Ethnic Folklore in Your Classroom: Traditions, Tales, and Treasures from Tijuana to Timbuktu

A festival! Just the word conjures up bright lights and movement, warmth and celebration. A folklife festival embodies all these certainly. But it provides something more besides: it enables us to celebrate the diversity of our cultural heritage—while forging a link that binds us together. It's the American tradition to enjoy the vast panoply of American to share these traditions with others, in a folklife festival.

The festival you are about to read about is one of a recent Festival of American Folklore in Washington, D.C., to demonstrate the folklife customs of Americans from Southeast Asia. Each year the Smithsonian's American Folklife Festival focuses on a different culture or set of cultures, and each year thousands upon thousands of visitors listen, watch, study, join in, sing along, recount their own stories, and feel a stir of recognition or a sense of wonder and delight as they view or take part in the customs and traditions of other cultures.

You and your students can share some of this same exhilaration by putting on a folklife—or cultural heritage—festival of your own in your school classroom. This issue of ART TO ZOO tells you how to guide your students through the steps of doing fieldwork for the festival, organizing the material, and actually staging the event. In the process of such activity, your students will have the opportunity to practice gathering information through interviewing and other means, organizing data, and presenting the material both orally and in writing. And in enjoying and sharing the customs of others, the children will also gain insight into the whole idea of folklife—what folklife is and how it is shared by people everywhere, including oneself and one's own classmates.

The most readily observed and colorful examples of folklife are ethnic—that is, those customs and practices followed by a group with common ties in a particular area or in similar ways? If the children can look back into their families' pasts and see that such was true, they are beginning to discover an important part of what folklife is—the passing on of traditions from one generation to the next. Next return to the bulletin board photographs and ask your students to study each picture again closely. Now they should see that in some of the pictures, participants look as if they are members of the same cultural group. This observation should lead the youngsters to another part of the definition of folklife: Folklife is always shared by a group with common ties, such as a family, a community, or a nation.

Now ask your students to list some of the customs practiced in their own homes to celebrate an event commemorated in many different cultures—the arrival of the New Year. For example, do they perform special dances, cook special dinners, or watch television the annual celebration in New York's Times Square? How were some of these customs learned? Was it from a book . . . by copying, or imitation . . . or by listening to older family members?

If the students say they have learned a particular holiday tradition by imitating or listening to older family members, they have discovered another part of what folklife is: Folklore traditions are always passed from generation to generation by word of mouth, or imitation, rather than through books. This is why, for example, Dr. Louis C. Jones, Director Emeritus of the New York State Historical Association, has described folklife as the "most fragile kind of history there is . . . the part of history that is unwritten because it lives on in the people's tongues and in their everyday ways, until somebody takes the trouble to preserve it." [From "Folklife in the Schools: A Student Guide to Collecting Folklife," Yorker Field Research and Writing Guide, an informal publication of the New York State Historical Association, 1976.]

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Southeast Asian woman dancing at the Festival of American Folklife, Washington, D.C. Photo credit: Chip Clark
Now have the children recount what they have learned so far about folklore: Their answers should include the following:  
- Folklore is concerned with traditions. 
- Folklore traditions are practiced by people from the same background, and 
- Folklore traditions are handed down in either of two ways—by word of mouth or by imitation. Following these traditions may have led to continuing material handed down by a group, community, family, or nation, by word of mouth, or by custom or practice. 

Besides this standard definition, a special vocabulary has grown up around the relatively new academic discipline of collecting and studying folklore. Here are some of the terms frequently used by folklorists which you might want to share with your students.

**Folklorist.** A person who studies folklore. 

**Ethnic folklore.** A way of life that people still follow who are keeping that tradition alive. 

**The purpose of an ethnic folklife festival?** Is it just for fun, or does it have a serious purpose? 

**THEORY.** What is this? This traditional material is handed down by a group, community, family, or nation, by word of mouth, or by custom or practice. 

**ETHNIC GROUP.** A group of people who have characteristics that set them apart from other groups. 

**FOLKLIFE.** The customs and traditions of any given culture, an ethnic folklife festival can provide information about the ethnic lore of your community. 

**REPETOIRE.** The folklore that tradition bearers know. 

**ACTIVE REPETOIRE.** A way of life where people keep up the traditions. 

**PASSIVE REPETOIRE.** A way of life where people no longer practice the traditions. 

**ORGANIZING THE MATERIAL.** The recording of the customs and traditions of an ethnic group. 

**DOCUMENTOR OR FIELDWORKER.** A person who records (through tapes, notes, or photographs) a particular tradition in order to preserve it for the future. 

**INFORMANT.** A person who has knowledge of a folklore subject (folkway) and is interviewed by a documentor or fieldworker. 

**What Does Ethnic Mean?** 

With the exception of Native Americans, all families in the United States have emigrated to America since the 1600s. The Puritans who set sail from England on the Mayflower and landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620, as well as our country's most recent arrivals, from say, Mexico or Cambodia, share this factor in common. For various reasons they all have emigrated from their own countries of origin to the haven of the New World. Next ask for some of your students to volunteer to tell about the countries their families came from originally. Then ask if these students' families still practice the customs of their countries of origin. What are some of the ways they celebrate Easter, or New Year's Eve, Christmas, or Hanukkah, for instance?

*Explain that people who carry on the traditions of the country from which they emigrated are said to be continuing their ethnic culture (from ethnosc: the Greek word for nation).* 

As a writing assignment have the children describe a celebration or other ethnic tradition they practice at home and the feelings they themselves associate with that tradition. Read some of these essays aloud in class and ask the students' opinions on why people continue their traditional practices when they come to the United States. 

Next discuss with the class which of the customs or traditions just described the students find especially appealing. After several children have named such favorite practices, ask if some of these customs remind them of their own customs. What are the similarities? Then discuss also the differences between these practices and the children's own customs and ask the students if they sometimes feel timid about things that are outside their folklore, then, is it fun or fun?

**What's the Purpose of an Ethnic Folklife Festival?** 

As you become more familiar with customs that are different from your own, do you find that you like them better? Why? Do you think that this is why people continue their ethnic traditions? Does this mean that the activities suggested below, other possibilities to consider include a game or a storytelling workshop and a craft demonstration.

**Talk about the countries their families came from.** Do you have folk costumes for dances or celebrations that we could borrow for our festival? Do you have old photographs of family folk practices? What other things do you have relating to our family's ethnic traditions? 

**Do you have any dances from our place of origin that you could teach at the festival?** Do you have folk costumes for dances or celebrations that we could borrow for our festival? Do you have old photographs of family folk practices? What other things do you have relating to our country of origin? Toys? Ways to play games? Crafts you could demonstrate or teach (decorating Easter eggs, for example)? Are some of the foods we prepare and eat adapted from recipes used in the country or region our family came from? 

If so, are there any recipes we might prepare at the folk festival?

**Consulting Outside Sources** 

Besides books, sources other than your student's own families can provide information about the ethnic lore of your community. Include churches and synagogues, as well as organizations like Italian-American or Polish-American societies, and restaurants. For example, a small group of children, accompanied by you, might interview a member of the clergy in a particular ethnic neighborhood. Besides this, other possibilities include a tape recorder. The questionnaire that follows should help the children structure their interviews so as to obtain the most useful kinds of information. 

What country or countries did our family originally come from? Do we mark holidays and other special events (such as births, weddings, and funerals) in the same way these occasions were marked in the country, region, or culture we originally came from? How did we learn such customs? 

**When you were young did you have activities suggested below, other possibilities to consider include a game or a storytelling workshop and a craft demonstration.** 

**WORKSHOPS AND DEMONSTRATIONS.** 

Workshops and Demonstrations* 

In the workshops and demonstrations, it is important to remember that the significance of each presentation should be discussed, so as to place the activity in cultural context. Besides the activities suggested below, other possibilities include a game or a storytelling workshop on the occasion-and such individuals might be asked to contribute to the festival by coming in to demonstrate songs, dances, crafts, games, or food traditions of their particular group. 

Ethnic restaurants should be visited when they are closed to the public, preferably in the morning. Besides recipes, these establishments can provide other useful information: for example, the owner or chef of a Greek restaurant may know of Greek-American dance groups or craftspersons. 

**Organizing the Material** 

As the period for the fieldwork draws to a close, your students will have gathered enough material that you and they together will be able to establish categories of traditions to be represented at your festival. A chart such as the one shown here will help you accomplish this task.

Once material from every ethnic group represented in your classroom has been organized in this way, your next step will be to divide the folklore material into "active" and "passive" categories. Passive objects include costumes, handicrafts, ritual objects, and photographs, all of which can be used to decorate the festival area. The active, dynamic materials—dances, songs, food, stories—will be used in workshops and demonstrations.

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Scenes from the Festival of American Folklife, Washington, D.C.

1. Puerto Rican women dancing. Photo credit: Barbara Hadley
2. Barbeque, North Carolina style. Photo credit: Barbara Hadley
3. Riding the vipukelkka, a Finnish whip sled. Photo credit: Chip Clark
4. Vietnamese New Year's game. Photo credit: Dane Penland
5. Hmong embroiderer from Southeast Asia. Photo credit: Barbara Hadley
6. Costumed dancers from Vietnam. Photo credit: Dane Penland

The Festival of American Folklife is sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service.
Family Folklore Exhibition

A new Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service show on the subject of Family Folklore has begun a nationwide tour. Watch for it near your city or town. Here are the dates in 1984:

Feb. 11–March 11, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus; May 19–June 17, McMillan Memorial Library, Wisconsin Rapids; July 7–Aug. 5, State Historical Museum, Jackson, Miss.; Aug. 25–Sept. 23, Columbus, Ga.; Museum of Arts and Sciences, Macon, Ga.; Apr. 5–May 4, Public Library of Columbus and Franklin County, Columbus, Ohio.

Smithsonian Offers Summer Course for Teachers

You don't have to live in Washington to study at the Smithsonian. "Using Museums to Teach Writing," a special one-week course, will be offered by the Smithsonian Institution this summer for elementary and secondary school teachers living more than 75 miles outside the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. The course is accredited by the University of Virginia. Tuition and materials fees will total approximately $200. No scholarships are available.

"Using Museums to Teach Writing" will survey ways in which teachers can use local museum exhibits and community resources as tools for teaching writing. In addition to working on formal and informal exercises, participants will interview several Smithsonian Institution staff writers to learn about various approaches to writing. The course, worth three graduate credits, is open to full-time classroom teachers of grades 5 through 12, school librarians (media specialists), and curriculum specialists. Instruction for hearing-impaired individuals can be provided for all class work.

Classes will meet July 5–13, 1984, in Washington, D.C. Specially priced housing may be available in a conveniently located college dormitory. Participants will arrange for their own meals. Enrollment is limited. Applications must be postmarked no later than April 6, 1984. Notices of acceptance will be mailed by April 30, 1984.

For an application form, including complete information, write:

National Seminars
OESE, A&I 1163, Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
Or, call (202)357-3049.

Song Workshop

For each workshop, choose a group of songs—a lullaby, a folksong, and a holiday song, for instance—representative of a specific cultural heritage. With the help of a knowledgeable parent or other adult (who should also be present at the performance), teach the songs in advance to four or five students. Then at the festival performance, pass out words and song sheets to each class member. Have one of the students who already knows the words and music introduce each song and explain its background. After the song has been performed, other students should be taught the song and encouraged to join in. A parent, student, or music teacher might accompany the group on harmonica, guitar, or piano.

Dance Workshop

In format, this is similar to the song workshop. Four or five children who have already been taught the dance steps demonstrate them and then help the rest of the class join in.

Discussion Workshop

A discussion workshop might be built around the theme of New Year's celebrations. Assign one child to be a TRADITIONAL BEARER for each cultural group represented at the festival, to tell how his or her culture celebrates the arrival of the New Year. Then the similarities and differences between methods of celebrating can be discussed.

Another good topic for a discussion workshop is "immigration," in which parents or grandparents tell stories of how they or their ancestors came to the United States.
Beans, Beans, and More Beans . . .
From All Over the World

by Ann Bay

When you think about a food that practically everybody eats, dried beans come immediately to mind. All over the world—in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas—beans are a staple of everyday life.

To make dried beans, the seeds from one or another kind of bean plant are harvested and then dried. Drying preserves the beans, which means they will keep on your kitchen shelf for a very long time, no matter what kind of climate you live in.

Dried beans are highly nutritious (with lots of protein, vitamins, and minerals), widely available, and inexpensive to buy. This, along with the fact that they keep well, helps to account for their worldwide popularity.

There are many different kinds of dried beans: black beans, mung beans, kidney beans, garbanzos, black-eyed peas, and lentils, to name just a few. Which of these kinds of beans you usually eat depends largely on where you live. For example, lentils are popular throughout much of Africa; black beans are eaten in Latin America; and white beans of various types are widely enjoyed in Europe.

The way in which dried beans are cooked also varies from place to place. Two famous bean dishes from the United States are baked beans (New England) and red beans and rice (Louisiana). Here is a recipe for red beans and rice:
Red Beans and Rice

**ingredients**
1 lb red kidney beans (about 2 cups)
½ lb ham bone with meat
8–10 cups of water
1 onion, chopped
1 clove of garlic, chopped
2 Tbs celery, chopped
2 Tbs parsley, chopped
1 large bay leaf
salt and pepper to taste

**preparing for cooking**
As with all dried beans, you have to plan ahead because the beans must be prepared before cooking. First measure the beans, wash them under running water, and sort carefully through them, removing any stems, stones, or other inedible matter. Now soak the beans: Either cover them with cold water and let them stand overnight . . . or drop them a few at a time into a big pot of boiling water, boil two minutes, and let stand covered for two hours.

**cooking**
When the beans have finished soaking, drain them of their soaking water and cover them with 8 cups of fresh water. Bring this to a rapid boil; then lower the fire and let the beans simmer while you prepare the other ingredients to add to the pot.

In a frying pan, brown the meat lightly. Then remove the meat from the pan, and add the onions, garlic, celery, and parsley in its place. Cook these vegetables slowly in the meat drippings until tender. Now add the meat and vegetables, along with the bay leaf, to the bean pot and continue to let all of this simmer very slowly for at least two hours, or until the beans are very tender but not mushy.

Next, correct the seasoning. Using a long-handled spoon, reach into the pot and scoop up a few of the beans. Let the beans cool on the spoon before you taste them. (You can tell that they're cool when they stop steaming.) Now decide: is salt or pepper needed? If so, season to taste.

**serving**
Finally, cook 2 cups of rice according to package directions. When the rice is tender and fluffy, put it on plates and serve the beans over it. Makes eight generous servings.

NOTE: “Red Beans and Rice” is especially delicious when served with a tossed green salad and crisp French bread.
Doing What Folklorists Do

When you ask your family about traditions and customs, you are doing what folklorists do. Folklorists find out about certain things people do now that their mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers did before them. Such things include making special foods on holidays and dancing special dances at weddings. Folklorists are interested also in the kinds of traditions people carry on at work. And they are interested in children’s games—since games too have been passed down from one generation to the next.

Marjorie Hunt is a folklorist who works for the Smithsonian Institution’s Folklife Program. She went to college to learn how to study the traditions of many different kinds of people from all over the world: storytellers, craftspersons, artists, dancers, singers, and workers in a variety of jobs.

Marjorie Hunt searches out such people to take part in the yearly Smithsonian festival. She says her job requires detective work. “I follow a thread,” she says. “I’ll ask at the church or stores or restaurants, or knock on people’s doors, to find men and women who still practice folklife traditions and can teach others about them.” Being a folklorist, she says, “requires a keen interest in the different ways people live.”

Marjorie is especially interested right now in researching and telling the story of the Italian stone carvers who, for the past twenty years, have been making the statues and decorations on the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Vincent Palumbo and Roger Morigi come from five generations of stone carvers in Italy. The two men began to learn their craft by doing odd jobs around their fathers’ studios when they were seven. After many years of training, they finally became master stone carvers. Now Marjorie Hunt is making a movie about the two of them.

In doing her job Marjorie Hunt has gotten to know interesting people all over the country, which is one good reason she loves her work. Being a folklorist certainly is for her a challenging and rewarding life.
Sticky Bean

Sticky Bean is a game of tag played by people who come from Southeast Asia, from Hong Kong to be exact. For this kind of tag, you must start with an even number of people. Make one person *it.* In Sticky Bean, people are safe from the person who is *it* only when they are *in pairs touching each other.*

To make the game more fun, it is better to split up, and then to pair up only when the person who is *it* comes around!

This tag game is called Sticky Bean because the players are supposed to stick together like red beans cooked in hot soup.

To learn more about becoming a folklorist, write to the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540, or to the Office of Folklife Programs, Smithsonian Institution, 2600 L’Enfant Plaza, Washington, D.C. 20560.