

# African Diaspora



*Arabbers or street vendors from Baltimore have been an important part of the Festival for several years as much for their fresh fruit and gayly decorated carts, as for their significance as living folklore.*

Photo © Roland Freeman

The term "African Diaspora" refers to dispersion through the slave trade of African peoples and cultures. In its second year, the Festival's "African Diaspora" program continues to emphasize the strengths of one of America's most vital ethnic groups, the Black Americans. The organizing principle is to document those aspects of culture that link Black Americans to Africa, the mother continent, via the Caribbean Islands and Latin America.

Artists and craftspeople were invited to this Festival from the African nation of Ghana, the Caribbean nations of Jamaica and Haiti, and from cities across the United States.

Presentations represent basic societal activities—worship, family, and trade. Worship activities by all participants take place on an altar setting that is a prototype of a rural U.S. church. Trade activities take place in a typical Caribbean market place. An African house, the traditional center of family activities, becomes the setting for small group presentations which allow for intimate interchange between participants and visitors.

Workshops will establish the family of cultural experiences linked by common origins. For example, a music workshop on the Black American blues form will present the urban blues of "Hounddog" Taylor, the country blues of Bukka White, and the comparable African music of Salisu Mahama from northern Ghana. The vocal and instrumental continuum heard in these forms will be strengthened by the music of a group of Black Cajuns from southwestern Louisiana. Mahama's instrument, the gonje, is of the violin or fiddle family; Fontenot of the Cajuns plays the fiddle; the guitar sounds of Bukka White and "Hounddog" Taylor represent a change in string instrument, but not in use or quality of musical sound.

Craft presentations will demonstrate a direct link between traditions in the U.S., the Caribbean and Africa. Hair preparations have carried over without change from Africa. Cornrowing or hair-braiding and hair threading, part of a rich revival presence sweeping Black American communities, will be demonstrated by a Black American and a Ghanaian hair dresser. Basketweavers from Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, working with sea grass and split palmetto in woven coils, will sit beside craftspeople from Ghana and Jamaica as they use comparable materials and techniques to produce similar baskets.

In the garden behind the African house, foodstuffs common to the Black community such as okra, turnips, and root vegetables will be growing. In the food demonstration area many of these foodstuffs will be used in versions of recipes prepared by cooks from Chicago, Ill., Accra, Ghana, and Kingston, Jamaica.

Cultural presentations, children's games, cooking, and sacred ceremonies, will express the commonality of experiences of Black people. The languages heard throughout the area—English, French, Spanish, and the African languages of Twi, Ga, and Dagboni—reflect aspects of the historical dispersion of Black people.

To supplement the live presentations movies, filmstrips, photographic exhibits, lectures, books and records will be used.

The performing artists and craftspeople of the African Diaspora express the unity within diversity that characterizes African culture wherever it exists. Musicians, dancers, cooks, woodcarvers, hairdressers, basketweavers and fishnet makers from three continents represent urban and rural, secular and sacred, home and community activities of Black people.