

The Smithsonian Institution Office of Folklife Programs: What We Stand For

Since 1967 the Festival of American Folklife, through the celebration of cultural richness and diversity, has sought to conserve traditional folklife both in the United States and abroad. The Festival is the most visible symbol of broader commitments and activities which engage not only the Smithsonian's Office of Folklife Programs (the Festival's producer), but also scholars, professionals, public agencies and community advocates.

In the broadest sense, folklife represents the creative strength of a diverse humanity – the accumulated traditional wisdom and aesthetics of countless cultural groups throughout the world. Folklife refers to the traditional material products, social processes and cultural patterns of tribal, ethnic, community, regional, familial and occupational groups. It also includes the ways in which living people establish continuity with a significant past – the on-going process of traditionalization itself. Folklife is often described in genres, symbolic forms and enactments, such as ritual, song, music, dance, craft, foodways, folk theater, verbal art, decorative art, vernacular architecture, belief systems, folk medicine and other folk sciences, occupational lore, games, myth, legend and celebration.

Folklife is primarily inter-generational, transmitted orally or manually and of communal significance. Its traditional content and style are controlled by members of a group, not external institutions and interests. People participate in traditions in a variety of roles – as, for example, American Indian lacrosse players, Afro-American gospel singers, Anglo-American fiddlers, Lebanese cooks, auto assembly-line workers, Mexican *corrido* singers and Cajun boat builders. Folk traditions are maintained informally over time and given contemporary expression in community settings – on farmsteads and in urban neighborhoods, in barns and bars, in living rooms, at worship and on the street, at the workplace and play, at celebrations and commemorations. Many of these traditions may become institutionalized and be reframed for presentation to wider audiences through the use of new media, either by community members or by outsiders.

Today the integrity and continuity of many communities and their traditions are threatened by national and world patterns of economic control, environmental destruction, culturally insensitive media and ethnocentric educational systems. The destruction of folk communities and their traditions diminishes cultural diversity and represents a loss in the human repertoire of material skills, art forms, languages and ideas. To meet this challenge, communities need empowerment to practice, represent and control their cultures – to assess historically received traditions as well as mold emergent

ones. The Office of Folklife Programs assists this effort by supporting and engaging in cultural conservation activities – scholarly research, professional advocacy and public programs – that promote continuity, integrity and equity for traditional cultures. Staff folklorists, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, archivists, designers, media specialists and others attempt to:

- document and interpret traditional cultural forms and their practice with the collaboration of community members;
- disseminate information on traditional cultures and cultural conservation to the general public;
- provide access, visibility and representation for diverse traditional cultures in a national museum setting;
- represent cultural conservation concerns within the Smithsonian and to public policy makers, both nationally and internationally;
- assist traditional communities as they chart their own cultural futures;
- contribute to the development of theories and methods of cultural conservation and representation.

The means by which the Office of Folklife Programs accomplishes the above goals include: the Festival of American Folklife; Smithsonian/Folkways Records; *Smithsonian Folklife Studies*, a publication/media series; collections of cultural documents; exhibitions in the national museums and through the traveling exhibit service; program broadcasts on Radio Smithsonian; national and international symposia, conferences and seminars; community inreach and educational outreach activities; research projects, publications and presentations; and fellowship, internship and training programs. Ethnographic documentation associated with these activities in the form of fieldwork reports, audio recordings, film, video and photographic materials comprise the Smithsonian Folklife and Folkways Archives and Collections.

In addition to primary research and programs documenting and presenting traditional culture, the Office of Folklife Programs provides an experimental setting for examination of the most effective modes of representing and recontextualizing particular traditional performances, processes and artifacts on behalf of communities within a museum setting. This and related knowledge on the methods of cultural conservation are shared through training of staff, visiting scholars and interns; university teaching; technical assistance to communities; and cooperation with other like-minded international, national, regional and local agencies.