

A Banana Peel is Good for Headaches
Observations from the Traditional Arts Field

By Lily Kharrazi

Between dinner and dessert one evening, Doba G., a medical doctor in her late seventies who emigrated from the Ukraine to San Francisco in 1993, gave me a tip:

Lily: “Sometimes I get headaches from red wine, really severe ones.”

Doba: “You should put a banana peel on your forehead.”

L: “Excuse me?”

D: “Yes, of course, a banana skin.”

L: “Are you kidding, Doba?”

D: “No I am serious—we do it in my country. Try it. It will take away the headache.”

Writing about the traditional arts requires recognizing that things are not always what they seem. Headaches can be mitigated by potassium-rich foods like bananas. The point is that to obtain a banana peel, you first have to eat the fruit. Like the advice given to me by Doba, traditional knowledge can be delivered in indirect and surprising ways.

Traditional arts indeed can be surprising and their identity somewhat elusive; try explaining what arts they encompass and who they involve. The answer will never be brief or direct. Indeed, sometimes the best answer is to say what they are not, which is any one definable thing.

As a concept, traditional arts evoke images of continuity, stability and longevity because they carry the genetic code of shared cultural and aesthetic values from one generation to the next. Teaching the technique of Mayan weaving on a back strap loom to your daughter is an example of cultural continuity through family and ethnic group, as is learning Passover melodies at the annual observance of this holiday. Yet there is tremendous room for variation even within this direct transmission. If you happen to be Jews originating from Libya as opposed to a family of Russian Jews living for the past five generations in San Francisco, you might be singing the same words, but the melodies and chants would sound completely different from one another (and perhaps equally dissonant with one another).

If this explanation sounds neat and elegant—traditional arts are cultural forms passed down through the generations, morphing over time—it is only because I haven’t yet mentioned the other side of the story, the often brutal side. The arts practices of many people have been threatened by horrific experiences of genocide (Cambodians), political policies aimed at silencing cultural practices (Native Americans, Kurds), historical neglect (African Americans, LGBT communities), and major disruptions due to forced migration (Somalis). The survival of

traditional arts for these communities can provide a path out of quicksand. The truth of the matter is that traditional arts are often hidden from the larger public view, not so much because they don't want to share practices with outsiders, but because the driving force behind such arts is internal to the communities that practice them. *Above and beyond all other reasons, they do so in order to strengthen themselves.* When this is the aim, an audience could simply be irrelevant.

Of course, not every community in the traditional arts field has endured life-endangering and traumatic circumstances. For example, the arts of India are robust and alive right here. Judy Mitoma, World Arts and Culture professor at UCLA, recently told me that there are now more bharata natyam and hula schools in Los Angeles than ballet schools. It seems the new demographics, the changing face of California that has been approaching all these years, has actually arrived. In the Bay Area, one need only pick up a weekly publication like *India West* to see page after page of announcements of concert-length performances of music and dance, as well as a plethora of teaching academies.

There are Carnatic music lessons and bharata natyam schools representing the arts of south India, kathak dance and Hindustani music from north India, odissi dance from southeast India, and the list goes on. Critical mass helps. These developments reflect the proliferation of émigrés to California (the Silicon Valley in particular). But this abundance also points to a more important insight: It is the centrality of traditional arts to the Indian psyche which has created a cultural environment so lush with choice.

Forty-two years ago, when the Ali Akbar Khan School of Music was established in Marin County to teach sitar and tabla, the students were mostly European-Americans. Not so today. For the Indian community, participation in the arts often signals increased social status. Children who embark on a serious study of music will travel to India in the summer to learn with their guru. In the intervening months, the master and student will continue their study via Skype. How many 11-year-olds listen to Carnatic violin lessons on their iPods? And how did iPods get into a discussion about traditional arts? Maybe the same way banana peels became a topical headache remedy.

Studios & Community Centers: Traditional-Arts Safe Zones

The internal need of communities engaged in traditional arts portrays only part of the picture. Another important partner contributing to this activity in the Bay Area is the interested “outsider”: the serious student who may not share the heritage of the community in question.

These dedicated learners create an important consumer base for artists who teach and perform, providing income that allows artists to continue their work in traditional music, theater, dance, storytelling or craft. They attend weekly classes, sign up for workshops and go to intensive camps. African and African-diasporic arts, as well flamenco arts are particularly prominent in the Bay Area. The development of each sector has flourished under this model. Often these classes produce a level of proficiency that allows master artists to establish performing companies. Then those companies, with heightened visibility, become the face of traditional arts. We see not the original thing, but the by-product of cultural gatekeepers reflected in their work with student performers. Many of these dance and music ensembles find performance opportunities with the

San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival and may participate in cultural festivals like the Cinco de Mayo Parade.

Dedicated outsiders have been vital intermediaries for the non-English speaking traditional artists in particular because they can navigate the business world, or negotiate the maze of immigration, and interface with the funding world to write grants for endeavors they love.

Studio life has also produced another offspring: the emergence of the cultural tour. More and more master artists are arranging to take groups of interested students back to their villages and homes overseas. Such tours have traveled to Guinea, Cuba, the Philippines and most recently to Haiti in order to observe pre-Lenten activities. The trips deepen understanding of the arts through firsthand experience and establish bonds between participants. Perhaps most importantly, these trips create a village industry that generates prosperity. Welcoming home the traditional artist with Americans in tow is like welcoming home the prodigal son or daughter bearing the gift of American dollars.

New Work: Can We Say Context?

There is both joy and grit in our multicultural reality. Nowhere is this more evident and captivating than in the creation of new work based on cultural practices. While most students (of all ages) are gracious and respectful of traditional artists in the studio situation, there are issues regarding artists who borrow freely from cultural practices. Have they done their due diligence in understanding the cultural context? Is it appropriate to borrow Native American regalia for a contemporary dance costume? How did that ritual chant end up sampled in a song track? This kind of work (some refer to it as fusion) is fascinating, not because it is always wrong but because it signals a conversation that begs to be facilitated. In the best of all worlds this dialogue would happen between culture-bearers whose art forms and practices are in danger of appropriation and those who seek to create new art expressions from it. The key issues center around the fact that for the traditional artist, their mandate and aesthetic spring from a collective source. This is not to diminish the role of an individual's innovation within tradition. The artist creating new work usually operates from the aesthetic drive of the individual.

The new work that is particularly interesting to me vacillates wildly between cultural specificity on one end, and the free fall exploration (often appropriation) of cultural forms on the other. At its worst, these attempts become caricatures. Sometimes these caricatures might be excused because they are inadvertent or the result of ignorance. But these situations also present themselves in our larger environment in the most benign of situations. I have often wondered why we have so many fundraising galas replete with "Oriental" themes. These costumed flame-eating pashas and belly-dancing waiters are the hired (human) props for parties that raise money for the best of causes. If we were to deconstruct the many issues that these party themes bring up, it would be worthy of another essay. Suffice it to say, one could argue that the same nullifying attitudes which permit these fun events to occur are also related to attitudes that would permit foreign policy to caricature the people it seeks to annihilate.

Economic development and market forces cast a looming shadow over the preservation of traditional arts as well. The recent sale of simple baskets at the furniture giant Ikea illustrates the

fragility inherent in the traditional arts story. The baskets sold at Ikea were created by foreign workers in Asia, based on the centuries-old weaving technique of the Penobscot, a Native American tribe in Maine. As a Penobscot weaver explained the dilemma of the basket makers, whose traditional weaving is being duplicated cheaply, she also lamented, “The people in Indonesia or the Philippines who have reproduced our baskets are most likely disenfranchised themselves.”

Successful models for the marriage of traditional arts with contemporary expressions do exist. They share a few attributes that contribute towards this goal: They are firmly rooted in a tradition and use it as a springboard for artistic exploration. Doing so, they bypass clichés and get beyond the often paralyzing stasis of trying to be so culturally sensitive that the art making is boring. Both the work of the Kronos Quartet and Lines Ballet have pushed Western classical idioms of the string quartet and ballet, respectively, towards this aim. The Kronos’ discography is filled with such exchanges, while choreographer Alonzo King has introduced movement textures in unlikely pairings with the martial arts of Shaolin monks. The Chitresh Das Dance Company reminds us that experimentation must emanate from its strong anchor in the tradition. As kathak master Das exchanges rapid fire footwork with Jason Samuel Smith’s rhythm tap dancing, an interesting subplot emerges towards “new” idioms. Intercultural collaboration between master musicians from such places as Azerbaijan, Italy, Japan, Afghanistan and Bulgaria is the hallmark of the San Francisco World Music Festival. Together they create new directions for their shared musical journey.

Inadvertent Entrepreneurs: Sending It Back Home

So now we are in quite a different territory, a long way from the direct transmission of traditional cultural forms from one generation to the next in its original context. It turns out that what happens here in the Bay Area can have a profound effect on traditional arts practices in home countries, a phenomenon that is becoming more evident, in large part due to the easy use of technology.

Danongan “Danny” Kalanduyan, who was recognized in 1995 by the National Endowment for the Arts as a Heritage Fellow, has been credited with introducing to the West the music of the Mindanao region of the Philippines known as kulintang, which is a music ensemble comprised of tuned brass gongs. He recently spoke about his experiences at a public gathering sponsored by the Alliance for California Traditional Arts, reporting that he now records all of his performances and teachings stateside, sending them home to Mindanao. Why? “Back home,” he says wistfully, “they have forgotten how things were done in the old days.” Technology will allow him to fulfill his role as a mentor and elder for his community, but from a very different zip code. This odd and interesting trajectory for traditional music is absolutely critical in keeping alive the arts of this Muslim minority in the Philippines.

Another example of unexpected yet synergistic outcomes from traditional arts activities is the work of Voice of Roma, a non-profit organization based in Sonoma County. Its mission is to promote and present Romani cultural arts and traditions in a way that counters both romanticized and negative “Gypsy” stereotypes, and in so doing, contribute to the preservation of Romani identity and culture. Although the Roma are scattered through many countries, living among us

here in the Bay Area as throughout the nation, they often remain hidden due to the long history of persecution they have endured.

There is one distinct tradition that tends to bring the Roma together, though, and that is the spring equinox observance called the Herdeljezi. Here in the Bay Area, the efforts of one married couple, whose initial aim was to spread awareness of the plight of families in war-torn Kosovo, have had a huge impact. Thirteen years ago, Sani Rifati and Carol Bloom hosted a backyard lamb roast, complete with traditional music and dance lasting into the night. Fast forward to today, and we see that this home event has burgeoned into a transnational effort. The local Herdeljezi attracts hundreds to hear the music of top-quality Romani artists from all over the world. Participants can also buy goods made by the women of Kosovo, who use fabric sent from the U.S. to make quilts and throw pillows to sell at the event, each embellished with the international symbol of the Roma, a wagon wheel. A humanitarian impulse and traditional arts celebration have been transformed into an entrepreneurial lifeline, one that inspires offshoots. The Bay Area Herdeljezi Festival has reinforced pride in Romani culture, so much so that its founders have been asked to consult with a Baltimore-area group who wants to duplicate the Festival in their own community. A new tradition?

I am lucky to see Doba G. a few times each year at the home of my best friend. We are usually brought together by the celebration of life-cycle events—birthdays, weddings, anniversaries. When Doba first came to California she would offer toasts (there's that red wine again), recounting how her family observed Jewish holidays in the basement of their apartment building because the practice of Judaism was forbidden in the former Soviet Union. She tried hard to impart Jewish identity to her only son, aware that she had only limited access to the tradition to pass on because her own cultural expression had been suppressed. Her life story reminds me of how fleeting these cultural assets are and how quickly, even within a single generation, they can be lost. This is why it gives me pause to recognize that sometimes, even though the “genetic code” is broken, the essence and even the forms of traditional arts can be recaptured, sometimes through classes far from home, lessons delivered via Skype, Carnatic violin heard via iPod, or recordings sent from the Bay Area back to Mindanao.

What do traditional artists and communities need to keep creating expressions deeply rooted in and reflective of their communities' shared standards of beauty, values and life experiences? Simply, what every other community needs: a measure of safety, but *more so*, because traditional arts and their communities are among the most vulnerable. Be it the forces of acculturation or the realities of economic disparities, the health of our new California is dependent on the strengths of its parts over the sum. Traditional arts practices serve this up well. “*La cultura cura*,” words spoken by a prominent medical researcher, are prophetic not only for California's large Latino population, but are easy enough to be understood by those of us who are not fluent in Spanish.

For all the rough edges and obstacles that persist, the Bay Area provides a locale where “otherness” can be welcome. I hope we continue to pride our Bay Area selves on this value, as well as our curiosity and adaptability, because they will help traditional arts flourish and evolve in directions impossible to imagine right now.

Resources

India West: www.indiawest.com

Ali Akbar Khan School of Music: www.aacm.org

San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival: www.worldartswest.org

Kronos Quartet: www.kronosquartet.org

Lines Ballet: www.linesballet.org

Chitresh Das Dance Company: www.kathak.org

San Francisco World Music Festival: www.sfworldmusic.org

Voice of Roma: www.voiceofroma.com

Kulintang: www.kulintang.com

Alliance for California Traditional Arts: www.actaonline.org

About Lily Kharrazi

Lily Kharrazi is the program manager of the Living Cultures Grants Program at the Alliance for California Traditional Arts where she has had the privilege of meeting and working with many of the communities whose portraits helped to inform this essay. A dance ethnologist by training, she has worked in refugee resettlement and was formerly program director at World Arts West, producing nine seasons of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. She serves as a consultant to both local and national projects involved with arts and culture. A first generation American, she is trying to figure out if it's family folklore or truth to say that she is the first one in her family to be born outside of Iran in 14 generations.

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