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More than any other modern nation, the United States is an amalgam of people from all over the world. Its "main stream" flows from Europe with its myriad cultures which traditionally have fed into and been nourished by Western civilization. As European populations came to occupy the New World, they discovered another segment of their own species long in possession of the land. This group, really hundreds of tribes called American Indians, was removed by thousands of years from the Western tradition. For some scholars, notably anthropologists, the recognition of this separateness raised a series of questions which could only be answered by intensive field research. This field work produced some great collections of the material culture of many American Indian tribes along with innumerable volumes of published works on the non-material aspects of these cultures. The great museums with their imaginative displays of American Indian life are testimony to the dogged scholarship of generations of dedicated field workers. Scholarly interest in the American Indian has continued to grow until the present day. One effect of all this interest has been the growing recognition and acceptance of Indian culture as a valid, though in some ways strikingly different, way of life.

While the record with regard to our efforts to understand the American Indian has been good, the same cannot be said for what is culturally closer to home. Despite the fact that scores of valid cultural traditions have fed into American culture, we are still woefully ignorant of these cul-

## WHY AMERICAN FOLKLIFE STUDIES?

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*Navaho Indian Sand Painting.  
Photo: Ruri Sakai*

tures and their living carriers. Though most Americans of European descent have assumed a kind of mainstream identity, there

are still numerous enclaves of viable culture groups which have remained on the banks of the river. To discover the American identity, we must gain an understanding of these cultural minorities on a scale similar to our knowledge of the American Indian.

Specifically, what is known of Greek-American culture? Where are the Greek communities in the United States? How many Greek speakers are there? What specific items of material culture are still uniquely Greek produced? What is the social organization of these Greek communities? Where can we find and what do we know of Greek cuisine, art, literature and music? What are the processes by which so many of these enclaves of Greek culture have remained visibly Greek, while at the same time so many persons of Greek descent have moved into the mainstream?

These are only a few of the very important questions which can and must be raised if we would understand our own identity as Americans. One can substitute any ethnic group for Greek and appreciate the magnitude of our ignorance about our own society. Hence, we could raise these questions about such groups as Russians, Irish, Norwegians, Italians, Poles, Japanese, Chinese, Basques.

Now is the time to begin to seriously tackle the problem of the identity of American culture. We must do it by understanding the culture of the ethnic groups which have successfully nourished and been nourished by the mainstream. It is to this task that a program of American folklife studies must address itself.