# Braima Moiwai is coming to AMES!

Braima Moiwai is a freelance artist from Sierra Leone, West Africa, based in Durham, North Carolina. Braima studied history and geography at the University of Sierra Leone, Fourah Bay College, and taught in Jaiama Secondary School for three years before migrating to the US in 1986.

He is a storyteller and musician who specializes in the oral traditions of the coastal regions of West Africa and the influence of African languages and cultures on the African diasporas, especially the Gullah culture of South Carolina and the Georgia Sea Islands. He provides hands-on experience (drumming, storytelling, basket-weaving, traditional textile tie-dye and batik techniques) as well as information on the historical background of these art forms. His workshops explore the connections between African and African-American culture and history. Braima also gives a lecture series on Oral tradition as passed down from his grandmother, a well renowned Mende storyteller in Sierra Leone.

Braima served as an expert on oral tradition, languages and music that survived among the enslaved Africans of American Southeast for the civil war movie "The Patriot" with Mel Gibson, and played a Gullah musician in the film. Braima is an active member of the "North Carolina Association of Black Storytellers" and founder of the "Gullah Project" in North Carolina and serves as tour guide for school field trips to the Gullah Islands.

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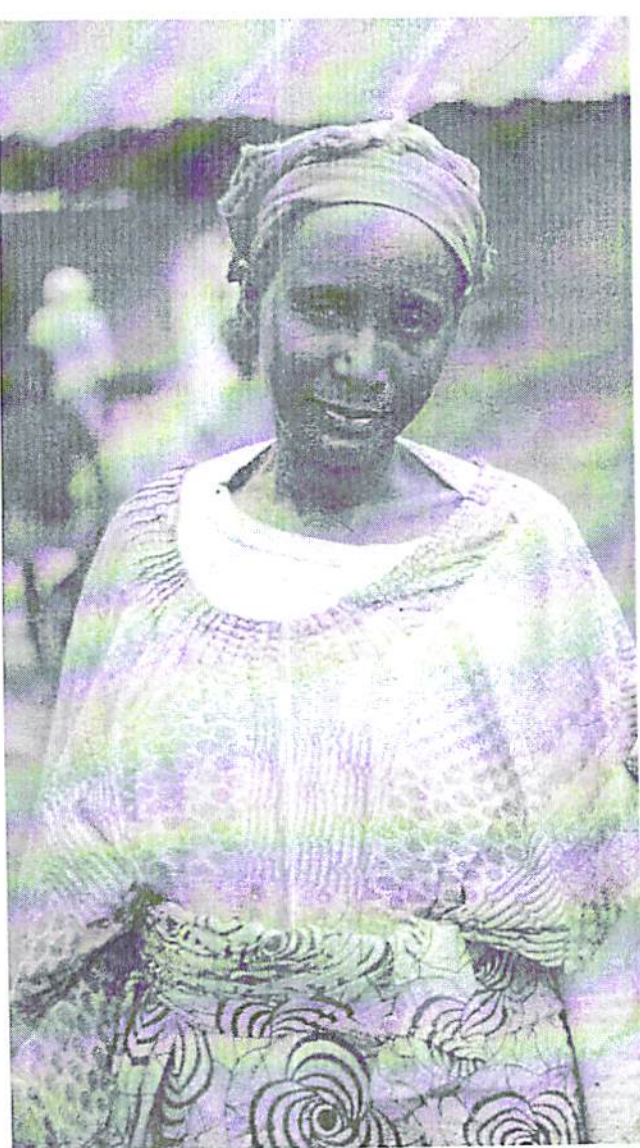
Braima Moiwai - West African Artist and Storyteller

# "Remember Your Food" by Braima Moiwai

Imagine six months of dry, dusty climate, and thunder clouds are rolling toward your neighborhood in a cool, dark mist. Now pretend that you are the children of a West African village waiting under the tin roofs of your mud huts for the clouds to burst and bathe you in a downpour of thirst-quenching rain. Showering in the rain is so much nicer than standing in the trickle of murky water from the stream half a mile away that you have been using to wash yourself each evening after finishing your work on the farm. These rains, marking the beginning of the planting season, bring joy for the children and adults alike. Everyone takes the opportunity to sing and to dance while the rains pours down our bodies. We drink straight from the sky until our bellies are full and refreshed. The rain that falls into our buckets and our pots is stored in large clay bins for use later on.



This is a memory from my childhood in Sierra Leone in West Africa. I am from the Mende tribe. I was born the seventh of nine children, and I am the only one to receive a formal education outside of the traditional Mende practices. I attended college at the University of Sierra Leone, studying history. I came to North Carolina in 1986 to join my fiancee, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in the town where I had gone to teach high school students. Most rural Sierra Leoneans assume that America is a place where a better life is in reach for everyone. My family - especially my mother, Mata Gbateh - did not think that way. They were not impressed by Western culture or its materials benefits. They preferred the practices and routines of life in the tropical rainforest, where generations of extended family had proceeded them on ancestral farmlands.

My mother and my grandparents, well-respected community leaders, were concerned with continuing and strengthening Mende village life, a peaceful and nonviolent ways of life. They believed my willingness to marry and live abroad was the result of "too much book" and not enough farm work. My mother was proudest of the fact that all eight of my brother and sisters wanted to be farmers. They could feed their families and take care of the coffee and cocoa plantations that my father had put

in as "life insurance" should the weather not cooperate to produce our subsistence-level rice crop. My father died when I was just two years old. According to my mother, he had hoped I would become a blacksmith.

In our remote village of Bunumbu, the elders often told stories about colonial times of their childhood. In those days, British missionaries established schools and churches in our region and co-opted our leaders to work in them. These Westerners exploited divisions among the Mende people in an effort to change the language, the traditions and the customs of out tribe, the very things the elders believed comprised the goodness of village life.

When these stories were told, my mother would often say: "If our people throw away what we know and take something new, we will have nothing. The English and the Sierra Leoneans who incorporate these new beliefs don't have an understanding of the Mende people and how we know what we know. We belong to our past and to our future. It is our responsibility to protect the knowledge and the history of our people." My mother was a respected herbalist who carried with her an extensive oral history of our people, our stories and songs, as well as, the herbal mixtures that healed otherwise deadly diseases.

Not surprisingly, her last words to me as I packed my few belongings onto the lorry for Freetown, the capital city, were: "Balema bila meheima." Remember your food. "Balema bila meheima" was her way of reminding me that community is the food for every human life. She understood that a sense of community and belonging protects one from being lost in the world. She was worried that I would not find a place to belong in America. I was 24 at the time, and I had a lot more growing up to do.

Since my arrival in North Carolina 13 years ago, I have shared my memories of Sierra Leone with students in public school, community centers, summer camps, and other places where children gather. Working as a freelance artist and storyteller, I relate the customs and small adventures that life can present in a remote and seemingly poor rural setting. I tell how history has connected this part of America to the west coast of Africa. Slaves were exported from my country to the Carolinas and Georgia because of their expertise in rice agriculture. I hope my stories will instill among my students a curiosity about Africa, their own family histories, and about the culture many of them came from. I want to connect the values my mother taught me to the children in this country, and my own two children, Juju, 9, and Jebe, 3. Sharing my experience is the best way I have figured out to belong here while fulfilling my mother's wish and my own conviction that remembering my food is a worthy way to make a living.

In 1991, civil war broke out in Sierra Leone, spilling over from the neighboring Liberia. Rebel armies rampaged across the eastern part of the country, seizing control of the mines and valuable natural resources. The village of Bunumbu was one of the hundreds that were destroyed by children and youths kidnapped by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), then forced to take drugs so they could commit otherwise unimaginable acts of terror on their families and communities. Twenty thousand innocent people are dead. Ten thousand more have had arms, legs, lips, and other body parts cut off or mutilated. In a country of just 5 million people, there are more than 1 million refugees.

Two months ago, a peace agreement was reached. The democratically elected president invited the rebel faction into a coalition government. Because this faction represents a rogue army that has terrorized the population, it seems unlikely the agreement will hold. My mother worried about what I might lose by emigrating. Those who stayed have lost almost everything. Their homes were burned to the ground, some with people inside. Their farms were abandoned. Those who escaped to refugee camps were completely traumatized by the time they arrived, sometimes after months of hiding in the bush before they could arrive safely. I am often sad that the Mende way of life that I celebrate in my work is now lost not just to me, because I left, but for those who stayed and experienced horror that is hard to wrap around my mind.

Before my mother died in 1995, she told my sister Howa to tell me that she dreamt it was time for her to go, she was tired. I knew that meant that, as an old woman, she didn't want to begin reclaiming the work of a lifetime. Living day to day in a refugee camp with poor facilities, rampant disease, and limited supplies of food was not something my mother could ever imagine for herself or her family. She spent her last year living in Freetown, which remained outside the rebels' grip in the western part of Sierra Leone. It was a place she went only because my sister told her that she would be able to talk to me on the telephone. Until then, my mother had never seen a telephone.

I will never forget the day when my phone rang in Durham and I heard my mother's voice on the other end. She had stood in line six hours at the national telephone headquarters to call. "Howa has brought me out of hiding in the bush to this strange city. There is too much noise in the streets at night. I cannot sleep. I have spent the last four months eating only roots and berries. In the distance, I have seen rebel children high on drugs. They wear Nikes and shoot people who are not fighting for or against with machine guns. I do not want to know this life. This is not what my life is made of."

When I went to Freetown five months later to say goodbye, Howa and I arranged for her to return to the Mende region, with the help of secret connections, through the bush. After I returned to North Carolina, I learned that she died peacefully in my brother's arms not far from home, as was her wish. The following year, disease killed my brother Amara and his wife, leaving six children behind.

Last month, my sister Howa called me from Freetown. She alone of my seven surviving brothers and sisters and their families is not living in a refugee camp. So it is the two of us who are trying to shoulder the burden of caring for Amara's children. Howa has been making the traditional tie-dye gara and selling it over the Internet. But with the airlines shut down, her business is limited. My family is not able to harvest the coffee and cocoa that my father once imagined as security for all of us. The life's work of my parents and grandparents has been destroyed. My entire family is in dire straits.

The elders in my village used to say, "If trouble comes upon one's household and becomes too big to handle, then one must ask for a neighbor in the community for help." Remembering my promise to my mother to remember my food, I am asking for help. Of course, my family is just one of thousands who need humanitarian aid. But in the words of Grandma Nematu, my mother's mother, "Kuwai ala kuwai mahun." Literally, this means, "Of one has two shoes, the bottom one goes first." In other words, we have to start somewhere.

Following this article a fund-raiser was held on Oct. 16 1999, which raised $1,600 for the Moiwai family in the Knema Refugee Camp in Sierra Leone.

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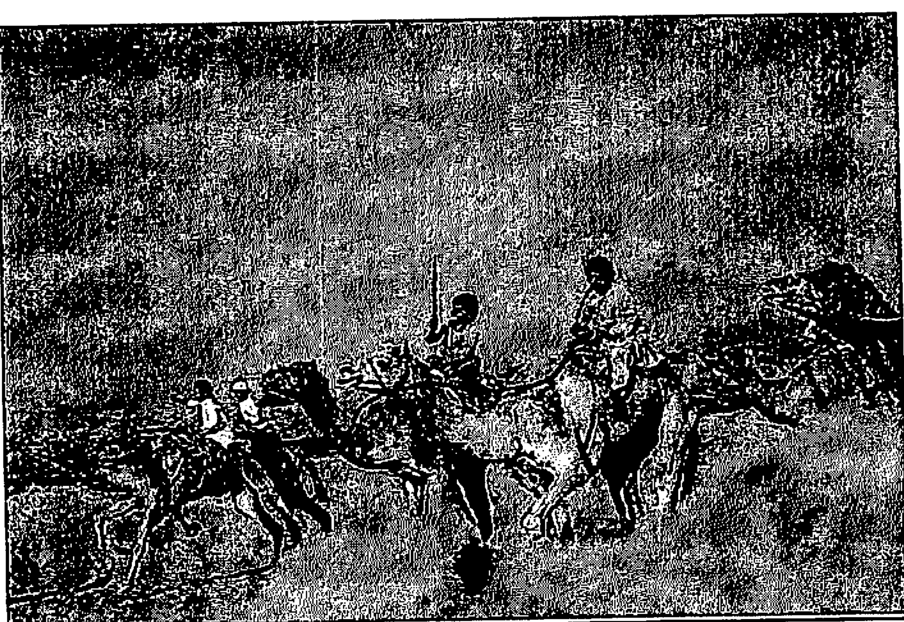
# Children of War and Hope in Sierra Leone

*—Braima Moiwai*

Children are as powerful as they are precious. I am a grown child of Sierra Leone, a country in West Africa where we have paid for this lesson in blood, in severed body parts and with the death of a million children, women and men. Part of my tradition calls for sharing, "komei," which means in Mende, "let me share." So, komei with you in the hope that the people of this land, my adopted home, will not ever pay such a price.



**Camel race in United Arab Emirates** —*photo* UNICEF

Alienate a generation of children from the awareness of the beauty of what has already been created, dreamed and said.
Give them little reason to hope that they can share in the abundance of the Earth.
Fail to create faith in their unfolding hearts that civilization will welcome and love them and eventually call upon them to

take their turn as creators and *creatrices* in their own right. Then...

Let short-sighted, lawless people fill the children's ears with "easy answers;" fill their bodies with drugs and put weapons in their hands. Let these villains demonstrate their power by raping and maiming some of the children. Let them seduce the rest by their apparent superiority to the current powers that be when they kill the children's families in front of their eyes, when they assassinate and mow down other adults who represent the current, imperfect order and with empty promises to put the children in charge after the destruction. Although we share this history with other nations and communities, this is the recently-ended darkness of Sierra Leone.

There is more to say about the little villains who pillaged in their own backyards. And there is even more to say about the bigger, invisible villains who conspire to benefit from suffering in every corner of our global village. But let me now share, komei, about my first trip back to Sierra Leone in seven years.
And komei my hope to participate in a powerful healing to render impotent the villains and their shameful weapon and to mend the hearts, minds and spirits of our many orphans, including my own.

What healing force could be more powerful than all the weapons of mass destruction in the irresponsible hands of the twisted, empty souls of humanity's invisible oligarchy? The sacred stories and oral traditions lovingly and mindfully passed from our few surviving elders to the wounded children—and we are all wounded children—will heal and protect us. Many of the orphans of the Holocaust and wise elders like Bruno Bettleheim found this to be true. And my own brother, Gbewah, whose very name means wise elder, is ready to spread the ripples of healing stories out from the hearts of the surviving members of my family to our village, our nation and our world. One day, the ripples will be felt in the Triangle. He says, "all our elders have been swallowed up by this war and we who survived are like birds after the hawk carried their mother." But I am getting ahead of myself.

The story of my return to Sierra Leone begins when my lifelong friend, just back from his own visit, reported to me that the "up-country" roads—that is the roads that connect the urban part of the country to the rural villages—were newly safe enough to travel. The relative safety is due to efforts of UN peacekeeping forces, the will of the international community and the fact that the diamond mines in Eastern Sierra Leone are now running low. When I considered taking this journey, what were fresh in my mind were the repeated pleas of my sister in Sierra Leone and my intimate friends all over the world not to take the chance of returning

while rebels and the gangs of armed children were still murdering and maiming civilians.

When my 11-year-old son, Juju, learned of my intention to surprise my surviving siblings with a visit, he was also worried. Although the US media have largely ignored the war in Sierra Leone since it started in 1991, Juju had seen the macabre images of amputees and refugee camps on American TV documentaries. He "spoke" eloquently to me in sign language: "Papa, there is war and people are starving."

I felt our bond and I knew the risks I was taking with Juju's potentially fatherless future. But my homesickness was overwhelming, my friend's reports were encouraging and my need to bring whatever joy I could to my sister and the rest of my family made me determined to "li nya yei," which means in my native Mende tongue, "to go home," when one feels homesick. Rebel atrocities be damned. It was time for a family reunion.

I arrived in Sierra Leone on July 8, 2001. I landed at the Lungi Airport in Freetown, the capital city. After living 15 years in America, seeing my people was unsettling. I was greeted by starving children. The city itself was overcrowded and teeming with displaced people. Refugee camps were scattered all over the outskirts of the city. Maimed children with missing arms, legs, even genitals that were cut off by the rebels, lived with single mothers under plastic, United Nations tents, which were barely able to protect them against the drenching rains of the wet season.

Despite such a dismal greeting, I tried to remain optimistic. I was eager to hear news about my village, Bunumbu, after ten years of rebel war. What I heard was heartbreaking. Folks told me Bunumbu no longer existed. My village—with its thatched houses, coffee and cocoa farms—where I played under the moonlight, worked on the farms and joyously swam in the nearby Loya River, had been turned into a bushy, overgrown woodland. There were once as many as 40 families there. But, no one is living there now. Who destroyed Bunumbu? I was told it was the children—children who maimed and killed other children.

In the Capital, I saw more amputee children and the graveyards of children lucky enough to die instead of having to live with (and recover from) memories of ghastly horrors. It was the very children of my village who looted, pillaged and committed unimaginable crimes against hundreds of community members, but more importantly, against a way of life. The children of my village had visited upon them more violence than the generations which preceded them could ever imagine.

Many people blame the rebel leader, Foday Sankoh, who they say, acted in concert with Liberian president, Charles Taylor, to "recruit" the children of my homeland through force: children were kidnapped from their schools, some were raped. The children were easy to manage. After they were "recruited," the leaders used drugs—cocaine, crack and heroin—to control them. The rebels, as young as 12 and under, were forced by Sankoh and the Liberian leaders to maim and kill. For what? For diamonds. My 11-year-old son could very well be a general with the rebel forces.

Sierra Leone is very rich in diamonds. The second largest diamond, *the Leone Star*, was found in Kona district, near Bunumbu. Who has profited from this lucrative trade that spawned a 10-year orgy of violence and destruction of my people's traditional values?

I realized that my own family's plight had been the plight of the entire country. In 1991, the rebels, that is the children living in the community, forced my family to flee Bunumbu without taking any of their belongings. They ran for their lives and spent what must have seemed like endless nights in the woods subsisting on roots and berries. I knew all this from the many letters and phone calls that I had been forced to be satisfied with during the aching years of physical separation.

The spent bullets, fired by children aiming AK-47 machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, were everywhere. "Children fell from the backs of mothers and they couldn't turn back," my brother's wife, Mariama, said. "It was a matter of life and death." I also knew from letters that my family had stepped over dead bodies all through abandoned villages to Segbwema, a town 20 miles away. It became their new home. The rebel leaders however, were unrelenting in their lust for blood and diamonds. The deadly children were unrelenting in their lust for a sense of power and control over their chaotic, might-makes-right world. In 1997, there was another upheaval and my family had to run for their lives again.

Hundreds of families trekked westward over 70 miles to Blama, a farming community noted for its rice, coffee and cocoa farms. That is where my extended family lives to this day. Bunumbu is but a memory. My head was swirling with confusion, pain, anger and questions. What could have possibly gone so wrong that allowed the very fabric of my country to be ripped apart? Many fellow Sierra Leoneans were asking themselves that same question as they looked at an entire population surviving in refugee camps. The elders, the very foundation of our society, had died. The weak and sickly could not run. Many lost their lives in the struggle.

Who would teach our children the precious and sacred oral traditions of our people? During my visit, the clear truths and teachings that I had grown up honoring in the past, glared at me from the chaotic present. The elders of our village had always been our vital link to the past. They were the keepers of the oral traditions of our ancestors' wisdom. The present generation of children in Sierra Leone had been tragically denied these traditional values, and knowledge of the power these values could bring peace, order, justice and freedom.

Imagine a country where libraries and hospitals have been burned down and all the wise and learned are killed. In my village the elders who would teach the children are gone. They, who were our traditional libraries and teachers. These venerated herbalists and griots who were poised to pass on the old ways were almost all gone.

On the third day of my visit, having sufficiently recovered from jet lag, I took, along with my youngest sibling, Hawa, and two of my nephews, a bus to Blama to see the rest of my family. The highway we took is the only roadway that connects the city of Freetown to the rest of the country. Its present condition is terrible. We bumped up and down because of the seemingly countless potholes and through dozens of UN barricades to reach Blama. It took ten hours to go 180 miles.

During the rebel wars, the highway became known as the "Death Trap." It earned that name because of the frequent rebel ambushes. No one was safe. Evidence of the war was everywhere. The wreckage of burned cars and trucks were all alongside the road. It looked like a junkyard. The people called it Sankoh's Garage.

The spirit of my people amazed me. We were packed into the mini bus like sardines. Nonetheless, we passengers entertained each other with songs and survival stories. We listened in silence to a woman telling how her entire family was forced into a house only to have it burned down by the rebels high on drugs while they were inside. She was the only survivor.

As I listened to the stories and songs, my anxieties rose in anticipation of seeing my brothers. The last time I saw them was in 1986, when leaving to join my fiancée in Durham. From letters, I also knew about their families. My oldest brother Bockarie had three children. Amara had six, Gbewah had nine. Kenie proudly had ten and Hawa, my sister, had one. When I saw Gbewah, I recognized him the moment he smiled. All of us have the same big smile. But he looked tired and thin. His wife Mariama and the children had just returned to the farm. Interestingly, I learned that deafness may be a genetic trait in my family. JuJu has a cousin who is also profoundly deaf.

Despite such overwhelming challenges, I tried in the smallest of ways to restore a few of our society's traditional values with my family. I remembered, when I was a child, we used to eat from a single bowl according to our ages. Nostalgia forced me to suggest that we eat with our hands from the same bowl for old time's sake. I remembered how our late mother made the five boys eat from a big congo pan and the four girls from another. Gbewah's huge appetite was well represented by his enormous hand filled with rice. We teased him about his "kavae," his huge appetite and he in turn, teased me about my huge head. Our joyous laughter was a healing relief and despite the sorrow that lined my way there, I knew I was home—home at last.

I thought too about the survival stories I had heard on the mini bus and wondered about what my own family had endured. The next day, Bockarie and Kenie joined us at Gbewah's home for a family meeting. Traditionally, he or she who comes home asks for the news and so I did. Gbewah opened the meeting by calling on our ancestral spirits to join us and he thanked them for their guidance. "Thank you for coming home," he then said to me. Gbewah connected the family to The Dead. There was complete silence in this traditional Naming of The Dead. Gbewah named family and members of the community close to us who had died in the war: our mother, Matta Gbateh, our brother Amara, our Aunt Jenneh. She had 15 children. Only two survived the war.

Our silence during the Naming of The Dead echoed far beyond the walls of Gbewah's home. He finally broke the silence with a story: "Once upon a time," he began, "a bad spirit came and turned the heads of the children against their own parents. With the help of guns and drugs coming in, the children fought amongst each other, ruled over the adults and took all the wealth for themselves. This rebel war was about diamonds, something for the strangers."

Then my brother started naming other members of our once close-knit community who had died. Uncles, aunties, grandparents. That's when I realized the seemingly irreparable gap in our generation. Yes, we are like baby birds that just lost their parents to the hawk. My journey home was about the faces and hearts of those who had called me from afar. Yes, the bushpeople, the farmers, the original wildcrafters. Seeing members of the community who raised me, people who loved me, I know what it means to be really loved. I know of growing coffee and cocoa and cultivating rice. This special way of life that even the colonial Englishman could not change. This is a way of life I inherited from my grandfather who told the colonizers that the ancestral land belongs to the families. It is a natural right.

While considering my country's dilemma, I am reminded of Patricia Jones-Jackson's book, "When Roots Die." It is an account of how Africans, during the African Slave Trade, were cut off from their customs and heritage by little villains gone astray to enrich big villains far away. Similarly, the horrible war in Sierra Leone has disconnected the survivors and future generations of my people from the wisdom and precious traditions that can only descend from the elders.

Although I am far too young, inexperienced and imperfect to be an elder—and although I, too, am orphaned—I must and will try to participate in the massive healing on Sierra Leone's hope-filled horizon. I am grateful to this community and this country for sheltering me and the sacred wealth my grandparents, my father and my mother entrusted to me. I am a living library and librarian in one. I am also grateful to my wise friends who held me back from running headlong into the fray all these years. I have shared our sacred teaching tales with thousands of children in the Triangle to show my gratitude to my adopted home and community.
Let the healing continue for all of us.

In the noble words of my grandma, Nembutal, "the world is a spider web. A break in the web affects the whole." Let us continue to tell our healing stories, to mend the web and to weave the children and each other back into a beautiful, diverse, just, compassionate and peaceful worldwide village.

*—Braima Moiwai*

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