

Passing Culture on to the Next Generation:

African Immigrant
Language & Culture Schools
in Washington, D.C.

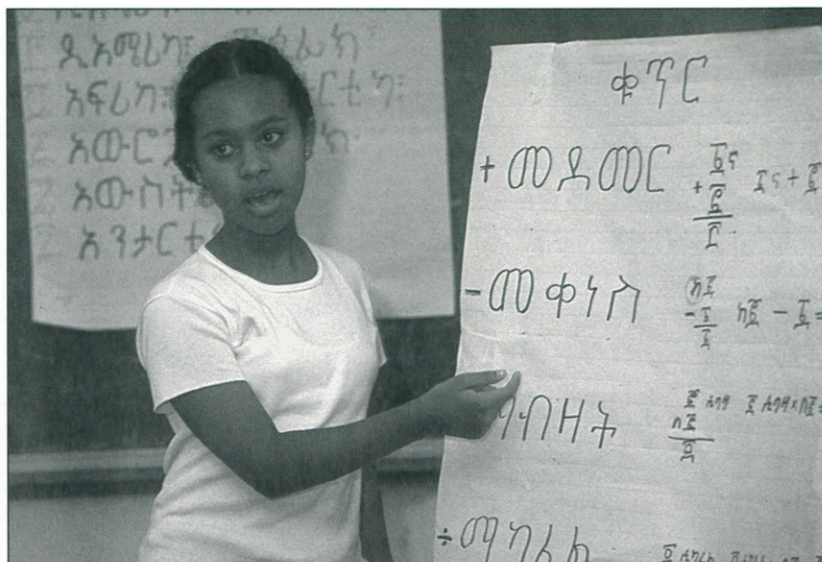
Remi Aluko & Diana Sherblom

Language and culture are inextricably intertwined. Culture is the totality of ways of living built up by a group of people in response to how they see their environment. And these ways are passed from generation to generation by various means, including language: prose and poetry, written and spoken, in forms like proverbs, riddles, folk tales, jokes, fables, songs, drama, drumming, chants, raps, and other musical media.

People from many parts of Africa have been voluntarily coming to America for quite some time for leisure, business, and education. Through many of those years, cultural identity was not an issue, because the African communities were transient. Many people did not even come with their families. Many Africans did not want to live far away from home for long. This mind-set is reflected in a Yoruba proverb that says, “*Ajo ko le dundun, ki onile ma re’le*,” “No matter how pleasant and enjoyable your sojourn abroad has been, you must return home.” And, indeed, most people did.

But in the last couple of decades, more and more Africans have been migrating permanently to the United States. In response to grave economic and political conditions in many African countries, they have been making their homes and raising their families in America. The feeling these days is expressed in this Yoruba saying that contrasts sharply to the earlier one: “*Ibi ti aiye ba ba’ni, ni a ti nje*,” “Home is wherever you find life in abundance.”

Immigrants settling in America have had to deal with a sense of cultural dislocation and shock as a result of being immersed in a varied and very different cultural milieu. In response, immigrant communities of Nigerians, Ghana-



ians, Ethiopians, and others express a common sentiment for passing on their culture to their children, for the sake of individual and group identity and for posterity.

One way they have begun to carry out this mandate is by forming cultural associations and, more recently, language and culture schools. For many African adults, of course, this is a much more formalized way of passing on the culture than they experienced themselves. In Africa, cultural training occurs daily in many aspects of life and through oral traditions. Members of African social associations exert communal efforts to form language and culture schools in response to their shocked realization that their children — those born here and those brought from Africa — will grow to be part of the melting pot of dominant American culture. Associations like the Isokan Yoruba Language Institute teach the Yoruba language to interested children and adults. The Ethiopian community organization offers a language and culture camp to children in response to parents’ requests; Hermela Kebede, an officer of that organization, says parents ask for classes in Amharic so their children will be able to communicate when visiting relatives in Ethiopia. “Even here, we feel they need to know their own culture; they need to show part of who they are,” she explains. Other language and culture schools were born from an individual’s vision. For example, Remi Aluko (co-author of this article) founded and directs Camp-Africa, a summer day camp for children that provides cultural enrichment through formal and informal instruction in languages, history and geography,

A student at the Ethiopian summer school explains geometric formulae in Amharic. Photo by Harold Dorwin

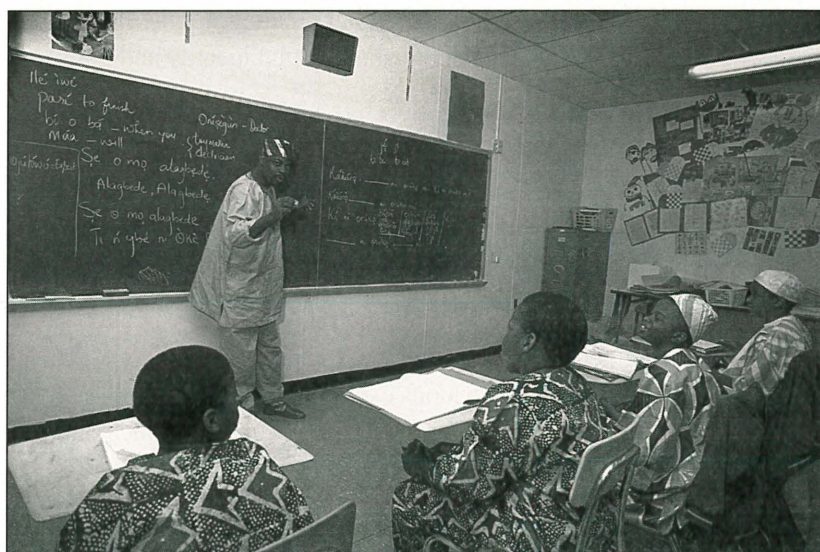
African Immigrant Folklife



(above) American-born children in Washington, D.C., learn dance and drumming at a school directed by Assane Konte, a Senegalese dancer and educator.

Photo by Harold Dorwin

(right) Instructors at a Saturday school sponsored by the organization Isokan Yoruba use teaching strategies they acquired as educators in Nigeria to teach the Yoruba language. Photo by Harold Dorwin



belief provides the hope and the expectation of returning home. If and when they do return, they want their children or foreign spouse to be able to fit into their extended families. Hence, they have the desire to teach them about their culture, especially those aspects that have to do with the etiquette of respect for elders, eating in public, greetings, and dress. Dr. Akinyele of the Isokan Yoruba organization explains, "We believe that

music, games, cooking, storytelling, drama, crafts, and etiquette.

Parent-teacher groups run after-school cultural enrichment programs in public schools, while the Nigerian Youth Organization and the Ghanaian Volta Ensemble Dancers meet in family homes to teach dances and cooking to build relationships among children and adults. Obvious in all these efforts is that Africans are striving to provide their younger generation with cultural roots that will hold them firmly, help them grow, and give them a sense of identity, which many believe has helped them cope with the difficult transition to life in America.

Africans believe in strong family and cultural ties. This

by teaching our children our culture we will one day go back to our fatherland triumphantly." With this kind of goal in mind, many culture schools are challenged to present language in an experiential context — to teach language and culture for use rather than as an academic study.

In language and culture schools, a community's adults brainstorm about which curriculum works and which does not; they strive to recruit teachers and students and find other participants — not always an easy task. One might assume most African children are in culture schools. On the contrary, for many African parents, such a concept is new, and commitment to such schools is not a priority;

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many think they can teach their own children better at home. But many are waking up to the reality that kids learn American TV culture fast when parents are away at work and kids are home alone. The economics of survival prevents many parents from passing on any significant amount of culture. Hence, the future of language schools looks promising.

Some proprietors of language schools have an ultimate goal of providing a cultural immersion program during summer vacations, in which American-born children would go to their home country in Africa to gain authentic experience as they interact daily with custodians of their culture.

The success of many existing cultural schools cannot be measured yet, because they are still very young. Many of them have “teething” problems, with finances sometimes insufficient to hire qualified and interested teachers for the children. However, some experience success, even if not by standard measures. Camp-Africa reports that positive, significant, and lasting marks have been left with many of the children who have passed through the camp. Parents and children interviewed reported that children feel good about themselves and about their African heritage, while many still sing the traditional songs they learned in camp. The future of language and culture schools looks bright in the light of the present situation of the African immigrant community in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

Remi Aluko is a mother of five, educator, writer, and one of the community scholars of the African Immigrant Folklife Project. She founded Camp-Africa, an educational summer program which exposes young people to the traditions and history of her Nigerian homeland and other African countries and communities.

Diana Sherblom is an educator trained in anthropology who has interned with the African Immigrant Folklife Project since last year. She interviewed the directors of several language and culture schools for this article.

Make Someone Heavy!

Makele Faber

In Senegal you greet people heavily, that is, *tedinne*, which literally means “make heavy.” When Senegalese people greet you heavily, you know they think you are important. And the more time they spend greeting you, the more consideration they show for you, the “heavier” you become.

Throughout Africa, greetings begin every interaction and create the basis for all social relationships. Greetings become even more important in African immigrant communities, who maintain traditions of greeting among themselves and pass them on to their American-born children, not only to create the social ties that bind them but also to remind them of the many social customs of home.

Here is a short list of greetings. Join the tradition and use them to say hello to participants in the African Immigrant Program!

Arabic - *Ahlan wa sahlán* — Hello.

Amharic - *Enkwandehna metah chu* —
Hello and welcome.

Oromo - *Ashamaa* — Hello.

Susu - *Ima ma* — Hi.
T’na moufe — How are you?
Did anything bad stay with
you overnight? — (a morning
greeting).

Akan - *Ete sen* — How is it?
Eye — Fine.

Luo - *Oimore* — Hello.

Sesotho - *Dumela* —
Hello (and response
to hello).
Uphela joang —
How are you?

Ijo - *To baroa* — Hello.
Nda’ni la’oku — How are you?

Igbo - *Daa lu or nde wo* — Hello.
Ke du — How is it?

Yoruba - *Ekaro* — Good morning.

Ekasan — Good day.

Ekalé — Good evening.

Wolof - *Nan’gu deff* — How are you?

Mangui fi rekk — I am fine.

Diola - *Kasumai* — How are you?

Kasumi kepp — (response).

Mandinka - *Hera bay* — Do you
have peace?
Hera dorong —
Peace only.

Somali - *Iska waran* — Hello.

Nabad — (response).

Zulu - *San bonani* — Hello.

Swahili - *Hujambo* —
Hello (to one person).
Sijambo — (response).
Hamjambo — Hello (to
more than one person).
Habari — What’s the news?

Makele Faber is a second-generation Guinean American. She worked at the Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies as an intern for seven months last year on the Working at the Smithsonian program and is currently conducting field research on area African immigrant students for this year’s African Immigrant Program. She works full time in the political department of NARAL (National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League).