

Living Traditions in a Modern World

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When we think about cultural traditions in contemporary society we often envision people dressed in costume for some holiday commemorating a historical event or reenacting a past way of life. Content to relegate tradition to the domain of habit, that which is handed down, and the unreflective, we are less inclined to conceive of tradition as a living force shaped by ongoing human creativity and adapted to the modern world.

It is obvious that all traditions had a beginning, and at that point must have been new and innovative. In fact, a provocative book, *The Invention of Tradition* [Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., Cambridge University Press, 1983], examines this subject directly. Some traditions seem to have been consciously and formally instituted – sport trophies, freemasonry rituals and Scottish tartans, for example. Others, sometimes even those connected with revolutionary movements, embedded symbols or ceremonies they sought to preserve in a legendary past that may have drawn from fragments of popular memory woven together with invention. More often, we may know only that a particular tradition was established with relative suddenness. But whatever the manner of their origin, those that survive for us to see and hear are the living embodiments of creative acts. Others, represented today only by their artistic and technological vestiges in our museums, still must be classed among the flowerings of human creativity.

Rather than viewing tradition generically as a moribund obstacle to change and innovation, it thus seems wiser to look at traditions as cultural resources – reservoirs of skills, aesthetic expressions and conceptual orientations – which people draw upon to craft solutions to new problems and to express their engagement with biological, psychological and social exigencies. Indeed, an approach of this sort characterizes the current scholarship and public programming of the American Folklore Society, whose centennial we celebrate on the Mall. Founded one hundred years ago because of the need to document and study disappearing cultures, much of the Society's attention is today engaged in the documentation and interpretation of emerging traditions and cultural expressions. Folklorists work in inner cities, conduct research on occupational groups, analyze processes of traditionalization and cooperate with other professionals in devising natural conservation and historical

preservation strategies, which also promote cultural continuity, equity and integrity.

The living exhibitions which make up this year's Festival provide ample illustrations of this view of the traditional. The Massachusetts program tells a paradigmatic American story. Gay Head Wampanoag, Yankee settlers, Afro-American migrants and immigrants from Italy, Greece, Poland, the Cape Verde Islands, Puerto Rico and Southeast Asia have not only preserved their traditions; through ingenious acts of individual and community creativity they have adapted them and endowed them with new meanings, as circumstances have changed. The Metropolitan Washington program points to the heightened consciousness of cultural issues associated with the migration experience. The program asks how immigrants from El Salvador, Ethiopia, China, Trinidad and Tobago, as well as domestic Anglo- and Afro-American groups historically migrating from nearby states, discard, reinvent and reconstitute their traditions as they actively make a new place home.

We are fortunate this summer to host a varied contingent of musicians and performers from several republics of the Soviet Union. Through these musicians, truly ancient traditions nurtured in various pastoral, tribal and religious environs have not merely survived, but actually flourished in contemporary Soviet life. Also at the Festival are American musicians who, as part of a groundbreaking cultural exchange with the Soviet Union, will travel to Moscow to participate in the International Folklore Festival in August and be reunited with the Soviet musicians participating in the Smithsonian's Festival.

I invite you to watch all of these fine performers, and to listen to their music. As you do so, think about their exemplary ability, not only to keep alive the traditions they represent, but gracefully and creatively to bring them forward endowed with contemporary significance. And note also how the exceedingly complex modern boundaries which separate people from people can be overcome by an appreciation of our many traditional musics.