

Building an Arts and Culture Support Network for Newcomer Artists in Central New York State

**A Report for the American Folklore Society's
Consultancy and Professional Development Program**

by

**Lisa Overholser and Ellen McHale (New York Folklore Society),
in consultation with
Laura Marcus Green and Amy Skillman (co-directors, Building Cultural Bridges)**

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BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

The New York Folklore Society (NYFS) has become increasingly involved in working with newcomer artists from refugee and immigrant communities in the past few years. The NYFS functions primarily as a statewide resource organization for folklorists, community-based groups, and traditional artists in the state of New York. A growing refugee population in the Capital District region, along with the ability to conduct more targeted outreach to newcomer artists in refugee and immigrant communities since 2008, has uncovered a wealth of traditional arts practices in Central New York State that exists largely unrecognized to the general public.

In 2011, with the assistance of a Folk Arts Outreach grant from the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation (MAAF), the NYFS facilitated an Embroiderers' Gathering. The Gathering was an artists' exchange between two immigrant textile artists located in Pennsylvania and Ithaca, NY, one from Hungary and the other from the Ukraine. The exchange concluded in a public, community-wide gathering of textile artists and needleworkers that was very well received by community members. Through the public portion of this exchange, we were able to connect with Karen refugee textile weavers from Burma who were resettled in nearby Utica, as well as other textile artists from various backgrounds in the area. More importantly, artists were able to connect with each other, share stories and skills, and celebrate their common artistic bond across cultural barriers.

Additionally, as with all Folk Arts Outreach grants from MAAF, there was a folklorists' exchange at this gathering, which allowed the staff at NYFS to discuss and share their perspectives with the visiting folklorist from Pennsylvania, Amy Skillman. Amy has worked extensively with refugee traditional artists in Pennsylvania, and has helped organize much larger projects that have come out of that work. Because of the connections NYFS made there and through other smaller events (such as the annual UNSPOKEN festival, a multi-event forum jointly produced by the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees and members of the Utica community, held every October since 2010), the New York Folklore Society has established an initial working relationship with a few of the refugee artists (particularly among the resettled Karen population in Utica and in Albany), by inviting them as paid performers and demonstrators in local festivals and folklife events.

This Embroiderers' Gathering led to two important realizations:

1. There was a strong desire on behalf of both the newcomer artists and the folklorists to continue these types of gatherings. They are opportunities not only for cultural exchange, but also for discussing shared problems, concerns, issues, techniques, hard-to-find materials etc. Participants at the Embroiderers' Gathering mentioned that they found the gathering "invigorating" and "inspiring", and folklorists also realize that there is a lot of potential in terms of serving artists from these communities.

2. While there is an abundance of traditional artistic knowledge within newcomer communities, artists often struggle to meet their own socio-economic needs, from finding housing and employment, to securing adequate health and child care to navigating a complicated social service infrastructure. Cultural and artistic organizations are often ill-equipped to deal with these sorts of needs, which, in our experience, makes it difficult to foster a mutually beneficial working relationship. Too often, artists must choose between meeting their basic needs and finding outlets for developing and sharing their unique talents, talents that are typically highly prized and valued in various ways within their own communities but are unrecognized in their new setting.

In 2012, the New York Folklore Society worked with the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA), in a consultation it provided to NYFA for their Folk Artist Development Program. The program allowed senior traditional artists from immigrant communities in the NYC metropolitan area to further develop and build skills to carry their art forms forward. Although the program was essentially modeled on the New York Folklore Society's Mentoring and Professional Development Program, the consultation it provided to NYFA further highlighted the need for a larger, regional network in serving newcomer artists from immigrant and refugee communities.

As a result of the groundwork that these previous programs laid, the New York Folklore Society invited Building Cultural Bridges co-directors Amy Skillman and Laura Marcus Green to conduct an Art of Community workshop in the central New York area. The Art of Community workshop is specifically designed to bring together arts and social service organizations to strategize ways to better serve newcomer traditional artists and their communities. Many of the issues raised and explored in this type of workshop are precisely the sorts of issues that NYFS felt were of concern in the newcomer communities they have been working with: sustaining culture in ways that can also be economically beneficial to communities; finding ways to frame traditional cultural knowledge in different settings; and simply learning about resources available to traditional artists. Building Cultural Bridges is a national initiative encouraging interdisciplinary support for refugee and immigrant arts and heritage through publications, presentations and community-based workshops. As co-directors, Amy and Laura are skilled folklorists and cultural activists who have organized many such workshops across the country. It was decided to host the event in Utica, NY, as one of New York State's largest refugee resettlement agencies—the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (MVRRCR)—is located in this area. It has more extensive facilities and infrastructure than the refugee resettlement agency in Albany, NY (United States Committee on Refugees and Immigrants, or USCRI), and there is a much larger refugee population in Utica. In Utica's smaller urban setting, the refugee center seems to be much more centrally involved in the day-to-day activities of refugees.

This report:

This report stems from observations made by consultants and event organizers before and during a day-long Art of Community workshop in Utica on May 17, 2013; notes and materials collected from workshop participants at the workshop; and follow up discussions and meetings

between the project consultants and the organizing institution (NYFS). We begin with a Summary Report of the essential workshop preparations and the day's activities. Based on our observations, we have also identified Key Outcomes and Observations that we feel were the most important elements in advancing a stronger arts and culture support network for newcomer artists in the state of New York, and ultimately, regionally as well. Finally, we provide a brief "Next steps" section that clarifies recommendations for future activities. Four appendices are also included, outlining the people present at the workshop; the agenda for the day; ideas people were excited to share; and a summation of evaluation comments.

SUMMARY REPORT:

WORKSHOP PREPARATION

After several phone conference calls and meetings between the consultants and NYFS organizers in the late winter and spring of 2013, it was determined that the workshop would be scheduled for Friday, May 17, 2013 as a day-long workshop consisting of local, regional and nationwide models of arts and service organization collaborations; some artistic demonstrations if possible; and small group planning sessions. The Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (MVRRCR) in Utica would have been a natural choice for a workshop venue. They are not only the social service organization most directly involved with refugee communities on a daily basis, but unlike many social service organizations, they are located in a former schoolhouse building with many large classrooms and spaces to carry out a number of different activities. They were also very open to the idea of a workshop and were committed from the outset to seeing this workshop succeed. However, as they also teach ESL in several of those classrooms, there ultimately was no space available for the entire day. Fortunately, the Utica Public Library, located right next door to the refugee center, was available and was willing to rent us space for the workshop in their large conference space upstairs. They also had an adjoining second room that allowed for more possibilities in terms of break-out sessions, smaller group sessions, etc.

The next step was outreach. This presented a unique challenge in that the host organization—the New York Folklore Society—was not located in Utica, but two hours away in Schenectady, NY and in an entirely different county. As a result, the organizational and institutional frameworks of the city were relative unknowns (just as the Folklore Society was a relative unknown to most institutions in Utica), and lots of legwork had to be carried out in order to identify invitees for the workshop. The Folklore Society could not rely on long-standing relationships to build the invitation list, and instead had to largely start "from scratch" or rely on recommendations from the Refugee Center. This was, essentially, fieldwork, something the staff at NYFS was certainly qualified to do. It presented a wonderful opportunity for collaboration between the New York Folklore Society and the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, and in the end, this was one of the most successful aspects of the entire project. For the New York Folklore Society, doing such extensive organizational fieldwork in an area of the state with a paucity of folklorists present was extremely beneficial. And in terms of network building, this was key.

It was determined that one of the key institutions to be involved should be the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute (MWPAI), an umbrella complex of buildings and structures that serves as the major cultural institution in Oneida county. The Education Director at the MWPAI was delighted to participate. It was discovered that the Art Institute has undergone a recent internal initiative in the past two years to become more engaged with newcomer communities—and the community at large—in their own backyard. In fact, just last year, they created a brand new Community Arts Education Coordinator position at their Community Art School specifically to try to engage community artists. The timing of the workshop, therefore, could not have been better in this regard.

Outreach to other service organizations proved to be very difficult, again mostly because of our geographical distance from the workshop site. The local BOCES organization was more than happy to send our invitation out, but with a major Arts in Education showcase already organized for the very same day, it was tapping into exactly the same audience that we were trying to reach. Unfortunately, it was not possible logistically to capitalize on this coincidence. And with a lack of familiarity with the institutional landscape of Oneida County and very little name recognition in the area, we had a very small response rate to our invites from job agencies, economic development councils, community health organizations and the like. A press release and especially follow-up personal phone calls were crucial in at least helping to get the word out and generating some curiosity, but it did not necessarily translate into workshop attendance from this sector locally.

We finalized our outreach by reaching out more regionally across the state and even into neighboring states (i.e., the Connecticut Cultural Heritage Program in Hartford, CT, the Vermont Folklife Center), and had a good response from this effort. This further emphasized to us the desire to establish a region-wide network. Once we had a better idea of who might be participating, we realized that there were certain themes that seemed to naturally present themselves. One was the presence of museums as organizations interested in the traditional arts. The Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute has already been mentioned, but we also had the Folk Arts Curator (Carrie Hertz) from the Castellani Museum at Niagara University scheduled to attend and so this seemed to represent an intuitive theme for our workshop presentations. We planned accordingly by having the Education Director at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute speak about the initial work that they have done with local refugee artists, which consisted of an exhibition of cross-cultural wedding attire and after-school programs for youth. Given that so many of our invited traditional artists in the Utica area worked with material crafts (i.e., Karen weavers, Somali Bantu artisans of beaded jewelry and woven mats and baskets, a Karen painter, a Bosnian weaver), this also allowed for a natural pairing in the breakout sessions, since museums primarily deal with material objects. In the context of festivals and other public programs, museums also present performing arts, such as music and dance, so there was also a connection to be made with the Iraqi musician and the Congolese dancer in attendance.

Our invited traditional artists were central to shaping the workshop. When we considered the artists who would be present, sewing or weaving “circles” seemed to be a primary theme. The

traditional artists in attendance presented three examples of this type of activity, each in a totally different state of organization and development—a local group of Somali Bantu women who engage in several types of traditional hand crafts and would like “to do something” but don’t know how to get started; a local Karen weaving circle started at the refugee center that is just getting off the ground thanks to a microloan grant; and a more fully developed cross-cultural sewing circle that has been active for six years, initiated at the Connecticut Cultural Heritage Program. This mix presented us with a great opportunity to discuss mentoring at the workshop, as each of these projects was in a different stage of development. More importantly, it allowed these newcomer groups to learn from each other, and to see the potential in such activities.

Finally, another theme that seemed to present itself was the theme of traditional expressive culture as used in a therapeutic or health care setting. Although we did not have any representatives from health-care organizations or public health agencies present, we did have a folklorist present (Valerie Walawender) who has begun to gather together a loose network in western New York of artists and medical professionals who are formulating preliminary proposals for projects related to the role of traditional arts in a therapeutic setting. Also in attendance at the workshop was a Congolese dancer who has been in the United States for only five years, but has already organized a Congolese dance troupe to help raise money for awareness of the genocide in the Congo, as well as awareness of the trauma that such genocide can cause for survivors. Trauma is an experience that is common among almost all refugee populations, and so this became a very useful topic of conversation at the workshop, even though there were no formal presentations on this issue.

THE WORKSHOP

The Building Blocks: National, Regional, and Local Models and Resources

We began the day with morning panels that offered attendees national, regional and local models of collaborations between arts and social service organizations. Our workshop facilitators, Amy Skillman and Laura Marcus Green, presented examples from their work with refugee and immigrant artists. To learn more about the models they presented, see the following publications:

Laura Marcus Green: “The Best of Everything”: A Collaborative Approach to Refugee and Immigrant Traditional Arts. *Voices, Journal of the New York Folklore Society* 32 (3-4): 3-10. 2006. (<http://www.nyfolklore.org/pubs/voic32-3-4/refugee.html>)

Amy Skillman: “Domestic Voices: Using Oral History and Ethnography for Social Activism,” in *The Art of Community; Creativity at the Crossroads of Immigrant Cultures and Social Services*, a publication of the Institute for Cultural Partnerships and Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees. 2006 (<http://tinyurl.com/bfpkjb2>)

Amy and Laura also discussed the workshop publications offered as a part of the registration: *Newcomer Arts: A Strategy for Successful Integration*, *The Art of Community: Creativity at the Crossroads of Immigrant Cultures and Social Services*, and the online *Newcomer Arts and Culture Directory* (<http://tinyurl.com/7vvoluh>). These publications, part of Amy and Laura's Building Cultural Bridges project, present examples of collaborative projects between arts and social service sectors, in support of refugee and immigrant arts and culture.

We then had a morning panel highlighting regional models of collaborations. Jennifer Cieslewitz, a staff member at MVRRCR, spoke alongside Eh Lah Shee and Lanetta Sae, two of the Karen weavers involved in a newly created Karen weaving circle project begun with a microenterprise loan. The Karen weavers talked about the obstacles that keep people in their community from weaving: a lack of time and English-language ability. The weavers need to obtain more tools, which would encourage more people to participate in the project. Jennifer said that they would like to open the program to other cultural communities, as it presents an opportunity to share cultures. With this project, the profits go back to the weavers. They may start keeping a portion of the profits, to go back to the project for weaving tools, materials, and entry fees for various markets. The group indicated that they had just started to get involved in local farmers' markets, but were exploring ways to become more involved in arts events and festivals. They also indicated that being involved in the project was an excellent way for the Karen weavers to practice English skills, (and indeed, Eh Lah Shee gave a wonderful presentation in English to our group!).

Next was a presentation by Lynne Williamson, Doina Lechanu and Fatima Vejzovic from the Connecticut Cultural Heritage Arts Program at the Institute for Cultural Research. They talked about their cross-cultural sewing circle project that was inspired by a traveling exhibit hosted at the Institute for Cultural Research, *Weavings of War*, which demonstrated how, out of sadness, people created beautiful things. After hosting *Weavings of War*, Lynne decided to look in her own community to see if there were people making such things. She found many. She started a sewing circle in Hartford. Six years later, the circle is still going. The circle participants wanted to create a market for their work, but still preserve the cultures and let people know their new neighbors. The project is a way for people to learn about the new cultural communities coming into the area.

Over the years, the artists have made some money and improved their English skills. The money is helpful, of course, but the most important thing is to preserve their cultures. Doina pointed out that people who come from wartime situations have memories and images in their minds they can never forget. But while weaving, they can learn English, and meet people who are interested in their work and their cultures. Doina mentioned that the sewing circle project is important to participants because it "can give them back who they are, especially their dignity".

In addition to selling their work at markets and arts events, the group has begun marketing on the web. The pricing is tricky, as the artists can't really be reimbursed for the time they spend working, because their artwork would cost too much. But they make enough money to help cover their bills, etc. They have developed marketing materials including a logo that is based on

a crocheted doily with a globe emblem on it. The logo appears on their product tags and stickers, which are placed on their shopping bags. Also, the group has prepared narratives about their products and bios of each of the women to give to customers.

The first panel also included a talk by April Oswald from the Munson-Williams-Proctor Art Institute, who discussed the challenges of addressing the community's diversity at an institution whose collection is based on 19th century-to-present fine arts and decorative arts. The collection consists primarily of American and European art. She posed the questions, how do we work with our community, which is so diverse and wonderful? How do we make what we have meaningful to our community?

One answer is the Unspoken Conference. This annual human rights conference is put on by the Mohawk Valley Center for Refugee Resources. The Munson-Williams-Proctor Art Institute (MWPPI) hosted this event in their auditorium.

An exhibit called *Leap of Faith*, which featured photography from Myanmar, was a way to celebrate and present one of the cultural communities in the area, the Burmese.

In collaboration with Peter Vogelaar, former director of MVRRCR, the MWPPI put on a program called *Art on Stage*, in which two middle schools worked together in an after-school program. This project presented a challenge, since the schools have a competitive relationship and don't normally work together. Their cultural diversity also made the collaboration challenging. Project personnel asked themselves, in the same way that sports can bring people together, can we do this with the arts? They ran an after-school program on Friday afternoons for three years. The students became familiar with the artworks, participating in various activities in which they interpreted the pieces through their own cultural and generational lens. For example, project personnel instructed the youth, remember what you are seeing; draw or write what was going on in the artwork. Students looking at a painting of the Great Depression, not knowing about the history of that piece, saw a gang. The artists had conveyed feelings and thoughts about what they saw. It was great to hear the students' impressions from their own perspectives. The students drew and wrote about the artworks and developed theater pieces based on them, which they then performed. Through the collaborative project, the students from different schools got to know one another. Community building was an important outcome of this initiative.

MWPPI also did a show called *Wedded Perfection* which featured wedding dresses—this was an exhibit on loan that had mostly traditional Western white wedding gowns. The museum invited community members to display their own cultural wedding gowns. They called that ancillary exhibit, *Global Traditions*. It featured wedding garb from Japan, China, Somalia, Afghanistan, Korea, India, and other countries. This project was a great way to make a connection with community members, and a way to make a connection to the existing collection. The museum also provides free tours of the blockbuster exhibits to ESL classes. Other opportunities to showcase local artists include the Sidewalk Arts Show, an arts festival that features arts and performances.

Next was a panel on local resources that highlighted support that was available locally for such projects. Lisa Overholser, from the New York Folklore Society, spoke about their Mentoring and Professional Development Program for traditional artists, community-based organizations and others interested in presenting, documenting or archiving folklife. Elizabeth Lane, from Central New York Arts, a regional arts organization, also spoke about community re-grant programs that were available to traditional artists. Both Lisa and Elizabeth provided samples of the application forms. The NYFS Mentoring and Professional Development Program information and application form is available at <http://www.nyfolklore.org/progs/mentor.html>, and information about the Central New York Arts Community Arts Grants is available at <http://cnyarts.org/grants/community-arts-grants/>).

These morning models and resources panels were designed as “building blocks” and/or inspiration for people to develop new project ideas and/or enhance or augment existing projects. Please see Appendix II to this report, Art of Community in Utica Agenda, for more details about the day’s activities.

To further encourage idea generation and creative planning, we asked people at the end of these morning panels to write down ideas that excited them. Please see Appendix III, “Ideas that people were excited to share” for a record of participants’ ideas. We then adjourned to lunch for informal networking, and were served a wonderful buffet at Lotus Garden restaurant, a local eatery begun several years back by a Cambodian refugee.

The Art of Our Community: Artists’ Presentations

Practically speaking, this workshop was a bit different from previous Art of Community workshops in that a far greater number of refugee artists was present. This ratio changed the dynamic of the workshop in a couple of different ways. Firstly, artists for the most part did not fully know what to expect, and upon reflection, there were a couple of different reasons for this. Partly this was due to language barriers, which is always potentially a challenge when working with refugee artists. In the morning workshop sessions, communication was facilitated with paid interpreters, but this was not always possible in informal discussions prior to that. With the presence of interpreters at the workshop, we also did not anticipate that the sound level in the room would necessarily make it difficult to hear everything that was being said. There was also some concern that not all of the information was being transmitted fully to the artists, as there were some highly conceptual ideas presented and perhaps some arts-specific vocabulary not used in common parlance.

Nonetheless, the presence of so many artists made for a highly energetic workshop. In the afternoon, we allotted time for artists’ demonstrations, for which we moved into a second room. The artists spoke, sometimes through interpreters, about their art, demonstrating techniques if they chose to do so, and showing some of their artwork.

During the artists' session, Ah Mu, a Karen weaver from Utica, talked about her weaving and shared a traditional story of a snake that is "told" in the design in a woven wall hanging on display during this session.

The Somali Bantu weavers showed their work. Zaiub Hweis brought a traditional mat that she had woven in Somalia. People use these mats for weddings and other occasions. Now living in Utica, Zaiub needs to find the grasses to make the mats. Weavers use natural dyes for the colors in the mats. If they can find these materials locally, they can also make baskets. Bosnian weaver, Fatima Vejzovic, a member of the Connecticut Cultural Heritage Program Sewing Circle, demonstrated on her upright loom. She explained that she has taught others to weave and that even if she doesn't always speak the same language as her students, she can still teach them. During the artists' session, for example, she was showing Eh Lah Shee, one of the Karen weavers, how to use her loom. Fatima brought a beautiful display of her woven pieces.

Solange Mirika, a young Congolese dancer from Albany, talked about her dance troupe. She works with refugee children from the Congo and Rwanda, among other countries, teaching them traditional dances. Solange said that learning the dances helps the youth to forget the things they saw in their countries, like massacres. When they earn money with their dancing, they donate proceeds to local youth programs that address poverty and homelessness. Participants in her program know how it feels to be a refugee, and so they are trying to help children and young people in this country who are having difficult experiences.

Solange also has a program called Smile Again. When Solange was at Syracuse University, she had friends who were fashion design majors and they did a free fashion show in Albany, which was very successful. With the funds they raised, they decided that the local Burundi community needed money, so they donated it to them.

Solange talked about the violence in the Congo that is commemorated in August during a memorial. To raise awareness of the situation in the Congo, she and others are working on a documentary film about the memorial. She needs help finding funds for this project. Solange said that there are many massacre survivors in the U.S. and that entertainment activities help them forget their bad memories.

Mohammed Abdulkareem, an Iraqi artist from Albany, sings and once performed as an actor on television. He sings songs in Arabic, and he had a musical group in Iraq. He would like to find ways to return to the things he was doing before he lived in the U.S. He would like to find funding to go back to school and get his career back on track.

Abya Hoo, a talented young Karen painter from Utica, also spoke. He said that he wants to be with friends.

At the end of the artists' session, Erica Piazza from the MVRRCR talked about a program called Creative Inclusion, a music and art camp where volunteers teach guitar, art, drums,

photography. She said that there is more information about this on the MVRCR's Facebook page.

The artists' session was probably the most exciting part of the day. There was a real, genuine interest among the artists to see each other's work. At one point, a young Karen weaver, Eh Lah Shee, spontaneously came over to the Bosnian weaver's (Fatima's) loom, and although they could not communicate with each other verbally, Eh Lah stood behind Fatima and watched intently as she wove. Several minutes later, Fatima walked over to where the Karen back-strap loom was set up and watched Ah Mu, another Karen weaver, demonstrate. For many of the artists, particularly the contingent of ten Somali Bantu women, the Karen painter and the Iraqi singer, this was the first time they had ever really spoken about their art or had anybody interested in learning about what they do. It was an empowering moment for many of them.

Putting Our Heads Together: Afternoon Breakout Working Groups

The last session of the day was devoted to breaking out into small groups and brainstorming plans for potential projects. Because we had so many people from so many different places across the state and region, most of the small groups were very geographically diverse, and so any plans for collaboration were mostly in the hypothetical realm for the time being. The motivation behind the geographic composition of the groups was to diversify resources and expertise, and to allow individuals from the same locale to bring more information back to their respective home communities. Yet, because they were sharing an interpreter, and were already working on a fiber arts program, the Somali Bantu group worked together with Jennifer Cieslewitz of MVRCR, who is currently coordinating the Karen weaving initiative. These working sessions were the most energetic part of a very full day. Out of these smaller conversations came four ideas for potential projects that were reported back to the larger group:

1) Artists' Exchange, possibly leading to a multicultural arts exhibition:

Artists from different traditions (Bosnian weavers, Karen weavers, dancers etc.) could come together to meet every other week. The best way to let people know about the exchange would be to create posters that can be posted on the wall at the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees in Utica and other strategic locations. The group suggested using the talents of Abya Hoo, the Karen painter, to create the posters. The next steps would be to contact all the ESL instructors so that they can let their students know about the exchange; create a planning committee to organize and keep track of the project and decide when and where the meetings will happen; and then find a space, bearing in mind the use/activities when deciding on a space. The exchange would include sharing stories, especially to help others understand how important the artwork is to the artists and their communities. For example, the story of the snake represented in the Karen weaving by Ah Mu added more meaning to that piece. So the first few meetings could be just for people to share their art forms and to tell the stories behind them.

From there, the exchange can move to bigger meetings every two months for demonstrations and art making. After several months, there will be enough material to begin planning an exhibition.

2) Cultural Community Coffeehouse and Festival of International Arts:

This group started with a huge idea of doing a Festival of International Arts. In the end, they took the idea of a Ceilidh and drew upon that model to create an International Coffeehouse. The idea is to start with an existing coffeehouse and feature refugee arts one Friday evening a month for an international activity to which all are welcome. The coffeehouse would consist of music, storytelling, and poetry of both newcomers and Americans—anyone who is interested. The venue could put local art on the walls, to help artists sell their work. Make it a potluck to feature food from all different countries. Have it be an open-mic style event so that anyone who comes could perform, but have one featured artist each night.

Next steps include: 1) finding a location; 2) reaching out to community groups who might be interested (libraries, ESL programs, churches etc.); and 3) starting PR through websites, radio stations, etc.

There would be no fees to attend, but donations would be accepted. If any proceeds resulted from this, they would be dedicated to buying musical instruments for people, or whatever is needed.

3) Somali-Bantu Cross-Cultural Sewing Circle in Utica:

This group recycled the idea of a sewing circle—a Somali-Bantu cross-cultural sewing circle. This would be hosted by the Somali Bantu community, but open to all who want to come. It would be held at the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees. The host group wants to be inclusive to all cultures. They want to use the existing Karen weaving program to connect with pricing and marketing strategies. They will use word of mouth to advertise the circle, and will create a poster with signage in other languages. They need to acquire materials at the beginning to jump start the project. The sewing circle could help people find the materials they need to do their art forms, such as sewing machines, beads, etc. Members of the sewing circle could produce an inventory of items to sell.

Additional notes for this project included:

- ✘ A sewing circle (weaving, knitting, crocheting, embroidery) a couple afternoons a week.
- ✘ People from all groups within the Utica community are welcome to attend to work on sewing projects.
- ✘ Incorporate youth by bringing children who are 10-18 years old to learn different sewing techniques.
- ✘ Coffee & snacks

4) Creative Action Research Project, involving the development of traveling educational kits:

This group actually had a mission statement: *Develop accessible resources for newcomer communities to have the ability to freely express their culture and heritage as a vehicle to assist in integration & increase compassion and understanding.*

The idea is to create a traveling educational kit through which people can learn about genocide, post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), among other refugee experiences, and/through the arts of refugee cultures. The kit could be used across the state and forwarded by the new committee (formed to create this project.) The project committee needs to develop new ideas for fundraising events—a singer could do a concert to raise some funds, for example. A concert could be a way to raise funds to get this project started. Have some kind of marketing event, and draw on people well-trained in marketing to handle this. This project team could meet every other month.

At the center of each of these project ideas was the idea of cross-cultural sharing and communication. Participants documented their sessions on worksheets, noting sequential action steps, needed resources, key players, and a timeline for the work. Participants will receive copies of these worksheets, along with a contact list, to facilitate communication and further work on these projects.

OUTCOMES IDENTIFIED & OBSERVATIONS:

1. Relationship-building is key. Our workshop came about as a result of prior gatherings and discussions, and in terms of network-building, this was essential. The Karen weaver (Ah Mu) who was present at the 2011 Embroiderers' Gathering speaks very little English, and had not had any prior contact with the New York Folklore Society staff before that first gathering. At this workshop, only the second time the NYFS staff had met her, and almost a year-and-a-half after our first meeting, it was a pleasant surprise when she saw our staff and consulting folklorist Amy Skillman, smiled, and simply said "Ithaca" (the site of the gathering). This moment of recognition after such a long period of no contact was reassuring, and allowed a sense of trust and ease to develop in our working relationship. It demonstrated that repeated contact is highly important in establishing these kinds of long-lasting relationships.

For some refugee artists who are more isolated from their own cultural communities, the workshop served as a way to forge new relationships with like-minded individuals. An Iraqi singer who attended our workshop had come to the U.S. only ten months ago, completely alone, without any friends or family to support him or to provide a sense of close-knit community. He felt isolated in his new home, and as an artist, had a hard time finding a niche for himself in the Albany Iraqi refugee community, as there were no instrumentalists who could accompany his singing. He indicated that this was the main reason he came to our workshop. Although he was still the only musician at the workshop, by the end of the day, we all observed that he was more interactive with workshop participants, and seemed to "blossom".

2. The most sustainable excitement and potential is generated from within communities.

Related to the idea of relationship-building, the artist participation would not have been so extensive if word had not spread from one key “gatekeeper” within the community to other members. This was especially true in the case of the Somali Bantu participants. Contact was initially made with Muhamed, a young English-speaking Somali refugee who works at the refugee center. He then contacted a community elder, who brought several artists. Though this was a cumbersome process to work through logistically, it was the appropriate way to proceed, and resulted in full community support and participation in the workshop.

Once the Somali-Bantu artists were at the workshop—all of them female and with little to no English speaking skills—it was clear that as the day progressed, they were participating more and more. When we passed around the contact list at the end of the day, some of the women were calling home to get their email addresses correct because they wanted to be listed on this contact list individually, not just through the “gatekeepers”. Also, although they had initially planned on leaving early, the women called other family members to arrange for spontaneous babysitting, so that they could stay through the end of the workshop.

3. There is a great interest in cross-cultural sharing among newcomer communities. When we learned that every single one of the project ideas generated in the small group discussions centered around the idea of cross-cultural sharing and exchange, it was apparent that traditional artists in refugee communities want to learn from each other. There was a great sense of camaraderie generated among the artists, and as one participant noted, “we could have had the artists’ demonstrations going on all afternoon and people still would have been talking to each other!”.

We got the sense that there was a new “community” being born right before our very eyes, and there was a great deal of respect and admiration for the artwork and artisans from other cultures. Not only is it a wonderful model to follow, but in the end, there is also “strength in numbers”. Having a group of artists that are so willing to learn from each other and who are so appreciative of other cultures translates into more flexible and dynamic opportunities in projects, collaborations and presentations. It can also allow artists to find points of connection, discover what is really unique about what they do; it can serve as a powerful mental, social and economic resource, and it empowers artists as they begin to negotiate the complex arts network.

4. Reaching across disciplinary boundaries can be a useful way to frame traditional arts. One of the goals of our workshop, of course, was to discover ways that different types of organizations could work together. Although we didn’t necessarily have as many sectors of service organizations present at the workshop, we did get the chance to deeply explore arts in some specific settings (i.e., the museum setting). We also had the opportunity to explore arts in a therapeutic or healing context, and I think for many of the artists present, this was not how they were used to thinking about what they do.

Likewise, just having artists consider what they do as “traditional” was a useful exercise as well. In the artists’ demonstration hour, Ah Mu gave a wonderful talk about one of her textile wall hangings, where she relayed (through an interpreter) a story about a man and a snake. She then pointed out how this snake was incorporated into the textile design. Having that context imbued the textile with much more meaning, of course, for anybody who was looking at it. But for the artists, that moment might well have served as a new way of looking at what they do. Many of them may never before have considered storytelling as a part of what they do, or how it could be useful in the art that they create and how that art could be understood by others. In follow-up de-briefings about the workshop, we re-affirmed the importance of cross-disciplinary projects and the benefits they provide. Many examples, of course, were discussed in the day’s workshop. But there are other models as well.

The Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA) has some excellent material on their website about studies and projects they are engaged in, including the publication *Weaving Traditional Arts into the Fabric of Community Health* (<http://www.actaonline.org/sites/default/files/images/docs/briefing.pdf>). We were interested in this material as connections between traditional arts to public/community health and therapeutic settings was a topic of interest to many in our workshop. The “African in Maine Case Study: Center for Cultural Exchange”, written by James Bau Graves, Margaret Juan Lado and Patricia Romney and published by Americans for the Arts in their *Animating Democracy* series (available at <http://tinyurl.com/bmuusou>) is an excellent case study of how arts programming could be used in community engagement.

Bill Westerman’s recent article “Museums, Immigrants, and the Inversion of Xenophobia; or, the Inclusive Museum in the Exclusive Society.” (published in *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, Volume 1, Issue 4, pp. 157-162) also resonated with us as the exploration of traditional arts in a museum setting represented a fair amount of our workshop conversation. Finally, Lynne Williamson’s article, “Weaving a New Life: A Somali Family’s Resettlement in Urban America”, a chapter in *Early Childhoods in a Changing World* (ed. Margaret M. Clark and Stanley Tucker, Trentham Books Limited: Stoke-on-Trent, England, 2010) was also highly relevant to the discussions arising in our workshop.

5. Pre-existing infrastructures can easily be built upon. Some institutions that are like-minded in terms of helping newcomer artists may already have some structures in place to help. Such was the case with the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees. As mentioned before, they have a great facility at their disposal, as well as good relationships that they have already fostered with other organizations and individuals. The Utica Public Library, we discovered, also has great facilities, and more importantly, a public gallery that is ideal for small, community-based exhibitions. And of course, the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute is ideally suited for exhibitions and has some wonderful space available for performing arts as well. With its Community Arts School, it is pre-designed to foster community engagement. And of course, the New York Folklore Society is already designed to be a statewide support system and resource for newcomer artists. Their Mentoring and Professional Development Program offers technical assistance training both to individual traditional artists as well the organizations that support or

work with them, and they have a statewide network of trained folklorists that can help in almost any region of the state. They are also institutionally situated as part of a larger national network of organizations dedicated to folklore research and scholarship. Key to developing projects and collaborations is making use of pre-existing structures such as these.

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Maintain the network generated at the workshop. Consider creating a listserv. It will be very important to keep the dialogue and communication going. At this point, it may not even be necessary to consider any “big” projects. Most “big” projects require a pretty well-developed plan, and plans come from discussion and the generation of ideas. So more important at this stage will be simply to keep people talking to each other, and to keep the learning and discovery alive. With such great geographic distances, physical meetings are probably not feasible, though surely something could be done in Utica to facilitate a follow-up meeting or two just to bring everybody together again. In lieu of physical meetings, a listserv is a good possibility, though as some refugees do not have good access to computer services, it may not be ideal.

In evaluation comments, one participant had this suggestion: “Have this kind of workshop more often”. Another said: “It was very inspiring to meet so many like-minded individuals. I honestly thought I was one of the only people concerned about preserving artistic heritage for newcomers.” And finally, another person wrote: “This workshop really helped me brainstorm new ideas that will work in my organization and with the partners I am developing. It is always useful to hear about models”. Getting people together serves many purposes, from inspiration to discussion to exchange. This is important groundwork that needs to be laid. To read additional comments from workshop participants, see Appendix IV, “Tell us something you want us to know”.

2. Develop a statewide, regional or national initiative to share resources about materials. An issue that came up over and over again among the newcomer artists at the workshop was the idea that they simply did not have the materials they needed to create their traditional art. As the idea became reinforced through informal conversations, and as individual folklorists and other individuals at the workshop suggested some alternatives, it became apparent that perhaps a very practical and useful tool might be to develop a shared resource for locating such materials.

3. Foster and capitalize on the interest in cross-cultural communication among various refugee communities. There was an inherent and genuine interest in learning about other cultures at the workshop. This is sometimes not the perception to those who have not worked with newcomer artists, and it was definitely an energizing force for all of those present at the workshop. It is recommended that this sentiment be capitalized upon through continued dialogue, as recommended above, but also especially in fostering ways to make this happen, whether it be through occasional informal cross-cultural artistic gatherings, or in simply supporting initiatives developed within and between cultural communities.

APPENDIX I: ATTENDANCE LIST**The Art of Community Workshop, Building Cultural Bridges****Hosted by the New York Folklore Society, Utica, New York****May 17, 2013**

Abdelshakour Khamis: Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees - Sudanese interpreter

Abya Hoo: Karen painter

Ah Mu: Karen weaver

April Oswald: Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute

Batula Mukoma: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Bauko Mahamed: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Biniti Musa: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Carolyn Stallard: AmeriCorps VISTA - The College of St. Rose

Carrie Hertz: Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University

Claire Beetlestone: Storyteller from Cooperstown, NY

Diane Smith: Centro Civico of Amsterdam

Doina Lechanu: Connecticut Cultural Heritage Arts Program, Institute for Cultural Research

Eh La Shee: Karen weaver

Elizabeth Lane: Central New York Arts

Erica Piazza: Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees

Fatima Vejzovic: Bosnian weaver

Fatuma Adau: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Hawa Mbwera: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Hilda Wilcox: Retired ESL teacher at SUNY-Oneonta

Janelle Roginski: Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute

Jennifer Cieslewitz: Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees

Joan Hastings: Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees

Kathryn Stam: Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (Board member)

Lanetta Sae (Lay): Karen interpreter and Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees

Lul Mukoma: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Lynne Williamson: Connecticut Cultural Heritage Arts Program: Institute for Cultural Research

Maryan Kabirow: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Mohammed Abdulkareem: Iraq singer

Muhamed Hussein: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Muslim Osman: Somali-Bantu Community Association

Solange Miriki: Congolese dancer

Svetlana Derevegs: Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees

Thalita Bow: Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees

Valarie Walawender: Hospice of Chautauqua County and Boys and Girls Club

Zaiub Hweis: Somali-Bantu Community Association

APPENDIX II: AGENDA**The Art of Community***Building a Newcomer Arts and Culture Support Network*

Utica Public Library, Utica, New York

May 17, 2013

8:30 am – 5:00 pm

Presented by Building Cultural Bridges and New York Folklore Society

AGENDA

- 8:30 Coffee & Tea/Registration – Check-in
- 8:45 Welcome: Lisa Overholser and Ellen McHale
- Review the Agenda: Laura Marcus Green and Amy Skillman
- 9:00 Introductions
- 9:15 National Models of Collaboration across the Arts & Social Services
Amy Skillman & Laura Marcus Green
- 10:00 Review of Workshop Publications: *Newcomer Arts Manual* (Amy) and *The Art of Community* (Laura)
- 10:10 BREAK
- 10:30 Panel I: Local Arts & Cultural Resources
- Social service:* Karen Weavers, Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, Karen weaving project
- Arts non-profit:* Lynne Williamson and Doina Lechanu, Sewing Circle Project, Connecticut Cultural Heritage Arts Program
- Museum:* April Oswald, Education Director, Munson-Williams Proctor Arts Institute
- 11:30 Panel II: State and Regional Community-based Resources
- NY Folklore Society:* Lisa Overholser
- CNY Arts DEC:* Liz Lane
- 12:00 Discussion
- 12:15 LUNCH
- 1:30 The Art of Our Community: Presentations/performances by newcomer artists
- 2:30 Putting Our Heads Together: Imagining the Project: Breakout Session A
- 3:00 BREAK

- 3:15 Putting Our Heads Together: Developing a Plan: Breakout Session B
- 4:20 Closing Session: Where Do We Go From Here?
- 5:00 Adjourn

APPENDIX III: INSPIRATION - Ideas that people were excited to share

The Art of Community Workshop, Building Cultural Bridges

Hosted by the New York Folklore Society, Utica, New York

May 17, 2013

Exhibit on the history of children of the world.

The idea of how to help refugees to overcome traumatic feeling in leaving their normal life – educating about trauma.

Regional resource (NY, CT, VT, PA) for locating materials for newcomer artists, and developing showcases and sales opportunities

This project has helped out Karen weavers, but now we have not enough tools so we have to gather together to research places and do a bake sale at places like Clinton Farmer's Market

An event featuring music, singing, dancing, storytelling, poetry, visual arts, etc. of different cultures (both newcomers and American performers). Carolyn has successfully done this even twice - vista@strose.edu for information

Ceilidh! – an international coffee house, monthly refugee based.

Story Circle – 3rd World Women -- Muslim women

Sewing and weaving circle project in Buffalo? Connect with West Side Bazaar

Incorporate more folk arts performers that correlate with fine arts exhibitions as well.

To have a big concert

Form a big group including choir and play drums

Want to work as I used to do in my country, like singing, TV show, etc.

Reach out to those in need by traveling and put what we have and to as a group

Work together to help new refugees and others and develop new ideas to help to overcome traumas.

Needed: A magazine of general interest – photos, stories, articles re services and community projects, poems, which publicizes arts and community events on newsprint (for economy's sake). Advantages: to acquaint many people of many interests to what artists and craft people are doing. Purpose: to find markets for arts among real customers, not just fellow artists (who don't have money to buy them). Limited or no advertising.

APPENDIX IV: REFLECTION AND EVALUATION - Tell us something that you want us to know:

The Art of Community Workshop, Building Cultural Bridges

Hosted by the New York Folklore Society, Utica, New York

May 17, 2013

(From Fatima) – everything good today, made new friends, thank you! We hope NY artists will come to Hartford.

I will include newcomer arts in future programming – and especially my thinking. I am now much more aware of newcomer populations and some of the challenges they face.

It was very inspiring to meet so many like-minded individuals. I honestly thought I was one of the only people concerned about preserving artistic heritage for newcomers. I'm very much looking forward to pursuing my idea in the future.

I need to get more involved with immigrant/refugee populations nearby from parts of the world I am unfamiliar with.

This workshop really helped me brainstorm new ideas that will work in my organization and with the partners I am developing. It is always useful to hear about models.

Involving larger community with performance, finding immigrant artists in my area

Have this kind of workshop more often. It will be better not to include too many topics, it has been overwhelming. Great organization.

I want to be more involved with refugee/immigrant artistic and cultural endeavors moving forward.

Starting more sewing circles (follow the template already initiated)

Mentor programs for artists

Youth traditional arts classes.

I will jumpstart new collaborative networks in NY/New England, building on existing projects

Useful links to resource people in central NY we will be buying two Karen looms.

Good way to promote Karen community (selling clothes).

Great ideas and ways of implementing ideas.

Great workshop – biggest help was connections with other community members that are like-minded.

Exciting to get a change to work with different cultures, especially working with women.

I'm retired, but as program chairman of a library group in Cooperstown, I will try to incorporate a program about how work in the arts has helped refugees overcome their psychological problems, if I can find someone willing to come to speak in Cooperstown on an evening this.

To be successful to change the community.

Somali-Bantu cross cultural idea to work with different communities.

It has helped make good connections.

This workshop will help people to become more educated in terms of being more open-minded and people would be able to build their skills from ideas that they retain in this workshop. It we could support each other in many cases would be beneficial.

I was aware that discussion divided into newcomer and non-newcomer groups. I'm not sure each understood each other.

Got more information for the future.

Know more people to work with for future projects.

I think this workshop will impact me by informing my community about art projects.