

Talk Story, Spring 1999 No. 15: 7

Center and UNESCO to Co-host Conference

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In recent years, official state and international institutions have begun to appreciate more fully the importance of culture in expressing human identity and mapping out disputed territories in local, national, and global contexts. With this increased recognition, "culture" has become increasingly a central agenda item in policy arenas. In order to understand how abstract, bureaucratic, policy-driven ideas about culture relate to how culture really exists in living communities, public agencies and private foundations are increasingly seeking partnerships with organizations who are in touch with local cultures on the ground.

The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage has long been wrestling with issues of cultural policy and the interaction between diverse community groups. With over 30 years of hands-on experience in working with political leaders and issues, and local artists, in dozens of countries, the Center offers a rich knowledge base and deep respect for the individual artists and the collectivities in which their creative expressions are rooted.

The Center staff will bring their experience as scholars, producers, and advocates for grassroots culture and local artist practitioners to an upcoming joint project with UNESCO's Division of Cultural Heritage. On June 27 - 30, 1999, the Center will join UNESCO in co-hosting a working conference in Washington, D.C., entitled "A Global Assessment of the 1989 UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore & Future Directions Towards Community Empowerment" (working title).

This conference is the culmination of a decade-long UNESCO initiative aimed at deepening awareness of and commitment to cultural expressions -- sometimes referred to as intangible cultural heritage -- that incorporate folklore, popular culture, and grassroots expressions: for example, crafts, storytelling, traditional music, folk medicine, and vernacular architecture. This effort formally began in November 1989, when the UNESCO General Conference adopted a Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore at its 25th session in Paris. This Recommendation provided a directive for member states in order to assist them in supporting the continuance of their folklore traditions. The document mapped seven key mechanisms for safeguarding of folklore: definition, identification, conservation, preservation, dissemination, protection, and international cooperation.

In an attempt to gauge how individual countries have studied, preserved, and disseminated their grassroots cultural traditions, UNESCO developed a survey and held a series of regional conferences aimed at fleshing out the effectiveness and continued relevance of the Recommendation itself in the context of vast changes in both local and global spheres.

The Washington-based conference to be held this June under Center auspices will draw a host of international scholars and institutional directors from 24 nations who have participated in regional UNESCO conferences leading up to this meeting, and whose initial recommendations form the content basis of the conference discussions. Conference recommendations along with conference papers, pre conference surveys, and analyses will be published and forwarded to UNESCO for consideration and

ratification, and distributed as well to national institutions, NGOs, scholarly and other organizations.