

The Festival is not about theatricalized folklore or idiosyncratic representations of cultural heritage. In privileging the cultural community, it seeks connections between artistic and cultural expressions and the economic and civic life of its members. Less an exercise in academic definition, the task is to understand, present, and encourage ongoing cultural creativity — the exten-

sion of those cultural traditions in a dynamic sense by the people who make, hold, and nourish that culture. That is, one of the aims of the Festival is to enable people to develop and continue to develop their own cultural heritage.

BUT WHAT IS DEVELOPMENT?

Development also has a history of definition. In the 19th century, development

meant moral and material progress, measured along a single, unilineal, racialistic scale of cultural evolution. The accomplishments of Victorian Englishmen were at the top of the scale, with various peoples and races accorded lesser positions in descending order from civilization to barbarism to savagery. The cultural heritage of most people was generally thought to be inimical

Leona Watson engages
Miss Etta in an
impromptu interview
at the 1991 Virgin
Islands Folklife
Festival restaging on
St. Croix.

Photo by Joan Wolbier



Conserving and Creating Cultural Heritage: The Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Diana Parker

The Festival has been called many things — an exercise in cultural democracy, a living exhibition, a radio that tunes in the whole wide world. It is, at different times, all of these things. But first and foremost, it is a calculated strategy to preserve cultural heritage.

The Festival encourages cultural conservation directly. By bringing stellar artists to the National Mall and presenting them to appreciative audiences of over a million people, the Festival hopes to convey to the tradition bearers, and those who follow in their footsteps, how important their skills and

knowledge are to a broad public, and how much loved. At a time when “cultural grey-out” is a worldwide phenomenon, it is critical to remind our cultural exemplars and their children how important they are to us all. In the words of cultural activist and folklorist Alan Lomax, “The aim of this Festival is not to make America proud of its folklore or to put on an affair that will please Washington and the Smithsonian, but to provide support for the big river of oral tradition which is now being dissipated and corrupted all over the planet. We cannot foresee what we would do if we did not have this river

of pure creativity always revivifying our culture, but life would be a very sorry thing if it dried up.”

The Festival also encourages grassroots cultural heritage by the method of its production. Each year we work closely with our counterparts in the communities represented on the Mall. Unlike other exhibitions in which a curator may select the objects to be presented, a Festival program is a joint negotiation between senior Festival staff and cultural specialists from featured communities. That is, people involved in the Festival have to figure out how to represent their culture, to imagine and present their culture as heritage. While this is not the easiest way to produce an event for either group, it is certainly the most educational. Many

Cultural Heritage Development

to development. Development or cultural evolution occurred over time, through the survival of better social and economic need-meeting practices, through borrowing of inventions and innovations from more evolved societies, and forced imitation through colonialism. This idea of development continued with 20th-century modernization theory, with cultural heritage used as a residual category

to explain irrationalities in society — values and practices that hampered populations from embracing the work ethic, consumerism, and efficient, utilitarian institutions. World War II demonstrated quite clearly that economic development did not necessarily mean moral superiority. And in the post-war world, various global accords have established standards of development comprising nutri-

tion, health, and other quality-of-life measures, including political, civil, and cultural rights — the rights to speak one's own language, believe in and practice one's own religion, and so on. At this point, the end of the 20th century, we have witnessed enough alternative modes of being developed. Capitalism has prospered in the cultural context of Japanese values and the social system of Hong Kong and southern China. Modern art, science, and computer work nowadays come from India. Musical culture the world over has grown from the infusion of African and Latin styles. There is no cultural monopoly on development.

WHY NOW?

Cultural heritage has assumed major importance in the world today for several reasons.

Politically, issues of cultural identity and the cultural affiliations of transnational, national, and subnational populations are crucial in the definition and continuity of national and regional identity. The United States experienced the so-called culture wars in the early 1990s and faces future challenges with regard to an increasingly diverse population, the growth of Latino populations, multilingual school-age populations, and the need to accommodate the differences in lifestyles and values among a wide variety of groups within a common civic framework. The Soviet Union, a former superpower, was undermined in part because of its failure to deal adequately with its diversity of peoples, its varied linguistic and ethno-national groups. Similar concerns about the relationships between mainstream culture and that of various marginalized communities constituted on the basis of regionality, religion, race, language, origin, have become political issues in Canada, China, Nigeria, Germany, Brazil, Turkey, Israel, Mexico, Australia, California, and New York City. Policies have varied from integrationist to segregationist, from en-

groups, having put together the necessary infrastructure to help us produce the Festival, have kept the team together to reproduce the event “back home.” Often, the team then lives beyond the “restaging” to continue to work on research and presentation. Both Iowa from '96 and Wisconsin from '98 have staff originally hired for the Festival still employed and actively doing critical cultural conservation work.

Finally, the Festival also attempts to aid in cultural conservation by supporting our participants' attempts at economic viability. At this year's Festival, through Smithsonian Folkways recordings, sales of artists' creations at the Festival Marketplace, and attempts to connect traditional craftspeople with larger markets, we work to provide tradition bearers with the livelihood necessary to allow them to continue their art. This is new territory for us, and we are learning how complex and challenging it is, but unless people can retain aesthetic, economic, and legal control over their artistic forms and receive some reward for it, these forms will surely die out as people face the necessity of supporting their families. Indeed, such a strategy, like the Festival itself, confirms that cultural traditions are vital and adaptable, and develop as real, living people connect their artistry with life.

Diana Parker is director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

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