



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Chicago Folklore Prize Winner: Felicia R. McMahon's *Not Just Child's Play*

BY LIBBY TUCKER

On behalf of the New York Folklore Society's executive board and the editorial board of *Voices*, I want to congratulate Faye McMahon for winning the American Folklore Society's 2008 Chicago Folklore Prize with her outstanding book *Not Just Child's Play: Emerging Tradition and the Lost Boys of Sudan*, published by the University Press of Mississippi in 2007. It brings all of us great happiness to see Faye receive this richly deserved award.

According to the American Folklore Society's web site, the Chicago Folklore Prize, "awarded to the author of the best book-length work of folklore scholarship for the year, is the oldest international award recognizing excellence in folklore scholarship." Since the prize was first awarded in 1928, Faye is the eighty-first recipient. As Robert Baron recently commented in an e-mail message to New York Folklore Society members, the Chicago Prize is the "Pulitzer Prize of our field." In recognizing this major honor, it seems important to quote the voices of a number of people, including the Chicago Prize judges, a member of the Lost Boys, a doctoral student assistant, and Faye herself.

At the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Louisville, Kentucky, on October 23, 2008, members of the society listened to the following comments from the Chicago Folklore Prize judges:

The winner of the Chicago Folklore Prize for 2008 is a gripping, fully theorized first-person narrative by a folklorist who, mindful of the cultural risks involved, has worked for several years with members of a culturally endangered group, Sudanese DiDinga war refugees relocated to the United States—"the Lost Boys." Felicia McMahon's *Not Just Child's Play: Emerging Tradition and the Lost Boys of Sudan*, pub-

lished in 2007 by the University Press of Mississippi, shows that because of the dislocations of war in Sudan, the Lost Boys, though now grown, were never properly initiated into manhood according to tribal custom and so are caught in a state of cultural childhood.

McMahon's work with the group in western New York State has been in large measure devoted to helping the refugees encompass that loss through recovery of remembered tribal dance and ritual enacted in public performances. The reader cheers the group on, honoring the Lost Boys' dance and ritual—transnational, cobbled-together, hybrid, but absolutely and authentically theirs.

This book is multilayered and thought-provoking, yet written in a clear and jargon-free prose. McMahon's topic—and her methods—are painfully relevant to us in an age of extended war, population displacement, and economic globalization. Folklorists of the twenty-first century need to look not only at the details of the author's interactions with this group, but also at the folklore theory that informs every paragraph of the work—and at its humanity. If folklorists are becoming more like Felicia McMahon, we and the discipline are better than we used to be.

Faye received these comments by e-mail, because her festival of performances by recent immigrants to the Syracuse area took place two days after the American Folklore Society's meeting began. The festival featured music, singing, dancing, and craftsmanship by DiDinga, Vietnamese, Liberian, and Congolese immigrants. Earlier that month, on October 4, she had organized a wonderful set of performances by Nepali/Bhutanese, Meskhetian Turkish, and Native American artists. I had the privilege of attending those performances with my husband, Geof Gould, who took photographs. We were deeply moved by the singing of the young Nepali women, who were excited to be performing together in their national dress; we also enjoyed the



Lino Ariloka Timan sings during *nyakorot*, a DiDinga dance, at the Warehouse in Syracuse on October 27, 2007. Photo: Geof Gould

Meskhietian Turkish wedding dance performed by a group of young people under the direction of a proud mother. Geof and I would have loved to attend the October 25 event, as well, but I was scheduled to chair a panel at the meeting in Louisville.

Fortunately, some comments on the October 25 performances came from Bryan Ripley Crandall, a doctoral student in English education at Syracuse University and Faye's assistant. After the performances ended, he wrote this e-mail message:

I would like to send another round of applause to Faye McMahon for what

she accomplished today. Not only has her book received a national award, but today's folk arts festival was outstanding. Seeing so many community groups of Syracuse come to perform, dance, and share their culture was truly amazing. The day was well attended, the entertainment was educational and moving, and the artwork was vibrant and real. On the sidelines, with only a few announcements here and there about the performers yet to come, stood Faye McMahon. She was tremendously central to bringing all of us together today: students, groups from around the globe, volunteers, academics, reporters, musicians, artists,

etc., and without her hard work, grant writing, devotion, and vision NONE OF THIS would have occurred today. Faye, I respect all you do. And Thank You on behalf of the world.

This touching tribute eloquently expresses Faye's dedication to the people with whom she works. She puts an enormous amount of time and dedication into all of her preparations for performances, working overtime to make sure that performers feel happy and proud of their contributions. Before the performances on October 4, she made a number of trips to show the performers where they should park and how they should get together. This sensitive attention to people's needs is typical of her interaction with immigrants to the Syracuse area.

After I came back from the American Folklore Society's meeting, I asked Faye some questions by e-mail. A transcript of our interview follows.

LT: How did you become interested in working with the Lost Boys?

FM: In 1999 I was contracted by Tony Clementi, then director of the Children's Museum in Utica, New York, to develop a folk arts program to bring children of many neighborhoods together for a family festival. Tony wanted to ensure we included the children of refugee families from Bosnia and Burma who had just arrived in Utica. Until Tony left his position at the Children's Museum in 2002, we collaborated on a NYSCA-funded folk arts program that included folk artists from these two new communities.

It was in 2002 that I was invited to teach a university-wide symposium course entitled *Beauty in Cross-Cultural Perspective* at Syracuse University. Recalling the positive community feedback Tony and I had gotten in Utica, I decided to call Syracuse's Refugee Resettlement Services to ask if I could meet with caseworkers to talk about the possibility of including folk artists from new communities in my classroom. Harvey Pinyon, a caseworker, was very supportive. Dean Eric Holzworth at the university agreed that folk artists are community scholars in their own right and provided honoraria for them. One



Charles Lino (left) plays the *lokembe* (thumb piano), while Dominic Raimondo sings at a January 5, 2008, book signing in Syracuse. Photo: Faye McMahon

of the new communities Pinyon had mentioned were the Sudanese Lost Boys. After meeting the young men, I felt compelled to do whatever I could to facilitate ways to bring recognition to their many talents.

LT: How did you get to know the young men and develop methods for working with them?

FM: Pinyon had suggested I first call Carl Oropallo, the young men's choir director at Saint Vincent de Paul Church. Carl had been directing the young men in the church's choir where they sang "church songs" in Swahili and English and sometimes Dinka or DiDinga, two southern Sudanese languages. But to say Carl was their choir director is a great understatement. There are more than 150 Lost Boys and Lost Girls in Syracuse, and they all call Carl their "Found Father"

because of his generosity and his years of support in helping these young people who are here with no parents to adjust to an American way of life. Carl is an important part of this book, and he has been an important facilitator over the years.

So, I attended the Mass when the young men were singing, and Carl introduced me to them as a "professor who is interested in your singing." They were as curious about me as I was about them, and I also think they were very, very lonely, being resettled in Syracuse with few opportunities to talk with Americans. I guess you could say the group and I made an "odd couple," but worked. They invited me to their homes and I invited them to mine, where we ate pizza or picked wild blackberries in my backyard. They taught me basic DiDinga vocabulary, and

we still laugh when I try to say "hohomala" for blackberry.

From there it is a long story about our journey to get to know each other. There were also long, lonely hours for me trying to find published sources because the DiDinga culture in particular is grounded entirely in orality. I relied almost entirely on our conversations and my observations of their public performances, which I eventually coordinated through Syracuse University and the Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center in Auburn, New York. Each time I wanted to ensure that they were adequately reimbursed and that their traditions were adequately contextualized. I realized after some time that current performance theories such as Bauman's could not account for the recontextualized performances of relocated people, nor was

Schechner's "restored behavior" theory in and of itself enough to elucidate the complexity of the process of tradition for transnational groups like this. Instead, I applied a combination of the two theories, which revealed that childhood play traditions contributed to the young men's transnational identity emerging in performances for new audiences.

LT: What impressed you the most about the young men's adaptation to new and difficult situations?

FM: They are resilient. They are flexible. They are playful. Most important, they formed a real community. They bonded together and never broke apart. But no one is an island. When their cars got flat tires in the middle of a snowstorm in Syracuse at 1:00 a.m., who do the Sudanese call? Their Found Father, Carl. And inspired by Carl's kindness, I tried to do my part as a folklorist by finding support for their performances.

LT: What are some of the most important insights that you gained from studying immigrants' recontextualized performances?

FM: Most refugees who come to our country come with optimism. After a few years, many remain the poorest of our poor and are living right on the edge. In the U.S. we know it is not a fact that we all pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. We all got to where we are today with help of someone we know: our family, our friends, or our community. I try to remind myself where I would be if I were to flee my country and were forced to start all over where I knew no one. Mary Pipher sums it up in her book, *The Middle of Everywhere: The World's Refugees Come to Our Town* (New York: Harcourt, 2002): "Picture yourself dropped in the Sudanese grasslands with no tools or knowledge about how to survive and no ways to communicate with the locals or ask for advice. Imagine yourself wondering where the clean water is, where and what food is, and what you should do about the bites on your feet, and your sunburn, and the lion stalking you. Unless a kind and generous Sudanese takes you in and helps you adjust, you would be a goner" (63).

LT: How can public and academic folklorists use *Not Just Child's Play* as a text?

FM: Working with refugees while they are still experiencing culture shock is not without risks. It is also time intensive and challenging. In public folklore work, cultural facilitation is needed if we are to do truly inclusive work. It's important to pass this work on to the next generation and for students to have the skills to work with newcomers. This work is truly important as our world becomes increasingly globalized.

LT: How has publication of your book affected the DiDinga immigrant community?

FM: I don't think my book has affected the DiDinga immigrant community, except it has made them aware that they have a unique culture—a real gift to give to us—and that Americans acknowledge that.

LT: Do you plan to do further fieldwork with the DiDinga or with other immigrant groups in the Syracuse area?

FM: As a thank-you to the DiDinga people for teaching me about their culture, I've donated all my book royalties to their fund to build a school and library in their village in Sudan. I am already working with several newcomers in Syracuse, most recently the Ahiska (Meskhetian Turks of Russia) and the Nepali of Bhutan. My life has never been so enriched.



After I interviewed Faye, she suggested that I send some questions to Dominic Raimondo, a member of the Lost Boys who currently attends community college in Salt Lake City, Utah. During an American Folklore Society meeting in Salt Lake City several years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Dominic, who serves as the leader of a group of DiDinga people in Utah. Besides attending college and supporting his disabled brother, Dominic continues to dance and to make beautiful ceramic cows according to DiDinga tradition. A transcript of our interview follows.

LT: How are your studies going?

DR: It's a struggle. And it's all self-sacrifice even though I need to speak for myself. What affects me is the financial situation. Even though I am somebody

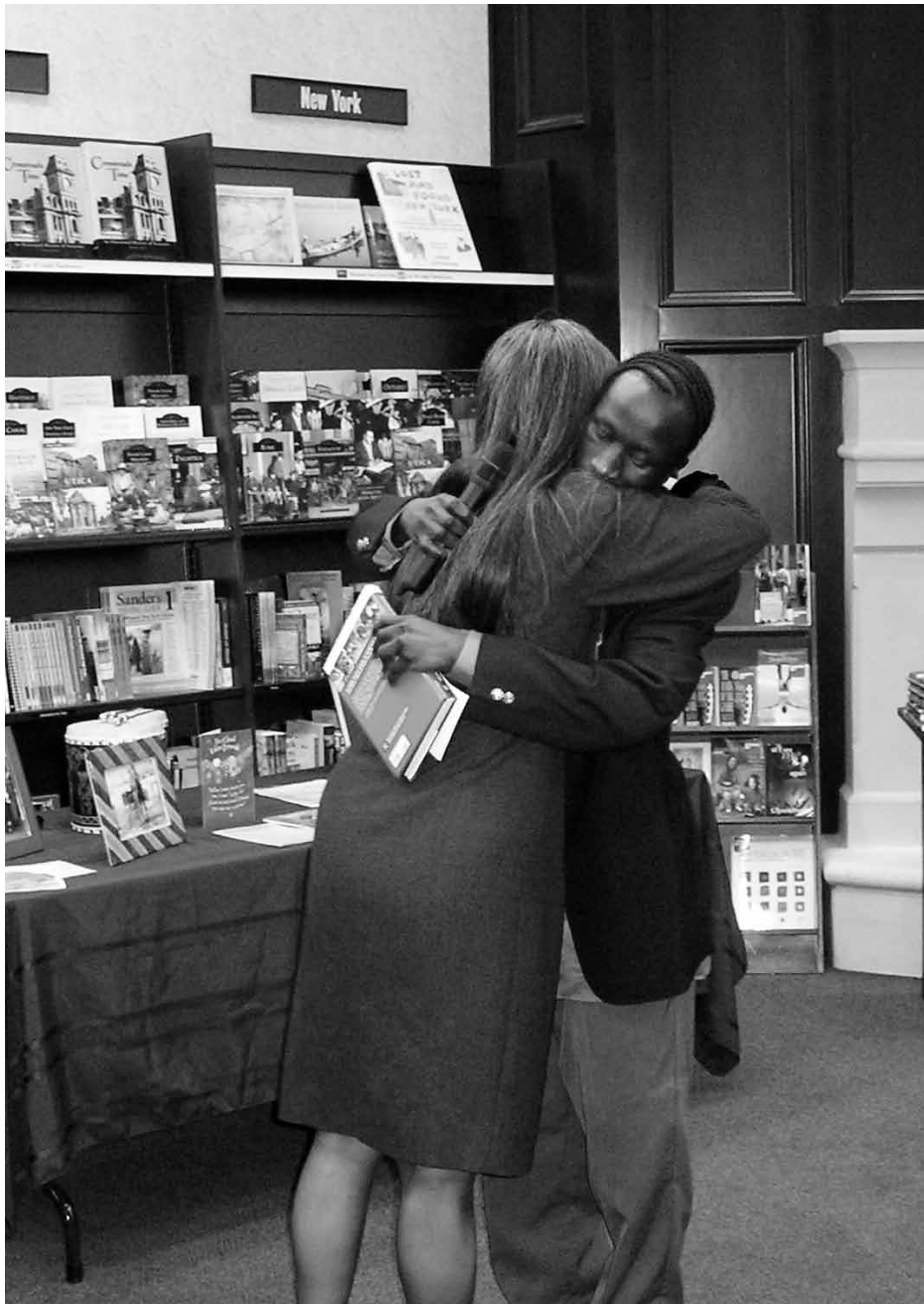
who loves to read and to get new ideas and to help the community around me and outside, because of the obstacles you can't get ahead. Sometimes I have to try to take one or two classes just to continue toward my goal but it takes forever. If I can have support, I think I can be a valuable in the community, but it is hard. I just have to struggle and tell whoever asks me, what are your problems, I have to tell them honestly because education is the only way for future in my life.

LT: How has your participation in DiDinga dance performances influenced your adjustment to living in the U.S.A.?

DR: It really helps. It has opened the door for me to Americans to understand me and me to understand them. It's like a key to a new society. You cannot get into a new group without you having something in it. It has helped me to share with American society, to share my culture, but most important for me to retain my culture. I could lose my culture but through performing it, it empower me. And one more point, and this have also made DiDinga traditional dance privileged. Without my participation and my idea of showing to Americans we would not have it existing, but because of the power



Faye McMahon introduces the DiDinga at the Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center's annual folk arts program in Auburn on August 21, 2005. Photo: Geof Gould



Dominic Raimondo congratulates author Faye McMahon at a book signing on January 5, 2008. Photo: John McMahon

I have in my heart and in my mind, it gives room for our culture to exist forever and ever in American culture.

LT: Please tell us your thoughts about the publication of Faye's book and its winning the Chicago Folklore Prize.

DR: This is a big achievement in DiDinga history. Never before had someone thought of putting DiDinga culture in writing. This book has encouraged me in difficult times to do more, and I just read and talk about it with a lot of people.

LT: How can readers of the book support the DiDinga people?

DR: The reader can help DiDinga traditional culture to continue by buying *Not Just Child's Play*. When the reader buys this book, this is financial help for DiDinga people. Money provides the tools to open everything in the world. Then the DiDinga will use the money to purchase their drums or *ceremi*, which are skirts for women and feathers, and those are important in our culture. For this group in Syracuse, I have hope.

Dominic's eloquent statement reminds us how important it is for all of us to feel hopeful and to work toward positive change. Through the publication of Faye's book, we have gained a model for understanding immigrants' adjustment to a new way of life through recontextualized folk traditions; we have also learned to celebrate impressive outpourings of courage and spirit. Thank you, Faye, for writing this wonderful book, and many congratulations! ▼

Libby Tucker has been a member of the New York Folklore Society's board since 2005. She was a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa in the 1970s.



To continue to receive *Voices* and enjoy the full range of New York Folklore Society programs, become a member!

See inside back cover for more information.

LIKE WHAT YOU'RE READING?

Make your voice heard! See the back cover for ways YOU can help save *Voices*.

Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

For the General Public

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

For Artists and Professionals

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

Mentoring and Professional Development
Folk Artists Self-Management Project
Folk Archives Project
Consulting and Referral
Advocacy
A Public Voice

Membership Levels

Individual

\$ 50.00	Basic Membership
\$100.00	Harold W. Thompson Circle
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Organizations/Institutions

\$ 75.00	Subscriber
\$100.00	Partner
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org

or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;

or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.