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# Music and Food in Multicultural Syracuse:

## Project Report

BY SYDNEY HUTCHINSON

As a child growing up in Tucson, Arizona, I was greatly inspired by “Tucson Meet Yourself,” the folk festival started by “Big” Jim Griffith and continued today under the leadership of Maribel Alvarez. I remember attending when I was perhaps 11 years old and being astounded by the huge variety of foods, music, dance, and crafts that one could sample. If it were not for the event we affectionately termed “Tucson Eat Yourself,” I would never have known that Tucson had, for instance, Afghani, Filipino, or Norwegian communities, much less been able to try their foods. I would also have missed out on some great opportunities for dancing to Tohono O’odham *naila* and Mexican *norteña* music. In college, I performed there myself with the group of Indian Americans with whom I studied *bharata natyam* dance, right around the time I took my first folklore course from Dr. Griffith. A seed was planted that eventually bore fruit, as years later I came to work in public folklore myself.

Two decades after leaving Tucson to study folklore, I find myself on the other side of the country teaching ethnomusicology courses at Syracuse University (SU). Syracuse is a bit of a hard-luck, postindustrial town. It’s a great place to live for those of us with a stable income and decent housing; less so for the 32 percent of the population living in poverty—in fact, recent reports indicate that the city is not only the 13th poorest in the country, but has the United States’ highest concentration of extreme poverty for Black and Latino residents (Weiner 2017). Since moving here in 2010, I have tried various ways of bridging the notorious town-gown divide that keeps many city residents resentful of those on “the hill” (as the SU campus is

called) and students afraid to venture too far off campus. The greatest successes have come as a part of my course, “Music in Multicultural America.”

In 2013, when I first taught this course, I structured it as an exploration of Syracuse’s various ethnic communities. Each week, a representative from one of these communities came to “the hill” to talk to us about their culture, the issues they faced in Syracuse, and what roles music and dance played in their community. These discussions served as jumping-off points for the class to discuss broader issues of race and class in the United States. We hosted classroom visits and performances by a Haudenosaunee dancer and language instructor, a panel of African American hip-hop musicians, a Jewish klezmer group, Sacred Harp singers, a Bosnian *saz* player, Cuban and Ghanaian dancers, a South Sudanese professor who shared his bull song with us, Korean and Indian student performers, and many more.

As I prepared to teach this course again in fall 2017, I wanted to maintain this successful format, but the new realities of the Trump era made me want to turn the class in a more activist direction. As the US government dramatically reduced the numbers of refugees accepted, criminalized immigrants, and created or enlarged rifts between all sorts of Americans, I wanted students to talk to the people most affected by these changes. While Trump raised walls, I wanted to build bridges. And so I thought back to the impact that “Tucson Meet Yourself” had had on a younger me and wondered if something similar would be possible in Syracuse. As a center for refugee resettlement—the county’s per capita rate of refugee acceptance is third highest in the nation—seven percent of

Syracuse’s population has arrived as refugees since 2000 (Baker 2016). If we were to count those who came prior to 2000, it’s possible that as many as 1 in 10 Syracuse residents has a refugee background. Many Syracusans are also proud of their city’s tradition of activism: once a stop on the Underground Railroad, its abolitionist history is commemorated in public monuments like the one on Clinton Square dedicated to the “Jerry Rescue,” during which average citizens defied the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) to break ex-slave William “Jerry” Henry out of jail and help him to reach Canada. It was also a center of 19th-century feminist activity, as noted suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage and her famous, freethinking son-in-law L. Frank Baum once lived in Syracuse, as well as of 20th-century antiwar activism, as home to the Syracuse Peace Council (“the oldest local, autonomous, grassroots peace and social justice organization in the United States,” founded in 1936 [<http://www.peacecouncil.net/history>]). Furthermore, I had been observing the growing interest in projects featuring refugee food traditions, particularly in the left-leaning university neighborhood where I live. It seemed to me that conditions were ripe for a test run.

I began my course planning nearly a year in advance by getting in touch with Adam Sudmann, the driving force behind the aforementioned food projects. Adam once worked at producing corporate food events for fashion houses in New York City, but grew tired of that world. He moved to Syracuse and joined Onondaga Community College’s Food Studies Management program, then started a teaching restaurant called With Love (see <http://withloverestaurant.com>) on Syracuse’s north side. With Love is an

incubator for mainly immigrant and refugee chefs to learn the restaurant business, so chefs and menus rotate approximately every six months. Adam also started the biannual pop-up food court called My Lucky Tummy (see <http://www.myluckytummy.com/>), which brings together a roster of immigrant and refugee chefs to cook for and converse with sold-out crowds of 400+ persons. Adam liked the idea of pairing music with food, especially if I could find a way to fund the performances. His contacts in local refugee communities proved invaluable when I did exploratory fieldwork to identify possible artists during the summer prior to the course. Our partnership also led me to contact SU's new Food Studies program—an ideal program partner because of its dedication to the study of food and society. Faculty member Elissa Johnson was soon on board with the idea of incorporating the events into her class on food and identity. Through additional meetings with Adam and Elissa, I developed a plan in which my students would interview various refugee and immigrant artists, document their traditions, and present them at two events. First, we would provide a musical program for the opening reception of the 2017 Convening of Welcoming Economies, a network of Rust Belt economic development initiatives seeking to benefit from the opportunities offered by the influx of immigrants to struggling cities. Second, my class would put together a performance focused on music and dance traditions of Burma to take place on “the hill,” in collaboration with Elissa's class, who would work with the Burmese chef-in-residence at With Love to document her food traditions, as well as to actually produce Burmese food for a reception to follow. We received major funding for the programs from SU's Humanities Center, along with the support of the Food Studies program and my own Department of Art and Music Histories. I saw these events as “test runs” for a potential, larger folk festival down the road.

In addition to these events and the detailed program notes we created for each one, some samples of which appear on the next

pages, my class worked to put information, including bios, articles, photos, and videos, on a course website. We hoped this website would attract attention to the project, thus boosting a potential future expansion, as well as generate publicity for the artists, many of whom hope to find ways to perform more widely and more regularly. (Please explore the site, <https://sjhutchi.expressions.syr.edu>, but note that not all artists we worked with appear on the site, and not all artists on the site ended up participating in the performances. Construction is ongoing.)

The logistics of it all were daunting at times. We worked with a roster of artists from the Congo, Myanmar (both Chin and Karen ethnicities), Syria, Bhutan, Puerto Rico, and Burundi, and chefs from Syria, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Pakistan. Some spoke little or no English, and like many refugees in Syracuse, some had experienced severe trauma. Working with consent forms and W-9 tax forms, communicating locations and directions, writing appropriate questions, and coordinating schedules were challenging for students—and, I imagine, for many of the tradition bearers as well. Nonetheless, both informally and in class evaluations, students reported great gains from the process at the end of the semester, and we were pleased with the events we produced. Student Grant Nygaard noted with surprise that, even in the time of Google, “It was humbling to find very few legitimate articles and info in English about an entire culture.” In light of his previous writing experience, journalism student James Groh at first struggled with the self-analysis that ethnographic writing required, but ended up discovering that “objectivity and reflection are compatible and even work together to make a story stronger.” Steven Marshall had expected Syracuse to not be terribly diverse, so was pleased to find it was in fact “a place teeming with a plethora of cultures.” He concluded, “going out and learning about the many things that make humans unique is good for the soul,” and so was the class.

Further outcomes were manifold and sometimes unexpected. In the final program,

we experimented by combining a Syrian Muslim musician with a Middle Eastern Christian dance troupe. The dancers performed to a popular Syrian recording to honor the newly arrived refugee, and it was a joy to see his face light up, as he recognized the song and sang along. Since the conclusion of the class, one student has ended up exchanging English lessons for oud lessons with our Syrian musician. Another is hoping to implement some of what she learned when she returns home to Botswana to start an arts center in her village. My husband engineered a recording of the Congolese musicians for them to send home to a family wedding, and then coordinated collaboration between them and local activist/musician Colleen Kattau. I sometimes still receive cryptic text messages that come to me, mediated by a smartphone Arabic–English text translator. In short, at least for a short time, this experiment in student-led public folklore succeeded in building the bridges I had hoped for. ▼

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Sydney Hutchinson is Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at Syracuse University and author of several books and numerous articles on Caribbean, Mexican, and Latin@ music and dance. Currently in Berlin, initiating new research on Cold War musical and musicological exchanges between Cuba and East Germany, she is also completing a new textbook on Caribbean music and a monograph on *merengue* histories and Dominican–Haitian relations. When not writing, Hutchinson cares for small children and/or yodels. Photo courtesy of the author.



# Artist Profiles by Syracuse University Students

## Program Notes

### Ahmad Alkhlef (Syrian Musician)

By Anya Patel

Ahmad Alkhlef has played the oud since he was very young, as he comes from a long line of musicians. He also makes ouds himself. The oud is the predominant instrument of Arabic music. It can be translated to English to mean “piece of wood.” Key physical features include a pear shape, twisted strings, wooden construction, a short neck, and a rounded back. It is a stringed instrument, with differing numbers of strings depending on the mode; the five-string model is preferred by many performers, including Alkhlef.

Alkhlef’s identity is tied heavily to his music. After having to flee his home in Homs, Syria, the music and instruments he creates serve as a connection to home, even as he is no longer able to be there. Despite religious or sociopolitical differences, music has always served as a way to unite the Arab people. Moreover, there is even a word in Arabic, *tarab*, for the rapture and euphoria created by music within its listeners, and it plays a key role in identity for many Arab people.

About the type of music that he prefers to play, Ahmad explains:

There is no favorite song or music for me. I can play everything, but sometimes, a musician will want to sing for

a specific person who wants specific music. But most Arabic music, you can tweak and make it into what the specific time calls for. You have to feel it.

The events that caused Alkhlef to leave the Middle East are tragic. He watched the explosion that caused the destruction of his home in Homs, Syria, when a missile flew overhead and decimated the very place he slept. He moved to Jordan, but safety eluded him and his family there as well: one day he set out to the bakery and found himself being shot at. Fearing for the safety of his loved ones, he packed his bags and moved to Syracuse—but not without a reminder of the horrific events going on at home. To this day, he and his wife suffer



Ahmed Alkhlef, a Syrian refugee, plays oud with a friend at Syracuse University on December 2, 2017. Photo by Anna Leach.





Nyasamaza “Immaculee” Kandathe and Olivier Byinshi perform Congolese gospel at Syracuse University on December 2, 2017. Photo by Sydney Hutchinson.

health concerns from pieces of shrapnel from the explosions in Syria and the effects of the war.

However, Alkhlef does not let this get him down; having found safety in Syracuse, he remains close to home via his music and instruments. Though he has seen some influence on his music from the proximity to American culture, and he has stated he wouldn't mind learning the guitar, he feels as though Arabic music and the oud, in particular, reduce the distance between him and home. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to acquire the specific types of wood and tools necessary to build his instruments in Syracuse.

By creating a mix of vocals, instrumentation, and percussion (often with the aid of a percussionist, such as his son), Alkhlef brings true Arabic music to the United States, to Syracuse, and to our event tonight.

Alkhlef's YouTube channel also contains videos of his music and performance, and can be found by searching his full name (Ahmad Alkhlef) on YouTube or following the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCICZkzIHrBbETLEXx0Tq9fw>

## **Immaculee Kandathe and Olivier Byinshi (Congolese Musicians)**

**By Caroline Chipman**

Nyasamaza “Immaculee” Kandathe and Olivier Byinshi hail from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The DRC is located in central Africa and surrounded by South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Zambia, and others. Being one of the larger countries in the Africa, the DRC is home to about 78 million people, who speak an array of different languages, like Kinkingo, Lingala, Tshiluba, and Swahili. French is the official language of the country since its colonial period under Belgian rule, and

it has the world's largest population of French speakers after France. Today, the DRC is very unstable as a result of the second Congo War, which started in 1998.

Nyasamaza and Olivier, like many others, left their country, became refugees in Kenya, and eventually came to America for safety. Both became involved with music at a very young age, influenced by their local Presbyterian church, where they spent much time as kids attending Sunday school and hearing music from the gospel choir. Olivier, who was introduced to the piano through his church, learned solely through hearing and repeating artists' singing, pairing it with a melody. He now studies in the Onondaga Community College music program, where he particularly loves learning jazz. Olivier also performs gospel music on the piano at church every

Sunday. His cousin Nyasamaza is a singer/songwriter, who also has lived in Syracuse since 2012. She has been involved in music since she was five years old, influenced by her family's participation in their local church choir. In the DRC, she recorded an album and performed often, using the stage name of Immaculee Kandathe. She continued performing gospel music in Kenya, which, along with the Swahili language, served as a lingua franca for the Congolese refugees who spoke different languages. In Syracuse, Nyasamaza enjoys performing and singing gospel, jazz, and popular-style songs, emphasizing lyrics that promote peace in her country.

Immaculee's music video for her song "Umpindure" is available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CY2Jm\\_2TzSQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CY2Jm_2TzSQ)

## Matupi Chin Dancers of Syracuse (Burma)

By Grant Nygaard

The Matupi Chin dance troupe from Burma consists of a group of young refugees from the Syracuse area. Today, they will perform their traditional "Star Dance."

Burma, also known as Myanmar, is a state in Southeast Asia that is bordered by India and Bangladesh to its west, Thailand and Laos to its east, and China to its north and northeast. The country has a population of around 51 million people and has 14 provinces and 9 states. It is also a very diverse state, with over 135 different ethnicities. The major ethnicity is the Burman or Bamar people; many of the smaller ethnic groups have rebelled



Matupi Chin dancers completing the final figure of the Star Dance at Syracuse University on December 2, 2017. Photo by Sydney Hutchinson.

over injustice and human rights violations in what is considered one of the world's longest running civil wars.

The dance troupe is from the Chin state, which is largely inhabited by the Chin minority group. The Chin state is located in the southwest portion of the country and is characterized by its sparse population and mostly rural, agrarian economy. The Chin make up a relatively small percentage of Burma's overall population, but have a complex network of subgroups that includes over 50 different dialects and a diverse range of cultural practices that differ from the majority. Also, although the Chin come from Burma, they do not necessarily identify as Burmese, which is synonymous with the Buddhist majority, as most Chin are Christian.

According to scholars, a significant way that the history of the region is told is through song, as a form of oral history. The music itself most often predates the Christian invasion of the region, making it a unique expression that has been passed down for generations. While there have been changes in the music over time, the lyrical themes are what make the music constant.

Although a lot of these languages/cultural practices bear similarities, they have differences due in part to the heavily forested, hilly geography, which made it hard to travel to other nearby regions. Even today, there is no one road that links the northern and southern portions of the state. Isolation created an environment where different languages and traditions developed.

Members of the dance troupe performing today identify as Matu people of the southern Chin region, which includes the city of Matupi. The Matu region is known for its remoteness, even within the Chin state. Like the rest of the region, the Matu are overwhelmingly Christian. Jacob Ngawi, a local Matu Chin refugee, leads the dance troupe. He explains that there are around 500 Matu Chin refugees who currently call Syracuse their home, and the community is always growing. Because the Matu Chin are

such a small ethnic group, having so many in a community like Syracuse is very rare (the other large population in the United States is found in Indianapolis). We are lucky to be able to observe and experience their cultural practices today.

The meaning and significance of the "Star Dance" is intrinsically linked to the identity of the community and how they present themselves to other groups and peoples. According to Jacob, the dance is used as a ceremonial tool during Chin cultural celebrations, as well as to showcase their unique culture to the world outside of Burma. It is also typically performed on February 20, Chin National Day. This dance is unique to the Matu Chin, while other Chin ethnic groups have their own versions. The dance has been passed down by parents to their children, as a way of preserving their culture and identity. It is so important to their heritage that a performance must be approved for quality assurance by older members of the community, before it is brought out in public.

Today, the Star Dance will be performed by 10 dancers, 5 men and 5 women, all youth in the local Matu Chin community, who are taught by Jacob. The dance is accompanied by piano alone. It varies in length, but can stretch to as long as 12 minutes with an experienced group.

## **Jacob Ngawi: Profile of a Matupi Chin Dancer**

**By Casey Pritchard**

Jacob Ngawi, now 22, began dancing at the age of 15. He learned to dance the same way as everyone else did—from the generation before him. A year after he began dancing, when he was 16 years old, he had to leave his home and come to the United States. He told me that his journey was scary. When he arrived in the United States safely, he settled here in Syracuse. Now that he has been dancing for quite a few years, he is taking on the responsibility of teaching the younger generation how to participate in their cultural dances. One

thing Jacob said he enjoyed about America was our education system. He told me that it took him about five years to learn English, and he just graduated this past May. And, of course, Jacob said he loves Syracuse's snow! Jacob looks forward to going to Refugee Day every year with the other Matupi refugees. It is a wonderful opportunity for Chin refugees from all over the United States to come together, perform their dances, and celebrate their culture.

## **Assad Almajid (Syrian Chef)**

**By Allison Mannheimer**

On Monday, October 23, 2017, the Sky Armory in downtown Syracuse will be transformed into a venue filled with diverse cultures from around the world. The Welcoming Economies Convening takes place over three days, during which people from around the globe meet to discuss topics ranging from politics to programs and highlight notable people in the field who are paving the way for future generations. From 6:00 to 8:00 in the evening, conference attendees will be able to experience something Syracuse has become increasingly known for—diversity. Guests will be treated to performances from multiple refugee populations within the city, as well as food prepared by refugees, highlighting the countries they were forced to flee from. This article focuses on one specific chef, Assad Almajid.

Assad was born in Damascus, the capital of Syria. He began working in his father's shop when he was nine years old, learning about sweets and ice cream. He would spend every day after school working with the ice cream, and every morning until midnight on the weekends. He loved working with his father, but dreamed of starting his own business one day. If he stayed in Damascus, he would only be able to make \$500 a month, which would not be a sufficient living salary. So, Assad chose to get his Master's Degree in business



administration. He then moved to Dubai for nine years to work as an accountant:

Dubai is a city of money. I decided to go there, work a couple of years, make some money, and come back and start my own business. I'm the type of person that doesn't want to get help starting my own business.

That persistence paid off. When he returned to Damascus, he opened his own chocolate factory. It became extremely successful. Most of his sales were from exports; he sold a majority of his chocolate to other countries in the Middle East. Everything was going well, until the war broke out.

The Syrian War initially began as an attempt to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad after the government used deadly force to halt protesters who opposed him. Violence escalated, and it became a civil war. The war has lasted so long because other countries have involved themselves in Syria's war. The United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and others have taken sides in the war, adding military, financial, and political support to the fight. Many countries have interests in controlling Syria because of its location in the Middle East. Russia has been backing President Assad, while the United States is backing opposition forces.

The United Nations reported that over five million people have fled Syria since the war began (see <http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocusRel.asp?infocusID=146>). This has left neighboring countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, struggling to manage the influx of refugees to their population. Assad Almajid and his family were a few of the refugees who made the choice to leave their home in hopes of finding safety. Shortly after the war broke out, Assad's flourishing chocolate factory was destroyed by the bombings. His family made the decision to leave Syria and fled to Jordan. Assad was unable to work in Jordan legally unless he did labor, so he could not restart his chocolate factory in that country. After three and a half years in Jordan, his family was accepted into the United States as refugees.

Over ten thousand refugees have come to Syracuse since 2000, which is a significant portion of the population. According to Syracuse.com, Onondaga County "accepts refugees at the highest per capita rate in the state and the third-highest rate in the nation" (Baker 2016). In June 2016, Assad, his wife, three daughters, and son arrived in Syracuse. Although he was not able to choose where in the United States that he moved, he said he studied the area, the people, the weather, and the buildings and felt Syracuse would be the right place for his family. He plans to stay in Syracuse for the long term and has purchased property to start realizing his dream of owning a business again.

Assad now owns 2727 James Street, near the Key Bank. Instead of a chocolate factory, Assad will make sweets and barbeque, similar to his father's business, which Assad grew up working in. He is looking forward to finally opening his shop, known as Sinbad's Sweets and Ice Cream (see <https://www.facebook.com/SinbadSweet/>), but knows that it may take some time before it is ready to go. Everything is ready, his supplies, the refrigerator (on its way from Turkey), and his employees. However, permits take a long time to approve before the work can be done to legally open the shop. It's also difficult to market and find ways to promote his product. Assad explains, "People prefer what they know. They don't know my product. I need to teach people my product."

In order to reach Syracuse, he has taken any chance he can get to share his product with others. At Welcoming Economies, guests were treated to Assad's Syrian ice cream, made by hand. Assad made ice cream for 300 people. Guests may have tasted a bit of a crunch, since his ice cream machine and hammer are still on the way to Syracuse, so it might not have been as smooth as it typically would be. While the base ingredients are similar to most ice cream, including milk, heavy cream, and sugar, additionally, there is mastic gum (also called Arabic gum), *sablal*, rosewater, and pistachios, making it extremely flavorful.

Its nuttiness, combined with a subtle floral aroma, was a taste many guests had not experienced before but will look forward to tasting again in the future.

## Habiba Boru (Ethiopian Chef)

By Fallon Siegler

Practically every Ethiopian meal starts with *injera*, a flat, fermented pancake that is pivotal to Ethiopian cooking. It is made with a grain called teff, which, until recently, was exclusively grown in the area. Next, a stew of some sort, called *wat*, or a vegetable dish is poured onto the *injera*. These dishes are generally abundant with spices like *berbere*, a mix that usually includes pepper, garlic, ginger, cumin, and other spices. *Injera* is used to scoop the stews, vegetables, or salads, and once gone, everyone eats the *injera* at the bottom of the dish, which is now soaked in the juice and spices of the stew. Some Ethiopian beverages include *arera*, the liquid part of yogurt; *tedj*, a honey wine that is highly alcoholic; *talla*, or beer; *arak'i*, a beer-like drink; and coffee. Coffee is extremely important in Ethiopian culture; one is not supposed to drink it by oneself. As part of the culture, one will invite friends and neighbors over for coffee.

When it comes to eating in Ethiopia, it is about more than just the food; it is about togetherness. In a practice called *gorsha*, one friend tears off a piece of *injera*, dips it into the stew, rolls it and puts it into their friend's mouth. Sharing meals is important in Ethiopian culture, as it creates bonds with strangers and reinforces bonds with friends and family. Eating in a circle together also strengthens those relationships. Habiba Boru keeps these traditions alive, but she did not learn everything she knows about Ethiopian cooking in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is located in eastern Africa, to the west of Somalia. A military group called the Derg disrupted the country in 1974, transforming the country into a communist state. This takeover, subsequent drought, and massive famines



created a huge number of refugees. Among them were Habiba and her family. Habiba and her parents split from her grandparents and siblings, and they found themselves at a refugee camp in Kenya in 1992. Here, her mother would make and sell different *wats*, *injeras*, and *samosas*. She called her business “Habiba’s Hotel,” as “hotel” is synonymous with “restaurant” there. Habiba learned much of her cooking knowledge from her mother, starting at the age of seven:

If you’re a young girl in a household, they used to say back home, “If you don’t cook you will not find a husband.”

So, every time my mom used to say that, so I have to learn to cook, obviously. Down the road I want to get married, and if I don’t know how to cook then no one’s going to marry me. I’m so glad that I did that, because if I didn’t do that, look at me today, I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing, what I love to do.

Habiba arrived in the United States in 2000, and her love for cooking never faltered. Her favorite dishes are *doro wat* and *misr wat*. *Doro wat* is a chicken stew that is normally made for a special occasion, like a wedding or for guests. It is made from chicken, *berbere*, onions, and hard boiled

eggs, as well as other traditional stew ingredients. *Misr wat* is a red lentil stew.

Since 2000, Habiba has worked largely with the Syracuse refugee community. She works at the North Side Learning Center, helping them connect to the rest of Syracuse, through services like housing, translation, immigration, and social services. Additionally, she works as a job developer at RISE (Refugee and Immigrant Self-Empowerment), another refugee program, where she helps refugees find jobs.

She still incorporates cooking into her life, however. Her children also love *misr*



Karen dancers rehearse at the Karen Buddhist Monastery of Syracuse on September 24, 2017. Photo by James Groh.

and *doro wat*, as well as *alicha*, which is a mixture of beef, carrots, and potatoes. Recently, Habiba has used her talents in a life-changing way. Earlier this year, she got a call from her parents and discovered that her father was going blind. She wanted to take her children to see her parents at their home in the United Kingdom before that happened. However, she was unable to afford the expensive trip. Through Adam Sudmann's With Love Kitchen, though, she was able to raise money for the trip through cooking.

Despite her work with the community, Habiba has aspirations of cooking professionally one day:

When my mom was in a refugee camp, where nobody even dreams of doing stuff like that, in times of struggle, she managed to build a small space out of sticks and mud and called it Habiba's Hotel. My dream is to make that dream come true and open Habiba's Restaurant or Habiba's Kitchen one day. It's just not easy to do that; it takes a lot. I hope miracles happen. I'm going to try and work so hard to achieve this.

Ethiopian food brings people together, and Habiba continues that tradition here in the Syracuse community.

## **Karen Buddhist Monastery Dance Group (Burma)**

**By Jasmine Kim**

The Karen (Ka-REN) are an indigenous people from the Thailand–Burma border in Southeast Asia. They are one of the many ethnic groups in Burma. Most Karens practice Animism and Buddhism, but all religions are welcome, and about 30 percent of Karens are Christians. In Syracuse, the Karen community preserves Karen culture by creating and maintaining strong social ties within the community.

Karens are known for their hospitality and friendliness, which they willingly extend to everyone, as well as for their

energetic and jubilant festival dances and colorful traditional clothing. Dances are a way in which they create community when they have no permanent homeland. Karen dance in the Syracuse community not only signifies unity, it also represents Karen nationalism. In history, the people of Burma suffered from persecution by their own nation's army and tyranny. Due to this struggle, many people moved out of their homes and villages and into refugee camps. In this context, dance gives them hope, and they imagine their community to be complete again. Karen dance helps them to construct a notion of a larger togetherness.

Today, we will see a performance by members of the dance group of Syracuse's Karen Buddhist Monastery. Three members of the dance group lived in a refugee camp, eventually left Thailand, and came to Syracuse. Terdah is the leader of the dance group, as she teaches the younger boys and girls to dance. Her niece, Mu Mu, is also a member of the dance group, as well as a high school sophomore and volleyball player. Poe is also a sophomore in high school who dreams of becoming a doctor. Along with the rest of their group, these dancers will be performing two songs: "Naung Swa Po Awa" and "Lwe Aye Bar." Both songs are about the Karen community and freedom. Mu Mu explains, "We want to show how Karens cultivate [dance] and what [our] dance looks like, so they will recognize us as Karen people."

## **Bhim Biswa (Nepali Bhutanese Musician)**

**By Daniel Solomon**

Until 2008, Bhutan was a Buddhist kingdom located between China and India. It is considered to be one of the world's most isolated countries. Its government enforced a strict cultural regulation policy to limit the influx of foreign influences, including tourism, in an effort to preserve the country's Buddhist culture. Until the 1960s, the country did not have electricity,

paved roads, cars, telephones, or a postal service. Only during the late 1990s did it begin to allow access to television and the Internet. In the early 1990s, however, with the aim of ensuring a homogenous culture, Bhutan stripped the ethnic Nepalis residing in Bhutan of their citizenship and forced an estimated 108,000 (registered) refugees from southern Bhutan into seven camps in eastern Nepal. These 100,000+ people in camps made up roughly one-sixth of the population of Bhutan.

Homes in these camps were small huts with bamboo roofs, dirt floors, and no running water. Camp conditions are on record as having improved between 1995 and 2005, but initially many of the people relocated to these camps succumbed to malnutrition and diseases. In addition, the Bhutanese refugee population was denied the privileges of citizenship in Nepal and was only granted limited access to work opportunities.

In 2000, Bhutan and Nepal agreed to allow some Bhutanese refugees to return to Bhutan, but due to inhabitants who were born in the Nepalese camps not having established Bhutanese citizenship, they were denied repatriation. In 2007, a core group of eight countries came together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and offered to help resettle Bhutanese refugees from the seven camps to allow them to begin new lives elsewhere. By 2015, it was reported that just two camps remained, and the refugee population stood at less than 18,000 people.

Bhim Biswa, who resettled in Syracuse in 2009, recalled his personal experience of resettlement during an interview conducted in November 2017:

I am from Bhutan, Bhutan is my country. We are Bhutanese Nepali. For political reasons...more than 100,000 people were taken out of the country. We ended up coming to Nepal and became a refugee camp. We lived there for 20 years. Then we tried to go back to Bhutan; Bhutan didn't let us in. We didn't have a place to go; then, an



Bhim Biswa, Nepali Bhutanese musician. Photo by Daniel Solomon.

international organization came and said we'd like to resettle you. So many people went to Canada, the USA, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, so ... we are divided. But more than 60,000 came to the USA.

When asked about the tension between Bhutan and Nepal, he stated matter-of-factly that: "Nepal is Nepal, a different country. We are not from Nepal, we are from Bhutan. Only we talk the same language, but we are Bhutanese, not Nepalese. So, we are kept in the refugee camp, we are isolated. They really hate us." Having spent nearly 20 years of his life growing up in a refugee camp, he expressed, throughout our interview, an incredible amount of gratitude for having been allowed to be resettled in the United States:

"So as we come here today, tomorrow we got the same rights. Same opportunity like everyone."

My interview with Bhim took place inside of the home recording studio he has built in the basement of his family's home in North Syracuse. The tour of his studio began with a demonstration of the *madal* drum, the first instrument he'd learned to play. The *madal* is a small two-sided hand drum held sideways in the lap while seated. One of its heads (the "male" head) is larger than the other (the "female" head.) The smaller or "female" head produces a ringing tone when struck and is typically tuned to the tonic note of the music being played.

Bhim began learning music by playing with like-minded friends living in a refugee

camp. "In 1995, I was like teenager. At that time, it was really difficult. We didn't even have a guitar, no teacher at all." His first experiences of making music were playing the *madal* in a group called the Druk Youth Band. "Druk," he explained, "is a beautiful word for the Bhutan." Over years spent practicing music with the youth group after school, he learned to play bass guitar, drums, harmonium, piano, and then, guitar. He stressed that the group's music-making experience was "not something we learned from teachers; we learned from each other by hearing. I don't know notation or anything."

While some may view a lack of formal musical training as a handicap, Bhim values the hands-on approach he took to learning music. Despite not having taken lessons, he



is more than willing to provide lessons and teach kids to play guitar or drums. He stated that he has developed a teaching method, which minimizes theory and maximizes the enjoyment of making music.

“Teach them that [music making] can be fun,” he says, “and encourage them to play.”

Participating with a Christian youth organization while in Nepal resulted in Bhim being granted an opportunity to participate in recording projects. He was invited to play guitar and sing on recordings. The experience of recording in a simple multitracking studio seeded the dream of eventually having his own recording studio, where he could compose his own musical arrangements. “My first time recording,” he joked, “we recorded to a seven-track tape recorder.” Several years later, and thousands of miles away from where he’d first begun playing music, he is now fully equipped with the means of recording multitrack arrangements and collaborates with local musicians as well as friends located in different regions throughout the United States.

He demonstrated a number of his recordings, introducing the style as *adbunik* music, a modern variety of Nepali romantic pop music, which gained popularity on Nepalese radio in the 1990s. He described his ideal musical production as “music that the people will like,” explaining that “some younger people enjoy pop music while older people enjoy the folk-styled music,” and that he strives to compose and record music which resonates with a majority of the Bhutanese people. His music’s lyrics, he explained, are a reflection of his gratitude and devotion to God, and he beamed with joy while telling me of the blessings he and his family received by way of being given an opportunity to resettle and thrive as American citizens.

## St. Elias Antiochian Orthodox Church Dabkeh Dancers (Middle East)

By Anna Leach

*Dabkeh* is a traditional folk dance form that is widely popular among many groups of people in countries such as Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel. *Dabkeh* is performed in joyous settings, such as weddings and other family celebrations. Men and women can dance together, but traditionally, women do not dance without men in the group. This tradition has changed over the years, with more modern groups practicing and performing with only female dancers. The typical formation is a semicircle, with everyone holding hands or linking arms and moving in a counterclockwise direction. A major feature of the dance is the stomping. There are also small steps and hops, with the “leader” of the group, who is the best dancer, performing the most elaborate moves. The other dancers follow the leader and can copy his or her steps.

*Dabkeh* continues to be a significant part of musical life, as people have migrated from Arab countries and settled around the world. It is a tradition that is being passed down to younger generations in order to help them learn about their family roots and also to make sure the dance form is maintained. Modern dance teams are taught by older dancers, who may have performed while still in their home countries. They also watch videos of other groups for inspiration, though those groups also learn the traditional steps from their predecessors. Like any traditional form of expression, *dabkeh* aids in connecting generations while also educating youth in a changing society affected by globalization.

The Saint Elias Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church of Syracuse serves as a place for the Arab American Christian community to gather. The parish was established originally on November 10, 1929. In the ‘30s and ‘40s, despite a large-

scale fire, the parish continued to grow, and organizing continued to become more structured. At this time, the first annual social event for the Central New York Arabic speaking community, the Annual St. Elias Mahrajan, was established. Growth continued throughout the ‘50s and ‘60s, as more societies within the church (from choirs to youth organizations and men’s societies) created a more formal programming ecosystem. The new facility on Onondaga Hill opened on Saint Elias Day in 1969.

Today, the church congregation is still primarily influenced by those of Arab heritage, from new Americans to those whose families have been rooted in Central New York for years. Through regular programming, including the annual Syracuse Middle Eastern Festival, St. Elias continues to serve as a resource for many generations of Middle Eastern Christians.

### Profile: *Dabkeh* Dancer Samira Mahshie

For 18-year-old Samira Mahshie, dance was always destined to be part of her life in some capacity. When asked how she initially was introduced to dance, her answer was immediate: “Definitely my parents,” she says. “All younger kids are expected to dance. There’s no ifs, ands, or buts.”

Mahshie, who dances with the Saint Elias troupe, says *dabkeh* is a relatively simple dance from a technique perspective, using a mix of crossing legs, kicking feet, and stomping. All the dancers are women at present; this is reflected in the style as well, the movements overall more “elegant” and “flowy,” incorporating more general smoothness, plus more involvement of the hands (as opposed to in the men’s style, in which hands are held behind the back, the focus being on flashier footwork).

The group, comprised of all women, is one indication of the transition phase the group is currently weathering, according to Mashie. Since she has been dancing, at its height, there were as many as 14 dancers. At present, there are only four. And Mashie is on the “cusp” of the age range, technically too old at 18 and as a college





Members of the St Elias Antiochian Orthodox Church of Syracuse perform *dabkeh* dance at Syracuse University on December 2, 2017. From left, Elaina Elamir, Grace George, Aliah Mahshie, and Samira Mahshie. Photo by Anna Leach.

student to still be involved. However, there is a new generation on the horizon; in the next few years, she says a new group of 12 to 14 young dancers from families within the congregation will take her (and many other of the current members) places.

Mashie's own involvement in dance came through the church as well; her great grandfather immigrated to Syracuse from Palestine, and her family has a history within the Saint Elias community. She considers herself primarily an American (she cannot speak a "lick of Arabic" but "[does] know the swear words," she jokes), and many of the other girls currently dancing are the same. She says *dabkeh* has still provided her a way to connect to her family and her heritage.

It has also allowed her to learn more about other Middle Eastern cultures, due

to the diverse nature of the congregation. This especially comes through in the song choices, Mahshie says. For example, often, the group has to be careful to choose songs (often, one Syrian, one Palestinian, one Lebanese) to "appease everyone," but through that, she is exposed to all these different musical traditions. Making these choices also helps unify the church audience, as each can feel represented in their own ways and then learn as a whole about others.

"I think a lot of people also like to hear the music that we're doing," Mahshie says. "It's really popular songs that we do when we dance, so a lot of people will be able to understand them or know what's going on at least."

This idea of centralized community and simple *fun* is central to *dabkeh*, according to

Mahshie. Those elements of joy and unity are huge parts of what attracted her to the form originally, and it's something that has kept her dancing, too.

"It's a really happy dance. You do it to celebrate, to have fun, let loose," Mahshie says. "It makes everybody happy. It doesn't matter if you're Palestinian or if you're Syrian or if you're Lebanese—as long as you dance, it's kind of like we're all the same." ▼

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