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Teachers drum up following

By Emma Downs
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A performance by Tamafoli African Drum and Dance begins with a gesture of unity, one familiar to the people of Guinea, West Africa.

The members of the troupe – led by Conakry, Guinea, natives Soriba Simbo Camara and Abbas Camara – bump fists with one another and then place their own closed hands over their hearts.

"Wontanara," they say. We are one. We are a family.

And then the music begins – an intensely rhythmic form of traditional African music that combines a thundering wall of percussion with the inherently musical quality of Susu, a native ethnic language spoken by the group's founders.

The result is a feverish, joyful combination of rhythms, all performed on drums handmade in West Africa. The djembe, dununba, sangban, kenkini – the drums are made using goat or cow skin; some played with sticks, some by hand.

"Drum and dance is my heart," Simbo Camara says. "This is my life and this is why I am here."

Simbo Camara, who speaks a combination of Susu, French and English, has lived in Fort Wayne for less than a year. After marrying his wife, Lynn Aicha, the two moved from Vermont to the Midwest, joining Abbas Camara and his wife to teach drumming and African dance.

"We'd heard there was a desire to learn in the Midwest," Lynn Aicha says. "But people lacked teachers. And the response here has been great."

During their short time in Fort Wayne, Tamafoli African Drum and Dance has performed publicly in a wide array of venues – onstage with local jam band Fawn Liebowitz, as artists in residency at Whitney Young Elementary School and as collaborators with the Three Rivers Jenbe Ensemble.

"Teaching is a different feeling than performing," Simbo Camara says. "You feel proud. I'm teaching my experience. And that is how (Abbas) and I learned, too. Teachers in Guinea share the tradition."

Simbo Camara and Abbas Camara, who are not related, both began drumming as children. While adults sat in circles, playing djole and kuku rhythms, the children were given buckets and pails to play with. Drumming went hand in hand with every aspect of life, they say.

"In Guinea, if there is a wedding, you drum," Aicha Camara says. "If a baby is born or if there is a funeral, everyone plays at a dundunba, a street party. It is part of your life every day."

Both Simbo and Abbas have worked with national and independent orchestras and ballets in Guinea. But in the United States, they are primarily teachers, instructing and performing at universities and alongside other dance groups in Ohio, Michigan and Illinois. During February and March, Simbo Camara will teach in Atlanta and Mexico, while Abbas Camara will work as a resident artist with the Three Rivers Jenbe Ensemble. The nomadic nature of their profession has made it difficult to begin teaching classes in Fort Wayne, a goal they hope to achieve within the year. All they need now is a venue, Simbo Camara says.

"But it is always exciting for us, no matter where we are," Simbo Camara says. "To watch the students, the children. They'll clap. They'll raise their arms and say, 'Yes!' And when it is over, you have done something good for everyone."

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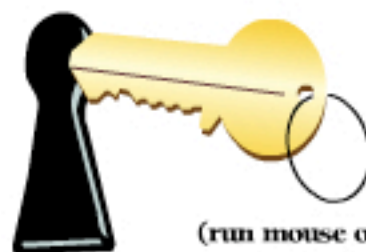


Abbas Camara, left, and Soriba Simbo Camara perform together as "Tamafoli African Drum and Dance."

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