In folklore studies, there is a dearth of information about the transnational processes by which diasporic communities actively negotiate their identities. In this article, I examine the variables that affect the cultural performances of the DiDinga, an understudied group of southern Sudanese refugees, known in the United States by the moniker “The Lost Boys.” In today’s world of globalization and transnationalism, documentation and interpretation of recontextualized performances is more critical than ever before. Part of this inquiry seeks to make explicit the tensions that affect ways by which this small group of parentless male youth come to consensus about appropriate and meaningful traditions performed for the public in a new context. Drawing on public sector work with refugees, I explore how folklore research contributes to identifying internal and external forces that act on the aesthetics of recontextualized performance of diasporic groups, as well as how folklorists work effectively to present and interpret recontextualized traditions of people now residing in the United States.

In this article, I focus on transnationality and the cultural effects of global processes on emerging traditions of refugees from southern Sudan now living in New York state. I explore the gap between understanding expressions of transnational identity as it relates to the lived experiences of refugees, who are more concerned with maintaining cultural authenticity and less concerned with their relationship to hegemonic American society. Central to this inquiry is the performance of tradition in a new context, resulting from the forced migration of refugee children who have lost connection with their parents and elders. In today’s world, folklorists are coming in contact with more and more diasporic groups whose cultural identities are transnational; that is, they maintain dual identities that can be said to involve both the globalization and the localization of culture (Safran 1991; Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994). Folklorists have long understood the performance of tradition to be a dynamic process that is emergent and not static (Hymes 1975; Bauman 1978, 1986; Glassie 1995). Because historical periods can never be replicated, even if outward expression appears unchanged, the meanings of traditions have changed. Emergent traditions, selected and reformulated as representative of a group’s identity, serve as
a means of identifying, affirming, and valuing uniqueness and personal history. In my research with Sudanese “Lost Boys,” I found that understanding their recontextualized dance song tradition was complicated by their life circumstances: they had lived for more than ten years with no contact with adult members of their DiDinga tribe. Further, because their culture is based largely on orality, there are few published sources and no official orthography for their language.

Before suggesting a theoretical model for understanding the emergence of tradition, I will ground it in a discussion of my fieldwork as well as a description of the inductive methodology I used to document the danced song traditions of the Lost Boys. It is not enough to say that the traditions of this small group are emergent. Comparisons over time of the videotaped danced songs and taped conversations with the Lost Boys about their performances reveal several forces acting on these traditions performed outside of their original context. It becomes apparent that diasporic authenticity can be defined when we recognize that, like all tradition, it involves a to-and-fro movement between culturally shared knowledge and group negotiation, ever affected by changing internal and external tensions.

My work with Sudanese refugees was one of those proverbial life coincidences with profound personal consequences. Like many people in other American cities to which the Lost Boys of southern Sudan had immigrated, I was at first only vaguely aware of this small community of young and parentless male refugees living in Syracuse, New York. I did not seek them out, nor they me. Less than a year after these Sudanese refugees arrived here, I contacted the local Refugee Resettlement Services to invite recently relocated people of any origin to my university class to share some of their traditions. That is when their amazing story of survival began to unfold for me. They were enthusiastic about performing for my American students, but there were programming limitations that would affect their presentations. Although traditional artists should be encouraged to self-present for new audiences, the mediating role of the public folklorist helps to ensure that traditions are adequately and appropriately recontextualized. As Robert Baron (following Dan Sheehy) has noted, “Folk artists should be adequately prepared in order to appropriately and effectively adapt their repertories and performance styles and rhetoric of performance” (1999:192). Therefore, the primary responsibility of introducing traditional performers through new frames falls squarely on the shoulders of the presenting folklorist.

Documenting Recontextualized Tradition

The compelling stories of all the Sudanese refugees are tragic, but none more so than those of the Lost Boys. In the late 1980s, after decades of civil war in their native land, thousands of Sudanese children, some as young as six and seven years of age, fled their burning villages and trekked to Ethiopia. Many of the survivors remained in camps in Ethiopia until, in 1991, a newly elected government there expelled them. Finding themselves back in Sudan with civil war again threatening, in 1992 the boys continued walking more than 600 kilometers into northwest Kenya, where the Kakuma camp was established to protect them. Some were imprisoned by officials at the Kenyan border; many others died in a war they did not understand and for which
they were not responsible (Zutt 1994:2). Dinka, as well as the smaller group of Di-
Dinga men, now comprise the total of seventy-five Sudanese Lost Boys who arrived
in Syracuse in 2001 after the United States offered 3,000 young men safe haven in
several cities throughout the United States. Until they volunteered stories about their
traditional village lives prior to the war, I had not fully comprehended how different
life is for the many refugees who come to the United States from rural, remote regions
of the world such as southern Sudan (Pipher 2002:63). I marvel at the resilience of
this group of young, shy men who have maneuvered their way in the United States
with no parents or elders here to advise them. With the help of a few dedicated vol-
unteers of Catholic Charities and other local parishes, they adjusted quickly to a
western way of life: the Lost Boys work, pay rent, buy cars, go to school, talk on cell
phones, and surf the Internet on donated computers. Most Americans who come in
contact with them are struck by their exuberant friendliness and adaptability. The
young men are cheerful, bright, and genuinely playful. They feel privileged to be in
the United States, but when asked about their families in Sudan, their voices become
serious: “We don’t know.”

My documentation of the traditions of the DiDinga young men began inciden-
tally. As a freelance public folklorist, I had wanted to find an appropriate venue where
I could introduce Americans to the rich culture of refugees now living in the city. I
had already decided it was important to honor the living traditions of the newest
residents in the neighborhood surrounding our university by inviting folk artists
from Bosnia, Burma (Myanmar), and Ukraine to my classroom. But in my first in-
terview with them to prepare for the classroom visit, I began to ask directly about dit,
the Dinka word for the traditional male bull song; they said they did not know the
word. When I asked about the colorful beaded vests for which the Dinka are renowned,
they said they did not know about such things either. I suspected that their lack of
knowledge resulted from separation from their families at such an early age. When I
overheard the young men speaking among themselves, I asked if they were speaking
Dinka. It was then that I heard the word DiDinga, which they described as an “en-
tirely different language.” The difference, they explained, was so great that the two
groups communicated in Arabic or, in the United States, in English. They reassured
me that I had made a common mistake, which was not “too bad,” because both Di-
Dinga and Dinka were cattle herders and sang bull songs, which the DiDinga called
olé (also oli). After apologizing for my ignorance, I used the opportunity to ask them
if they would teach me what I needed to know before they came to my classroom
(Briggs 1986).

After meeting this small group of DiDinga Lost Boys, I also recognized the impor-
tance of documenting their traditions as they continue to evolve in a new context and,
in this case, a new country, while at the same time finding new outlets for their cul-
tural expressions. A part of this inquiry was to elucidate the ways a group comes to
consensus about appropriate and meaningful traditions performed outside of their
natural cultural context. This process involved recontextualization and transnational-
ism, both of which affected the young men’s performance of identity. Focusing on the
negotiation process related to aesthetics and identity, it soon became clear that the
young DiDinga men selected, omitted, or recombined traditions learned as children
in their remote rural villages, as refugees in Kenyan camps, as students in Nairobi missionary schools, and as residents in an urban American environment. The young men told me that they had sung together in a Dominican missionary school in Nairobi under the leadership of Charles, now about twenty-one years of age, because he was the oldest. In Nairobi they had learned to harmonize in the western choral tradition. It was at the University of Nairobi that the DiDinga had competed with the Dinka in a dance competition in which they won first place “over the Dinka.”

In general, there are few publications to guide folklore research with the many refugee groups in the United States. Although I have had many opportunities to observe firsthand the Lost Boys’ traditions as they continue to evolve here, my dilemma as a folklorist is how to collaborate with the young men in order to adequately present and interpret these traditions now being performed outside of their natural context in Sudan. It was two years before I had the good fortune to observe DiDinga traditional dance in its original context, and that opportunity was limited to a home video made by a DiDinga elder who returned from a refugee camp in Sudan. But eventually I witnessed and documented the first full-scale DiDinga dance performed in the United States when DiDinga elders drove en masse from distant states to Auburn, New York, for a public performance with the Lost Boys.

There can be no accurate discussion of the performances of these young men without an understanding of how war has disrupted the lives of every man, woman, and child in southern Sudan. As the U.S. Committee on Refugees (USCR) reports, the Sudanese have suffered more war-related deaths during the past fifteen years than any single population in the world. The current phases of the war began in 1983, pitting the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) and its allies against the government of Sudan and its military and allies. Since 1983, the SPLA has been fighting for the rights of the largely Christian south against domination by the Arabic-speaking Islamic government in the north. This war has cost the lives of more than two million people, the death toll greater than all the fatalities in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Somalia, and Algeria combined. Today there are still four million Sudanese internally displaced within their own country, and the young DiDinga men whom I know are only a few of the 350,000 refugees who fled to neighboring countries, unable to return to their war-ravaged homes. In July 2002, the Sudanese government and southern rebels reached an agreement to hold a referendum that will give the south the option to secede from the north after a six-year interim period. Because the Arab League wants to see a unified Sudan, during the first round of talks the government will exempt the southern Christian and animistic Sudanese from Islamic sharia law.

But the war in Sudan is more complicated than a simple north-south territorial conflict. The conflict has now spread to western Sudan, where the mostly black Muslim populations are engaged in armed conflict with the Islamic Khartoum government military that is engaging in “ethnic cleansing.” As Francis Mading Deng (1995) and others have shown, many deaths have also resulted from infighting among southern Sudanese rebel armies. Among both DiDinga and Dinka young men in our city, there are some who have witnessed the murders of their own families by neighboring rebel soldiers. In Syracuse, the majority of the young male Sudanese refugees are
Dinka, who insist that the killing of civilians is a misunderstanding among brothers and not an issue for international concern. From the DiDinga perspective, however, it is more than mere misunderstanding. Because of the domination of the DiDinga by not only the northern Islamic government but also Christian and animistic groups like the Dinka and Nuer in the south who make up these rebel armies, what might appear to be a traditional danced song about warriors and cattle-raiding of long ago between DiDinga and their neighbors like the Toposa can be sung as a protest against the atrocities committed by Islamic government soldiers from the north as well as by southern Sudanese rebel armies against southern Sudanese civilians:

Etedia tolit
Nalimaya tuhui hadim nak hasina bee shinang Naleimaya tuhui
Ero ero ero
Nalimaya tuhui hadim nake hasina bee shingang Nalimaya tuhui
[The tolit fruit has detached itself from the tolit tree.
We would like to see Mt. Nalimaya overturn.
Ero, ero, ero,
We would really like to see Mt. Nalimaya turn over.]\(^5\)

According to the group, tolit is DiDinga for a special kind of tree that is “very, very big” and has very big “plums.” When I later found tolit in Rosato’s dictionary, I learned that it is DiDinga for the sausage tree (kigelia pinnata). It was no exaggeration when they said that the “plums” were very large. The fruit of the tolit, which is in the bignonia family, is two feet long and can weigh as much as fifteen pounds. As a matter of fact, the fruit hangs on long ropelike stalks and resembles giant sausages. I thought it was strange that a song about a sausage tree would be sung with such emotion until I learned that “Etedia tolit” means “the tree dropped its fruit,” an ode to the tree that killed a group of invaders when it dropped its fruit on the invaders sitting under it. The singers, therefore, request the tolit to “do it again” and further invoke Mt. Nalimaya to “turn over” to evict the invaders. Eventually, the DiDinga told me that songs like tolit have “hidden meanings.” As Lino told me, “This song means the DiDinga are a hospitable people and the SPLA who are Dinka rebel soldiers came to our land, but then they would not leave and we are asking the tolit tree to drop its fruit to kill them” (Interview, Syracuse, March 10, 2004).

“Really DiDinga”

The DiDinga have two traditional dances: gyrikot and nyakorot.\(^6\) Although there are many kinds of songs for healing, weddings, funerals, and so forth, the songs the Lost Boys performed for American audiences include only three types: political songs, mocking songs, and warrior songs. Mocking songs are sung during gyrikot, impromptu social dances, in which singers form a stationary semicircle and then sway as they sing. Story songs can also be sung during this spontaneous gyrikot, or during nyakorot, the formal full-scale celebratory dance, which often lasts twelve hours or more. Nyakorot opens formally with lilia, a very slow procession that is also performed to signal the end of nyakorot. Political songs and warrior songs are usually sung during nyakorot,
while *olé*, the bull song, can be sung, usually by the creator of the song, anytime and anywhere. If the singer is a renowned bull singer, he will be encouraged by the others to perform his song during the full-scale *nyakorot*. If the song is considered exceptional, it may be sung by others even when the song’s creator is not in their presence. The DiDinga I interviewed all told me that *nyakorot* is based on *padan* and *ngothi*, two dance steps unique to them, and that *nyakorot* is “really DiDinga.” By contrast, *gyrikot* is said to have been adopted from neighboring groups in Uganda and, in some ways, demonstrates creolization, the combining of cultural elements from two or more distinct aesthetic systems that give rise to a new expressive behavior (Szwed 2004).

I first heard the DiDinga sing *Ichayo*, which translates simply to “fighting,” during a public performance in the nearby city of Auburn, New York. The program was sponsored by the Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center, which had contracted me to coordinate their public folk arts program. I saw this as an opportune time to introduce Americans to the Lost Boys and convinced the director to provide the venue—the parking lot of the Thompson Memorial AME Zion Church in Auburn. The audience for the performance was mainly African American with no prior exposure to DiDinga language or culture. Although a printed program with historical information and translations by the young men was distributed, the ensuing questions after the performance demonstrated the audience’s strong desire to connect with an African heritage and, at the same time, exposed the audience’s unfamiliarity with Dinka or DiDinga cultures. When the young men attempted to explain the cultural differences between DiDinga and Dinka, both of whom were performing that day, several audience members insisted, “But don’t you think at one time you were one people?” The DiDinga and Dinka, who are linguistically and culturally distinct and do not intermarry, merely stood still—and blinked in amazement. Both Dinka and DiDinga repeated, “We are different tribes.” Although it would have been impossible for me to step in and explain the debate over the usage of the word “tribe,” I did try to clarify the cultural differences between the two groups who, according to extant archaeological evidence, originally migrated to southern Sudan from very different parts of Africa. For the American audience that observed the performances, however, the Dinka and DiDinga remained simply a “Sudanese tribe.”

After the performance, all of the dancers seemed surprised by the degree of American unfamiliarity with Sudan and its numerous “tribes.” Indeed, because the audience was made up of mainly African-American Christians, most had giggled when the DiDinga mentioned their continued tradition of polygamy, still practiced by many Christian Dinka and DiDinga and other groups in southern Sudan. Despite the audience’s general unfamiliarity with Sudanese cultures, the young men expertly demonstrated their traditional artistic virtuosity with coordinated rhythmic movements and vocal agility through quickly changing musical modes. The audience was stunned. After the program, one American expressed what many of us were thinking: “They [the dancers] appeared to transport themselves back to Sudan—and at one point, I too felt they took us with them.”

The power of this performance could never be properly captured on video or in print because, as John Miles Foley has so aptly noted, “The play’s the thing (and not the script)” (2002:184). When I later met with the young men to review the videotapes
in my home, their comments supported Foley’s statement in a literal way that even Foley may not have expected: when I asked why they had been laughing during some of the songs, they explained that a playful teasing exchange between Fortunato and Lino had been taking place during the dance. Fortunato had substituted Lino’s name in a song, a change that made Lino a cuckolded husband whose masculinity is in question when his wife receives a love letter from another man. In addition to missing these playful substitutions, in this recontextualized performance, the traditional critique by the audience was nonexistent. In spite of limitations, the audience’s enjoyment of the men’s rhythms and movements and the experience of being transported to Sudan indicated a degree of aesthetic appreciation beyond the spoken word. As I later worked on the translations for these danced songs with the singers, however, it became increasingly clear that outsiders could never fully appreciate culture-specific, oral-poetic language such as that used by the performers. It is extremely difficult for English-speaking DiDinga to render the meaning of the songs into English. For example, some of the words have been adopted from their traditional enemies, the Toposa. One DiDinga elder admitted that DiDinga do not know the meanings of these words, but the Toposa words nevertheless contribute to DiDinga aesthetics. I relied mostly on Charles’s translations and then checked them with Paul Atanya, a Canadian DiDinga musician who had taken a three-day bus trip to perform with the young men on August 17, 2003. Earlier, I had contacted Atanya by e-mail and later by telephone after hearing a cassette tape of his Canadian band, Kojo, which the young men had given to me. After speaking several times with Atanya, I realized the subtlety that existed in what I thought were relatively straightforward texts:

Ichayo hotongutho Iota
Ichayo hotongutho Iota
Ichaya gore baoko nyao
Ichaya hotongutho Iota
Ichaya loholia hotonguthu Iota
[They fought a gun battle until they lay on the ground.
They fought a gun battle until they lay on the ground.
They fought a gun battle during the war of Nyao.
They fought a gun battle until they lay on the ground.
The children fought a gun battle until they lay on the ground.]^8

The repetition of this song is characteristic of all DiDinga songs. The refrain is repeated unless the lead singer inserts another line and changes the octave. When the soloist returns to the original octave, it indicates that the song is about to end. The reference to “they” in this song is intentionally vague. According to Atanya and the young men, the song describes one particular historic battle between the DiDinga and their traditional enemies, the Toposa (whom the DiDinga claim to this day are hostile to them). Battles often relate to the cattle raiding that occurs among many of the ethnic groups. The use of the word children (loholia) for warriors is an example of special language; and like the repetition and the parallelism of most DiDinga songs, it is fundamental to the song’s meaning as well as to its inherent power (see Foley 2002:184).
Although the DiDinga word for children is used, the song is sung by villagers to encourage young men to continue the hereditary fight. When I asked the performers to comment on the meaning of the text, they merely described it as “a nice song.” Another DiDinga explained that the song was about a tribal war and DiDinga men “who really fought and didn’t give in.” They suggested to me pride not only in the bravery of the DiDinga warriors, but also in the cultural acceptance of cattle raiding, which traditionally has been the root of almost all intertribal warfare. Yet, they admitted on several occasions that cattle raiding is “destructive.” The DiDinga word for children is essentially facetious in this context, because this song is praise for young adult males who have already been initiated and granted warrior status. It is also ironic because modern Sudanese armies on all sides have conscripted male children to fight in an adult war.

The word “fighting” refers to ethnic conflicts over cattle raiding as well as to the killing of DiDinga civilians during the current civil war. Many of the songs (e.g., Ichayo) that the DiDinga identify as old ones, can also be new; that is, such songs may imply both recent wars and political events in addition to the original historical battles. When sung for American audiences, the commingling of old and new meanings may in fact produce a hybrid—two distinct reference points forging a new identity for the performers, not as warriors, but as refugees of that war. None of the young men explained the song in this way, but because of their new life experiences and education, the word “warrior” for them has perhaps taken on new meaning.

Other songs, however, were designated as new, because they may be transitory. For example, during one performance, they sang Tinga Tinga Lobulingiro, a strangely upbeat tune that praises Peter Lorot (whose bullname is Lobulingiro), commander of a DiDinga rebel army. One young man explained that they sang the song to honor Lobulingiro because he killed another commander and that it was “a new one):

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Enek Sadiq Lugo ica
Gerengi anyaha guwa ci hauna kicaya Kapuata ma kicaya Kapuata tel hotia Tororita
lahadi Juba ci ngati hengera huwanya iwir Sadiqi uha Khatiba
Nakeny hichayo
Muxsasa ereyo ica
Khatiba Ghazali nica anyaha guwa ci Sudani
[Tell Sadik to leave (the South).]
Garang is coming, bringing (military) force.
That we intend to bombard and liberate Kapoeta.
After we have liberated Kapoeta, we march on Torit until Juba (whereupon) we divide
(munitions).
Nakeng Battalion, let us fight!
Broom Battalion, wait (for us!)
Gazelle Battalion is coming, bringing Sudan’s force.]
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In the mid-1980s, John Garang, commander in-chief of the SPLA/M (Sudanese People’s Liberation Army and Movement), scored many military victories when he liberated strategic towns in southern Sudan from the control of Arabic soldiers. The southern rebel soldiers in this song are warning Sadik, who was prime minister at
that time, to leave southern Sudan because Garang was bringing his military forces to liberate the cities of Torit and Juba. Charles later explained, “We are telling Sadik to move out [of] that place [Kapuata] and leave southerners alone to have peace as other people do. We will move from Kapuata, Torit, and Juba if you [Sadik] will not move” (Interview, Syracuse, June 20, 2002). The young men smiled broadly as they sang this military song and the soloist later added that there was a positive “feel” to the song, telling me that Sadik should move out of Kapuata before the “team came for reinforcement to overthrow,” indicating the young men’s boast that their DiDinga “team” will ultimately prevail.

Unlike traditional (old) songs, this new song was not highly repetitious, and examples of parallelism and special language seemed to be absent (see Foley 2002). Dancers formed the traditional dance circle of nyakorot but remained motionless until the song was finished. At that point, they resumed their clockwise movement using a traditional dance step called ngothi, in which the feet are only slightly tapped before a jump. Also, unlike the old song in which nuance is subtle, this one is specifically tied to a particular event and person; anyone familiar with the history and politics of Sudan can understand the message.

Prior to the performance, I observed that the inclusion of this song had been heatedly debated by the DiDinga on several occasions. By consensus, both songs were eventually included, although initially the soloist had argued that the song about Sadik was not a traditional (old) song but rather a new (political) one and should not be performed for Americans. Once the decision was made to include these two songs, however, I was surprised when the DiDinga also sang *Ee Uket Nohoni* (Why Are You Torturing Us Like This?):

Ee uket nohoni  
Ee longo cik gang dekerik i horoma ho  
Uket nohoni  
Ee uki hati koruma iin meder  
[Why are you torturing us like this?  
Yes, you guys on the hill above?  
Why are you torturing us?  
Yes, it will one day become a vendetta.]

This song is about oppression of the DiDinga by the Islamic majority. Although the groups are not named, they sing that one day the situation will be reversed. “Guys on the hill” is a reference to the police post built near Mount Lotukei, close to the Ugandan border, by Muslims from the north. The song is actually a protest about police brutality against the DiDinga, who were powerless to resist. Instead they taunted their enemies with songs like this one recalled from their childhood. Unlike the other political songs, however, *Ee Uket Nohoni* is sung in the traditional DiDinga proverbial style; that is, the text is a symbolically dense narrative that relies heavily on contextual information for the audience to grasp its meaning. Like most traditional DiDinga songs, its specificity is only recognizable to DiDinga, and, without an intimate knowledge of DiDinga oral history, the meaning is entirely lost.
By contrast, “new” songs like Tinga Tinga Lobulingiro incorporate specific references to people and current events. Yet both old and new songs are sung to the same kind of traditional melody, with a soloist taking the lead and the chorus replying in a sort of call and response. In other words, whether the texts were traditional or new, the melody and the delivery remained old. In essence, all DiDinga songs are both old and new because the DiDinga often express themselves in a traditional proverbial manner without naming specific people or places. I also came to realize that “nice songs,” however militant, expressed bravery, resistance, and a positive outcome for the DiDinga. Sometimes it was only the soloist, the eldest in the group, who knew the songs and introduced them to the group, demonstrating how an individual’s repertoire can increase that of the group. The fact that only the soloist understood the references did not seem to hamper this process. “Proverb” is the word used by the DiDinga to explain that, in the original village context, their succinct songs serve as a newspaper: referring back to specific incidents or specific people, but always in flux. It is “generative theory,” rather than Albert Lord’s oral-formulaic theory, that I believe best explains the nature of these mutable songs, an approach described by Bruce A. Rosenberg in his work on black sermons: “Lord ties the creation of new formulas (metrically governed utterances) to the singer’s recollection of the commonest ones. Actually, the singer is freed from such memory and such hydraulic reliance. He has at his command not several score or even several hundred formulas which can be altered by a word or phrase substitution but rather a metrical deep structure enabling the generation of an infinite number of sentences or utterances in the meter of his native language” (1990:147). The DiDinga singers also demonstrated a similar facility with “metrical deep structures,” and, even if they did not know the words, they responded to the call of the soloist, who strung together several songs. The following texts elucidate a subtle negotiation process occurring during recontextualized performances.

Lobalu and Lotiki

The group’s repertoire included what I would call traditional folktales sung as “proverbs” because the text was so succinct that it required a great deal of cultural literacy. For instance, the song “Lobalu” had initially been performed in my university classroom:

Ololo Lobalu Ololo Lobalu
Aitani cieth hutuno
Mumm Lobalu aitani ceith hutuno
Aa iin cieth carret inni
[Ololo Lobalu, Ololo Lobalu
How do you think you are building the house?
Mmm, Lobalu how are you building the house?
Why is the house (looking like) a porcupine?]12

They explained that the DiDinga take great pride in building their homes, granaries, and so forth. Women especially take note of this with respect to eligible single men
approaching the age of marriage, because a man must be capable of designing a good house for his bride. The song is about an actual man named Lobalu who had poor architectural skills. During a public construction of a village house, Lobalu’s portion of thatched hut was rough. The grass was not smoothly applied, but instead stuck out like a porcupine’s quills. The original composer wasted no time in exposing Lobalu as an incompetent builder to the whole village. His failings were recorded in a song, memorialized in DiDinga oral history (cf. Rosenberg 2002). The song about Lobalu also implies the importance that houses, built on steep slopes, both conform to DiDinga aesthetics and be strong enough to endure the rainy seasons.

Every DiDinga to whom I spoke knew the traditional song “Lobalu” as well as “Lotiki,” a warrior song typically sung during nyakorot and performed on several occasions for different American audiences. The traditional song, with which all of the young men were familiar, was eventually written in DiDinga and English for our program brochure by the soloist, as well as by Patrick, a younger DiDinga Lost Boy from Kentucky, who stayed with Charles during the summer of 2002. Because there is still no official published orthography for DiDinga language, inconsistencies are to be expected. Yet the song texts, recorded in print for the first time here, are remarkably identical. I compared Patrick’s written text with the one given to me by Charles:

Patrick’s version:
1. Adohit kodobuana Lotiki liku bali
2. Adohit kodobuana Lotiki liku bali
3. Lika ba Lotiki tomiro
4. Lika ba Lotiki tomiro
5. Holo adahita
6. Adohit hotogutho heeni tamiro
7. (Anek lo hirto gong ablahi tina buliohi)

Charles’s version:
1. Adahit hodopuwana Lotiki likaibani
2. Adahit hodopuwana Lotiki likaibani
3. Likaiba Lotiki taminaro
4. Likaiba Lotika taminaro
5. Holo adahita
6. Adihit hotongutho heeni taminaro

[Interview, Syracuse University, August 6, 2002]
When I asked Atanya to confirm the young men's orthography, he supplied yet a third way to represent DiDinga language:

Soloist: Adahit hodobwana Lotiki lika ibali
Chorus: Adahit hodobwana Lotiki lika ibali
Soloist: Lika ba Lotiki taminaro
Chorus: Lika ba Lotiki taminaro
Soloist: Holo adahita
Chorus: Adahit hotogutho heeni taminaro. (e-mail communication, 2002)\(^\text{14}\)

“Lotiki” is actually part of the warrior tradition of young men, found throughout East Africa. These songs are often associated with African age grades in a hierarchical status system.\(^\text{15}\) Charles insisted that the text concerns a hunter named Lotiki: “The vultures ate Lotiki during hunting time. Only men sing it, mostly when they are hunting. Hyena kill Lotiki and then the vulture came and ate Lotiki’s corpse. You hyena, one day they will come to eat you.” During the second performance, he had altered the text by omitting the final line, a reference to eating the cows. To confirm what I assumed was a chance omission, I reviewed several tapes of past performances with the other young DiDinga when Charles was not present. Their translation of the song was consistent with his, except they continued to refer to the omitted line:

Joseph: That is about a guy named Lotiki. Lotiki, he was like butchered somewhere. When people went hunting, he was butchered. You know, hyenas ate him up. Actually, all these songs are like stories.
Dominic L.: But they—we—don’t sing it entirely. But they sing it in a proverb way.
James: The hyenas ate Lotiki. Then the vultures ate Lotiki. They could go and eat the cows. So, you could go and eat this meat and it is Lotiki. Tell hyena who eats animals at night to come and eat at daytime too. Vultures eat Lotiki and they sleep in trees like, like, I don’t know the name for the word [vultures]. They are slow and lazy. (Interview, Syracuse, June 20, 2002)

When I later worked with Charles to write the song text, he continued to omit the reference to cows (\textit{tina}). All of the young performers insisted that Lotiki was a hunter who was eaten by a hyena. Yet, when I asked Patrick and Peter, the two other DiDinga visitors from Kentucky, both of their versions included the final line, \textit{Anek lohirto gong adahi tina balioli} [Tell the hyena, you have always been in the habit of devouring the cows at night]. To understand who Lotiki was I spoke again with Atanya, who explained that in DiDingaland, the hyena is one of the most despised animals because they are the most frequent killers of livestock such as goats, sheep, and especially cattle, the basis of the DiDinga economic system: “The DiDinga word for hyena is \textit{lohirto}, but because of their dislike for this animal, the DiDinga call it ‘Lotiki’—which means ‘one with big ears.’ Since he is a cunning as well as ruthless hunter, the hyena in this song is both admired and ridiculed; and at the end of the song, he is killed and eaten by vultures” (e-mail communication, 2002).

Yet, in contrast to Atanya’s interpretation, all of the young DiDinga translated the
text to mean that Lotiki, a human hunter with big ears, was eaten by the vultures. None identified Lotiki as a hyena. Because no version identifies who killed Lotiki, the young singers said that the song implied that hyena was his killer. Finally, I asked Charles, the soloist for this song, why he had deleted the last line. He declared simply, “For effect.” But my doubts lingered. Were the young men adequately familiar with DiDinga tradition? After escaping, each young man had been separated from his village and had been living together for the last ten years in a refugee camp, eventually attending missionary schools in Kenya. Their interpretation of the text was certainly possible because the grammatical structure of the song in DiDinga language left a space open for the young men to interpret it in this way. It seemed to me that the song, based on how they had understood it as children, represented a tradition unique to this subgroup of DiDinga. Unlike DiDinga elders, who might view their performance as defective, as a folklorist what I saw was not incomplete but rather authentic and meaningful for this small group. The young men had communicated a DiDinga child’s understanding of the song—but it was now being sung by young men. Later, I learned that Lotiki is a common name for young DiDinga boys. In this way, the young men had preserved a shared tradition. Because of the continuing civil war in Sudan, it was impossible for me to visit DiDingaland to learn more about these traditions. It was necessary, therefore, that I rely on these young men’s descriptive memories about DiDinga dance traditions and honor their traditions as they were emerging in a new context. I later discovered that other DiDinga elders in the United States fully approved of the young singer’s decision to omit the last line; in fact, the change was acceptable to DiDinga whom Charles eventually visited in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Moreover, some of the versions sung by the Lost Boys did not change even after DiDinga elders pointed out that their songs were not “good”—that is, the young men did not fully understand the traditional meaning. It was then I realized that the Lost Boys had created their own nostalgic repertoire: as “immature” as some of the songs might appear to the elders, these traditions were the ones the young men shared and continued to perform after the elders’ departure from our region.

Gyrikot: It’s All about Love Stuff

On the surface, none of the DiDinga young men’s songs appeared complex enough to warrant an in-depth text-centered approach. While applying Dennis Tedlock’s microanalysis to the DiDinga songs gives the impression that an oral performance can be adequately represented in print (1983), I found a more useful approach in inviting the singers’ commentaries as they reviewed a videotape or listened to a cassette tape after the performances. Similarly, capturing the danced songs in print is not easy. The lively and highly repetitive antiphonal melodies of this group, based on the pentatonic scale, are composed spontaneously even when performed in Sudanese villages—hence, no two melodies are ever performed in exactly the same way. DiDinga songs possess unique musical characteristics, such as frequently changing keys, stringing different songs together with little or no break and changing melody or rhythm. Musical accompaniment is unique because, unlike other neighboring Surmic-speak-
ing groups, the DiDinga, until recent contact with other African groups, did not use the drum. For the most part, songs are unaccompanied by instruments, except for a tooeri (reed trumpet), occasional hedemeta (hand-held rattles made from dried gourds), or chugurena (small bells worn on the forearms and thighs). Percussion is produced by stomping the feet while clapping and standing in a line; when females are present, a male-female formation called padan is formed. During nyakorot, the movements also include ngothi, jumping in rapid sequence.

All the young men in Syracuse knew padan and ngothi. Even without instruments such as hedemeta, the young men improvised the sound by using aluminum pans and tin trays with forks and knives from their kitchen. When I offered them wooden instruments, which I had bought at a store specializing in African wares, they politely accepted the instruments but still performed on the next occasion with the aluminum pans. I thought that perhaps they had misplaced the wooden instruments, but they clearly preferred metal whistles, knives, and forks as accompaniment for their songs; however, when I purchased two horse and cow-tail fly-whips and community members donated African thumb pianos, they did use these additions. It is interesting to note that the DiDinga tell me their word for the fly-whip is nyalado, a word borrowed from the hostile Toposa. Thus, their incorporation of cultural objects from the Toposa, and from countries like Kenya and the United States, demonstrates the creativity that occurs during cultural contact. Although nyakorot was danced and sung in the “truly DiDinga” way, the musical instruments had been hybridized. And soon after performing with Africans from Ghana, the young men requested that I provide a drum for their next public performance.

Like many other East African groups, in addition to political songs the men most frequently danced and sang mocking songs like Mariah, during which the tempo increases until it culminates in an insult or reprimand. Other songs included references to love relationships between young men and women, and therefore gyrikot is the genre favored by DiDinga youth in Sudan. In the United States, gyrikot lent itself to many performance opportunities because it is a vigorous dance tradition that could be appreciated by non-DiDinga speakers (see Figure 1). One young DiDinga explained a young man’s preference for this tradition because “gyrikot is all based in love stuff.” The most obvious example of “love stuff” follows:

Soloist: Ai Mariah hanyaki thong
Ai Mariah hanyaki thong
Chorus: Ai Mariah hanyaki thong
Ai Mariah hanyaki thong
Soloist: Ee tira thiga da
Chorus: Arita hina gi ci ereketa
Ee Ai Mariah hanyaki thong

[Soloist: Maria says, I’m pregnant.
Yes, Maria says, I’m pregnant.
Chorus: Maria says, I’m pregnant.
Yes, Maria says, I’m pregnant.
Soloist: Yes, so let us see you give birth.
Chorus: Instead she is giving birth to
it (something we do not know).
Yes, Maria says, I’m pregnant.]^16

This kind of repetition, according to Foley (2002), is connotatively explosive, just as the omission of a final line in Lotiki was made “for effect.” Like repetition, omissions
can also be part of the art of performance. Based in DiDinga tradition, the repetition in the song may be for effect, but the humor also conveys a serious warning about premarital sex: outside the institution of marriage, sex has its consequences. Among the DiDinga, sometimes an unmarried woman, like an unmarried man, might have multiple relationships. In this song, Maria tells her lover that she is pregnant, but DiDinga society has no way to determine fatherhood scientifically. This poses difficulties for many men and judges, who rely on physical similarity of the child to determine the father, a process that takes time. In this song, Maria claims she is pregnant by one of her lovers whom she believes is definitely the father of her child. But she is chided that she could be giving birth to something we do not know, because the father’s identity, human or not, is uncertain. The insult might go unnoticed even by linguists because of the subtlety of DiDinga verbal play. As the young men explained, in Maria’s case, the insult is “something we do not know,” which implies not only that Maria is promiscuous, but also that perhaps her offspring is not even human. Although few words are sung, each is loaded with meaning encapsulated in this shorthand form. It was difficult to interpret the pithy humor of these songs for an American audience. The songs were not exactly hybrid or creole, nor were they exactly incomplete, combined, or recombined. The young men were preserving their DiDinga tradition as they had understood it when forced to flee their villages at a very young age.
Although DiDinga abuse songs and political songs are common, the genre of song held in highest regard is the “olé,” a term for the male bull song (unrelated to the Spanish, Olé). Yet most of the DiDinga I met had not progressed through an initiation to warrior status, and thus none wore the black feather indicating the completion of the initiation that gave a man the privilege to sing a fully composed olé. Although none had yet composed full-fledged bull songs, some did recall the beginning stage for the bull songs of their youth composed for the man’s favorite bull. During adolescence, a son is given a calf that he must raise and for which he alone is responsible. As such, he must compose a song to his bull that will soothe the bull throughout its lifetime; it is the song the man will use to call his bull to follow him home after grazing. The importance of the olé for a man’s identity and the centrality of the bull in DiDinga culture is difficult for Americans to understand; it was revealed to me and my husband, John, during a lengthy exchange with several of the young men at my home on May 16, 2002:

Felicia: Do you have one? Olé?
Lino: Oh no, maybe if we would have stayed for some time we would have had one. If I had stayed there, I would have composed one, maybe. But it is not really hard.
Felicia: I heard Andrew and Anthony sing their [Dinka] bull songs once. It sounded very hard.
Lino: Oh yeah—being creative . . . you have your bull and nobody can touch your bull. If it is dead, it is a matter of life and death. If someone comes, you defend it. Nobody should do anything to it.
Felicia: Is this like your identity?
Lino: Oh yes, identity. Very important.
Dominic R.: Oh yes, very important.
Felicia: If you went back to Sudan, after you have had an education—and not everyone has an education—would you still be able to have the bull and sing the bull song?
Lino: Oh yes! It is our culture! It is our culture. You can’t just say “no” because it is your culture.
Dominic R.: I had my bull there. And when I was playing, it was still very, very young, you know. I was really in love. So, I composed one of the songs to watch it. You guys, when we were talking here, it was something that I really remember.
John: Do you perform this song? Do you have it written down? Do you have it in your head?
Dominic R.: Yes, I created it and when I was with my friends, taking it to grazing, so I was just singing to soothe my young love, my bull. For example I can sing it . . . . That is why, when we were discussing this, in my head, I said, “Oh, I am very much happy to hear this” and I had it in my heart. It is just something that is there.

At my request to hear his bull song, Dominic jumped up, made a snorting sound and held his arms high over his head in imitation of the bull’s horns. What took place next was a kind of call and response:
Oli cani ci marini oo ci homina
Oo Oli cani ci marini oo ci homina
Locia eet oli cani ci marini oo ci hamina
Ci ica aduot ci homina
Locia eet oli cani ci marini oo ci hamina
Illale oli cani ci marini oo ci hamina
Locia eet oli cani ci marini oo ci hamina
[I love my bull with its red head.
Oh, I love my bull with its red head.
Son of my uncle, I love my bull with its red head
Which no one will stone.
Son of my uncle, I love my bull with its red head.
Thank you, I love my bull with its red head.
Son of my uncle, I love my bull with its red head].
(Interview, Syracuse, May 16, 2002)²⁷

Until Dominic sang his olé, I had never heard a DiDinga bull song. It was another year before I had the good fortune to meet Angelo Gola, a renowned DiDinga bull singer who was living in Nashville, Tennessee, where he worked as a night security guard (see Figure 2). Atanya had encouraged Angelo to come to Auburn to perform with the young men on August 17, 2003. For the program, Atanya also provided translations for Angelo’s songs recorded below. An adult bull singer composes his individual olé over a period of years, as he matures from a young boy to a man. His maturity is expressed through the characteristics of his pet bull. For example, I later learned that bull songs are poetic and flowery, which surprised me because warriors sing them. There is no such thing as a fully composed bull song; instead as vignettes are created, they are added to the singer’s bull song, which in effect constitutes his repertoire:

HODO HODO HODO
Hodo hodo hodo Ningiti mamu ho
Manga hongi modung Iyo Naita Riono
Manga hongi modung
Manga hongi modung Iyo Naita Riono
Manga hongi modung
Ningiti mamu ho

[My! My! My!
My, my, my. This is the place of water.
Stop sleeping on your stomach. Oh yes, Naita Riono.
Stop sleeping on your stomach.
Stop sleeping on your stomach. Yes, Naita Riono.
Stop sleeping on your stomach.
This is the place of water.]

ATI DOHOLECO
Duha da nibuuk cugunik
Aito gi uma ci hanyaha na
Kai kedenano thong
Na Lolima Awo Nyakori
Lolima Awo Nyakori
Kamuhani na iyieni nganita

[MOTHER OF THE CHILD
You too tell your story.
There is nothing that I bring to you (dowry).
I am seeking a loan.
I Lolima, Awo Nyakori,
Lolima Awo Nyakori.
I was thinking of you today.]
These are some of the vignettes that make up Angelo’s bull song. Angelo is thirty years old. By comparison, Dominic had only one vignette—the song of a young DiDinga boy who loves his pet calf. When Dominic sang his ole at my kitchen table, his friends respectfully sang the refrain because this was the song Dominic had had “in his heart” until my request to hear it:

Felicia: Now, how did you other fellows know when to sing [in refrain]? Is this something that you have worked with?

Figure 2. Bullsinger Angelo Gola (far right) leads DiDinga Lost Boys and DiDinga visitors in a traditional nyakorot line formation in Auburn, New York, August 17, 2003. Photo by Felicia McMahon, courtesy of the Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center and the New York State Council on the Arts.
Dominic R.: No, it is our language.
Lino: He is kind of leading you, you listen to what he says. After several repetitions, you get it.
Felicia: And you just do it?
Lino: Yeah.

John: I noticed that it was very rhythmic. Is this a traditional rhythm or pattern of sound? Because I read Latin and Greek language from the ancient world and much of their poetry as it has been written down was derived from the kind of cultural things that you fellows were just talking about, what we call pastoral poetry actually started from the songs of shepherds taking care of their sheep. As we have the poems in Latin and Greek, it is very highly developed written down by poets, but they are based on and come from the kind of tradition that you were singing where someone would sing with or to the animals that they were taking care of as shepherds. These were not poets and later on the poets developed this tradition into poetry. It is very fascinating that you fellows would have engaged with your bull in a poetic way and the rest of you knew the kinds of traditional response.

Dominic R.: The song that I sung was about my bull’s red head and black sides and that no one will touch until it is gone bigger. That is brief about it.

Dominic L.: He liked the color of the bull so that is why he sang about the color of the bull.

John: How long did you have this bull when you were young and how long do people traditionally stay in contact with one particular animal? Like, this bull that you sang about, which had beautiful red and black. How long, for example as a young boy you had this bull, would you continue to work with this bull and have this bull until you were an adult? Is this a tradition?

Dominic R.: Exactly. You know, when I started getting that bull as mine personally, when it’s just ... the mother gave birth to it, then it was smooth and heavy and very beautiful and from that point, I was also very involved in taking care of it and taking it home with my friends and milking its mother also. Suppose I also was still in Sudan, I should love that bull until it’s gone bigger and maybe I sell it and get money or maybe I [go to] someone to slaughter or do something in a special way, not just ... in a different way.

Felicia: So you have a special relationship with this animal?

Dominic R.: Exactly.

Felicia: Named? Do you have a name for it?

Dominic R.: Actually, I was supposed to come with a name for it but because of coming over here, that was the problem. And it was still very young.

Felicia: So you had a special ... in other words, so you and this animal together had a bonding relationship ... you were kind of bound together?

Dominic R.: Yeah, because its mother was really bought from my uncle, so my uncle brought its mother to the cattle I was taking care of and from there its mother gave birth, then the young bull just came out very beautiful and I took from there, because it was from my uncle from there.

Charles: When you make the program, you can put [his] bull song at the end because the bull songs come at the end.

This exchange prompted Fortunato to tell me that he too had a bull song, which he had composed as a child in his village. I requested to hear his olé, and as we sat at the table, he softly sang:
Fortunato told me that his bull song was about love because, when he was just a boy, there had been a special girl at one of the dances. Fortunato had not known that she reciprocated his interest in her, but his friends had seen her standing shyly behind him. Fortunato’s friends later told him that she had been waiting in the darkness for him to follow her.

*Retheorizing Tradition*

When I began this study of the Lost Boys’ performances, a theoretical model to interpret recontextualized tradition was lacking. I needed to know who decides which traditions are tied to this group and how that might be decided, with issues of identity at stake. To address these questions, it was critical to note that the dance songs represented the young men’s memories, their cultural values as DiDinga males, their experiences as refugees from Sudan, and their lives as educated young men living in the United States.

Because of their life circumstances, nostalgia and childhood memory acted on their traditions (McMahon 2002). Their lives as displaced people, the new audiences, and my role as a presenter when they performed were all external forces that affected the aesthetics of their traditions. For example, when sung for American audiences, the commingling of old and new meanings produced a hybrid where two distinct reference points forged a new identity for the performers—not as warriors, but as refugees of a war. None of the young men explained the song in this way, but because of their new life experiences and education, the warrior role for them may have taken on new meaning.
For the Lost Boys, the opportunities to perform in the United States could be both liberating and constraining. Performing their traditional songs enabled them to express a group identity and their musical talents were honored as something unique to share with American audiences. Here they had no cattle, however, so the songs became nostalgic and sometimes playful expressions of a lost childhood and a former way of life rather than songs of bravery. Conversely, in Sudan it would be incomprehensible for lower status males to perform these songs during nyakorot and certainly never apart from specific community celebrations. In the United States, free of adult DiDinga censure and strict traditional rules, they enjoyed the license to perform the traditions that they favored. Here was a “safe space”; the traditions became a way through which their urban western identity was integrated with their DiDinga heritage.

More important, over time I learned that for this parentless group of youths, the strongest variable affecting their traditions was the play phenomenon. Their traditions were based on childhood games. Much of their performance was like adolescent teasing or mock fighting in a way reminiscent of children imitating adults (see Figure 3). When I met Marino, a DiDinga refugee who newly joined the group in Syracuse

![Figure 3. Fortunato (left) and Joseph (right) take traditional warrior stances for the nyakorot, Auburn, New York, April 25, 2004. Photo by Felicia McMahon, courtesy of the Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center and the New York State Council on the Arts.](image-url)
in February 2004, he described songs and dances that he too recalled as a child in Sudan: "When it is evening and the moon comes up, they are playing [a] gourd and when others come they are singing then. It is like a kind of practice about what they hear the adults singing. One of the ways to learn our culture is to just imitate it" (Interview, Syracuse, March 19, 2004). It was this combination of children's games and warrior songs that had resulted in the Lost Boys' repertoire.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I proposed a theoretical model to elucidate how tradition emerges in a new context, a theory arising from intensive fieldwork and documentation of one small group of refugee youth. I believe it is applicable, however, for understanding the traditions of diasporic communities everywhere. When I began working with the DiDinga Lost Boys, it had been less than six months after their immigration to the United States. Although they were still experiencing culture shock and I knew little about DiDinga culture, I believed this was a critical period for researching their traditions and for finding new cultural outlets. Globalization has created a global commons, a performance space where there are few guidelines to help facilitate interaction. But folklorists today are in a unique position to make valuable contributions with long-term effects. Public folklorists, in particular, are in a critical position to facilitate ways for newcomers to maintain cultural identities and thus avoid being overwhelmed by American culture.

As Greg Gow suggests, traditions for diasporic communities are articulated within the present. When a ritual is performed in a new context, there is "a series of alignments and lived conjunctions that do not represent a hidden real but are the real. They constitute the individual and collective reality of being . . . in exile" (2002:3, emphasis in original). Likewise, the performances of the Lost Boys are "real" and "authentic," not incomplete or invented. The Lost Boys engage in a kind of compartmentalization, a latent state, which enables them to "travel" back and forth across cultures. This is a process they had engaged before coming to the United States: while in Africa, they had had to adjust in a short time from rural village life to refugee camp life, and then to urban life when they were given the chance to attend a boarding school in Nairobi. Philip Mayer discusses the tension between the accommodation and preservation of traditions occurring within new contexts: "In town as in country these two 'localities,' the local and the 'tribal,' are interwoven. They maintain and reinforce each other" (1971:291). We can extend Mayer's observation to transnational communities as well.

To define an authentic diasporic identity, it is necessary to recognize that every group has a shared cultural memory, a cooperative "vault," but equally important are the players involved in consensus. We need to know whether those involved in the negotiation process are insiders or whether decisions are being dominated by outsiders. In the United States, the Lost Boys negotiate among themselves to create a combination of children's songs and warrior songs that result in playful, powerful performances. This improvisational ability has enabled the Lost Boys to take control of their past and to present themselves not as refugees, but as DiDinga warriors in a new land.21 In this way, the young men are both preservers of DiDinga culture and
harbingers of social change. Because those involved in the negotiation stage are all Lost Boys, consensus has been possible.

At the same time, it is important to remember that every consensus has a “history,” made from a collection of differing opinions that do not just disappear once a tradition is negotiated. Under new circumstances, when new variables act on tradition, earlier opinions of group members may resurface. Thus, the dynamic process of tradition is set in motion. Each time there remains the need to identify new variables and conditions that play a central role in the production and reproduction of the collective identities of diasporic communities.

Notes

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1. According to folklore, refugee workers named this group of boys, who arrived en masse to refugee camps, the “Lost Boys” after the unaccompanied group of male children in the story of Peter Pan. Of the seventy-five Lost Boys in Syracuse, the majority are Dinka, but a few DiDinga also arrived in 2001. The Dinka and DiDinga do not record birthdates; thus, for immigration purposes, the young men’s ages had to be estimated. There were nine DiDinga youth who initially arrived in Syracuse and with whom I worked on public performances: Charles (21); George (17); Dominic L. (16); Joseph (16); Dominic R. (21); James K. (21); Lino T. (21); Fortunato (21); and Simon (21). Peter (14) arrived in 2003; in 2004, Marino (21), Benjamin (20), and a few other DiDinga arrived whom I did not interview. In this article, to ensure their privacy, I use only their first names and no details about their social lives.

2. This small group of nine had been resettled in Syracuse by Catholic Charities and the Refugee Resettlement Services, which had found apartments for the young men, who lived in groups of four or five to an apartment and secured factory or service-industry night jobs so that they could be financially independent when their three-month federally funded subsidies ended. The youth who were teenagers were placed with foster families and attended local high schools. All of the other men attended a local community college, education being a high priority for them. Their complex culture and tragic stories remained unknown to most Americans. Even now, some two years after national media coverage (e.g., on CBS’s Sixty Minutes II), the remarkable narrative of these young men, who have lost fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, and who for all intents and purposes are now orphans, still waits to be told to those outside their group.

3. As one researcher admits, “The DiDinga are one of those anthropological anomalies” (Fetterman 1992:2). For this reason, I decided to focus exclusively on this lesser-known group rather than the Dinka. Faced with a paucity of published information on DiDinga folklore, I was forced to rely on early published accounts from the 1920s and 1930s by missionaries and by one scholar in particular, Jack Herbert Driberg, the first of two anthropologists to work among the DiDinga (1922). Later, when Archibald Tucker published Tribal Music and Dancing in the Southern Sudan [Africa] at Social and Ceremonial Gatherings (1933), his book did not provide any mention of a Surmic-speaking group like the DiDinga. Likewise, studies of the closely related Murle (Arensen 1992; Lewis 1972) barely mention the song and dance traditions that are an integral part of this Surmic-speaking group in eastern Sudan. As a matter of fact, no documentation of any danced song traditions from the southern Sudan has been published, with the exception of The Dinka and Their Songs, Francis Mading Deng’s seminal study (1973).

4. All of the young men expressed a strong desire to eventually become American citizens; yet they insisted that one day they must return to their villages in Sudan and only there, at particular ritual spots,
could the initiation rituals take place that would enable them to become men. To document this identity negotiation process, I used an inductive methodology: I recorded the performances and the young performers' comments while reviewing videotapes of each performance, as well as the insights I gained while observing and collecting data. The difficulties of my investigative efforts were at first compounded by the fact that, although anthropologists and linguists had researched Nilotic-speaking groups, such as the Nuer and Dinka in the Sudan (Huffman 1931; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Lienhardt 1961; Deng 1973), studies of Surmic-speakers like the DiDinga are almost nonexistent. Further, linguists have been unable to classify the isolated DiDinga language and have established no official orthography. For background information on DiDinga history, economics, and kinship systems, I did find somewhat useful a study on DiDinga culture by Andreas Kronenberg, published only in German (1972), as well as a doctoral dissertation by Marilyn Harer Fetterman (1992), who lived among the DiDinga in Sudan during the 1970s and 1980s. As a folklorist, I was surprised that scholars had not documented the songs of the DiDinga. I never had the opportunity to live among the DiDinga, but knew from meeting the Lost Boys that songs are central to the cultures of many southern Sudanese groups like the Dinka and DiDinga. Without published sources, limited though they are, it would have been nearly impossible for me to rely solely on interviews with the young men whose English was limited.

5. Translation by Marino.
6. There is a third dance, umoya, which the young men tell me is “only performed a little bit” because it is the dance of elderly men.
7. This situation only underscored the long-term and far-reaching damage that colonialism and slavery have inflicted on both Africans and African Americans.
8. Translation by Paul Atanya.
9. Sadik was the former Sudanese prime minister who was deposed in 1989 by Omar Beshir, the current military ruler.
10. Translation by Paul Atanya.
11. Translation by Charles.
12. Translation by Charles.
13. Translations by Patrick and Charles, Syracuse University, August 6, 2002.
14. There was no noticeable difference in the DiDinga or English translations of Charles and Patrick (or even Paul’s, the adult DiDinga), but the young men’s “interpretation” of the word-for-word translation is very different from Paul’s. This is possible because Lotiki’s identity is not spelled out in DiDinga language. Patrick and Charles were separated from adult DiDinga at such an early age that they are translating from a child’s understanding even though now they are young adult men. This irony is present in all of their performances.
15. Following my paper delivered at the American Folklore Society meetings in 2004, Simon Lichman suggested to me that the Lost Boys’ recontextualized warrior dance refers to the fact that they are not yet initiated. In traditional Dinka and DiDinga cultures, warrior status had to be conferred before young men could marry. Becoming a warrior meant becoming an adult and could only be achieved by going through an age-set system, a social grouping that closes and forms a unit. In anthropological terms, both Dinka and DiDinga, who are relatively decentralized and egalitarian, have elaborate age grades, which constitute the age-set system. Membership in the age-set lasts for the duration of the members’ lives because each age-set moves through the age-grade as a unit. It is the age-grade that provides the system of social stratification and political control, because it enables senior grades to oversee the junior ones.

The DiDinga, although essentially egalitarian, do have a form of political structure based on elders and judges in this rigid senior ranking. There are approximately ten grades in the DiDinga system. Although the DiDinga men in Syracuse ranged from fourteen to twenty-three years of age, they were still considered in the lotim age grade. “Lotim” means baboon, and it was also the song that the young men had performed on several occasions in the United States. The age-grade of lotim is beneath ngohit, the first level in the system. Thus, the young men remained in the lowest level—which is normally for very young boys. They will remain lotim until they return to Sudan to perform thapaninit, the ritual spearing of the bull during male initiation.
16. Translation by Charles.
17. Translation by Dominic R.
These songs are sung to bulls or to women, because cows are the basis for the dowry. Bull songs can also be about battles, warriors singing them to attract women; this is a society in which polygamy is still practiced, even if the DiDinga are Christianized.

To date, there is only one published source that even superficially mentions women’s songs (Kronenberg 1972). Traditionally, one role of DiDinga women’s songs was to encourage cattle raiding by singing praise songs to sons successful in these raids. Cattle raiding continues to occur in the refugee camps in Kenya and other parts of Africa today among a variety of ethnic groups, and many lives are lost in conflicts over cattle. In reaction to the destructive effects of this practice, many Sudanese women from neighboring groups like the DiDinga recently have tried to end this tradition by changing the content and meaning of the songs to something less confrontational. For example,

Topsa, Turkana, Dongiro, DiDinga,
Fighting has become foolishness.
What can we do to these cattle of ours?
Cattle have run out while we scramble.
They go to Toposa, they finish [kill];
They go to Turkana, they finish;
They go to DiDinga, they finish;
They go to Dongiro, they finish;
Men have died fighting,
Fighting, Fighting. (Akabwai 2001:15)

Women's songs such as this one demonstrate that tradition, like identity, is constantly changing. During the August 17 nyakorot, for instance, the DiDinga women sang songs for peace.

References Cited


