

Proceedings of Smithsonian-UNESCO Conference Forthcoming  
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Proceedings of the Smithsonian-UNESCO conference held June 27-30, 1999, will be published by the end of the year. That conference brought together 35 official delegates from all of the world's UNESCO-defined regions, official observers from universities, non-governmental organizations, and public-sector institutions, and Smithsonian staff.

In one sense, the conference completed a four-year process of evaluating how well a Recommendation adopted by the international organization ten years before was working to protect "folklore and traditional culture" in countries that are members of UNESCO. About one third of the papers presented used that document, The 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore, as a temporal and conceptual point of reference to assess current thinking about traditional cultures in various geographical regions and institutional practices. The volume includes regional evaluations and global assessments, critiques, and historical treatments of the topic.

In another sense, the meeting was an initiative designed to move cultural policy in particular directions. The presence of members of indigenous and other local cultures emphasized the necessity of engaging local agency and expertise in the planning and implementation of cultural and other policies that affect local populations. And a group of legal specialists addressed the topic of intellectual property rights as these relate to traditional cultures --an area expressly avoided by the 1989 document. Discussion of such legal questions accounts for one-quarter of the papers included in the volume. The remaining papers describe developments in the world of traditional cultures and techniques employed in their safeguarding and revitalization.

The volume *Safeguarding Traditional Cultures: A Global Assessment* includes papers, two brief statements from UNESCO dignitaries, and the complete final report on the conference, including an adopted plan of action, which has been translated into French and Spanish. Of the initial printing of 2,500 copies, 1,500 are being distributed by the Center to university libraries, social science departments, and organizations concerned with the safeguarding of traditional cultures. One thousand will be sent to UNESCO's Division of Cultural Heritage for further distribution.

Center's Participation in UNESCO Experts' Roundtable in Turin, Italy.

The Plan of Action adopted at the 1999 Smithsonian-UNESCO Conference called for the development of a new, more binding international legal instrument to address the safeguarding of traditional culture and folklore. To pursue this policy, UNESCO's Intangible Culture Unit in the Division of Cultural Heritage convened a meeting in Turin, Italy, March 14-17, 2001, for the purpose of developing a definition of "traditional culture and folklore" on which that legal instrument would be based. The Center was asked to send James Early and Peter Seitel to that working meeting.

The 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore defines the contents of the category "traditional culture and folklore" as cultural products: "the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts" (emphasis added). Consistent with this, the

recommendations almost entirely addressed the importance of supporting the efforts of folklorists, archivists, and other institutionally based professionals to maintain and disseminate information about these important creations and forms.

The 1999 Smithsonian-UNESCO conference made it clear that this definition and practice were not sufficiently broad to include the bearers of traditional culture themselves in their efforts to preserve, maintain, and develop their own cultural heritage. Participants at the conference continually stressed the necessity of engaging the agency, expertise, and perspective of local tradition-bearers in the safeguarding of local cultures. A new definition was called for to reorient policy. To this end, Early and Seitel proposed that this kind of culture be defined in terms of process rather than product. The definition ultimately adopted by the experts' meeting focused on "peoples" learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability. . . ." This was accepted by UNESCO's Executive Board and will be the basis of further development of the proposed international instrument. Its importance is that the definition of culture shifts from products, which are alienable from local populations and their agency, to processes, which are not. To safeguard culture is thus to safeguard a local people's right and agency in practicing their culture to create artifacts, social relations, increased knowledge, and economic development.

To be sure, definition has always been part of the discourse of folkloristics. But the distinction between process and product seems especially crucial at this time, when, on the one hand, culture has moved closer to the center of a field of policy formation that now includes multilateral, non-cultural institutions like the World Bank, and on the other hand, there is widespread concern and action among indigenous and local communities regarding threats of globalization.