

## **MALIAN CULTURE CLUB It's all things Mali at Norwood center**

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### **Body**

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IN AN unassuming storefront in **Norwood**, a small, dedicated group is working to bridge the cultural gap created by West African immigrants chasing the American dream.

The spot on Villa Ave. is home to the **Malian** Cultural **Center** and its founder, Assetou Sy, is driven by personal experience.

"If you are here in this country, you are working so much and you don't have time to talk to your kids, to show them your **culture**," Sy said. "My kids didn't have the opportunity for that so I said 'Let me help my community.' "

Using her own money, Sy opened the **center** in July 2009 to teach native traditions to the area's youth, among the estimated 8,000 Malians living in the Bronx and 12,000 in upper Manhattan.

In honor of **Mali**'s first lady, the **center** also bears the name Mme. Touré Lobbo Traoré .

Sy also strives to share her **culture** with the larger American community. The **center** has sponsored concerts with top **Mali** artists such as musician Oumou Sangaré, and hosted movie nights and food festivals with traditional dishes like tigadèguèna, rice topped with peanut butter sauce.

"Everyone has heard of Timbuktu but not everyone knows **Mali**," said Sy's husband, Mamadou, who helps at the **center**.

The free cultural program for children is the core of Assetou Sy's mission.

Each Saturday, she drives house to house to pick up 17 children. Once at the **center**, the youngsters get two hours of French language instruction and an hourlong cultural lesson.

Inspiration abounds: masks, wall hangings of bôgòlanfini cloth (cotton fabric dyed with fermented mud) and colorful posters decorate the **center**. A bank of tables overflows with small drums, decorative bowls and wooden animal carvings.

Sy and two volunteers teach the youth, who range in age from 5 to 12, about such traditions as communal eating and etiquette in the native Bambara language.

Last Saturday, Sy stood before the group of fidgety kids to teach them about respecting elders.

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"In Africa, it is very different from here," she explained. "You never do eye contact if you talk to persons you respect or to elderly people. It is disrespectful."

The students gasped at the revelation. Mohamed Dieng's hand shot up in the air.

"My grandfather is in Africa," the 9-year-old boy said. "So if I go to Africa, I can't look at him?"

Sy smiled. "When you talk to him, you do like this," she said, clasping her hands and bowing her head.

Sy is hoping to raise funding to expand the cultural center and its programs.

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## HOW TO HELP

To learn more or to make a donation to the Malian Cultural Center Madame Att Lobbo Traore, visit [www.umaca.org](http://www.umaca.org) or call (917) 557-2298.

## Graphic

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Toumani Biabate, 8, shows drum skills at Malian Cultural Center in Norwood, opened July 2009 to teach native traditions to the area's youth.

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