



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (KK) Kate Kruckemeyer, ()

Accession Numbers:

KK-03-05-FN

Fieldnotes

- - -C

Audio recordings

KK-03-05-CS

Photographic documentation

- - -M

Additional materials

Initial Contact: 5/27/2003 Contact Date: 5/30/2003

Related Accession Numbers: KK-03-02, - - - -

Individual/Group/Event: Gabe Mokwuah

Address: [REDACTED]

City: Springfield Zip: [REDACTED] County: Hampden

Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED] Evening: [REDACTED]

E-mail: [REDACTED] Website: www.nigerianamericanculturalcouncil.org

Contact person: _____

Title: Acting Chairperson, Nigerian American Cultural Council

Location of Interview: Hampden Superior Court (his workplace) [2nd meeting at PAHMUSA Juneteenth, see KK-03-02]

Street Address: 50 State Street

City: Springfield Zip: _____ County: Hampden

Special Needs (including translation): _____

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): activities and plans of the Nigerian American Cultural Council; initial discussion of Mr. Mokwuah's participation in Nigerian dance traditions with follow-up documentation of simple performance of masquerade dance

Traditions noted for follow-up: further research on dance traditions as group expands

Other Possible Contacts: Nana Owusa, traditional costumer (see below)

Summary Description:

Gabe Mokwuah

Acting Chairperson, Nigerian American Cultural Council

[REDACTED]

Springfield, MA 01118

www.nigerianamericanculturalcouncil.org

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

John Osborne of the Mayor's Office suggested Mr. Mokwuah as a contact.

Gabe Mokwuah is one of the main leaders of an emerging organization called the Nigerian American Cultural Council. He described the group to me as primarily interested in educating the Pioneer Valley community about African culture, supporting the cultural needs of Africans in the community, and uniting all people through support of culture. They are starting with Nigerian culture since the organizers are mainly Nigerian, but they want to expand to include all African cultures. Gabe says that between Springfield and Amherst there are about 45 Nigerian families. While this critical mass of families creates a supportive context for cultural activity, the relatively small size makes it difficult to organize, Gabe says.

They currently have a website and Gabe hosts a radio show each week. The radio show is called "World Beat Radio" and comes on every Saturday evening from 6-9pm on WAIC (91.9 FM).

Two years ago they sponsored a Nigerian Independence Celebration in November. They will do this again this year if they have funds. The celebration did/would include food, dancing, music, probably talks on relevant topics. When they did this in 2001, they had a DJ, not live music—he is not aware of local musicians in Springfield other than one man mentioned below. He did mention some musicians in Northampton (I think he may be referring to Tony Vacca and his work with Gokh-Bi System).

A number of group members also performed this March at U. Mass.'s African Cultural Night. They performed a traditional Nigerian men's dance referred to as "Masquerade." Gabe was one of the performers. The dance is traditional to the Igbo people in Nigeria [if I understand correctly, the Igbo are a smaller ethnic group than the more numerous Ibo]. He described the dance as "very special to us."

From his description, the dance does not use masks, but rather a long costume. Three members of the group began the dance and then encouraged the audience to join in. This is a dance done only by men—there are comparable women's traditions. The group has no immediate plans to practice or perform the dance or others like it, Gabe says they would be happy to perform it for other people and events. They hope to get a group of dancers to perform this at the Springfield Carnival this year (he has already talked with Vera O'Connor of the Carnival Association), and also in November if they can organize another Nigerian Independence Celebration. [SEE BELOW—I was able to document a simple version of this dance at Juneteenth]

The Nigerian American Cultural Council has a number of other ideas it would like to implement if it can find the resources:

- An African museum/cultural center/resource center for the Pioneer Valley. Gabe has been impressed by what he has heard about such an organization in Cincinnati and has communicated with the director there. As of our first meeting, he had not yet made contact with PAHMUSA, the Pan-African Historical Museum here in Springfield; I passed on the contact information for Lujana Hood at PAHMUSA.
- Gabe noted that the NACC would like to bring an African Film Festival to the Pioneer Valley.
- There is no African restaurant or store in Springfield, They would like to support someone to start one. There are two such stores in Hartford, which is where most community members go to do shopping.
- He is working with the organization SCOLA (Satellite Communications for Learning) from Washington, DC, to see about bringing much-loved Nigerian television shows to local cable or satellite.
- He has communicated with the NYC-based African Theater (www.africantheaterusa.com) about bringing plays to the area.

Fieldworker's comment: With some more funding sources, this group might be able to get some of its plans to fruition, and then, having more cultural resources might encourage more active involvement in traditions. Additionally, more connection with other African American and Afro-Caribbean groups (like the proposed cross-over with Carnival and my suggestion to contact PAHMUSA) would certainly help with a support framework.

SECOND FIELDVISTT:

Gabe quickly followed up on my suggestion that he contact Lujana Hood at PAHMUSA directly. By mid-June they were in close contact and Ms. Hood arranged for Mr. Mowkuah to perform the masquerade dance at PAHMUSA's Juneteenth celebration (described generally in KK-03-02, second

visit). I was able to attend that event and document the masquerade dance in photographs and with some further conversation with Mr. Mowkuah.

The masquerade dancer is costumed in what is essentially a loose body stocking knit of natural fibers, with some fringe that creates interest in the movement. Gabe described his costume, which was made in Nigeria, as a simple masquerade costume, one that would be worn by a young man. Older masqueraders, which he described as being of a different "caliber," do more secret/sacred versions of the dance and have correspondingly finer costumes. There is a gap across the chest of the costume which is used to enter and exit the costume. The masquerader has a string secured in two places on the face of the costume, and which he pulled out on a number of occasions. Gabe explained that this is so when the dancer comes close to someone, they cannot see his face. Also, while the masquerader can speak, he must disguise his voice. The masquerader is supposed to be anonymous.

Gabe says the masquerader symbolizes the spirit of man. The character comes out for special events—if a village is hosting a prince, or perhaps on a special holiday. Typically one masquerader dances with a few other non-masquerade men who will engage him directly in the dance. The masquerader starts the dance and draws the others in, then extending to audience members. Gabe performed alone at Juneteenth, so he attempted to draw members of the audience in directly. He says the dance is livelier with other dancers who know how to interact with the masquerader. In this performance, the masquerader seemed like a trickster; for instance, he stole one man's cane to get him to dance. At Juneteenth, Gabe performed to prerecorded music; ideally he would have live accompaniment.


Gabe says that "this caliber" of masquerader can go out in public at any time. Even this less refined caliber of masquerade, however, can only be danced by men who have come of age (about 17 or older), and can only dance with men. More secret/sacred masqueraders can only dance at night and can't be seen by women (Gabe said that although this isn't the right terminology, it is sort of like a secret society). Some other types of masqueraders will wear actual masks with their costumes.

Gabe makes no claims to be an expert at masquerade, indeed he asserts that his brother, who lives in New York, is much better than he is. However, Gabe is very happy to be carrying on this tradition here and hopes to enlarge the number of people in the area who can perform it with him.

Potential contacts:

Gabe knew of few people who would qualify as active tradition bearers. He noted that most of the members of the community were professional people who likely did not have time for such activities even if they knew them. He did mention the following people:

Nana Owusa


A "wonderful" Ghanaian woman who used to run a dress shop in Tower Square. She now works in human services and, Gabe Mokwuah believes, still makes traditional African clothing.

Gabe Mokwuah mentioned a man in Springfield who is part of a drum and dance group based in Hartford, and will try to track down contact information. He also knows that there is a Nigerian women's dance group in the Worcester area, and will try to find out their name.