

# African in Maine

## Case Study: Center for Cultural Exchange

BAU GRAVES, JUAN LADO, AND PATRICIA ROMNEY

### PREFACE BY ANIMATING DEMOCRACY

PATRICIA ROMNEY

Since its founding, the Center for Cultural Exchange (CCE) in Portland, Maine, has worked to help cultural communities keep their heritage vital. Culture, community, and collaboration have been the cornerstones of their work. According to Bates College professor Marcus Bruce, the Center helps “the respective communities of Portland to define themselves both in their public performances and ongoing discussions . . . [and] invites the wider Portland community to discover the diversity of cultures within its midst . . .” (*Culture as Community: Grassroots collaborations in action* (2000)).

To advance this ongoing work, the Center received funding in 2001 from Animating Democracy to engage Portland’s African immigrants and refugees in cultural programming and dialogue. Since the 1980s, numerous immigrants from Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Somalia have moved to Portland. Work with the local African population was not new to the Center; many Africans had participated in CCE programs, including the first Sudanese conference mounted collaboratively with the Sudanese community in April 2001. Through this participation, relationships had been forged.

CCE’s program, titled *African in Maine*, aimed to build culture and community by assisting each African community to develop cultural programming that would represent its country and people. Dialogue occurred first, within each of the Sudanese, Congolese, and Somalian groups, and second between individual African groups and the wider, white community of “Mainers.” The project aimed to address how cultural representation (or misrepresentation) can impact public perception of refugee communities and to build broader awareness of the diversity and conflicts affecting these newcomer African communities. It also sought to identify what constitutes valued cultural resources for these groups and how these could be recognized and supported.

Between 2001 and 2003, each of the three African communities took a different, self-determined path to plan and implement their cultural events, with the Center serving as facilitator of the planning dialogue and decision making among community members. These dialogues were “civic” in the true sense, helping fractious divisions within each African community group to negotiate what and how each would represent its culture to itself and to others outside the group. The Congolese produced three events: the Ndombolo Rumba, in which local artists and children performed; a fashion show; and finally a cultural festival, which included a short play, a

film, and a Congolese feast. Dialogue was a part of each event. The Somalis held a Muslim celebration of Eid el Fitr at the Center, and had performances by the popular contemporary Shego Band. The Sudanese developed a festival that brought together over 150 Sudanese in the roles of dancers, singers, wrestlers, poets, lecturers, and panel discussants, and included a huge Sudanese feast. Postperformance discussions for these events often focused on audience preconceptions about Africa and about what they had learned from the cultural events.

The *African in Maine* project challenges the concept and illuminates the realities of “dialogue” within and between cultures, including divided immigrant and refugee communities. This case study explores language and cultural differences between the Center’s predominantly white U.S. staff members and the immigrant groups, and examines the role of an “outsider” cultural organization in fostering cultural democracy. It deepens understanding of the significant internal differences that exist within each African national group—tribal, generational, religious, immigrant/refugee, and gender—and how these differences need to be taken into account.

While, on occasion, tension between tribes or between community members with different politics or different styles generated bad feelings and disconnection from one another or from the Center, each national group nonetheless succeeded in talking and making decisions. Each group “produced” several cultural events that did indeed bring members of its community together and also has drawn audiences from the community of “traditional Mainers,” who have left the productions more informed about the history, culture, and politics of their new neighbors.

# AFRICAN IN MAINE

BAU GRAVES AND JUAN LADO

## BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

Portland and the state of Maine have experienced a remarkable demographic transformation in the past twenty years. Who would have predicted that Maine would become an important destination for refugees from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, a home to migrants from dozens of countries? People from Africa have been especially prominent in these waves of new Mainers. Somalis, Sudanese, and Congolese have established substantial communities in the Portland area. Their presence has triggered a significant reappraisal within the community at large regarding issues of social inclusion, race relations, ethnic pluralism, and history. The city is undergoing a shift in how it imagines itself, in what it aspires to, and in how it signifies its identity.

African refugees have multiple challenges to confront in their new homes: They must contend with their status as displaced minorities. Most struggle to acquire English language skills. Few are able to ascend beyond the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. They do this in an environment that is dramatically different in its climate and ethnic make-up from their native lands. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Maine is the “whitest” state in the Union. Most Mainers could not locate Sudan or Somalia on a map and remain ignorant of basic facts about Africa. For example, many Mainers assume that “Africa” is a country. Very few are even aware of the extreme diversity that exists within the African continent, much less conversant in any of its hundreds of ethnically specific cultures.

For their part, Maine’s African refugee communities have struggled to find common bonds—with white Mainers, with African Americans, and with each other.

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All of these relationships are problematic in their own ways. The whites are uninformed; the blacks are uninformed and occasionally seem aggressive; and from the perspective of any individual refugee, almost all of the other refugees may seem just as strange since they come from geographically distant tribes and ethnic groupings.

This is the backdrop against which the *African in Maine* project evolved. First, the project addressed each of the three groups’ sense of themselves: how do they self-identify? What cultural practices have significance to group identity? How can they be supported by a public arts agency? This track of dialogue and creative activity was inwardly focused, each community addressing its own needs and aspirations. The second phase of the project comprised the development of vehicles to convey each community’s sense of itself to the wider Maine public. This track was outwardly focused, in an attempt to lay claim to a piece of Portland’s overall cultural landscape and have the rest of the community recognize it.

The Center for Cultural Exchange has been engaging local African constituencies through a variety of programs for many years. At the time of the development of *African in Maine*, there were relationships between the leadership of each community and the CCE in various stages of evolution, and many Africans had participated in past programs. The funding from Animating Democracy and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) allowed the Center to dramatically expand both the volume of programming and the community-based process that was crucial to

formulating programs. In doing this, the Center relied upon several existing organizations: The Sudanese Community Association had been in existence for several years. Bana Ya Congo Kinshasa was a Congolese support group that formed almost simultaneously with the beginning of the project. The Portland Public Schools' Multilingual and Multicultural Programs Office has employed representatives of each representative nationality, all of whom are well respected within their own communities. While no Somali organization existed as this project began, the East African Community Association took shape during its course. In addition, a small group of

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community elders was sometimes asked to represent the Somali community. While not a formally constituted body, they were consulted frequently during the years of the project.

In every case, the Center was explicit in stating that *African in Maine* offered a unique opportunity for each community to develop cultural resources. But the Center did not—and does not—view the project as a discrete one with a clear beginning and ending. It is a part of a continuum of programming and community engagement in which the Center has been involved

for some time and which will extend into the foreseeable future. It was positioned as a “project” because that is the context that American arts funding demands (to the great detriment of most community-based work), and for the purposes of this report is inclusive of all the African initiatives within the grant time-frame, roughly from the summer of 2001 through spring of 2003.

During this time, the Center hosted dozens of meetings at which the refugee communities hashed out their internal disputes and formulated specific program objectives: six extended artist residencies, in which musicians and dancers worked with members of the different communities and visited local schools; 23 public events such as concerts, community suppers, and dance parties; and seven public dialogues at which the general audience was engaged in discussion following various kinds of presentations. In many cases, the communities were themselves the participating artists: approximately 200 community members were engaged as dancers, musicians, cooks, or speakers.

The complexities present within the refugee communities, stakeholders in the planning and development of the *African in Maine* project, created major organizational challenges. This report shows how layers of language, tribal affiliation, politics, religion, custom, and personal association played out in the evolution of programs serving local Sudanese, Somali, and Congolese communities. To better understand the problems encountered in this process, it is necessary to briefly analyze the political and social evolution of these communities and the reasons that led to their displacement from their ancestral homelands and their resettlement in Portland, Maine.

## **SUDAN**

The word “Sudan” in Arabic means “the land of black people.” When the first group of Arabs came to Sudan around 1300 AD in search of green pastureland, ivory, gold, and other resources, they found dark-skinned people in the region. Sudan is the largest country in Africa, traversing a wide expanse of land that bridges black Africa in the tropical rain forests and Arab Africa in the arid eastern parts of the Sahara desert just below Egypt. Sudan is bigger than western Europe and is one quarter the size of the United States. In terms of population, mineral resources,

agricultural land, hydropower, water resources, and flora and fauna, Sudan is among the gems in the African continent, yet it has not known peace since independence.

At the Berlin Conference of 1885, Europe divided up the African continent, and Sudan became a colony of Britain. Before this period Sudan consisted of two very separate nations: the Arab Islamic nation to the north which had one history, language, territory, culture, religion, economy, and historical vision; and the African nation to the south, comprised of communities or tribes sharing common African culture, languages, religions, and systems of tribal politics and land use. Although there were continuous small-scale wars between the black tribes and the migrating Arabs, the two nations had little to do with each other. As the twentieth century progressed, elite Islamic religious groups in the North began to protest British rule in Sudan, beginning a long and bitter war of independence. Before Britain finally left Sudan, it conspired with northern Sudan to unite the South and the North. The southern Sudanese elders protested this “premature marriage,” but the British and the Arab leadership ignored their demand for southern autonomy.

As a result, troops in southern Sudan started a rebellion against northern Sudan rule at the eve of independence in 1955. That resistance developed into a civil war, which has intensified under the leadership of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). This continuing civil war in Sudan, which currently has a population of some 30 million people, has had destructive consequences: 4.5 million have been internally displaced or become refugees in neighboring African countries; more than two million have died as a result of military actions; hundreds of thousands of others have been physically and mentally maimed; and two entire generations of people have been denied the most basic rights to development. Thousands of Sudanese refugees have been resettled in diaspora all over the world, including in Portland, Maine.

### **The Sudanese Community in Portland**

The Sudanese people of Portland are trauma survivors of the civil war in their country. Mostly from southern Sudan, they include members of at least nineteen of the 400 tribes that live in Sudan. Each tribe has a different set of subcultures and speaks a totally different dialect barely understood by anyone outside the tribe. Some tribes have not been exposed to other Sudanese tribes as they come from distant areas and hence are sometimes suspicious of outsiders. There are also a few Islamic, Arabic-speaking immigrants from northern Sudan who have isolated themselves because of the tensions that exist back in Sudan.

Although the Portland Sudanese still suffer the pain of being torn apart from family and friends, they are grateful to be in Portland with a community of peers and are striving to preserve their culture while adapting to American culture. An organized body, the Sudanese Community Association, was formed in 1995 by the first group of Sudanese that arrived in Portland. The Center for Cultural Exchange sought to form a partnership with this organization at the beginning of the African in Maine planning process. But the war in Sudan has aggravated tribal divisions, making the functioning of this body very difficult as different tribal groups pay allegiance to various political factions that are involved in the war, harboring bad feelings towards any community members that support different factions. Before any culturally specific planning could begin, the Center’s staff needed to help facilitate some form of shared understanding of what constitutes the Portland Sudanese community: How does the community self-identify? What do the various factions hold in common? And what keeps them separate?

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## Sources of Conflict

There are many complex causes (hidden or expressed in meetings) of conflicts that have disrupted Portland's Sudanese community:

**South/North** The name of the organization has been a big issue of contention among individuals in the Sudanese community, many of whom think the organization should only serve the interests of the people of South Sudan and that it should therefore be called the Southern Sudanese Association. Those against this point of view think the organization should embrace all Sudanese irrespective of political differences. The issue of the organization's name was debated over and over again, and people had to vote for or against a united Sudanese organization. Even though the unity group won, the group against unity remained frustrated and disgruntled, so much so that they continue to undermine the organization.

**South/South** Although most Maine Sudanese are from the South, there are also divisions within the region that aggravate tensions. Most of the Sudanese tribes that live in Portland are from Equatoria, the southernmost province. The Dinka, who mainly come from the province of Bahr el Ghazal, and are the largest tribe in Sudan, have dominated the politics of that region for the last 20 years, and form the bulk of the revolutionary army (SPLA) that is fighting the government of Sudan. But their number in Portland is small. The Nuer people, though less numerous in Sudan, are more populous than the Dinka people in Portland. The Sudanese oil fields are situated in Nuer villages; thus most of the Nuer tribe has been forced out of the area by the Sudanese army to protect the oil fields and foreign oil companies. As a result of this displacement, the Nuer are the single largest Sudanese tribe in the United States. These two warrior tribes, the Dinka and Nuer, are mainly livestock farmers, and they have often competed for pastures in the Nile valley. They are traditional rivals and have been involved in intertribal wars through history. In 1991, a Nuer faction broke away from the SPLA to form a competing splinter force.

When the Center for Cultural Exchange invited a representative of the SPLA to address its Sudanese Conference in 2001, some of the tribes protested that it was nepotism for Equatorians on the Sudanese Community Association to recommend someone of Equatoria to address the conference. On the other hand, the Nuer, fully behind their own SPLA splinter group, believed that this was an effort to promote the image of the mainstream faction, which they accuse of human rights abuses of Nuer people.

**ACERELA/South** In 1991, students in all the schools in the South participated in civil disobedience and staged demonstrations to protest the policy of compulsory teaching of Islam. The government crushed the disturbances, and the ringleaders were jailed or executed; the rest crossed the borders, fleeing to neighboring countries. Some of the students who found their way to Portland were from the Acholi tribe of Eastern Equatoria; they formed the ACERELA, with membership limited to members of the Acholi tribe. Being the first organization of Sudanese refugees in Portland, ACERELA won the attention and support of Mainers.

The small group of young men running ACERELA soon represented the Sudanese in every forum. Things changed with the formation of the Sudanese Community Association, which attempted to represent all tribal groups. The members of ACERELA felt dislodged and began to resent the Sudanese Community Association and to turn against its first President, who is himself an Acholi. The Sudanese elders suggested that ACERELA could conduct its own programs, but its members should also cooperate with all Sudanese under the umbrella of the Association. But ACERELA continued to keep aloof, saying they did not like the president.

Because a great number of Sudanese want the different tribes in the community to coexist peacefully, they worked towards the election of a new president. This new president, however, was also unacceptable to some members.

**Nuba/South** The Nuba are people of black African descent who have been oppressed and marginalized by the Arabic-speaking people of northern Sudan throughout history. They live in a region to the northwest of South Sudan so they are not part of South Sudan according to the south-north boundary drawn by the British in 1956. The South Sudanese people have embraced the Nuba people both here and back in the Sudan, where the Nuba are fighting alongside the SPLA forces for their own liberation. Yet the Nuba are a minority among South Sudanese, and they believe that they run the risk of being dominated by the larger tribes. So the Nuba were at times suspicious of decisions or actions of the South Sudanese-led community.

**Gender issues** Two Sudanese women were among the most active and vocal members of the Sudanese Community Association as this process began. The women's leadership was too much of an upset to nature as some of the male-dominated Sudanese tribes saw it. Wherever they turned, they saw a woman who looked them straight in the eyes, equally capable to reason and make sound decisions. Some Sudanese men resorted to creating false stories, dissention, and unnecessary arguments that disrupted community meetings.

### **The Sudanese Conference**

This was the situation at the time of the Center's first Sudanese conference in April 2001, when the conflicts escalated. Some Sudanese protested the participation of the SPLA and threatened to picket or disrupt the conference. They wanted the meeting cancelled and lobbied with human rights activists here, some of whom wrote letters to the governor and mayor calling for its cancellation. On the other hand, the majority of the Equatorial tribes lobbied for the conference to proceed as planned. Ultimately, the invitation to the SPLA's representative was withdrawn; instead, representatives of other tribes were asked to speak at the conference.

As part of the conference activities, the Center for Cultural Exchange had invited songwriter and singer Emmanuel Kembe, who was driven out of Sudan because of his powerful, popular protest songs. Kembe uses his songs to attract public attention to the despair and desolation of South Sudanese people as they face the tragic consequences of the war. These songs created a feeling of oneness, and all tribal groups—some of whom in the past would not even greet each other—danced together and sang along with Kembe, shedding tears of pain in the process. It proved to be a cathartic event. The day after his performance, all the Sudanese made monetary contributions and hosted a huge dinner party in honor of Emmanuel Kembe. It was so pleasing to see all the differences and conflicts forgotten as everybody chatted, ate, and danced together.

But as soon as Kembe left Portland, the Sudanese people went back to their quarrels over who-is-who in South Sudanese politics and which tribes should dominate community affairs. The *African in Maine* project was developed within a climate of impending crises among the Sudanese. The heat generated in the various tribal groups during the conference and the sense of solidarity among Sudanese brought about by Kembe's performances helped enable the community to move the project forward. It also became clear that the involvement of a neutral mediator could substantially enhance and promote individual and intertribal relations.

## Many Meetings

When the Center received funding from Animating Democracy and the National Endowment for the Arts, the next step was to facilitate meetings in the different communities. There was need to bring in a qualified facilitator to avoid quarrels and to help the community identify ways that could aid understanding among them. Effort was also made to ensure that every tribal group was consulted separately and that the project's goal of bringing the community together through cultural activity was explained to them in detail—if necessary, in their own tribal language. The Center aimed to make the Sudanese community a major stakeholder in this whole exercise, ensuring that the programs would proceed according to the community's plans.

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The meetings did not proceed smoothly, however. The Nuer people were still angry over what happened at the Sudanese conference so they were reluctant to participate. Although special efforts were made to engage the ACERELA leadership, they sent four representatives who refused to sit in the meeting room with everybody else. They accused the Center of trying to encourage tribalism and disintegration in the Sudanese community by sending them an invitation as a tribal group. The other group of Acholi, as well as the Zande, Bari, and other smaller tribal groups from Equatoria Province were represented. But the two other provinces were not adequately represented since the Nuer of Upper Nile Province and the Dinka of Bahr el Ghazal Province declined to send representatives. As a long series of meetings progressed, alliances among participating tribes shifted. Partway through the deliberations, two tribes that had previously been at odds became allies. Personal rivalries resulted in some people's refusal to participate, only to change once friends in attendance reported progress. From meeting to meeting it was almost impossible for the facilitators (who had to struggle with constant interruptions for translation into tribal languages) to understand how the various players lined up.

Simultaneously, the disagreements within the Sudanese Community Association intensified and the executive committee was dissolved. This was a setback in the Center's process, but there was no choice but to follow through the delicate and sensitive process of assisting the community to reconstitute itself. There were tense meetings at the Center for Cultural Exchange every Sunday for months. It was important first for the Acholi to agree on the formation of a body that could conveniently reach the whole tribe. In some of the meetings one could hear insults and laughter or see tears in people's eyes, and in fact some heated arguments almost led to exchange of fists. Most of the meetings were not well attended, and this was disturbing because the leaders wanted every Sudanese to participate in the dialogue and in the election of a new executive committee. A "provisional committee," whose main function was to

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communicate to all Sudanese about the importance of having a strong organization, was voted into existence.

The Center continued to pursue its cultural agenda, meeting with the "provisional committee," as the Association continued its internal dialogues. Community members were asked: What

does your community need to help sustain its culture in Portland? How can the Center help to demonstrate to the Maine public the wealth of Sudanese cultural heritage? How can the arts address the issues that matter most to you and your family? How can cultural programs help to promote dialogue and cohesion among the Sudanese and other refugee communities in Portland?

How can they help in building dialogue and understanding between the refugee community and the general population of Maine?

Gradually, a consensus began to emerge regarding the kinds of cultural activity that Portland's Sudanese valued and wanted to promote. These included: traditional dances from all of the different tribal groups, including both performance demonstrations and participatory community dances; the rich oral tradition of poetry, storytelling, and drama; fashion; choral music in several different formats; educational events such as lectures and panel discussions; and all events were accompanied by food.

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An important distinction also became clear during the meetings: While each of the tribal groups wants to maintain its own integrity, all are agreed in the desire to be recognized collectively as Sudanese. The vehicle for achieving this was to be a large-scale Sudanese cultural festival, with performances and demonstrations by each of the discrete tribal groups. This could demonstrate both the strength of Sudanese traditions, and the diversity *within* the Sudanese community. The decision to focus on this goal was a milestone in the development of the *African in Maine* project.

### **The Cultural Festival**

Representatives of each tribe went back to their communities, circulating reports of the meetings and inviting others to respond, make changes, or add ideas to the proposals. All the different tribes within the Sudanese community were welcomed to use the Center's space for meetings and rehearsals. Within a matter of days, some of the groups, including the Acholi and Zande, came up with budget proposals so they could start rehearsing for the Sudanese cultural day. Their main request was for drums and costumes, which were later purchased for permanent community use.

In March 2002, a large number of Sudanese voted in a new president and executive committee for the Community Association. For the first time, the executive committee was made up of representatives from more diverse backgrounds, including a member from the Islamic Fur tribe in North Sudan. The Center's intrusion into Sudanese affairs illuminated the conflicts within the Sudanese community—its persistence in putting a cultural agenda before the community played an important supporting role in bringing it together in a more cohesive manner than anyone could have envisioned. In this instance, art played an important part in helping a community to define itself.

On Saturday, August 24, 2002, several months of intensive dialogue, decision-making, and endless rehearsal came to fruition. Over 150 Sudanese appeared onstage in an unprecedented show of unity. Hundreds more were in the audience, along with over 100 white Mainers. They heard lectures and panel discussions, enjoyed an enormous Sudanese feast with specialties prepared by cooks from fourteen different tribes, and saw performances: A Bari women's choir; four different dances by the Acholi; a Nuba wrestling match; a staged Nuer marriage negotiation; a child's poem presented by two elementary school girls; a pan-Sudanese dance ensemble called "The Nile Girls"; an Islamic bridal dance from the North; and a presentation by the only member of the Madi tribe in Portland. It was an extraordinary spectacle.

As we might have expected, everything did not turn out exactly as planned: The two Nuer men who were selected to represent their tribal community did not show up, and a Nuer woman stood up to the challenge to organize their community for a performance. Though a strong leader, she was not included among the Nuer who attended meetings simply because she was a woman. In the end, the Nuer men who had been reluctant to get the program going enjoyed

the dance so much that they did not want to leave the stage to give others their chance to perform, and had to be asked to leave.

Five or six core ACERELA members did not participate in the dance performances. Some of them tried in vain to prevent their sisters and brothers from participating. The preparation for the festival was so great that every member of the Acholi community wanted to be part of it.

The Zande had made a traditional xylophone that closely resembles what is used in Zandeland. However, because they considered this event as a competition for best tribal performance, they aspired to get an original xylophone that could only be made in Sudan using a special kind of wood. Despite the fact that we tried to persuade the leaders of the Zande community to use whatever instruments were available until we were able to order a xylophone from Sudan, they declined to perform.

The Fur said they would not perform without costumes that would have cost a lot of money. Since the funds available could not meet this demand, the Fur people, like the Zande, ended up not participating in the event. Although the Center's distribution of funds to the communities was straightforward and equitable, some individuals felt that the program's funds should be redirected in their direction.

The Dinka were very unhappy that they did not participate. They were not keen on participating at the beginning, but they got excited as the Festival approached. They asked why, being the largest tribe in Sudan, they were not featured in the Festival. It was too late for them to prepare a performance, but they did prepare and contribute Dinka traditional food. They will be the first onstage next year.

## Outcomes

The divisions within the Sudanese community exist not only between but also within tribes. Some of the problems are political and religious like those between the North and the South, but others are social, based on how people interact with each other. The divisions create problems and make peaceful coexistence between Sudanese difficult. The meetings of the Sudanese community were fruitful not only in bringing them together but also in committing them to participate solidly as a community in promoting their cultural heritage.

The Center's effort and resilience in slowly following through the task of reconciling the tribes met with notable success, and the situation now is much better than it was before the festival. The tribes that didn't have an opportunity to dance or make presentations were finally involved one way or another. Sudanese youth have built relations with each other and with kids from other communities. The Sudanese and Africans in general have developed self-confidence, identity, and a sense of achievement. Elderly women have shared a life of excitement with their peers during the numerous rehearsals and performances. Some Sudanese met other Sudanese for the first time and now socialize with each other. Some of those who work on weekends didn't have an opportunity to take Saturday off—but many of them did not work that Saturday. They had a good reason to take that Saturday off, and many employers understood and granted it. White Mainers had an unprecedented opportunity to experience African culture in a setting and format dictated by Africans, in a display of diversity that was utterly unique to Portland's Sudanese community.

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## SOMALIA

Somalia is the elbow-shaped and largely desert country wrapped around Africa's Horn, about the land area of Texas. Only about 6.5 million people live in the entire country, and approximately one quarter of the population lives in the so-called Somaliland Republic, which seceded from the rest of Somalia but has not been recognized as a separate entity internationally.

Somalia's people are mostly nomadic and predominantly Sunni Muslim. They are divided into six major clans, each of which is divided into numerous sub- and sub-sub-clans. Somalia is neither "African" nor "Arab," although it is located on the African continent and has often been considered Arab. At the time of its independence in 1960, Somalia was described as one of the few mono-ethnic states in Africa, one with a common language and culture, and a single religion, Islam. While this was probably an exaggeration, it was substantially true.

Somali society is largely a product of its geography and climate. The land is very dry and generally does not permit sedentary agriculture. The people move, with their herds of camels, goats, and sheep, always in search of good pastures and water. Such a world offers few possibilities of permanent settlements, cities, or the distinct political structures we have called "the state." As a result, Somalis developed their own structures to provide stability.

Blood ties are the only connections of which one can be sure. One's kin group is the only tangible social reality, which explains the enormous, overpowering importance of genealogy and the lineage system. Armed conflicts between roving groups, usually representing distinct kinship groups, are frequent. Since the political "state" per se does not exist, some sort of mechanism had to be found so that conflicts would not threaten the survival of the kin groups. The basis for such a mechanism is the lineage system itself. Nomadic groups move and fight. After a while the groups stop, meet, and hold a *shir* (palaver); they agree on compensation and the payment of blood-price (*mag*). They may remain at peace for some time or ally with another kin-based related segment against other enemies.

During the so-called "scramble for Africa" of the nineteenth century, this lineage-segmented but culturally homogeneous population was arbitrarily divided into five distinct colonial units, controlled by the French, British (two separate colonies), Italians, and Ethiopians. The dream of uniting these five colonies became a mainstay of the Somali independence movement. This driving force for unification led to the refusal of the Somali Republic to sign the 1963 OAU charter, which stated as one of its guiding principles recognition of borders inherited from colonization. The new state was quickly overwhelmed, contending with up to 60 political parties, all expressions of the various clans and sub-clans.

After a succession of coups, and a period as a client state of the USSR, the national government effectively ceased to exist, and Somalia was carved into clan-based fiefdoms. The situation was worsened by the devastation caused by a widespread drought and famine that killed tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people. In 1991, the United States was authorized by the United Nations to send a peacekeeping force to Somalia, opening a corridor for humanitarian assistance to the starving citizens. After the death of eighteen soldiers in a firefight with forces loyal to one of the warlords, however, the U.S. withdrew.

No one now rules in Somalia, which has become one of the world's poorest countries. The United Nations estimates 1.5 million people are starving, and that another 4.5 million require food and other emergency assistance. About 1 million Somalis have fled the country, and many have been resettled in the U.S. The Somalis are the largest single group of African refugees to have arrived recently in the United States. Many have settled in Maine.

### The Somali Community in Portland

Despite the clan divisions, Somalis seem outwardly to be a close-knit community and the divisions would not be immediately transparent to an outsider. Unlike the Sudanese who clearly show their tribal differences, the Somalis try as much as possible to portray themselves as one united people, with one religion and language. It took some time, as the Center for Cultural Exchange pursued collaboration with the community, for signs of fragmentation and rivalry to emerge. The differences between individuals and groups were not only based on clan divisions but also on other factors such as age, religious adherence, and level of education.

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### Sources of Conflict

**Clan differences** When the Center brought the first Somali music bands to Portland in 2001, the majority of the Somali people were excited to have musicians in town to express their culture. However, it came to the attention of band members that some community elders did not approve of them because they happened to come from a different region or clan. In making programmatic decisions, the community was not able to easily determine a specific artistic preference. Every Somali would recommend the name of an artist (and there are dozens of them) to be brought to Portland. Someone else from another clan would say: “Oh no—this artist is not that competent, and the person who has recommended him/her did so because the artist is from their clan.”

**Generation gap** The early concert events, while open to the public, attracted audiences that were about 80% Somalis, and 80% of these were teenagers. The bands mixed Somali styles like kababey and sharah with funk, reggae, and rap to create a swirling, dizzyingly refreshing dance sound, which the Somali youth love but which seems to be very embarrassing to some of the elders. Some of them complained that the music is not Somali but American, and that the Center for Cultural Exchange is trying to Americanize Somali youth. Others said the way the youth were dancing and shaking their waists was not appropriate and that these youth did not represent proper Somali culture. The Somali youth were happy and enjoyed the music and dance so much that they wanted the party to continue to morning. At times they sang along

*Some elders fear that their children will be exposed to music at the Center that they consider inappropriate.*

with the artists and one could clearly see the emotional attachment they had to the songs and music.

This generational conflict is reflective of a common schism in immigrant communities. As youth get more education and exposure, they tend to adjust faster and are more accepting of new ideas and innovations than adults. This is aggravated in Portland, where activist Somali youth have created weekly TV and radio programs. These media outlets are an important voice for Somalis in Maine, but the deejays often play electric dance music and hip-hop. The producers have been under constant attack for their musical choices. This has affected the Center’s programs since the same producers have covered its Somali dance parties. Some elders fear that their children will be exposed to music at the Center that they consider inappropriate.

**Religious factors** In the first visit of the popular Shego Band in 2001 the Center made sure the entire Somali community both in Portland and Lewiston got information about the performance. Flyers were taken to Somali stores, mosques, schools, and other meeting places. We soon learned that many of the elders were scandalized to see female band members wearing western

style dresses and showing their long hair in publicity photos. Some members of the community threw out the flyers put up at one Somali store. For a dress to be considered appropriate, the singer should have put on a *hijab* that covers a woman's arms and hair.

The Center cautioned the Shego Band about it and asked the female members of the band to wear traditional costumes in performances at several schools. Bandleader Shego Said categorically refused, adding that faith is between God and the individual, and that the band members cannot be judged by how they dress, but rather by their deeds and their communication with God. Although the Center replaced the photo of the Shego Band on the flyers with a picture of a camel, the damage was done; and some people decided not to participate.

**Gender issues** As in the Sudanese community, there are conservative Somalis who are uncomfortable with women in positions of authority. While both the executive director of the Center for Cultural Exchange and the African community coordinator are women, some Somali elders suggested that only the Center's male staff should attend meetings with the Somali committee. The women involved, including a Somali, said they were not about to rewind the clock and go back to a life where women's views were overlooked. Women have been crucial to the evolution of each African community initiative, despite the demands of some of the African men.

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### **A Committee of One**

This was the situation in the Somali community when the *African in Maine* project was started. We had rapport with many youth, and some experience with the community's complex dynamic, but we did not know how we were going to penetrate the circle of elders and suggest to them

*We had rapport with many youth, and some experience with the community's complex dynamic, but we did not know how we were going to penetrate the circle of elders and suggest to them the importance of developing a consensus...*

the importance of developing a consensus on aspects of Somali social and cultural life that could be enhanced through our programming.

The Center asked several prominent Somalis to form a committee and convene a planning meeting at one of the ethnic groceries. Although the meeting was well attended, and the participants were enthusiastic, we were disappointed that none of the youth activists had

been invited. The elders assured the Center that whatever decisions this committee made would be binding and acceptable to all Somalis. They also suggested that there would be no dissension within their community—claiming that the Center could organize programs with a single liaison, and that the committee and the Somali people would accept any resulting decisions. In subsequent meetings less and less of the committee members began to show up. One or two of the members mentioned that there should have been some monetary reward for the hours spent on planning the programs. In the end, planning devolved to a single individual.

In collaboration with the remaining community representative, the Center agreed to bring several members of Waaberi, the most famous Somali band, to Portland. A date was set, the news went out to the Somali community, and the excitement was high. However, the fees proposed by the Center were not sufficient to bring the artists to Maine for a single performance; our liaison assumed the task of arranging additional New England bookings. These dates failed to materialize, and commitments that had been made to the performers made it impossible to proceed without an additional date. Within hours of the artists' departure time,

the engagement unraveled. This created a rift between a section of the Somali community and the Center. The designated representative was embarrassed and unhappy with some of the Somali youth who now openly criticized him. Others said that the event failed because both he and the Center appeared to put money before the mission of the program.

### **White Supremacists and Bantus**

Despite this disintegration of efforts with the community of elders, the Center remained committed to pursuing cultural programs with the Somali community. At this point, the youth came aggressively forward to make their position clear. They said they were Somalis like the elders, were just as proud of their culture, and would therefore do anything to promote it. They asked if they could take the place of the elders' committee to plan a celebration of the feast of Eid el Fitr that marks the end of Ramadan. The Center agreed and the new committee soon assembled a program that involved several panel discussions with community dialogue, a potluck supper, the recognition of "all Somali high school students with a B or better grade average," a concert, and a dance party. They engaged representatives of the East Africa Family Association and the United Somali Women of Maine for presentations; the Center arranged for a performance by two musicians.

As this planning was underway, Maine experienced its most profound human-rights confrontation in several decades. During the previous year, about a thousand Somali refugees had moved to Lewiston, a predominantly Franco-American mill town about 30 miles from Portland. In October 2002, the mayor published an "open letter to the Somali community," asking that they try to stem the flow of refugees into Lewiston. This letter alarmed the state's civil rights activists, who loudly responded that the mayor had no right to single out Somalis—or any other group—and suggested that his motives were racially motivated. This very public controversy attracted the United Church of the Creator, a white-supremacist group from Montana, who planned a rally to "stop the Somali invasion of Lewiston." Soon, a coalition of religious and civic groups had formed to sponsor a counter-rally simultaneously with that of the white supremacists. The city of Lewiston rented riot control equipment and hired over a hundred off-duty policemen from other towns.

This crisis revealed another division within the Somali community. As the political situation grew more heated, some of Portland's elders maintained a distance from the controversy, suggesting that the problems should be left to the Lewiston community. The youth who were planning the Eid festival wished to support the Lewiston Somalis, and offered the following explanation for the reticence of the elders:

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Arab slave traders kidnapped Bantu people from Tanzania to Somalia, probably en route to another destination. Some of these Bantu remained in Somalia and despite the end of the slave trade in the twentieth century they became a permanent underclass (not unlike freed slaves in the United States). When civil war erupted, they fell prey to various warlords. Eventually, more than 12,000 of the Somali Bantu crossed into Kenya and settled in a UN-sponsored refugee camp. But the officials who supervised refugee resettlement were not Bantu, and as the camps were emptied, the Bantu were left behind. Finally, in 1999, the UN recognized these Somali Bantu as "refugees," and their resettlement process began. The Somalis that came to Lewiston are said to be predominately from this Bantu underclass; some of Portland's Somalis did not wish to be associated with this community.

Nevertheless, the Center and youth committee persevered with the Eid al-Fitr, including a presentation by leaders of the Lewiston Somalis. This event fell just a few weeks prior to the planned Lewiston demonstrations, and the community as a whole was very unsettled, with pictures of neo-Nazis on television every night. An audience that was made up equally of Somalis and whites participated in an active discussion.

People were emotional in some instances, especially when an American woman in the audience asked, “What do the Somalis want in Maine?” The responses, coming mostly from young people, ranged from thoughtful to angry. Later in the evening, the singers began their performance with the Somali national anthem, *Soomaaliya Toosoo*, and everyone joined in the singing. Sometime that night a rock was thrown through the glass doors of the Center for Cultural Exchange, the only time the facility has ever been vandalized.

*People were emotional in some instances, especially when an American woman in the audience asked, “What do the Somalis want in Maine?”*

After the event, a couple of elders complained that it was attended by only one clan: it was unfair that the Center was dividing Somali people on clan bases. Later in the week, four Somali elders made a visit to the Center. They pointed out that the Somali community does not have an organization (like the Sudanese), and so there is no elder, or elders, who can claim to represent the community. They supported the youth, saying that any Somali person who is interested in running a program at the Center or anywhere else is free to do so. At this writing, the Center continues to look to the youth for leadership in organizing events, although there is a tendency for the youth themselves to disagree on what should be done and who should be responsible for it.

### **Outcomes**

Although the Somali community did not appear as fragmented as the other two African communities at the beginning of the *African in Maine* project, the Center later encountered the same scenario of conflicts. While some of the Somali elders do not approve of modern music or dancing, they relaxed their stance for several school-based productions in which the young people danced to the music of the Shego Band. This was probably the result of the dialogue between the elders and youth. The Center’s programs were also useful in providing a forum for

*While some of the Somali elders do not approve of modern music or dancing, they relaxed their stance... This was probably the result of the dialogue...*

the controversies surrounding the Lewiston crisis, offering a chance for Somali and non-Somali people to exchange views.

The Somali programs suffered because the Center failed to create a dialogue within the Somali community that could address the underlying divisions of clan and class. These are issues that are difficult for outsiders to grasp, and that go

unacknowledged by many within the community. We know, however, that the programs caused friction within the Somali community, even as they brought to the public’s attention significant issues about Somali life in Maine.

### **DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is slightly less than one-fourth the size of the U.S., and has a population of over 55 million. There are over 200 ethnic groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, speaking hundreds of languages; the official language is French, with Lingala and Swahili in common use.

In order not to confuse the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the Republic of the Congo, it is important to make clear the difference. While the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a former colony of Belgium, the oil-producing Republic of the Congo is a former French colony. The two share a common border, approximately 750 miles long, formed for much of its length by the Congo River. Brazaville, the capital of the Republic of the Congo, and Kinshasa (previously known as Leopoldville), the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are twin cities separated only by the Congo River. Some people in Africa therefore refer to the Democratic Republic of the Congo as Congo Kinshasa and the Republic of the Congo as Congo Brazaville. The Congolese that are involved in the *African in Maine* project are from Congo Kinshasa. An understanding of the political situation in the Congo is important because of the effects it has had on the evolution of the *African in Maine* project.

### Historic Contexts

Before its transformation into two colonial states, the Congo had already been exploited by the slave trade. By the eighteenth century, most Congolese societies had fragmented, vulnerable to outside forces eager to control the trade in slaves and ivory. In 1885 at the time of the Scramble for Africa, the Congo became the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium. Belgian rule in what became known as the Congo Free State (1885–1908) is associated with cruelty used to extract the maximum output of labor and natural resources.

In the wake of the two world wars, the rise of a class of westernized Africans (*évolués*) sparked a climate of social unrest and the development of nationalist sentiment and activity. In 1956 a group of Bakongo *évolués* led by their hero, Patrice Lumumba, published a political manifesto calling for immediate independence from Belgium. After a huge struggle, the Democratic Republic of the Congo won its independence in June 1960, and Lumumba was named prime minister. Belgium reacted by supporting the opposition—the more manageable Moïse Tshombe, then governor of the mineral-rich province of Katanga, and Joseph Mobutu, who was the army commander. In response, Lumumba enlisted the support of the Soviet Union. In the context of the Cold War, this seemed to pose a threat to many in the West, and the CIA orchestrated efforts to destroy Lumumba and his so-called “pro-communist regime.” Lumumba was executed only four months after becoming prime minister, making him a legend not only in his nation but also in Africa as a whole. Mobutu, viewed as a puppet of Belgium, became president after Lumumba’s death in 1961 and struggled throughout his long reign (1961–1997) to suppress civil unrest. Hundreds of thousands of Congolese were displaced, and many ended up as refugees in neighboring African countries.

Millions more were forced to leave due to wars involving Rwanda and Uganda in the late 1980s and through the 1990s. Many of Rwanda’s minority Tutsis had fled civil unrest and persecution to settle in exile in southern Uganda and eastern Zaire. Those who settled in Zaire are known as Nyamulenge; in Uganda, the Banyarwanda. In the late 1980s a rebel movement—the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—was formed with the declared aim of returning the Banyarwanda to Rwanda to fight the Hutu-dominated government. This motivated extremist Hutus to block the advance of RPF into Rwanda. Hutu militias assassinated their own Hutu president, Habyarimana, and his prime minister for their moderate views and restraint regarding the persecution of Tutsis. The entire minority Tutsi community in Rwanda was targeted for elimination. Within a period of 100 days, the Hutu extremists had killed approximately a million Tutsis and their sympathizers. The Tutsis retaliated, and by July 1994, the RPF had defeated the Hutu army and established itself as the new government of Rwanda. Fearing retaliation for Hutu government-orchestrated genocide, most of what was left of the former Hutu regime escaped to

Zaire, taking with them about two million Hutus. These were settled in camps in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Extremist Hutu leaders soon took control of the camps in the Congo and used them to launch attacks against the new Tutsi government in Rwanda. In October 1996, Rwanda and Uganda Tutsis declared war with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and attacked the refugee camps, killing thousands of Hutu refugees, including women and children. Meanwhile, President Mobutu of Zaire gave support to the Hutu extremists in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, since he shared ethnicity with the Hutu who are fellow Bantu, as opposed to the Hamitic Tutsis. While the war went on, President Mobutu fomented distrust toward Tutsis in speeches and repeatedly denied nationality and other citizenship rights to this population. The Tutsi-dominated army of Uganda joined with Rwanda to help fight Mobutu's regime.

In order to make the Tutsi insurgency look like a popular uprising instead of a foreign invasion, the Zairian-born Laurent-Desire Kabila was appointed spokesperson for an alliance of rebel movements fighting to liberate Zaire from dictator Mobutu. In 1997, the rebels seized Zaire's capital, Kinshasa, and Kabila was made president. Although Kabila was the president, the Rwandan army maintained command. The Tutsi Banyamulenge who had felt oppressed during Mobutu's reign found themselves in a limelight with the arrival of the Rwandan army in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They made an alliance with the Rwandan invaders who initiated illegal mining of lucrative minerals including gold, diamonds, and cobalt to support their poverty-stricken country.

As long as Kabila's rebel alliance was successful in presenting itself as a popular uprising instead of a foreign invasion, Kabila and his army were greeted in Kinshasa as heroes and liberators. But the arrival of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandans, as well as the Tutsi Banyamulenge in Kinshasa and other Congolese cities, made Kabila unpopular to the degree that he was seen to be allied with these outside groups. In a desperate effort to unite the Congolese behind him, Kabila gave all Rwandans 72 hours to leave the country, while he denounced all Tutsis in general, sending security services to persecute the Tutsis living in Kinshasa. All Tutsis, including those married to Congolese, children of mixed Congolese/Rwandan marriages, and any Congolese that looked like Tutsi, were hunted down. Public buses were stopped on the road and all Banyamulenge passengers were singled out for execution. This triggered off massive displacement of Tutsis and their sympathizers. Kabila's move prompted Rwanda and Uganda to immediately begin another war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, under cover of yet another rebel movement. President Kabila was shot, and a commission blamed Rwanda and Uganda for the assassination. His son, Joseph Kabila, who was in charge of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's armed forces during his father's regime, succeeded him in office. Every phase of this protracted conflict produced hundreds of thousands of additional refugees.

### **The Congolese Community in Portland**

Portland's Congolese community is small—it is estimated that there are about twenty families with an average of four children in each family. Towards the end of 2001, Mr. E'nkul Kanakan, who is a leader in the Congolese community, and a few others announced the formation of an organization known as Bana Ya Congo Kinshasa (People of Congo Kinshasa).

*...Kanakan wanted to be inclusive and involve every Congolese (Rwandan origin or not) in whatever cultural programs they would agree to promote.*

The formation of this organization was triggered by the planning of the *African in Maine* programs, with a goal of bringing the Congolese people together.

The first planning meeting was brief because some of the key players had not attended, noticeably the Rwandan Congolese who were encouraged by E'nkul Kanakan to join the process of developing the *African in Maine* project. As de facto chair of Bana Ya Congo, Kanakan wanted to be inclusive and involve every Congolese (Rwandan origin or not) in whatever cultural programs they would agree to promote. This was important because there were talented Congolese of Rwandan origin who had a lot to contribute in these programs. The discussion was mainly conducted in French and Lingala, and very little was communicated to the non-French speakers. We understood through the sketchy interpretation that the Congolese were actually arguing whether Rwandan Congolese should or should not be allowed to participate in the development of Congolese cultural programs. Most of the Congolese were united against the involvement of Rwandans. It was said by some that the Rwandan Congolese would act like informers and carry Congolese community secrets to Rwandans to be used to harm the Congolese. Through subsequent meetings and public programs, this theme continued to resonate. The Center staff facilitated these dialogues, since we assumed it would take quite long for an outside facilitator to understand the politics of war and rivalry between the Congolese and the Rwandans or Nyamulenge.

The Congolese allege that the Rwandan government carried out atrocities against citizens in the Congo, apart from robbing Congolese diamonds and other minerals. Everyone wanted a chance to express their experiences during the invasion by Rwanda and Uganda. In fact, the Congolese met by themselves a couple of times, and the discussions were heated, as some of the Congolese argued against the inclusion of Rwandan Congolese in any Congolese affairs. For their part, the Rwandans pointed out that they were born and raised in the Congo and that any culture they know is Congolese. They expressed an interest to participate in the development of Congolese cultural programs. Through pressure from moderates, the non-Rwandan Congolese reluctantly accepted their inclusion into planning meetings of the *African in Maine* programs.

*Everyone wanted a chance to express their experiences during the invasion by Rwanda and Uganda. In fact, the Congolese met by themselves a couple of times, and the discussions were heated...*

These positive developments in the dialogue advanced the planning process. The participants agreed that music and dance are a very important part of Congolese life. They supported a local dancer to instruct Congolese kids to dance the Ndombolo Rumba, the great Congolese national dance. The Congolese also requested dance parties featuring Tshibango Kadima and his band, RumbAfrica, as well as renowned Congolese musicians/singers like Papa Wemba, Kanda Bongo Man, and Kofi Olomide. When Kanda Bongo Man and Papa Wemba visited Portland, they attracted not just the Congolese, but also many Sudanese who enjoy the Congolese pop music; they may sing along with the artists despite the fact that most of them do not understand the meaning of the songs.

Another important item to Congolese is their traditional dress. For this, the group planned to have a fashion show. This was to be followed by an event focused on story-telling traditions. The Congolese also said that food, an important part of their culture, should be presented at every event. A planning committee of eight was selected to work with the Center in producing these programs. In practice, internal disputes around ethnicity resulted in attrition; in the end, the committee had dwindled to four. The planning committee had to meet many times although they did not have as many heated arguments as the Sudanese had.

### **Project Events**

The first Congolese event was the Ndombolo Rumba. This was an event performed entirely by local artists ranging from ages five to seventeen. The rehearsals for it did not proceed smoothly

because Congolese politics prevailed over the two teachers of the youth. One is a Congolese Rwandan, and she was uncomfortable in the company of the other teacher, who is Congolese but who was formerly married to a Rwandan who had been abusive of her ethnicity. There were arguments about what music and costumes were appropriate, when and where rehearsals should take place, and who should make the decisions. The Ndombolo Rumba took place on February 28, 2002 at the Center for Cultural Exchange and, while it was successfully received, the tension between the two teachers was noticeable. It was to be the last Congolese event the Rwandan instructor or any member of her family attended at the Center. The situation was aggravated by the fact that the Center did not offer as generous a compensation to her as had been expected. Even when Papa Wemba or Kanda Bongo Man came to Portland, her group did not attend the events.

The Congolese are very proud of their dress designs, which they share with other Africans but with details that are specific to the Congo. It is said that President Mobutu had banned the wearing of western style dresses by Congolese women, which forced women to promote the creation of designs that would suit all age/social groups; in the process, they fell in love with their costumes. Hence, the Congolese chose a fashion show as their next important cultural event because they wanted to show the world how beautiful Congolese women and men can look in their traditional clothes.

Two women were selected by the group to take charge of this program, and, again, disagreements over ethnicity and money led to dissention. The two disagreed right from the outset on methods and approach. One expected to be paid as much as any fashion designer in New York, and feared someone might copy the best of her original designs. The other argued that they should not expect payment from anyone to promote their own culture. This felt like an insult to the first woman, who decided not only to pull out of the event, but also suggested that before any more Congolese programs are developed, every Congolese should get a chance to say why they were not happy with the *African in Maine* project. The other seamstress took on the challenge of making the costumes on her own.

The fashion show took place on May 25, 2002. It was a successful event, with many people still talking about it today, and good publicity for the seamstress. She recruited models not only from the Congolese community but also from other communities, including a white American woman. The whole event was designed just like any fashion show in New York, drawing about 150 people, many of whom had never attended African music and dance events. Those who came to the Center for Cultural Exchange that day got to know that Africans, like the rest of the world community, are into the world of fashion with original African-made fabrics and styles that are suited to the climate, environment, and circumstances of Africa. This event created a sense of pride not only in Congolese but also in other Africans.

The next event, the Congolese Cultural Festival, started with the film, *Lumumba*, which tells the story of the struggle of Congolese people for independence. Next was a short play, *Journey to Kikabu*, acted by children twelve years old and younger. It took the Congolese people back to how peacetime felt in their country, and how young kids could travel safely from village to village unaccompanied by adults. The play explored the scenario of war and civil unrest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and how citizens left for refugee camps and safety in neighboring African countries and beyond, including in Maine. Afterwards the children performed peace and wartime dances. The events were interspersed with dialogue facilitated by Center staff.

This event was important to Congolese and Americans alike. The American audience learned that the U.S.

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participated in creating some of the civil wars in Africa, and the refugee crises that followed. In the dialogue following the film *Lumumba*, some members of the audience apologized for not only the assassination of Lumumba, but for the chaos that followed his death. Juan Lado commented that this was a successful dialogue, in that people reached understanding and respect for each other.

*These programs also gave the Portland community the opportunity to identify Congolese leadership through the resilient and creative ways the program developers went about doing their work.*

These events were bracketed by performances at the Center by major stars of Congolese *soukous*, Papa Wemba in the summer of 2001 and Kanda Bongo Man in 2002. These master performers attracted large and enthusiastic audiences, and represent the artistic apogee of the Congolese program. Their presence in Maine generated much pride and enthusiasm among the local Congolese. The final event was a dance party in March '03 with Kadima and RumbaAfrica, coinciding with the release of the *African in Maine* compact disc, featuring music and poems by the different African artists involved in the project.

### Outcomes

The performance component of the Congolese cultural programs was very successful in that the Congolese, including their children, learned new skills, and gained a sense of pride in their achievements. It is a powerful affirmation for children to happily and proudly perform on stage while their parents watch and laugh to see them perform. It was good to see new faces at the fashion show and the interest of several designers in the African clothing was a boost to the seamstress. These programs also gave the Portland community the opportunity to identify Congolese leadership through the resilient and creative ways the program developers went about doing their work.

At the same time, however, the ethnic and personal divisions that plagued the programs were not effectively resolved. The first events were well attended by Congolese, but some Congolese eventually withdrew from the planning committee with some bitterness. And, as in the Sudanese and Somali communities, some circulated negative comments against those who remained on the committee or the Center's staff. They claimed that the white people had money to spend on the programs but that the African coordinators blocked the flow of this money to participants. The end-result of the crises that developed during the planning of the Ndombolo Rumba led to a division of the Congolese youth dancers from two other youth ensembles.

Evaluation forms were distributed to the audience at the Congolese Cultural Festival, but the results—overwhelmingly positive—are more reflective of the whites in attendance than they are of the Africans, few of whom took the trouble to complete the questionnaire. Juan Lado felt that the form was more complex than many refugees cared to deal with. Evaluation remains anecdotal and largely subjective, based on the assessment of Center staff, particularly Juan Lado and E'nkul Kakanan (who is a board member). As with the other African ethnicities, culturally determined mores make the collection of evaluative data extremely time-intensive. Distribution of surveys at events does not elicit responses, which demand prolonged face-to-face encounters.

*...All African communities in Portland...struggle to understand why an African leader should spend free time to vigorously pursue the goal of organizing communities to unite and promote their interests.*

The process to establish Bana Ya Congo Kinshasa did not proceed well, although the Congolese programs were somewhat successful. Some Congolese have seen it as an effort by one group to

dominate Congolese affairs. This attitude is not limited to the Congolese but is common in all African communities in Portland. They struggle to understand why an African leader should spend free time to vigorously pursue the goal of organizing communities to unite and promote their interests. Some suspect that leaders are taking advantage of them to raise money for themselves, or have some hidden agenda with negative effects for the very community that they claim they want to empower. Individuals withdrew from the organizing committee for various reasons—but hidden beneath those reasons are the ethnic differences and the political conflicts between the Congolese and the Rwandans. It appears that the intra-Congolese dialogue, as in the case of the Somalis, has not achieved the most desirable results.

## **OBSERVATIONS ABOUT AFRICAN IN MAINE**

### **A Note on Facilitation**

Our original intent was to engage outside facilitators to conduct the primary dialogic portions of *African in Maine*, both insider community work and public dialogues. For this purpose, we hired a Boston-based firm, Interaction Associates for Social Change. The Center's directors, Phyllis O'Neill and Bau Graves, had both participated in an extended facilitative leadership training program that is led by Marianne Hughes, director of Interaction Associates (under the auspices of Portland's Institute for Civic Leadership). Through the Animating Democracy grant, Margaret Juan Lado had also participated in the Institute for Civic Leadership's training program with Marianne. We had been very impressed with Marianne's methodology and skills and felt she was a good match for our program. For her part, Marianne was very excited about participating.

Initial meetings with the Sudanese, Somali, and Congolese communities were all facilitated by Marianne Hughes. She also conducted an intensive follow up with the Congolese Community, and sent one of her team members to conduct a similar session with the Sudanese. All of these sessions yielded positive results; the communities were able to substantially focus their energy on the kinds of programs that they hoped to support through *African in Maine*.

*Due to the protracted nature of the internal dialogues, which encompassed many meetings...it was impossible to bring the professional facilitators to Portland for every, or even most, of the sessions.*

However, due to the protracted nature of the internal dialogues, which encompassed many meetings (an extreme number in the case of the Sudanese), it was impossible to bring the professional facilitators to Portland for every, or even most, of the sessions. This presented a substantial problem, since a facilitator returning to the program after a hiatus that might have included numerous meetings was not up to speed with the unfolding community dynamic. We could try to brief them as thoroughly as possible, but it soon became clear that the process required a facilitator who was fully participatory in order for it to move forward. Ultimately, the relationship with Interaction Associates was ended, and meetings were facilitated by Bau Graves or Juan Lado.

*In a larger sense, the artistic presentations themselves amounted to the communities' initiation of a nonverbal dialogue with Portland.*

Financial concerns also played a part in the decision to disengage with Interaction Associates. Within each of the communities, negotiations about how to spend limited grant dollars had begun. Sometimes these negotiations could be rather intense, but the dollar amounts in dispute were never more than a few hundred dollars. Interaction Associates, on the other hand, charged a fee of

\$1000 per day—which was discounted for this project. We ultimately had to question the wisdom of spending \$1000 to bring in a facilitator who would not be sufficiently informed about the individuals and issues at play in each community, while simultaneously pinching every penny on the program side of the budget.

In the end, we felt that our own skills and insights were adequate for the required facilitation within each community. As indicated in the case studies above, the public portion of the dialogues, like the artistic programs themselves, was shaped by each community's desires. Ethnic communities in general have serious concerns about how they are portrayed to the wider public. While significant dissension may have characterized the communities' internal process, none of them desired to present this face to their audience. Rather, they wanted their national histories and cultures to be presented thoughtfully and respectfully, by individuals who were perceived as authoritative. Only after key members of each community had the opportunity to offer commentary regarding their cultures and their place within Maine society, were they prepared to open the floor for interaction. This usually ended up following a question-and-answer format, not exactly the open-ended dialogic format envisioned by Animating Democracy.

On several occasions, Bau Graves inserted himself into this portion of the program to facilitate a conversation that could become more than a two-way Q & A. In these instances, audience members were somewhat more responsive, engaging with panelists, but also with each other. This was especially true during the Somali Eid al-Fitr celebration that coincided with Lewiston's political fracas. In this instance, with tensions running particularly high, the dialogue took on a very different tone, with whites asking poignant questions of Somalis ("So why are you here, anyhow?"). The responses were very moving for everyone present.

*This was not a community's interaction with an "artist," someone with special skills who is separate from that community. In these cases, our artists were the community.*

In a larger sense, the artistic presentations themselves amounted to the communities' initiation of a nonverbal dialogue with Portland. They were loud and public statements of how

each community viewed itself, of what aspects of its culture were believed to be the most important for outsiders to apprehend, and of how they wished to be seen in the public's eye. Whether it was the soukous star onstage, a platter of a tribe's favorite food in the dinner line, or the dizzy array of Somali women's dress-up clothes, each community was making important statements about itself.

### **The Effects of Dialogue on Art**

Intracommunity dialogues were a significant part of *African in Maine* and served to support cultural interests on two levels. They had an impact on the artistic work's development. In the realm of community art-making, which we experienced in the Congolese and Sudanese programs, the dialogues about refugee life in Maine directly informed the scripting of dramatic presentations. Community members recreated their common experiences of frustration and humiliation with American civic structures, a theme that is often just below the surface in many

refugee communities and that was openly discussed during the planning meetings. Other scenes, especially in the Congolese children’s play, harked back to a romanticized era of safety and security in their homelands (a time that none of the child actors had ever experienced). This was not a community’s interaction with an “artist,” someone with special skills who is separate from that community. In these cases, our artists were the community.

But the *African in Maine* dialogues not only informed the development of some of the community’s creative presentations, they explicitly determined *what* the artistic presentations ought to be, including artists who were “stars” within the community’s overall aesthetic universe. The Congolese, for example, just wanted to experience Kanda Bongo Man’s artistry in Portland, and show him off to the rest of the town. The dialogues made it possible.

### **The Center as Cultural and Civic Agent**

The complexity of dealing with layered divisions and disputes within each community was an ongoing feature of this project. Although the Center has a long history of working with communities to produce cultural programs, the dynamics of this project were uniquely challenging. The thicker the conflicts, the more time they require. We were very lucky to have engaged Juan Lado to coordinate the *African in Maine* project. She is not just a skilled facilitator, but is fully committed to work with her own Sudanese community, regardless of the many hurdles that emerge and the endless hours required to surmount them. This project, like any community cultural initiative, demanded a high level of insider competence. There were entire days when Juan would be out of the office. When asked what she’d been doing, she would say, “Well, I had to meet with the parents of the girls who want to dance in the next presentation. You can’t just go knock on their door and tell them what you want! No, first you must come in, share some food and conversation, interact with the whole family. Only then can you introduce the topic at hand. It’s the African way.” It is unlikely that any other CCE staff member could have either employed the proper etiquette, or taken the requisite time to gather the pertinent information.

*Community members recreated their common experiences of frustration and humiliation with American civic structures, a theme that is often just below the surface in many refugee communities...*

On the other hand, Juan is a member of the Bari tribe of Sudan, and as such is not viewed by the other tribes or nationalities as a neutral player. While her insider status surely offered great insights, it also rendered her work more difficult among most of the constituencies with which she was dealing. Juan wasn’t *enough* of an insider for most of them, and was sometimes perceived as a rival. During some of the facilitated dialogues, Bau took a more prominent role for this very purpose. He was clearly an outsider to all of the participants and thus was not perceived as having an agenda of his own. It is an irony of community organizing that sometimes an outsider can be more effective in bringing people together than a member of the community.

Due to the Center’s past and continuing community initiatives, some of these basic lessons had already been absorbed by our institutional culture. We know that facilitating community programs takes a lot of time and effort—far more time than most public arts presenters could anticipate. Our staff was already calibrated to allocate time and resources to doing this community spade work. We also had well-established relationships with key players in each community, individuals who were capable of reaching into their communities to address a public that is ordinarily closed to outsiders. As an institution, we are well accustomed to relying upon such insider guides (This can sometimes cause problems, as it did in our over-reliance on one

Somali leader). We also came into the program with plenty of experience marketing events to ethnically specific communities, a process that is heavily dependent on word-of-mouth driven by Malcolm Gladwell’s “connectors.”

The Center was attempting to build programs in collaboration with a group of people who lead extraordinarily complex lives. Many refugees work two or more jobs and still struggle financially. Attending an apparently endless series of planning meetings is not the highest priority, even for the most dedicated. One of the results of this social push/pull is a frustrating lack of consistency. Sometimes we would hold a meeting, and only one or two participants would have been present at the previous session. As a result, the same material had to be covered again and again. It is difficult to move a dialogue very far forward under these circumstances. But, this too, is simply a part of the territory. While all of these issues were enormous in the Center’s relationship with the three African ethnicities, they did not derail the project because contending with such issues is an assumed part of the Center’s facilitative function. We didn’t have to reshape our institution to do this work—as many arts-focused organizations might. Doing this work has already shaped our institution.

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Our audiences, in turn, have been shaped by the kind of programming that has characterized the Center for many years. A large percentage of the Center’s programs are focused on cultures, artistic genres, and performers who are unlikely to be well-known by more than a small community. As a result, educating our audiences about what they are

about to experience is an important part of many initiatives. In general, our programs are interpretation-thick, offering several avenues for individuals to expand their insight into the artistic product that is on stage. We rely on the standard array of interpretive strategies: printed programs or interpretive essays, interviews with the artists on our weekly radio program or on statewide radio/TV broadcasts, cultivation of writers and the constant funneling of information to the press and media, interpretive remarks from the stage, and a variety of meet-the-artist functions. Some programs go well beyond these, offering comprehensive participatory experiences for community members.

So, although Animating Democracy inspired the Center to engage our audiences in a dialogic process more fully than we had in the past, our patrons are generally accustomed and very receptive to a range of interactive strategies. The dialogues that we conducted in conjunction with our events were more engaging and informative than most audience-artist discussions. Perhaps this hinged on the fact that most of the artists, like the audience, were locals. Some of the techniques that we absorbed from our work with Animating Democracy, especially at the Learning Exchanges, informed how we approached dialogue, and are likely to become regular features in many of the Center’s programs, particularly those that have a powerful local component. Talking about the stresses of life is somewhat more immediate when addressing one’s neighbor than when asking questions of a visiting celebrity artist.

*Culture was the rationale for meeting, but it is impossible to discuss culture without asking vital questions about community identity.*

### **Civic Engagement**

*African in Maine* took place during the early years of African refugee settlement in our state. The African communities continue their struggle to find a place for themselves in Maine, a process that can be measured only over many years or decades. Mainers continue to struggle with the sudden appearance of thousands of Africans, as the events in Lewiston dramatized. *African in Maine* reflected these larger struggles; it may also

have played a role in shaping positive civic outcomes. It is extremely difficult, however, to quantify the overall importance of that role.

We know that the cultural opportunities offered by the grants from Animating Democracy and the NEA were important catalysts in bringing all three communities together. Culture was the rationale for meeting, but it is impossible to discuss culture without asking vital questions about community identity. What qualifies as “culture”? Whose culture should be supported? How should competing claimants be evaluated? What is the community that is to be represented? And who speaks on its behalf? Substantially more dialogue was devoted to these questions than was focused on art or art-making. Indeed, finding some consensus on the identity issues was an a priori condition for even beginning the discussion about artistic specifics. Only after the communities got clear about who they were and how they wanted to be perceived, could they take up questions about what kind of art could reflect that clarity.

Would those same discussions about what it means to be “Sudanese” have taken place without the incentive of money for cultural activity? Almost certainly, they would have. Would they have proceeded with the same sense of urgency and, finally, accomplishment without the celebratory prospects that *African in Maine* held out? Almost certainly, they would not. That is about as positive an impact as can be claimed.

Each community advanced in its own cohesion and understanding of itself over the course of this project. The Congolese formed a community leadership committee that was able to successfully produce several events. The production of those events ultimately revealed dissention among the leadership—an inevitable result of continuing group activity. An unexpected result is that now several dissenting individuals are taking it upon themselves to organize alternative events outside the purview of Bana Ya Congo Kinshasa. If *African in Maine* inspired individuals to begin taking an activist role in their cultures, regardless of the hand of a sponsoring organization, that ranks as a successful outcome.

The Somali community also gained through its involvement in the project. Even though several of the Somali events experienced substantial difficulties, the lessons learned through those missteps were valuable. The failure of the concert date with Saado forced the Center’s staff to look beyond the individual who had been delegated authority by a group of elders. Several younger Somalis stepped forward to produce the successful Eid al-Fitr festival, and they became allies of the Center. While this caused consternation among some of the elders (particularly among religious conservatives), others were explicit in stating that no group of elders can claim to speak on behalf of the Somali community. If young people want to organize events, that is their right and privilege. While it is not universally approved, the assumption of responsibility by some of the younger Somalis is an important result of the project.

The Sudanese community presented the most complex dialogic challenges, and perhaps gained the most through the evolution of the program. The weekly meetings engaged a very wide portion of the local Sudanese population, at least in some portion of the extended dialogue. One team of leaders was replaced by another, viewed as more responsive to community needs. It was a classic example of participatory grassroots democracy in action, with all of the twists and turns of a dramatic high-stakes contest. The Sudanese Community Organization is now a functioning and recognized voice for the entire community.

*In particular, the media surrounding the Somali Eid event—which was linked in the media’s eye to the Lewiston controversies—was significant and played some part in shaping Portlanders’ responses to the crisis.*

All three segments of the program received a large amount of public exposure, with numerous newspaper articles (several nice front-page photo spreads), radio interviews with various artists, and television news coverage of key events. In this, the goal of heightening Mainers' awareness of the presence of African communities, and at least an exposure to some of the diversity within each of those communities, was well met. In particular, the media surrounding the Somali Eid event—which was linked in the media's eye to the Lewiston controversies—was significant and played some part in shaping Portlanders' responses to the crisis.

*African in Maine* was certainly successful in its goal of stimulating dialogue within each community about its cultural legacy, and in enhancing the visibility of these communities in our state. The Center played a relatively minor role in the unfolding of the Lewiston crisis, but that event was an important moment in contemporary Maine political history—the time that the state's human rights organizers recognized the very broad extent of their support, and perhaps their viability as an effective political force (It remains to be seen how well they can capitalize upon this newly apparent strength). The project has also played a role in the emerging awareness among the city's power elites (corporations, bankers, attorneys, high government officials) that racial and ethnic diversity is now a very prominent feature of life in Portland, and that they all must figure out how to deal with it. *African in Maine* is one among many sources that are driving this evolution in our city's identity.

## CONCLUSIONS: DIALOGUE, ART, COMMUNITIES

What is the balance of dialogue and art? How can a community's voice shape the art? How can (or should) it shape the nature of the dialogue? Is this project primarily about building community? Or is it about making great art? Within the complex context of the three African nationalities, there were no absolute answers to any of these questions. Rather, the entire process had to maintain a very high degree of flexibility. The dynamics of interaction could shift our programmatic focus very rapidly; very few events came together in an entirely predictable manner. Often, from week to week, or even in the midst of a performance from moment to

moment, the Center's staff was uncertain about what to expect, or what might happen next. The need to maintain this flexibility is among the important lessons of this work.

While we find Animating Democracy's Western-based dialogic approaches to be important tools, the dynamic between individuals within each community often pushed our attempts to create an environment of inclusive dialogue aside. In good facilitative style,

we would generate a list of ground rules at the outset, but in practice preexisting interpersonal dynamics overrode such efforts. This problem was enormously exacerbated by the language barriers that prevented facilitators and some participants from even basic understanding of what was being said. Our attempts to generate open dialogue were also challenged by individuals and sometimes organized groups who resisted participation, usually by simply failing to attend meetings, but on a couple of occasions by showing up and pointedly refusing to enter the discussion. Of course, outside of our meetings, they were very vocal about their feelings. Some, perhaps most, of the actual communication that eventually brought people together took place offsite, in personal conversations, rather than in the forum that the Center created. It made us wonder about the useful limits of an accepted definition of dialogue, which assumes a willingness to participate by all parties that is not always a given.

*Some, perhaps most, of the actual communication that eventually brought people together took place offsite, in personal conversations, rather than in the forum that the Center created.*

The art—the public products of all this dialogue—was reflective of the communities that programmed it. American arts professionals often decry the lack of “professionalism” and “quality” in community-based art. However, communities themselves rarely make such distinctions. *African in Maine* offered moments of extreme artistic virtuosity, such as the performances by Papa Wemba or Kanda Bongo Man. It included events that held special significance for the insider communities, such as the performances by Emanuel Kembe and Shego Band. But it also included many events that were amateur attempts by local community members to represent themselves

From the perspective of the participants and their communities, this is irrelevant. Indeed, the events that featured community members acting, singing, and dancing onstage had an emotional resonance with their audiences that exceeded the response to the stars. This does not imply that community members lack insight into aesthetic nuance; they know very well what constitutes quality within their own cultural sphere, and they want that, too. It does state that issues of quality are often secondary considerations in the value of cultural events to insiders. Who is onstage can be far more important than what is onstage. The imposition of outsiders’ views of what constitutes “quality,” puts a frame around ethnic performance that is foreign to the experience of most community members. This particular, often-voiced preoccupation with “quality” within the American public arts community (especially among funders), is a red herring, itself a reflection of the elitism that still prevails in too much public cultural work.

*The imposition of outsiders’ views of what constitutes “quality,” puts a frame around ethnic performance that is foreign to the experience of most community members.*

Finally, an irony of the whole *African in Maine* project is its frustratingly brief duration. Grants are received, used, and exhausted; and then programs collapse until more grants are procured. This is very unfortunate and it may have had negative effects on those who were involved in the project and now feel abandoned. Juan suggests that this is like putting up a roof frame of a hut, and then abandoning the building process so the power of weather weighs on the bare wooden frame, which then rots, resulting in the collapse of the structure. She notes that in each African country there is a department of culture, a government agency that is a part of the system and here to stay. When *African in Maine* came to life, some of the communities viewed the Center as Maine’s “department of culture.” As long as American foundations continue to offer financial support on a short-term, project basis, they run the risk of alienating the communities that they are striving to serve. Cultural institutions’ relationships with community partners must be based in mutual trust. Once lost, such trust is difficult to regain. The Center for Cultural Exchange now has a significant challenge ahead in reforming its community connections in the present, post-grant environment.

These case studies offer a view of a slice of public programming that spanned two years. The Center’s efforts to form active partnerships with African communities began years before the *African in Maine* project was created; they will extend into the future. However, the documentary trail left by this project is instructive. The twists and turns involved in public intervention in the affairs of any community demonstrate the process that is involved. It is a process that can reveal both the value of public art and the limitations of outsider participation, however well-intentioned, in shaping the evolution of communities.

## REFLECTIONS FROM ANIMATING DEMOCRACY

PATRICIA ROMNEY

Animating Democracy was attracted to *African in Maine* because it embraced such a full range of cultural forms and expressions. Many creative people participated in the project. Tiny children recited their lines and in the process strengthened their connection to their ancestral homelands. Women demonstrated craftsmanship that honored the beauty of their birthplaces. Experts on African history and culture informed audiences beyond the level of their previous knowledge. Well-known popular musicians were brought to Maine for standing-room only performances. The productions of the Congolese, Somali, and Sudanese communities were informative and enjoyable for all participants.

The influx of immigrants and refugees to many communities across the country is certainly not a new phenomenon in U.S. civic life. We are, for the most part, a country made up of immigrants, but we are challenged in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries by the immigration of groups from areas little known to the United States' traditionally Western European immigrants. Immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East are now located from coast to coast, in Midwest farming communities, border towns, and small and mid-sized cities all over the country, in addition to major cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. They often struggle with traumatic displacement from their homeland and resettlement in a new one, while host communities experience their own struggles understanding, accepting, and supporting these newcomers. What insights does *African in Maine* contribute to field understanding of culturally-based civic dialogue work?

Immigration issues were among the most common issues that cultural organizations identified in their proposed projects to Animating Democracy. Because of the desire and need on the part of cultural organizations to work with immigrant populations, *African in Maine* and CCE's thoughtful analysis of it in the preceding case study provide valuable, nuanced insights into the role of cultural organizations and the challenges and rewards of working with these groups. Animating Democracy would like to underscore three key insights discerned from the project:

**1. Dialogue work with divided immigrant and refugee communities presents particular, and foreseeable, challenges.** The definition, function, and context of dialogue are important to effective arts-based civic dialogue work. Although Animating Democracy did not promote any particular model of dialogue, it was, at least at the outset, based most heavily in western ideals of dialogue and democracy. It is evident that there were complex dynamics within the immigrant and refugee communities that posed real obstacles to achieving the open-ended exchange of perspectives and ideas suggested by this definition of dialogue. In the Somali, Sudanese, and Congolese communities, the historic and destructive impact of colonialism, along with the factors of religious differences and tribal rivalries created a context of mistrust. These intra-group differences were coupled with the challenge of working with a U.S. population having different history and values, and limited linguistic competencies and cultural understanding.

The realities of these cultural differences and conflicts led to specific challenges for dialogue:

- The dialogue needs in *African in Maine* were basic. Rather than focusing on the construction of wise questions or finding the most useful dialogue model, CCE's dialogue work had to focus on the fundamental issues of how to get people to the table,

how to find a common language to use in the dialogues, and how to keep them in conversation.

- Cultural norms relating to gender, in particular the norm of separate gatherings or separate spaces for men and women, sometimes conflicted with U.S. values of inclusion and the rights of women.
- Intergenerational differences, which exist in all communities around the world, take a different turn when the group moves to a new culture, especially where there is an emphasis on youth and where the youth, because of their quick grasp of the new language, and their developing and malleable cultural identities, may make an easier connection with the new culture than their parents do. As did CCE, cultural organizations need to work with immigrant communities in a way that values young people while not disempowering the adult community or undermining traditional cultural values and expressions.
- Language barriers can not only prevent facilitators and participants from understanding what is being said, but can render completely impossible a deep dialogue between immigrant communities, cultural organizations, and audiences.
- Consistency of participation may be a challenge because of real-life demands on time, generated by the economic struggles of immigrant groups and the lack of extended family resources in their new country.

These difficult dynamics may require cultural organizations to check assumptions and shift expectations that an environment of inclusive dialogue can be achieved. Monolithic perceptions may exist of racial and ethnic groups that do not take into account sub-cultures, conflicts, and sometimes contradictory perspectives within communities. Understanding of intra-group dialogue is challenged when groups that others see as a single entity, define themselves differently; for example, whereas outsiders may see Congolese immigrants, the immigrants, themselves, may see Congolese and Rwandans. In *African in Maine*, intra-group work through cultural grounding—that is, reconnecting to one’s cultural identity through cultural expression—proved to be an important precursor to either intra-group or inter-group dialogue.

To work with these dynamics, a facilitator from outside the particular African communities, who is perceived to be impartial, can be an advantage. Yet, at this time, there is a dearth of facilitators who are culturally competent to do this work. Project leaders need to be prepared for exchange to happen in ways that differ from their preconceived notions of how dialogue should proceed. Steps backward may at times occur before steps forward can be taken. Organizers need to adapt their approach by integrating the goals of dialogue efforts into the regular cultural opportunities.

**2. Cultural work has a civic dimension.** Culture provides a civic forum. An engagement with “culture” offered African immigrants and refugees a platform, a place to engage in civic life. For disenfranchised immigrant groups seeking to stake a claim in the civic life of their new city, state, and country, culture is a way to stay centered in their own ethnicity and people, and at the same time establish identity by which others in the community will know them. Negotiation of cultural representation and priorities—which traditions to exhibit, what popular contemporary forms to “show off,” what emergent cultural forms to encourage or discourage—has social and civic value, often bringing forward issues of assimilation, public dress, and public behavior. Culturally-based forums can provide a comfort zone/context for recent immigrants and refugees to the U.S. to voice frustrations, humiliations, and fears related to U.S. systems and culture, a theme that is often below the surface. Cultural activity can advance a community in its own

understanding of itself and its relation to the broader community. Culturally specific production also contributes to the education and cultural life of the wider community.

Given the linguistic and tribal differences, as well as the historic conflict previously described, it is a wonder that these incredible productions took place. The Center successfully created the opportunity for cultural productions and community-building by facilitating the dialogue and decision-making that was necessary to accomplish these productions. The production of a compact disc of African music resulting from *African in Maine* project will serve to preserve these many national and ethnic traditions for these groups and the wider community, giving them a permanent record in the community's cultural and civic life.

Finally, CCE's efforts emphasize that cultural democracy and equity, that is, recognition of all cultures and providing access to resources that enable immigrants to define, sustain, and perpetuate their own culture, are and should be seen as a *civic* issue, not simply as an arts issue.

### **3. The role of cultural organizations in facilitating the engagement of immigrant and refugee populations in the civic life of communities requires long-term commitment.**

What kind of cultural organization is well-suited to do work with immigrant and refugee populations? Cultural organizations, such as CCE, whose mission is deeply grounded in building community through culture, are critical to a community's ecosystem and are well positioned to work in an ongoing way with immigrant/refugee populations.

Yet, these organizations are often challenged because they may be perceived as (and often are actually) "outside" the cultures of the communities served, especially if staffed largely by white individuals. On the other hand, it is an irony of community organizing that sometimes an outsider can be more effective than a member of the specific community in bringing a divided group of people together. Nonetheless, work within immigrant/refugee communities requires a high level of insider leadership and commitment of time, and understanding of etiquette, protocol, language, history, and values. To engage with culturally specific groups, requires an individual who is capable of reaching into those communities to invite them to address a public that is ordinarily closed or suspicious of outsiders. Therefore, it can be of critical importance that there be some representative of the community internal to the organization. In the case of CCE, a Sudanese representative was hired who could provide such knowledge and understanding. She did exceptional work. But even this arrangement had challenges, given that she was perceived as an outsider by other national groups, and by various tribes within her own Sudanese community.

Funding is another challenge. Project support by nature is limiting and may be detrimental to the integrated approach and long view taken by organizations such as CCE. There is no doubt that the short-term nature of project support and even other types of funding may impede community development. This effort makes clear for the funding community that long-term investments in organizations via organizational support would enable groups to do their work on *their* terms. It could also help support *permanent* staff with the necessary cultural qualifications and prevent situations, such as CCE experienced, where the Sudanese coordinator of *African in Maine* project could only be brought on for the duration of grant funding.

In closing, the opportunity and desire for shared cultural production enabled each community to engage with one another and work through long-standing differences and disagreements. Certainly conflicts still exist, but many members of the three communities were happy with the outcome and proud of the performances they produced. The experience of accomplishing the desired goal will almost certainly generalize to future efforts and events in each of the communities. National groups came together across tribal differences, and came to know one

another better. They shared a “stage,” and broke bread together. This was a huge accomplishment and demonstrates the opportunity that cultural production and dialogue offer to bridge intragroup tensions, while preserving identity and educating the broader community.

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**James Bau Graves** is codirector of the Center for Cultural Exchange. His work focuses on exploration of the personal, political, aesthetic, and ethical issues embedded in the concept and practice of public culture. At the Center, he has facilitated the creation of an extended series of programs, in close collaboration with community groups and artists, which address grassroots cultural aspirations, questions of identity, and social/financial power relations. Beginning his professional life as a musician, he quickly fell into a second career in arts presentation. As a multi-instrumentalist and composer, Graves has recorded and performed with several jazz and ethnic-music ensembles and has created collaborative works with dancer/director Ann Carlson. Since 1976 he has directed a wide variety of concert series; large and small festivals; and regional, national, and international tours. Beginning in 1982, Graves has been the professional partner of Phyllis O'Neill with whom he directed the Maine Festival until 1988, and founded the New Year's/Portland festival in 1984. Since 1987, they have directed Portland Performing Arts' concert series and, in 1999, created the Center for Cultural Exchange. In 1994, Graves participated in the USIA's pilot international arts presenters exchange with Greece and Turkey, and, in 1997, he was selected as a fellow of the New England/Greater North of England cultural exchange. He holds a master's degree in ethnomusicology from Tufts University. His first book, *Cultural Democracy*, is being published by the University of Illinois Press in November of 2004.

**Margaret Juan Lado** was born in the town of Juba in Southern Sudan. She went to Catholic elementary and high schools first in Sudan and then in Uganda during the first Civil War in Sudan (1955-1972). She was the second woman admitted to the University of Khartoum, Faculty of Economic and Political Studies, and graduated with a B. Sc. in Social Anthropology. In 1979 she was granted a European Development Fund Scholarship to do a graduate study program at the University of Wales (University College of Swansea's Center for Development Studies) and acquired a master's degree in social policy and administration. After graduation, she worked for the government of Sudan and was appointed director of the Social Welfare Department in 1986. She was responsible for the planning and management of socioeconomic programs for disadvantaged groups. When the second civil war in Sudan escalated, she was forced to leave the country in 1992. She lived in Egypt as a refugee until 1996 when she benefited from a resettlement program to the U.S. While a refugee in Egypt, she helped to develop socioeconomic programs for Sudanese refugees, which earned her a temporary consultancy position with Ford Foundation. She moved to Portland, Maine in 1999 and worked with the Portland Public Schools as a language facilitator before joining the Center for Cultural Exchange in 2000 as Community and Educational Coordinator. She is a widow with four children, two of whom attend high schools in Portland; the other two are medical officers working among displaced Sudanese in the war-ravaged part of the Sudan.

**Patricia Romney** was the Animating Democracy liaison to *African in Maine* and has worked with Animating Democracy as a dialogue consultant and facilitator on several arts-based civic dialogue projects. She is Visiting Associate Professor of psychology at Mt. Holyoke College and is a clinical/organizational psychologist and president of Romney Associates ([www.romneyassociates.com](http://www.romneyassociates.com)). She has held academic appointments at Hampshire College and Smith College. She received a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from The City University of New York in 1980. Romney has consulted for The Saint Paul Foundation, First Steps and Healthy Families, the Donahue Institute, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation, and numerous independent schools, colleges, and universities. Pat has authored over 20 articles on organizational consulting, family therapy, diversity, and education, and is a published poet and memoir writer. For Animating Democracy, she wrote “The Art of Dialogue,” a review of the ideas of selected historical and contemporary philosophers and dialogue theorists and the implications of their ideas for arts-based civic dialogue work.