

The 25th Annual Festival: Land and Culture

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This year, the Festival is about human relationships to land. Culturally, land is never just soil and terrain. It is roamed or owned, wilderness or property. Land can have borders or be a path to different realms. Ideas of mother nature, son or daughter of the soil, the fatherland, and heaven, earth and underworld, for example, show how intimately our understanding of land is intertwined with ways of thinking about cosmology, ecology, society, and personal and national identity.

Indonesian land punctuates sea and ocean to form some 13,000 volcanic islands. On these islands is an amazing diversity of environments, ranging from the sandy beaches of Sumatra to snowcapped mountains that rise above the rainforests in Irian Jaya on New Guinea. To sample this diversity, the Festival presents cultural traditions from three particular environments — the forests of Kalimantan, the fields of Java and the sea coast of Sulawesi. Kenyah and Modang people of Kalimantan show us how they have made life possible and meaningful in the rainforest. Witness their careful use of indigenous plants for medicine, trees for vernacular longhouses, and other forest products for aesthetic and religious practices. Buginese and Makassarese boatbuilders, seafarers, cooks and silk makers demonstrate skills they use to live with and from the sea — the economic trade and natural bounty it has historically provided. And from East Java come village agriculturalists, rice farmers of that island's rich soil who have developed an intricate fabric of social, material and performance arts. These rich traditions are the expression of a civilization whose cultural sources — local, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic — are as complex as any on earth.

Half a world away from Indonesia and much closer to home is the American "heartland." American culture embodies a few elemental self-images with mythic stature — the frontier is

surely one; the family farm is surely another. The idea of the family farm also entails some of our strongest values — hard work, self-reliance, family solidarity and community life. At the Festival, farming families from twelve midwestern states present their culture through family folklore and storytelling, community celebrations and demonstrations of work skills — from machinery repair to computer-based management of breeding records. Farm families try to preserve a way of life and to remain stewards of the land. But today their task is more complex than it has ever been, given the economic, technological and informational revolutions in farming. Tensions between an increased productivity through innovation on one hand and a preservation of family lifeways and values on the other, animate the present challenge of living off and caring for the land.

Land is also important as we begin to commemorate the Columbus Quincentenary and to consider the meaning and consequences of Columbus' voyages. Five hundred years ago, the year before those voyages, the western hemisphere was home to a wonderful array of peoples, cultures and civilizations. The land was populated by the descendants of peoples who crossed over from Asia to Alaska some tens of thousands of years ago. For millennia, this land was theirs. With a knowledge and understanding of this land developed over generations, native peoples gathered and cultivated its bounty, bred new crops, derived medicines to cure sickness, mined ores for making tools and ornaments, used its earth, stone and wood for building homes, made dyes for cloth and invented ways of preparing and cooking food. Land and its use informed social, moral, religious and cosmological beliefs, and sacred and secular practices. Some of this knowledge and practice of land use and its symbolic elaboration in artistic forms are still continued among many Native American

groups. At the Festival, culture bearers from the Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian people from Alaska; Hopi from Arizona; Maya and Lacandón from Chiapas, Mexico; Zapotec and Ikood from Oaxaca, Mexico; Shuar, Achuar and Canelos Quichua from Ecuador; Jalq'a and Tiwanaku from Bolivia; and Taquile from Peru illustrate how the land in many varied environments is cared for and thought about, and how, almost five hundred years after Columbus, the wise and humane use, the knowledge and power of land must be re-"discovered."

The Festival itself is no less about land. The Festival is mounted annually in a symbolically powerful place, the National Mall of the United States, surely among our nation's most sacred plots of land. In the Festival's 25 year history, it has brought more than 16,000 of the world's musicians, craftspeople, storytellers, cooks, performers, workers, ritual specialists and others from every part of the United States and more than 50 nations to the National Mall. Farmers and fishermen, bluesmen and quilters, taro growers and *matachines*, bricklayers and potters, representing only a sample of human cultural diversity, have demonstrated their knowledge, skill, aesthetics and wisdom. In doing so, they have told their story to some 20 million visitors. They have brought issues of cultural conservation, survival, continuity and creativity to the symbolic center of our nation, to national and to international consciousness.

The Festival is the foremost example of a research-based presentation of living culture. It has

enriched the spirits of the people — artists, scholars, government officials and visiting children and adults — who annually come to meet each other on the nation's front lawn. The Festival has shown that people of different backgrounds, beliefs and sensibilities can indeed talk together and understand one another if given the opportunity. And the Festival has had strong impacts back home, on the creative lives of individuals and the institutional life of communities.

The Festival does not celebrate itself loudly, perhaps in keeping with the character of the people it represents. The Festival resists commercialization, glitter and stylization. It is nonetheless a complex undertaking, undergirded by extensive research, detailed logistics, intricate funding arrangements and the like. The Festival is sometimes messy and unpredictable, but that is because it speaks in and through many voices. It is a 20th century genre of complex human interaction invented to get people to talk, listen, share, understand and appreciate one another, and to do it in a way that is indeed filled with fun and sometimes wonder. The Festival is firmly rooted in specially endowed land — land that belongs to and provides a place for everyone. The National Mall nourishes the mind, the spirit and the identities of those who stand upon it. Our Festival on the Mall helps empower cultures presented here to invite you to cross boundaries not regularly crossed and hear the voices of the earth's peoples, from around the world and from close to home.