

# Cultural Conservation

## by Marjorie Hunt and Peter Seitel

This year the Festival begins what we hope will be a series of research and presentation projects on the topic of cultural conservation. The introductory statement to the Festival Learning Center for this program reads as follows:

Cultural conservation is a scientific and humanistic concern for the continued survival of the world's traditional cultures. It grows like its sister concept, environmental conservation, from several related insights of scientists and humanists over the past quarter century.

First, living individuals and groups exist within ever-widening webs of relationships that form systems. The concept of *ecosystem* for example, has helped us to understand interrelationships between natural species and to devise strategies for conserving threatened parts of our environment. In the understanding of traditional cultures as well we are learning to look at larger economic, political and social contexts as elements in systems of which traditional cultures are also parts. Seeing them in these larger contexts allows planning for their continued vitality.

Second, the world's resources are limited, not unlimited. When cultures die, because their practitioners die or are forced or induced to give up their culture, great resources of understanding are lost. We all lose evidence of the variety of human cultural possibilities. Lost as well is native peoples' knowledge of their environment, based on intimate, painstaking observations compiled over generations — knowledge that may provide crucial information about managing ecosystems and the uses of particular plants. And aesthetic systems as complex and meaningful as any in humankind perish or leave artifacts devoid of their original meanings.

But more importantly, the people whose cultures are defaced, if they remain alive, lose the essential human tool for comprehending and coping with the world, for understanding and integrating their lives, and for orienting and raising their children. The effects of their loss — social dysfunction and alienation — may last for generations.

Finally, we have come to understand that it is possible to foster the continued vitality of "endangered species" — natural or cultural — without dismantling or derailing national and international economic, political and social institutions. Conservation can be made part of development plans. In the cultural sphere, this enables the bearers of traditional culture themselves to adapt their ideas and actions to a changing environment. They have done this when necessary for hundreds of years, within the

context of their own cultural thought, on their own terms.

Cultural conservation has been an underlying principle of the Festival of American Folklife since its beginning in 1967. This year we begin a program that explicitly explores the question of cultural conservation from several points of view. The exhibit examines the kinds of contexts in which cultural conservation becomes a necessary concern; it documents efforts on the part of the keepers of tradition themselves to conserve their own culture in the face of a changing social and physical environment; and it explores the efforts of U.S. public cultural institutions to address the problem of cultural conservation. We invite your participation in and comment on the exhibit, the performances by keepers of these valued traditions, and the discussions of various aspects of this most important topic.

As with many concepts and bodies of data in the social sciences, opinions on cultural conservation differ as to definitions, canons of evidence, analytic approaches and professional ethics. The scholarly articles that follow explore the range of situations in which we understand cultural conservation to be relevant.

Alan Lomax's "Appeal for Cultural Equity," first published in longer form in 1977, is an eloquent statement of the problem and a proposal for its solution. Addressing the social status of music as an expressive medium, he not only attests to the value of conserving living musical traditions on a worldwide scale, but also takes some of his fellow scholars to task for emphasizing ethnic distinctiveness in musical style instead of broader regional similarities, which might form the basis of regionally-oriented music industries. Charles Briggs' article is similarly directed to a particular expressive form; it develops an interesting conceptual framework for situating it within larger contexts; and, also like Lomax, it views the role of outside scholars and other non-native critics as both ambiguous and crucial. Barry Ancelet's article, on the other hand, is an insider's view which addresses Cajun culture as a whole. While still playing the insider/outsider theme, Ancelet's piece gives voice to the exuberant revival of Cajun consciousness now in progress, charting its origins and most recent developments. Duncan Earle's article on the Highland Maya in Guatamala again looks at the interplay between outside forces and internal cultural dynamics. Viewing Mayan Indian culture in the context of present-day developments, Earle moves the arena of controversy beyond the scholarly community to the world of political institutions.

It is our hope that the Festival — through its performances, Learning Centers and program book articles — be a forum in which scholars and the public can explore the nature and implications of cultural conservation.