


# Tell us your **true** story

> pfp \* program <



## Stories for pictures: giving photographs a good home



An interesting thing kept happening at our exhibition of Tom Morton's photographs of the ODUNDE festival, taken over a remarkable span of 30 years. Gravitating to photos of themselves, of family members, of old friends, people shared stories and recollections. Often they seemed unable to tear themselves away from particular images. Viewers got a certain look in their eyes: transported by the photos, they returned to other times, places, and people. One person's story prompted another's. People shared details, pieced together histories, named what (and who) needs to be remembered, collectively lined out history.

The PFP is in the business of supporting vernacular habits and practices—such as community storytelling around family photos like these. These habits and practices, in turn, work to sustain folk and traditional arts grounded in visions of equity and justice. ODUNDE and Tom Morton's photos are all about freedom of expression, about claiming and enacting the right to self-definition. And we are well aware of the common experience of community people: often pictured, seldom in control of their own representations. So when it came time to close the exhibition, we decided (without knowing exactly how we would do it) that we wanted to get these photos into places where they would keep stimulating the kind of storytelling that was happening in our gallery. Storytelling often needs to be prompted, and Tom's

powerful photographs were obviously good tools for evoking narratives.

And so we announced a storytelling contest, inviting people to send in their memories. We printed the poster to the left, with a clip-and-send form on the back. We asked for letters and email. We posted the whole show on line, where it remains ([www.folkloreproject.org](http://www.folkloreproject.org)). Most important, we invited people in and recorded open storytelling sessions at the PFP office, led by ODUNDE founder Lois Fernandez and her daughter, Oshunbumi Fernandez-Ogundana. Of course, people usually tell stories to others, not in isolation, so we sought out people pictured in the photos and recorded their accounts. We received (and heard) deeply moving recollections and thoughts on a wide range of topics: about beloved individuals who have been part of 30 years of culture-making, about particular years at ODUNDE, about what the event has come to mean, about moments when people claimed the right to call themselves African, about the struggle for self-definition. It quickly became clear to ODUNDE and PFP that this needs to be part of a larger project.

We don't yet know the next steps. But we do know a few things. In trying to return photos to places where they are known and appreciated, we stimulated a process where people talked together about who should own goods that were in many ways community property. We were tutored by people who shared

what they knew: knowledge, stories, lived experience. While this seems simple, it requires revising assumptions that the best place for museum-quality photos is in museums. Or that a work of art belongs to the person who pays for it. Or that value is best reckoned in dollars. These first steps in giving away photos—or, more properly, exchanging them, returning them, keeping them in circulation—multiplied value: the process deepened relationships, built knowledge, stimulated stories (making more powerful art) and good history-telling, and it brought people together to share what they cared about. It is a good reminder that no one owns culture, and that sharing resources, and keeping photos in the community, in private homes, is a way to keep them active and present.

Some examples of contributed stories follow. We continue to invite your contributions.

### Saudah Amin

The Fernandez sisters: I call them sister soldiers. All three of them got ODUNDE together. I feel as if ODUNDE was the first thing that ever happened in Philadelphia to help the Negro and colored people know they were African. I remember when I was a child, seven years old, I couldn't wait until April and the Elks Parade. That was the one that made me want to dance to some drums. Because when I was a child, that was the only time you could hear the drums.

When I was about 12, the Puerto Ricans came here, and then you started hearing the drums. Then I started dancing to mambo, cha-cha, and merengue. I would go into the house and I would dance to what the Puerto Ricans were doing.

I met the Fernandez sisters when I was about 17 or 18. They used to be around the Queen Mother. She had a house here, down the Bottom. Everyone would come there for the teaching. When ODUNDE started, they were the ones that put Philadelphia on the map for learning we were African Americans.

### Ayoluwa Eternity:

About Bob Thompson

In this photo he's a praise singer / a mediator between spirit and human / chanting sanctified words of anointment / offering fruits and flowers inviting the divine presence of Oshun / so she may bestow her blessings, healings and wisdom upon her children... these spirit warriors are gate-keepers of history ...

### Nia Bey AlRasul

I grew up in South Philadelphia. And I loved the American lifestyle. And it had nothing to offer me. I just couldn't enter. ODUNDE came through ACAF [African Cultural Art Forum], through my work with ACAF. My first African introduction, they taught me. They groomed me. Around the 1970s.

Then we heard about ODUNDE. And we started doing the vending at ODUNDE. The vendors would come in sometimes the night before, and we would function as a family through the night. They'd come and park in front of the area. Sleep in the car or in front of your station. ODUNDE was new to me. I thoroughly enjoyed it. And I was a vendor. And as we moved on in life, I became a mother. Thereafter, we became ODUNDE people.

Of the children in the photos,

Ibn Daoud is now 21. One year, Mama Malikah taught him stilt-walking. One year, his little self—he was the only one, leading the procession. Mukhtar, in the picture, is Nadirah's son, and now he is in the Gambia, learning the language. He lived in a high-rise in Jersey before he moved there with his father's people, and he couldn't run around. He went there to Gambia, and he said to his mother, "I'm free!"

[About Lois Fernandez:] I saw her on the street, wearing bracelets all up her arm. I said to myself, "I want to know who she is." And through ODUNDE I came to know her. And that is a request granted by the Creator.

Did you know that she is the one responsible for getting the word "illegitimate" removed from birth certificates? So we love her so. I am thankful and grateful to be able to say that I am one of her daughters.

### Katrina Hazzard Donald

When we were marching back from the bridge, that's when my grandmother said to me—and I was very surprised, I had no idea—she said it was like Mardi Gras in Mobile when she was growing up. And she was born in Mobile. You know Mardi Gras began in Mobile. It didn't begin in New Orleans. And she talked about how much ODUNDE reminded her of Mardi Gras. She said, "You know, Mardi Gras began in Mobile." And she said it reminded her of marching in the line in Mardi Gras.

### Benita Brown

This is a shot of Benita Brown as I was part of ODUNDE festival from the time I was a little girl. My mother used to take me to the ODUNDE festival when I was like six, seven, eight years old, but I never knew I would eventually become a part of the celebration until I joined Kulu Mele back in 1984-85 and I danced with Kulu

Mele before I left, and now I teach dance at Virginia State University and I teach traditional African dance that I learned from Dottie and Baba and Wilkie, and also I try to teach about the Orisha and the movements of the Orisha, and I learned this from attending ODUNDE and being involved with the Philadelphia dance community.

### Arisa Ingram

Tell you more history about this picture here. This picture here is a picture of my late father, Baba Ishangi. That's my father there. He was the Egungun there for quite a few years—10 to 20 years. And, of course, I'm here, but I'm in the front, guiding the masquerade. That was my job, to guide the masquerade and to guide the whole entourage down to the water and protect the masqueraders, the Egunguns, from being touched. This picture here, when I look at it, it just brings back very, very good memories because I used to go down all the time. And this is something that ODUNDE always represents. I think this picture was probably back in '89, '90 because, of course, I helped make the costumes. That used to be something I had to do all the time, in order to keep it up.

I've been going to ODUNDE for about 20 years. Kulu Mele used to open. And the Ishangi family used to close. Faithfully for about 10 years. Strong.

I used to watch Mama Dottie. That was my thing. After we finished with the Egungun, then I used to watch Mama Dottie. I used to watch Kulu Mele perform, Dottie and Wilkie and everybody. I used to think, "Hmm, I like that group, I like that group." Then my father'd say, "They're good people." And I'd say, "Yeah, I know. Yeah I know." Now, I've been with Kulu Mele about 10 years. For a while I was working with Kulu Mele, and then

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working with my father too. I didn't know. It was kind of hard to figure out which way to go. So I had to balance them even. Then in order to keep it up, I said, "What's there to do but go and join Kulu Mele?"

### Shineka D. Crawford:

A lesson learned  
(a true story)

It was 1993 or 1994 when my father Irvin Lloyd II had two important things to tell me. He wanted to lighten the mood and ODUNDE was coming up. He asked me to go with him to ODUNDE. "A what day?" was what I said. But I agreed. The day we were to go, I put on my tightest outfit, the highest heels, and made sure I put in a weave down to my butt. We met at my grandfather's house in North

Philly and he said, "Shineka, you can't wear those heels to ODUNDE because we will be walking a lot." I still wore my heels. When we got there I was disappointed at first. I didn't care about my heritage at that time in my life. I was considered a "hoochie mama." My dad showed me women with head-wraps and long frilly dresses and told me I should try it out. He told me I need to find myself before he dies. And then he told me he was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS. He told me he didn't know if it was from past drug use or sleeping with so many women unprotected or both. My dad told me I was a queen and I laughed so hard. Then he told me I was smart and my beauty wasn't between my legs. He told me my weave was horsehair and it was time for me to get my life together. I rolled my eyes

(but not so he could see me). He started pointing at women saying they looked good. My comment was, "Daddy, we ain't from Africa, those women need perms and it's too hot for all those clothes." I told my dad that they could never get a man looking like that. A year later, he died. He was always my best friend. I really didn't understand what he was talking about until two years ago. Now, with locks in my hair and a new style of dress, I am the Queen he always said I was. The poetry I have written since 16 now has more significance than before, and I will be attending ODUNDE for the first time since me and my dad had that talk.

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## Masked men of Cambodia/continued from p. 7

from the Reamker.

In 2004, they created an evening-length work of an excerpt never emphasized in their repertoire before, one in which Preah Ream is kidnapped by the ogres, and the monkeys have to traverse the sea, encountering dancing sea horses and crabs along the way. This piece is called "Veyreap's Battle." In early 2006, they premiered what they are calling "contemporary khol" in which "monkeys" and "ogres" performed a site-specific work, first outdoors, on a dirt path and in a tree behind the practice hall of the Bassac Theatre—a once-glorious edifice that was gutted by fire in 1994—and then inside the tattered practice hall. As opposed to traditional lakhon khol in which everyone is masked and costumed in elaborate brocades and sequined velvet,

this new version saw performers in simple black tee-shirts and loose trousers, with no masks. And though this piece was loosely based on a part of the Reamker, the references to a story line were somewhat diffuse as the six dancers played with the basic movement vocabulary of the tradition, stretching possibilities as never done before.

Way back in the 1940s, the Queen made a radical change in the composition of the royal/classical dance troupe. Being royal, nobody questioned her. Today in Cambodia, debate is raging over what can or should be allowed to "change," and what needs to be preserved in the realm of traditional arts, given the country's extensive legacy of loss. The dancers and musicians who challenged the status quo with the new approach to

lakhon khol have been met with a combination of delight (by some peers) and skepticism and criticism (by some in positions of administrative authority in the arts.) These performers already have plans, though, for what might come next....

*The Philadelphia Folklore Project will feature a performance of lakhon khol by five men (Tonara Hing, Sovanthy Meng, Thavro Phim, Ra Soeur, and Say Soeur), all of whom are graduates of Cambodia's School of Fine Arts, in its May Dance Happens Here weekend at the ArtsBank. These five were among the first generation of artists trained after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Specializing in monkey or ogre roles, each has toured internationally as a dancer. All are now resident in the U.S. The PFP program is supported by Dance Advance, NEA, PCA, and PFP members.*