



MAKING IT BETTER

Folk Arts in Pennsylvania Today

Nurturing Well-Being and Health

For Safe-Keeping: The Power of Artistic Traditions

by Amy E. Skillman
Institute for Cultural Partnerships

For many years, folklorists and ethnographers have been interested in the role of artistic traditions as a way for people to ensure the health and well-being of an individual, family or community. Well-being may be primarily understood as physical health, but also refers to mental, cultural or even spiritual health. Many examples can be found across cultures of art forms that provide a path for healing to occur. I began my own research in this area in 1990 with the opportunity to travel to Southeast Asia as part of a film crew. We were documenting the presence and changes of women's weaving traditions in the Diaspora experiences of Lao refugees. We had met and worked with Mone Saenphimmachek, a traditional Lao weaver living in St. Louis, and the goal of this trip was to gather footage that gave historical and cultural context for her art.

In the Southeast Asian country of Laos, all Lao girls learn to weave. While it is considered a valuable occupation, it is also an essential skill tied to religious and community life. A woman is responsible for honoring her mother-in-law with an exquisitely patterned skirt for an engagement gift, thereby proving her ability to provide clothing for her family – a key to one's well-being. She is responsible for adorning her daughters for rituals and celebrations. In recent history, it was not unusual for textiles to be used to pay fines or make marriage payments. Historically, the patterns on a women's skirt reflected her family's village, her ethnic group, her age, status and financial standing. So, the quality and quantity of textiles a person owns is tangible proof of status and wealth. Even today, men court young women at the loom and often select a bride on the basis of her skill as a weaver. Mothers tell their sons to look for a woman who is enjoying her weaving - who looks at peace while she works because she will have the patience and skill to be a good wife. Fewer women weave today, as Laos has entered the global economy and more women are working outside the home. Yet, in the markets, it is common to find rows of stalls selling skirts in a variety of patterns and styles.

One afternoon we took a break from filming to visit the temple grounds of the 16th century Wat Sisset. In the cool shadows of the temple interior, on the walls surrounding many layers of flower-bedecked Buddhas, were ancient paintings depicting the life of the Buddha. The paint was faded and chipped in many places, but once my eyes adjusted and I relaxed enough to absorb the peace of the place, I noticed an angel-like figure wearing a traditional Lao skirt. My heart skipped a beat as more and more of the painting came into focus and I realized the venerable legacy of Mone's craft. Here were 400-year-old celestial beings, dressed in traditional Lao skirts, depicting the role of Buddhism in Lao life.

As we traveled throughout Laos, I began to notice that the patterns embellishing the various Buddhist structures on the landscape were very similar to those decorating the traditional skirts. I wondered if there might be a connection. If the human form is like a temple, does the art that enwraps both also serve to ensure the health and well-being of the community? The temples are the center of community life. Though home to male monks and young boys seeking an education, it is the women who prepare the temple for auspicious holidays, feed the monks, and participate in the daily rituals. The monks are not allowed to prepare food or weave and they must rely on the women of the village to provide these basic needs. In fact, food is brought to the temple in fabric woven by the women. For men, the temple is more often a political forum where alliances are formed, knowledge is shared and decisions are made that impact the temporal needs of the village. The women, on the other hand, ensure the health and well-being of the monks and the surrounding community by managing that space between village life and spiritual needs.

So it is no surprise to find that the designs woven into the patterns on the skirts have historically provided protection against those spirits that might harm the wearer's soul. Sometimes a special waistband is sewn into the skirt of a deceased woman to ensure a peaceful journey into the after-life. A small piece of the skirt worn and stained by a mother at the birth of her son is saved and presented to him as a form of protection when he reaches the age of a warrior. Fruit trees are occasionally wrapped in a women's woven skirt to encourage fruiting and deflect any spirits who might want to harm the crop. According to anthropologist Robyn Maxwell, weaving has been called the "women's war" - that is, the way in which a woman can participate in the protection and safe-keeping of her family and village. In Diaspora, these skirts become important symbols of identity and repositories of history. Robyn Maxwell explains,

Since traditional textile production in Southeast Asia was exclusively the task of women, textiles are able to show history from a different perspective by reflecting a female view of the contact between different cultures, and are an alternative to the princely epics of war, succession and dominance. Many weavers, including Mone, may no longer be aware of the sacred meanings or protective quality of the symbols still used in their weaving patterns. As the rituals have changed, the uses for the textiles have also changed. They have become secular -- no less significant within a cultural context -- but not necessarily sacred. Mone now chooses designs because they remind her of her homeland, of her mother who taught her to weave, and of the life she had to leave behind. She does not consciously endow the fabric with protective powers. Or does she? I would argue that when she weaves traditional patterns into a skirt in the United States, patterns with a 400-year lineage, she is protecting the health of her culture and the history of her family; she is protecting the next generation against the debilitating effects of cultural isolation.

What other ways do artistic traditions nurture well-being? Some are obvious, such as lullabies, which not only ease a child to sleep but often reinforce beliefs and values that place the child into a large cultural and spiritual context. We have all seen the power of song to unite a disparate group or soothe a troubled soul. Marta Sam and Victoria Angelo, Acholi refugees from southern Sudan, carry in their hearts a centuries-old tradition of lullabies and children's songs that can help to heal a variety of ills. From colic to fever to toothache, there is a different song used as a remedy for each common ailment of infancy. This repertoire has given them special skills that enhance their success as workers in an early childhood learning center. But they also continue to perform and teach the traditional dances they learned as young girls. As Marta says, "When I sing songs in my language, I feel like me. And when I have a backache, I dance and dance until I feel better." For refugees in particular, continuing the practice of familiar traditions from home can serve to heal an aching heart, as much as it heals an aching back. In a similar way, Brujo de la Mancha practices the dance and music rituals of his indigenous heritage. Brujo, which literally translates as "wizard" should be understood to mean someone who uses the power of healing to transform illness into health. His healing tools are the arts. He explains it this way, "It is very important for me to keep learning about myself, my culture, and the world around me. Wherever I go, I am always aware how my living culture is full of arts and spirituality. This awareness pushes me to keep working hard to identify ways to express to the public an indigenous perspective that is not always seen in our contemporary, or historical, society." Through music, songs, and traditional dances he works to help Mexican immigrants reclaim their indigenous history and heal from years of oppressive discrimination.

The preparation and presentation of food is another clear way that we use tradition to nurture health in our families. I once asked a group of refugee and immigrant women, "What are some of the most important arts that you have brought with you?" They unanimously agreed it was their food traditions, their recipes and the way they prepare their food. Not only do the recipes maintain connections to our ancestors, the ingredients reflect our beliefs about healthy eating. These women see their food as considerably healthier than the food that most youth have access to in America. Sharing their food traditions is also a way to teach their children about their culture and to help them understand who they are in this new land. As one woman explained, "I try to cook the food from my country, but my kids won't eat it.... I do cry sometimes when I have to eat it myself and they request some American things or they bring food from outside. It is like they are rejecting my culture."

The Ukrainian ritual towels of Vera Nakonechny known as rushnyky are embroidered in a pattern of three layers: the earth at the bottom, represented by seeds signifying the roots or foundation of one's life; the present in the middle,

signifying one's current life and often represented as a family tree; and the cosmos at the top, often represented by flowers and signifying spiritual connection. In the words of Yuriy Melnychuk, a senior scientific research fellow at the Ivan Honchar Museum in Ukraine, "The rushnyk is one of the most traditionally sacred objects in the life of Ukrainian peoples." Vera adds, "Each is done in a different way with different symbols and different embroideries, and yet each is always symbolizing that spiritual part of human life." Rushnyky are used as decoration in the home to express one's Ukrainian identity. They are also used in ritual ceremonies such as a wedding or to cover the Easter basket for the Priest's blessing on Easter morning. Significantly, they are also used as part of a healing tradition. In Ukraine, when someone is sick and having a hard time recovering, all the women in the family or village get together beginning at sundown and embroider a rushnyk all night long. While working, they sing songs, pray for health and quietly share stories. The embroidery must be finished by morning to ensure that the person will heal. The towel is then wrapped around the patient who becomes embraced by the love and prayers that went into its creation. A towel might also be created to heal a community problem such as a natural disaster or a virus among the livestock. As Vera explains, "Sometimes they would put the finished towel over the gate and then have all the livestock go through it!" She describes one of these towels which as been embroidered with a row of girls connected like papercut dolls, "The girls symbolize power and ARE powerful. They do not allow bad things to come through their locked hands."

Many more examples abound. David Castano has carved wood into figures that remind the disaster victims of their ability to survive and heal. In July 2002, Que Creek Mine in Somerset County flooded. At the time, there were only 200 to 250 underground miners in the county, so it was a close-knit community. Due to mapping errors, one group of miners cut into an abandoned adjacent mine that was full of water which then flooded the area they were in. Miners on a level below were able to get out after being alerted quickly but it took several days to rescue the other nine who were lifted one at a time, using an old safety cage. Castano explains, "When I was asked to carve these nine miners for the Windber Coal Heritage Center, I wanted to carve something for each one that represented either the type of work they did underground or something about their time trapped in the mine... It wasn't just about the nine miners. It was about their families, their community, everybody in that whole group of people that go out to work every day, pack their lunch in a bucket and off they go." As Ruth Tonachel says, "His figures sustain family history and stories and invite imagination. They also helped family members heal from that near-disaster event."

Vietnamese artist Tuoc Tran paints portraits that facilitate one's responsibility to a deceased parent. The duty to mourn one's parents in death is considered a sacred obligation. If unfulfilled, the parent may not make it successfully to "the other world"(gioi khac). A soul that doesn't make it to the other world may be condemned to wander as a malevolent spirit, while a soul that does make it there can serve as a benevolent spirit for the living family. After the death of a parent or family member, Vietnamese families typically commission an artist to paint the likeness of the deceased person. This becomes part of the family altar where annually ancestors receive offerings that support them in the other world, and prayers for guidance and protection. Those who neglect the obligation risk the dangers that might result from a lack of protection. In the United States, where so many Vietnamese are Catholic, the tradition continues by placing the painting near the coffin during the burial rites.

In the northern tier of Pennsylvania, Natalie Phelps reintroduced the tradition of square dances as a way of bringing the community together during devastating economic times. She says, "When Adelfia folded [in 2006], emotionally it was quite a shock. It's been kind of scary for folks since then." People lost their jobs, their retirement savings and their trust. Natalie had played as a musician at dances in the late 1950s but there hadn't been a dance in the community since 1961. She organized the first dance in 2007 because she thought people needed something to rally around. Over 200 people attended. The dances have given them a chance to be joyful and laugh instead of focusing on the loss the community has experienced. She says, "... there were people there who hadn't seen each other for decades, and there were people there of all types that would never get together for any other reason. In fact, we are still getting calls to please keep them going. They had never experienced anything like that. It was very healing."

These arts are not usually lauded as the emblems of a civilization's creative achievements. Yet, as these examples begin to suggest, they exemplify the subtle, unsung traditions that have the power to transform, protect and transcend.