South Philadelphia Lois Fernandez, one of the original organizers of the ODUNDE festival, was inspired by a visit to Nigeria in 1972 where she participated in a ceremony held annually in honor of Oshun, a Yoruba river goddess. “We have a river,” she thought. “We’re between two rivers. Why don’t we do an African American event? Why don’t we go to the river?” And so ODUNDE, which means “Happy New Year” in Yoruba, was founded. The festival arises out of the tradition of African American culture that integrates the sacred and the secular. A procession led by a Yoruba priest or priestess, and accompanied by a battery of drummers and dancers, culminates in an offering to Oshun made by throwing fruits and flowers from the South Street bridge into the Schuylkill River. Infused with deep religiosity, the event also has the festive atmosphere of a block party, with organized vendors, scheduled performers, and an African marketplace.

From its modest beginnings in 1975 the festival has expanded over time to draw more than 200,000 people. It has survived and flourished despite opposition and the gentrification that has threatened the neighborhood, a historic African American community. When the ceremonies begin on June 11, 2000, ODUNDE will have been celebrated on South Street for a quarter-century.


Thomas B. Morton has been attending and photographing ODUNDE since 1976. An exhibition of 30 of his black and white photographs is on display at the University of Pennsylvania Museum until January 16, 2000. It was organized by the Philadelphia Folklore Project, in collaboration with ODUNDE, Inc., as part of their effort to document African American folk arts and institutions in South Philadelphia.

Morton is a photographer, linguist, and community relations specialist. His goal in photographing the festival was originally to capture the perfect ODUNDE moment—when everything comes together, “culturally, visually, intellectually, and emotionally.” We picture some of those captured moments here.—Ed.

Fig. 1. Participants gather to await the start of the ODUNDE procession. They hold individual floral tributes that will be offered at the Schuylkill River to Oshun, a Yoruba deity who is the owner of the river and of love.

Fig. 2. The Egungun, a Yoruba-based masked character representing the ancestor spirit, has been danced by the Ishangi family for more than twenty years. It leads the procession to the river.

Fig. 3. At the crossroads, honey is poured for Elegbu to allow the procession to advance across the intersection. He opens the door to the spirit world, the world of the Orisha (the Yoruba divinities). He can wreak havoc if he is not first placated with the appropriate offering.

Fig. 4. A battery of bata drummers from the African dance ensemble Kula Mele chants and drums to the Yoruba deities. The bata is a double-headed, hourglass-shaped Nigerian drum.

Fig. 5. Oshun’s offering of fruits and flowers is made to the river at the South Street bridge.
The University of Pennsylvania Museum received a grant of $50,000 from the Trust for Mutual Understanding to facilitate an EXCHANGE OF MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS between the UPM and the National Museum of Mongolian History (NMMH) in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. The exchange will enable the museums to continue planning a traveling exhibit on 20th century Mongolia, and to form a "sister museum" relationship that should continue for several years. In September 1999, Dr. Paula Sabloff, Senior Research Scientist and Curator of the proposed exhibit, was joined in Ulaanbaatar by Dr. Marilyn Norcini, Associate Director for Collections and Exhibitions, and Gillian Wakely, Assistant Director for Education, all of the UPM, for a two-week visit to the NMMH. The staff of both museums started selecting objects for the exhibit and shared information about collecting, cataloguing, and displaying materials. In addition, the UPM staff learned about Mongolian culture to help them understand the context of the exhibit.

Marilyn Norcini and Gillian Wakely presented a lecture to Mongolian museum professionals and university students planning to specialize in museology. Ms. Wakely described education programs at the UPM and Dr. Norcini presented a structural analysis of the UPM, as one example of an American university museum. The trip was not all work, however.

A case in a NMMH gallery displays traditional dress, representing the diverse ethnicities that constitute Mongolian culture. Photo by Marilyn Norcini

Dr. Idshinorov and Dr. Paula Sabloff in the seats of honor at a ger restaurant during a lunch hosted by the National Museum of Mongolian History. Photo by Marilyn Norcini

The hospitality extended to the UPM staff by the NMMH included a field trip into the countryside outside Ulaanbaatar, where they visited a ger, a traditional felt and canvas shelter. Photo by Gillian Wakely, (l. to r.) Mrs. Idshinorov, Dr. Idshinorov, Dr. Marilyn Norcini, Dr. Namsaikhan, Mr. Hudson (Treasurer, NMMH).