

CULTURAL PLURALISM: A SMITHSONIAN COMMITMENT

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In the United States today there is increasing awareness and debate about questions of culture. The terms “multicultural” and cultural “diversity,” “equity,” “conservation,” “survival” and “pluralism” are becoming part of public discourse as national and local institutions evaluate their missions, audiences and constituencies. The Smithsonian Institution has made cultural pluralism a high priority for the decade ahead in its research, exhibits, programs, staff and audience. This is a complex goal and this year’s Festival, as those in the past, helps us to pursue its many facets.

In its original charter, the Smithsonian is dedicated to the broad dissemination of knowledge. More than 25 million people visited the Smithsonian museums last year. Millions more read books published by Smithsonian Institution Press, watched “Smithsonian World” on television, listened to Smithsonian Folkways Records, attended Resident or National Associate programs, visited SITES exhibits in local museums or read *Smithsonian* magazine. One aspect of cultural pluralism is the democratization of access to knowledge: the Institution’s audience should not be limited by cultural, economic, and geographic boundaries. We must be *everyone’s* Institution.

But pursuing cultural pluralism involves more than indicating a willingness to admit everyone or encouraging wider audience development. Our exhibits need to reflect adequately the many American stories, songs, works of art, technological developments and bodies of wisdom created by the populace of the nation, and those of the world as well. People need to see themselves, their communities and their histories in our museums often enough to have confidence that their voice is being heard and understood in a national, even international forum.

The pursuit of cultural pluralism reaches beyond exhibitions and programs to the ways in which they are conceived. In the humanities, social and even natural sciences, new or alternative perspectives brought by scholars from traditionally under-represented nations and cultures make major contributions to our collective knowledge. Focusing new perspectives on

old areas enhances the process of creating new understandings, new paradigms, new visions. This is especially true when research is translated into exhibitions and programs. Scholars and others versed in the culture of those represented must have a voice in how that representation is accomplished. Including voices of the “studied” does not diminish the responsibility of curators and researchers to use their knowledge. Rather it challenges them to engage in a dialogue or even multilogue, so that different types of knowledge and understanding may emerge. Broadening our staff to include researchers and lay scholars of diverse backgrounds is not only ethically correct — it is also good for scholarship.

The Festival of American Folklife, the annual extension of the Smithsonian onto the National Mall of the United States, is a long lived national and international model for the research and presentation of living culture. It is an example of cultural pluralism in research, exhibition development and public education. This year, programs on the folklife of the U.S. Virgin Islands, the cultures of Senegal, and the Musics of Struggle present people who have much to say about the cultures they represent, but whose voices may not be frequently heard in national or international cultural forums. Field research to develop these programs was conducted largely by academic and lay scholars from the U.S. Virgin Islands, Senegal, and the featured communities, and usually in close collaboration with local cultural institutions. Program interpretation is multivocal, as tradition bearers, local scholars and Smithsonian curators speak for themselves, with each other, and to the public. Together they create a rich, pluralistic and knowledgeable perspective.

The U.S. Virgin Islands is a U.S. territory and a multicultural American society in the Caribbean Sea. Its culture reflects the continuity of African and European traditions, their creolization, or amalgamation, into new forms in the crucible of intense political and economic interaction, and the influence of more recent immigrants from Puerto Rico and the eastern Caribbean. Yet within this cultural diversity, Virgin Islanders recognize a unity born of intimate island

community life. People in the U.S. Virgin Islands understand one another and the complex ways in which their roots are entwined. Rich traditions deriving from home life, the market, plantation slavery and resistance to it, fishing, local and international trade inspire pride in Virgin Islanders. These island-born traditions are of increasing importance in a world penetrated by an impersonal mass culture not of their own making. But Virgin Islanders have also projected their skill and knowledge beyond their shores. Because of their relatively early struggles for freedom (emancipation from slavery was won in 1848) and their skill in successfully managing a multicultural environment, U.S. Virgin Islanders have played major roles on the mainland. Individual Virgin Islanders contributed to the Harlem Renaissance, the formation of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and to realignments in New York City urban politics — cultural, social and political movements which mark important developments in modern American history.

From Senegal to the Festival come exemplars of traditions that reveal historical development within ancient West African empires and the civilizations they nurtured. Senegal too is a multi-ethnic democratic society; it is joined together by national institutions and traditional values deriving from Islamic, sub-Saharan African, and European sources. Traditions of praise singing, storytelling, healing, weaving, hair braiding, and metal smithing enact and promulgate ethics of social responsibility, personal integrity, and the dignity of self within a spiritual framework. The embodiments of these values are important for contemporary Senegalese; they also can be keys to a complex history that connect Americans to their roots in West Africa. Many Africans brought to the Americas in the slave trade came from Senegal and nearby coastal regions of West Africa. The cultural continuity of the African diaspora in the Americas is still evident in traditions such as spirit stilt dancing and hair braiding practiced in both Senegal and the U.S. Virgin Islands. *Bru nansi* stories, West African moral tales about humans and animals, are still told in the Virgin Islands and in the American South. In the Georgia Sea Islands and in coastal South

Carolina they are told in Gullah, a language with West African roots that provides the grammatical basis for Black English. And there is a Senegalese tale about the Manding King Aboubacar II who set off westward across the Atlantic with two thousand canoes several hundred years *before* Columbus. Whether or not his fleet arrived is unknown. But that spirit of exploration, which also placed Senegalese in a network of trade routes through the Sahara to the Mediterranean, today motivates a generation of Senegalese-American immigrants to enter U.S. universities, participate in the professional work force and contribute to commercial and street markets in New York, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta.

In the Musics of Struggle program, we learn how different communities, in the United States and abroad, use traditional music, song, chant and movement to make their voices heard. In recent years we have seen profound changes in the social order resulting from mobilizations of popular support. Traditional music has taken on a dramatic, culturally dynamic role in some of these mobilizations. Old songs and tunes newly recontextualized or revalorized provide a link between the continuity of the past and the challenge of the present. Sometimes we forget how powerful the music can be which articulates a sense of moral purpose and moves a community, a people or a nation to transform itself. This program demonstrates that power to transform, from the songs of the Freedom Singers to the chants, in sign language, of students in Gallaudet's "Deaf President Now" Movement.

While the Festival gives us a means to comprehend cultural pluralism and distinctiveness, it also presents historical contiguities and functional similarities in culture. We can see the role that music plays in many communities, nations and cultures. We can understand the relationship of tradition to understanding history and informing social action. We can find connections and resemblances across oceans and centuries. But most of all, at the Festival we experience cultural expression, encounter creativity, and meet the people who can help us explore them.