a lot to teach students and the larger community. “It is my firm conviction that when we form friendships with ethnic communities other than our own, the learning that results not only enriches our lives, but makes us reflect on our own cultural values and beliefs,” says McMahon, who holds a doctorate in folklore and folklife studies from the University of Pennsylvania. “Newcomers to our country have much to teach Americans—not only about their unique cultures, but about the world.”

Preserving Traditions

Originally brought to Somalia from modern-day Tanzania, Malawi, and Mozambique as part of the Arab

slave trade in the 19th century, the Somali Bantu are an ethnic group historically persecuted for their cultural, linguistic, and physical differences from the Somali majority. Due to institutional discrimination by the government, most Bantu were never educated in Somalia and many remain illiterate, unable to read or write in English or Maay-Maay, their language. Theirs is an oral tradition, disrupted by political instability and relocation, which is why, says Luana Ramcharran ’10, it is all the more vital to work toward its preservation. “Somali Bantu culture is slowly becoming lost amidst the violence and persecution in Somalia, the destruction of their identity as they’ve fled to other countries, and their resettlement in America as refugees,” says Ramcharran, who worked extensively with the Bantu through RICTA projects in two anthropology courses she took with McMahon. “Their folk arts are the one thing they have been able to carry with them through their suffering so they may maintain their roots.”

Abdullahi Ibrahim ’11 concurs. He also experienced the trauma of civil war and relocation before immigrating to the United States as a refugee in 2004. Since then, he has earned a bachelor’s degree in social work from Syracuse University and become director of the Somali Bantu Community Association in Syracuse. “We are losing our culture,” says Ibrahim, who works as an interpreter and is pursuing a master’s degree in social work at SU. “This is a way of reviving our culture here. Handicrafts remind us of our history.”

Among those handicrafts are *ashindi*, weavings of natural reed or palm strips used to make *danbiil*, or woven, dyed-palm





basketry; *cilaan*, or traditional henna painting that adorns the hands, arms, and feet of Bantu brides; and *dun*, expressive floral embroidery in bright, primary colors on cotton curtains that decorate the walls and ceilings of many Bantu homes like Yaqub and Hassan's. Bold, geometric-patterned glass-bead necklaces, belts, and bracelets called *fiin* document important occasions like births

sherero dance, Ramcharran invited the Bantu to share their music and dance at Andaaz, the South Asian Students' Association's multicultural show. In turn, the organization donated a portion of the ticket proceeds to the Somali Bantu Community Association.

In fall 2010, RICTA facilitated a showcase of Bantu dance and craft at a multicultural event hosted by the Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center in nearby Auburn. There, members of the Bantu community performed *sherero*, as well as such traditional folk arts as *cilaan* henna painting and *dun* embroidery. It was also the first time they interacted with members of the larger Central New York community, leaving many Bantu participants proud and exhilarated. "I am very happy meeting new people through my handicrafts," says Hassan, the community's master basket weaver, through an interpreter. "Now everybody knows Habiba."

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and marriages and are passed down from mother to daughter. Finally, there's *sherero*, a traditional dance used for storytelling and healing purposes.

As a student in McMahon's Folk Arts, Festivals, and Public Display course, Ramcharran was instrumental in using the practice and preservation of these folk arts to establish a relationship between the University and the Bantu community. In spring 2010, after learning about the traditional

That, Ibrahim says, is his objective in the initiative. "The main goal is that [Bantu women] come out, interact, and advocate for themselves," he says. "We want to prove to people our women can come out, learn English, even become citizens." The relationship has since accelerated, with three campus events featuring Bantu folk artists, classroom visits by Bantu community leaders, student visits



Habiba Hassan's home is transformed into a living classroom for students in the anthropology Honors course *Migrating Memories, Migrating Arts*, taught by Felicia McMahan (left).

As her children look on, Habiba Hassan demonstrates her traditional art to Honors students Feifei Zhu '14, Meng Meng '12, and Maria Kontos '13.



Halima Omar (right) instructs Honors student Arianna Brown '12 in the traditional art of *danbiil*, creating a woven basket from dyed palm.

to Bantu homes, and the creation by students of an educational brochure, which will teach Americans about Bantu culture and invite donations for the Somali Bantu Community Association, a nonprofit group that provides services to the Bantu and other underserved communities in the Syracuse area.

Communities Coming Together

The relationship the anthropology department has developed with the Bantu community through RICTA is a shining example of Scholarship in Action, a partnership that can have a positive impact on both the community and the campus. As McMahan notes, it has enabled her to take lessons outside of the classroom and into the world. "I believe there is no classroom, textbook, or film that can substitute for human encounters in a real-life context," she says. "These experiences with community members do much more than enrich what I teach in class; there is the potential to enrich our lives." McMahan recalls an e-mail sent to her from Ramcharran, her former student, who wrote, "The experience with the Somali Bantu is one I'll never forget."

Other students emerge from encounters with the Bantu similarly inspired. "Working with any other culture besides your own opens your eyes to new cultural horizons," says Maria Kontos '13, a Renée Crown University Honors Program student who participated in both of McMahan's anthropology courses. "It enforces that we need to respect others and their cultures. It also enforces that no

tradition or culture is the right one."

But the initiative has had perhaps the greatest impact on the Bantu themselves. When she arrived in the United States, Hassan, like many refugees, was disoriented and in a state of culture shock. She had to start over again, learning such basics as where to find food staples, how to make doctor's appointments, and how to pay bills. As in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, basketry opened new doors for Hassan. In the beginning, it gave her a sense of purpose and a link to her past. Today, it is a bridge to her future in Syracuse, one in which she hopes, through her interactions with students and others, she can teach Americans about Bantu culture, learn to speak English with confidence, and one day go to school. "I am happy to continue practicing my culture here," says Hassan, who now instructs Bantu youth in Syracuse traditional folk arts. "A lot of people don't know our culture, traditions, and handicrafts. So I am proud to be teaching them. And I am happy to go to new places and meet new people through my handicrafts."

The folk arts initiative, Ibrahim says, has provided the Bantu both a means of preserving their cultural identity and a path to achieving success in Syracuse. "It gives them confidence, a sense of belonging, and a way of passing down something to their children so our culture isn't lost," Ibrahim says. "It also shows them that anything is possible in America, even," he says with a laugh, gesturing at the snow outside the window, "finding palm strips for basketry." ◀◀