From left, Michelle Kollie, Banti Zehyoue and Myra Njapau dance to Liberian music at a booth along North Boulevard at the fifth annual International Heritage Celebration on Sunday. The trio was performing a blessing dance, an African ritual believed to bring prosperity. Kollie is also holding an alligator-skin purse; Liberians believe alligators are sacred.

It’s wonderful. It’s a chance to open your eyes and see different cultures, things you wouldn’t usually see with your own eyes.

— Alice Lam, native of China who moved here in 1967

Acceptance and respect highlight heritage festival

By J. TAYLOR RUSHING

Alice Lam, a native of China, heard “Amazing Grace” played on Scottish bagpipes Sunday. Stan Masinter, a native Scot, saw Nigerians dance in the street. Five-year-old Hyungie Sung learned about her native Korea, and Jim and Ida Burke kicked back with Cajun music.

For the fifth year, the International Heritage Celebration brought the world to downtown Baton Rouge. The Sunday festival showcased exhibits, displays and demonstrations from 40 countries spread over five blocks along North Boulevard.

The skies stayed sunny, and so were the people. “It’s wonderful,” said Lam, who came to Baton Rouge in 1967. “It’s a chance to open your eyes and see different cultures, things you wouldn’t usually see with your own eyes.”

“The great thing about America is this kind of freedom. Other countries don’t have that. People shouldn’t take it for granted.”

Lam was watching the Caledonian Pipes of Baton Rouge, which included Masinter. Masinter also said the festival was “wonderful” but acknowledged it can be hard work.

“It takes concentration to play,” he said of his bagpipes. “But it’s great. It’s like making a gift for people.”

Nearby, Hyungie Sung stood dressed head to toe in a pink silk Korean dress. Her father, Myungkee, a physics researcher at LSU, moved his family to Baton Rouge in October 1995 after living in New Mexico, Ohio and Korea.

“This is really a marvelous experience for her because she can be proud she’s from Korea and get an idea of the nationality,” he said. “You learn respect for other countries, and that’s a great thing to learn. There’s a curiosity about finding what else is in the world.”

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Moustapha Diack of Senegal couldn’t agree more. The Southern University chemistry professor and his daughter were sitting together wearing multi-colored Senegalese clothes.

“Look at what I’m wearing. Do you see this every day?” he said. “This (festival) is about accepting people — the way they dress, the way they speak. That’s where it all starts.”

The festival was put together by the Baton Rouge Center for World Affairs to represent the 40 countries with natives now living in Baton Rouge. Center President Monika Olivier estimated the day’s turnout was the highest in the event’s short history.

“We really want to express the different cultures in town,” she said.

“It’s about introducing and educating people about these different countries, especially for children,” Mayor Tom Ed McHugh was among Sunday’s crowd and said the festival was created out of a sense that most residents didn’t realize the community’s real diversity.

“Baton Rouge had not traditionally been considered an international community, but people from all over the world make their home here,” McHugh said.

“Today people can see how America really is like a melting pot, mixing everything together like a bowl of gumbo.”

Perhaps Jim and Ida Burke put it best.

The Baton Rouge couple performed Sunday with the Baton Rouge International Folk Dancers and were on their way to a stage of Cajun music.