

*Representing Intangible Cultural Heritage:
A Case Study on Living Presentations in
the Mekong River: Connecting Cultures Program
at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival*

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by

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Abstract

This thesis explores and analyzes the practice of interpreting living cultural traditions, known as living cultural presentation, at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Using a review of the literature, participant observation and questionnaire surveys via email as the main methods of data collection, the thesis discusses issues and challenges around the live displays at the Festival. Central to these issues are authenticity, politics of participation and politics of representation. A case study on the Vietnamese displays at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival is employed to magnify these perspectives in further detail. This case study makes clear that although the participation at the Festival was evaluated as a success in a number of ways, delivery of the living presentations on the National Mall shows limitations inherent in the recontextualization, site restrictions, communication, as well as the Festival's mode of presentation. However, the post-festival effects and the prospective brought about from participating in the Festival onto the lives of the tradition-bearers and the viability of their traditions, although some are challenging, are considerable. It is recommended that although source communities need to be encouraged to document, preserve and transmit their traditions, the notion of 'performance' is fraught with potential dangers, especially in relation to authentically 'reproducing' traditions for consumption. Questions of ethics, responsibility and change to traditions as a result of performance need to be considered.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, folklife, living presentation, live interpretation, festival, Smithsonian, authenticity, politics of representation, politics of participation.

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List of Abbreviations

CFCH	Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
DCH	Department of Cultural Heritage
FAF	Festival of American Folklife
ICH	intangible cultural heritage
ICOM	the International Council of Museums
SFF	Smithsonian Folklife Festival
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Chapter I – Introduction

1. Background

In recent decades museums have undergone tremendous changes that have taken them beyond their physical premises and traditional mandates. However, the notion of the European-rooted “traditional museum” as the “cabinet of curiosities” or “the storeroom of a nation’s treasures” deeply influenced by colonial histories still exerts influence upon museum practices (Simpson 2001:1). Nevertheless there has been a shift from the ‘presentation of real things’ to ‘the production of experiences’, with ‘exhibitions becoming more people-centered, idea-oriented, and contextualized; the boundaries between museums and the “real” world are becoming eroded’ (Hein 2000:79).

Most of these changes had their origins in the social movements from the 1960s. Social upheavals have resulted in cultural institutions meeting severe criticism. Their practices were seen as an allegedly deep-rooted Eurocentric approach, especially in terms of representing ‘other’ cultures: ‘serving a cultural élite, staffed primarily by whites, reflecting white values, and excluding from the interpretive process the very peoples whose cultures were represented in the collections’ (Simpson 2001:9). Civil right movements in North America during the 1960s exerted strong influences on the public representation of cultures, particularly of those who felt ‘unrecognized, undervalued, or disadvantaged as a result of ethnicity, age, gender or sexual references’ (Simpson 2001:7). The 1970s observed a tendency of many museums expanding their conventional functions into community development and a shift from elite-controlled top-down to grassroots-based, bottom-up approaches, particularly amongst non-governmental and grassroots organizations (Kreps 2003:115; Simpson 2001). This tendency, however, did not force museums to reduce their dedication to the promotion and preservation of objects. It drew attention to the growing and diverse demands for preserving “living” cultures, underscoring cultural diversity, ‘self-representation’ and ‘self-expression’ (Simpson 2001:2). It required museums to recognize that bodies of knowledge and skills required to create those objects do need attention for preservation and promotion. A recent instrument adopted by UNESCO, the

2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage¹, fosters this indication in its agenda. This means museums would also have to recognize that the people, simultaneously the bearers, practitioners and sustainers of these knowledge and skills, must be involved in the process. They would thus strive to become more ‘participatory’ and ‘people-centered’ where the subjects exert their authority in the making of their representations (Kreps 2003).

These developments were known as results of the ‘second museum revolution’ in the post-colonial era, which took place ‘in response to upheavals in society’ (Davis 1999:52). It signaled the emergence of a ‘new museum discourse’ with emphasis on the involvement of local communities in the making of representations and preservation of their cultural heritage (Alivizatou 2007; Boylan 2006; Davis 1999; Karp and Levine 1991; Kreps 2003; Simpson 2001).

An important outlet of these developments in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States is the growth of outdoor folklife (or folk) museums, which expanded in parallel with ecomuseums in Europe (Davis 1999:50). The creation of folklife museums was seen as an attempt to promote ‘serious ethnological research’ and ‘revision of local history to include folk cultural materials’ in order to ‘justify museums’ failure in making realistic statements about ordinary past life’ (Marshall 1977:391). The conceptualization of American folklife museums was influenced by European open-air museums that had been operating for a hundred years, typically the Skansen model founded in Sweden in the late nineteenth century by Artur Hazelius (Davis 1999:49; Marshall 1977:395). According to Alan Jabbour², the conception of ‘folklife’ provides museums ‘an approach to democratising their exhibits, research and other activities’, where it ‘can be homespun and evoke life at the grassroots’, ‘explore and celebrate ordinary life’, while contrasting “other approaches” as being of ‘elite or upper crust’, and ‘emphasising the extraordinary’ (Davis 1999:50).

The UNESCO 2003 Convention has legitimized recognition by cultural institutions of living cultures. The convention further encourages and engages cultural institutions and services in the preservation and promotion of intangible cultural heritage with emphasis on the involvement of

¹ Hereafter referred to as *UNESCO 2003 Convention*.

² Founding director of the American Folklife Center, the US Library of Congress.

local communities. In line with the new international instrument, in August 2007, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) subsequently adopted an amended definition of museum that places both ‘tangible and intangible heritage of humanity’ at the center as the main subject for museums to *acquire, conserve, research, communicate* and *exhibit* (ICOM 2007). This can be considered a substantial revolution for museums in the twenty-first century that opens to a new area of subject matter. This marks a turning point for museums ‘to consider the implications of this major new development’ (Boylan 2006:54).

The above in part reflects a recent history of how museums have changed and have been changed as a constantly contested arena, the rise of ‘folklife museums’ movement in the United States, the growing recognition on living cultures by UNESCO and ICOM.

This thesis will discuss the presentation of ICH at one particular cultural event, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. This exposition of grassroots cultures was founded in the midst of the 1960s civil right movements in the United States. It is an annual temporary outdoors celebratory event held on the National Mall in Washington D.C.; the Festival brings together presentations of living traditions with a goal ‘to strengthen and preserve these traditions by presenting them’ (CFCH 2009b). Its concept of ‘living museum presentation’ with ‘emphasis on the interpretive voice of the tradition-bearers rather than the curators’ (CFCH 2009a) distanced itself from, thus arguably challenging, traditional forms of exhibitions and museums that devotedly focused on collections of material culture.

2. Description of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Established in 1967 under the name the Festival of American Folklife (FAF), the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF)³ is an annual curated exhibition program dedicated to grassroots cultures from across the United States and around the world. Produced outdoors on the National Mall in Washington D.C. by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage⁴ (CFCH) in

³ FAF and SFF will be used interchangeably in relevance to particular festival programs.

⁴ The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) is one of the Smithsonian Institution’s educational and research units under the division History, Art and Culture promoting the ‘understanding and continuity of diverse, contemporary grassroots cultures in the United States and around the world’ (CFCH 2009a). The Center was originally part of the Smithsonian’s Division of Performing Arts under the name Office of Folklife Programs created

cooperation with the US National Park Service, this summer event takes place over about ten days around the Fourth of July with an aim ‘to increase and diffuse knowledge about grassroots culture’ (CFCH 2009c). Each year, the Festival attracts more than a million visitors to the National Mall.

The Festival was initiated by the support and inspiration by Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, who wanted to ‘liven up’ the Smithsonian by ‘taking the instruments out of their cases and let them sing’⁵ (Kurin 1997:110 & 1998:8; CFCH 2009a). ‘Staid’, ‘stodgy’ and ‘dull’ – ‘like most museums of the day’ (CFCH 2009a) were Ripley’s impressions of the Smithsonian museums during his term at the institution. He also described the National Mall as being ‘saddened by its lack of vitality’ (CFCH 2009a). In his report on the initiative to mount the first Festival, Ripley critically reviewed the Smithsonian as failing to ‘present folk cultures fully and accurately’ although it possessed the largest collections of American folk artifacts (Kurin 1998:99). The Festival therefore became part of a larger effort by Ripley in making ‘the National Mall more accessible to the American public and the Smithsonian’s programs more exciting and engaging’ (Kurin 1997:110 & 1998:8)⁶.

Referred to as ‘an exercise in cultural democracy’ (CFCH 2009c), the Festival features a wide range of folk traditions from different regions and countries. To date, Smithsonian Folklife Festival programs have brought more the 23,000 musicians, artists, performers, craftspeople, workers, cooks, storytellers and others to the National Mall (CFCH 2009c). Each annual Festival is composed of two to three thematic programs, which usually include one or more countries, a region/state in the US, and/or occupational/thematic subject(s). For example, the 44th Festival in 2010 includes 3 programs: 1. *Asian Pacific Americans: Local Lives, Global Ties*; 2. *México*; and

in 1980. It was then renamed the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies in 1992 (SIA 2007) and Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage from 2001.

⁵ Ripley later rearticulated this admonishment in 1973 as ‘*take the things out of their glass cases and connect them to real life*’ (Kurin 1998:110).

⁶ Credits for founding the Festival also go to James Morris, director of the Division of Performing Arts, who initiated the idea, and Ralph Rinzler, the first director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, who developed the Festival. (Kurin 1997:111).

3. *Smithsonian Inside Out*⁷. In 2002, the *Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust* Festival program involved 375 participants from the United States and 24 countries located along the well-known trade route Silk Road that ran across Asia to Europe, from Japan to Italy (The Silk Road Project 2009).



Figure 1 A view of the 2004 Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall. Photo by Jeff Tinsley. Courtesy of Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

The production of a Festival program usually involves the participation and expertise by hundreds of researchers, folklorists, museologists, anthropologists, scholars and academics of relevant fields both local and international, technical personnel, and volunteers. Presentations at the Festival are thus usually the results of thorough collaboration in the processes of field research, documentation and selection of folk tradition-bearers. This research-based orientation is believed to ‘set the Festival itself apart from other folk and ethnic festivals’ (Sommers

⁷ The Smithsonian Inside Out is a special program that features aspects of “behind-the-scenes” work, knowledge and passion of the Smithsonian workers, i.e. curators, archivists, conservators, security experts, exhibition fabricators, etc. to the public. (CFCH 2009e).

1996:227). Outcomes of Festival research are a set of information and data on the cultural traditions that help Festival organizers determine what, who and how to present them on the National Mall, based on the criteria set forth for the Festival.

Referred to as a ‘living museum without walls’ (Kurin 1997:125), the Festival has three major goals:

- 1) to honor participants⁸.
- 2) to provide forums for participants to speak for themselves.
- 3) to make the broader public aware of the rich variety of cultural traditions found in our nation [the US] and the world (CFCH 2000)⁹.

Each year the Festival brings some hundreds of tradition-bearers – musicians, artists, performers, craftspeople, workers, cooks, storytellers, and so on – to the National Mall to present their ‘skills, knowledge, and aesthetics that embody the creative vitality of community-based traditions’ (CFCH 2009).

The Festival – especially its practices and methodological approaches – has a strong impact on policies and scholarship of the states and countries who participate. ‘Many states and several nations have remounted Festival programs locally and used them to generate laws, institutions, educational programs, books, documentary films, recordings, museum and traveling exhibitions’. (CFCH 2009c)

The Festival’s theoretical standpoint and practical approach may introduce an alternative in interpreting cultures in the museum context. This may be an accomplishment in theorizing and institutionalizing live interpretation in relevance to a new museum discourse. The disposition of working with and “displaying” real people, however, somehow has posed a number of issues and challenges pertaining to the human being – not the objects, besides those pertinent to the museum discourse as a whole, e.g. authenticity, authority, politics of representation, ethics,

⁸ The bearers of folk traditions being presented at the Festival.

⁹ The presenter guide in 1991 introduced two immediate goals: ‘1) To honor the participants and the cultural groups they represent through display of their traditional arts, skills, and knowledge—and thereby encourage their efforts; 2) To make a broader public aware of the rich variety of cultural traditions, the value of cultural diversity and its continuity, and the obstacles impinging on traditional cultural practice’ (OFP 1991:1).

recontextualization, and such. Some of these issues will be investigated and analyzed in the next chapters.

3. Personal position and involvement

I worked as a specialist staff member at the Department of Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam from 2005 with a primary duty to assist in the preparation for Vietnam's participation in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Parts of my tasks were to assist in fundraising, organizing training workshops for Festival researchers and presenters. Participating in these workshops, I was trained in field research, documentation, building exhibition plans for living cultural traditions and presenting them at the Festival. In working with the Smithsonian staff, local researchers and members of source communities, I was involved in every aspect of curatorial work that required field research of folk traditions, working with the communities in developing plans for presenting their cultural traditions at the Festival, and in the dialogues between the Smithsonian staff, the cultural managers, the local researchers and the tradition-bearers. I also acted as a presenter for two cultural traditions at the 2007 Festival.

4. Aims and objectives

I chose to examine the interpretive practices adopted at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2007; the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program was part of this Festival and took about four years to produce before being exhibited on the National Mall in June and July 2007. As it is impossible to cover all aspects of the Festival within the scope of this thesis, my focus is on the description and evaluation of a selection of representational practices, taking presentations by the Vietnamese participants at the 2007 SFF as a focal point. The emphasis in the Vietnam display was on traditional practices or intangible cultural heritage (ICH). With this context in mind I have set the following aim and objectives:

Aim

To explore and analyze the success of selected interpretive practices relating to Vietnamese living cultural traditions undertaken at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Objectives

1. To discuss the background and context relating to the display and interpretation of living cultural traditions to the public.
2. To describe the interpretive practices used to present Vietnamese living cultural traditions in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.
3. To define the meanings of ‘success’ and ‘authenticity’ when referring to the interpretation of cultural traditions.
4. To critically assess the performance of the Vietnamese input to the Folklife Festival.
5. To attempt to make some generalizations relating to the potential benefits and pitfalls of using ‘live presentation’ and ‘performance’ to interpret living cultural traditions.

5. Significance

This study explores the practice of interpreting living cultural traditions in public exhibitions and festivals. Although source communities need to be encouraged to document, preserve and transmit their traditions, the notion of ‘performance’ is fraught with potential dangers, especially in relation to authentically ‘reproducing’ traditions for consumption. Questions of ethics, responsibility and change to traditions as a result of performance need to be considered. This study will provide some guidelines and recommendations about the future display of living cultures, particularly in museum (or museum-like) contexts.

6. Thesis outline and Chapter content

Chapter I provides a brief background on a recent history of how museums have changed and have been changed, a description of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, my personal experience and involvement in connection to the Festival that led to this study. In this chapter, I also identify the aim of the study and break it into a number of objectives.

Chapter II introduces the methodological approach and data collection methods employed in order to obtain the objectives of the study. I also point out the strengths and weakness in these methods of data collection

Chapter III is a review of the literature and an analysis on the definitions of intangible cultural heritage, folklife, folklore, the conceptualization on living cultural presentation, and the genre of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Chapter IV discusses the practice of living cultural presentation by the SFF as a contested arena abound with issues of authenticity, politics of participation and representation. These issues serve as theoretical framework for the study.

Chapter V discusses and analyzes the Vietnamese cultural presentations in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Chapter VI reviews the methodology and findings in relation to the aims and objectives of the study. It also provides reflections on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and proposes recommendations for future research.

Chapter II – Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach. Rudestam and Newton (2007:35) point out the connection between qualitative methods and constructivist theory of knowledge because they ‘tend to focus on understanding experiences from the point of view of those who live them’. Hence, data collection in this thesis primarily relied on gathering information related to the perceptions, understandings and interpretations of the exhibition of living cultural traditions made by individuals involved in the various stages in the production of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF). Opinions were also obtained from researchers and scholars who conducted research about the Festival. The use of literature and theories about museum interpretation and theoretical issues in the representation of living cultures helped in the analysis of the data. My experience of participating in the 2007 SFF added another layer of personal reference and perspective to the study. The purpose of this method is to present a variety of perspectives in attempting to link theoretical and empirical data related to the Festival. In summary, a review of the literature, participant observation and questionnaire surveys via email, were the main methods for data collection.

1. Literature reviews

Literature mainly includes publications by Richard Kurin, former director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) which organizes the Festival, namely Kurin, Richard. 1997.. *Reflections of a culture broker: a view from the Smithsonian*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press; Kurin, Richard. 1998. *Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Culture Of, By and For the People*, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press; and other articles in Chapter 4 – ‘Festivals’ in Karp, Ivan & Lavine, Steven D. (ed.). 1991. *Exhibiting cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Theoretical perspectives on the ethics and politics in the display of cultures in the above works by Kurin (1997; 1998) and Karp and Lavine (1991) will be used as phenomenological patterns in identifying and analyzing the expositions in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program. Key theoretical concepts to be explored and discussed in regard with living presentations at the

Festivals include authenticity, politics of representation (authority), interpretation and communication.

Previous research and reviews on past Festival programs will also be the main resources in examining and evaluating various issues on the Festival in a comparative context. This literature mainly consists of articles and research papers reflecting personal experiences, observations during their participation in these programs. Some of them are published reviews and critiques on specific Festival programs. They include works by Richard Bauman [Bauman, Richard (ed.). 1992. *Reflections on the folklife festival: an ethnography of participant experience*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press]; a report by himself and Patricia Sawin [1991. 'The Politics of Participation in Folklife Festivals' in Karp, Ivan & Lavine, Steven D. (ed.). 1991. *Exhibiting cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. pp.288-314]; a series of papers by Heather Diamond, Ricardo Trimillos, Rhea Comb and Krista Thompson in the *Journal of American Folklore* (Vol.121, No.479, Winter 2008), and articles by other authors.

The thesis explores and analyzes perspectives by Vietnamese participants who were involved in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program as managers, researchers, presenters and tradition bearers. A video documentary produced by the Department of Cultural Heritage (Vietnam) reporting on the participation before, during and after their trip to Washington D.C., reflecting the voices of these people as well as impacts from participation in the Festival program, is used as a primary source.

The review of literature also includes a number of scholarly articles on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, policy papers, websites and other resources on the Internet concerning the Festival and general issues on museum exhibitions.

The above-mentioned data comes from a variety of sources, reflecting the diversity of voices about the Festival and its interpretive practice, including those considered as critical or even negative. Works by the Smithsonian staff and those who are involved in Festival production give perspectives of insiders. Literature-based discussions on theoretical aspects in the thesis tend to reflect phenomenological issues throughout such exhibitions of living cultures at the

Smithsonian Folklife Festival, in order to pinpoint their pros and cons, other than to romanticize or problematize them.

The literature sources provide a comprehensive picture of events like folklife festivals. Festivals are often contrasted with museum exhibitions for their living dimension (Karp 1991:281), believed as an alternative to interpreting cultures, bringing them closer to degrees of authenticity, accuracy, experience-oriented, or even verisimilitude (Bauman 1992). Although festivals do not necessarily ‘emphasize differences in taste or ownership’ (Karp 1991:283) as commonly seen in object exhibitions, they implicitly claim a non-elite reference of those who participate as the subject as well as those who participate as the audience. Festivals carry multiple effects besides the learning experience often aimed at in a classic museum setting through their ‘more democratic and nonjudgmental participatory and sensory aesthetics’ (Karp 1991:282). However, similar to most museums, the physical setting of festivals isolates their exhibits from broader contexts, for instance their historical and cultural contexts. Their constructed presentational formats become reductive in representing the whole. The subject is thus also reduced from ‘total sensory person’ to a ‘partial performer’ (Karp 1991:285). A similar process happens to the traditions being presented. This is where the conversations on authenticity derive.

It also becomes the concern of the audience that these formats somehow “museumified” live persons as if they were objects (Ibid.). This is to say the exposition of real people in such public space at festivals does not necessarily communicate the same messages as those intended by museum exhibition makers. It may produce a bigger issue, which reflects the underside of ‘control’ by Festival curators over the presented, in response to Kurin’s remark on “success” that derived from the inability of Festival organizers to control them (Ibid.). Deepening the gravity of these issues, the problematics of communication in displaying the cultures of living people may introduce the risk of turning a celebratory event into rhetoric of a ‘human zoo’ as criticized by many. Nevertheless, the practices adopted by the Smithsonian responded well to this issue, which will be discussed in later chapters.

Cultural representations at festivals do undergo a variety of agendas. Participants have their own agenda coming to the Festival (Bauman 1992). The participation of a country in such a Festival

further legitimizes diplomatic and political reconciliation under the name of cultural exchange, not to mention the degree of engagement of those institutions into various stages in developing these cultural exhibitions. This underlines angles of authority, the politics of representation, and ownership of cultures. The case study of Vietnam and other countries' displays at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival magnified these issues in further detail. A post-Festival survey by the Department of Cultural Heritage, the primary institution that facilitated Vietnam's participation, on the lives of Vietnamese artists and craftspeople presented on the National Mall shows that the Festival's impacts are substantive and influential, even observed within a short distance after the Festival. Discussions in the thesis will further elaborate and analyze these issues in various perspectives with examples of specific cases.

2. Participant Observation

Observations from my field experience from direct involvement in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival as a program assistant, Festival researcher and presenter provides additional evidence for discussion in the thesis. Observation of the Festival is mainly based on my direct involvement in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* project taking these roles. This multiple-role position in the program allowed me to be involved in the planning, field research and curatorial work for the Festival program. Parts of my duty were also to act as a presenter for two traditions on the National Mall, among the eleven traditions brought by the Vietnamese delegation, namely the *Hat boi Folk Opera* of the Kinh (ethnic Viet) and the construction of a dugout canoe by the Bahnar Rongao.

The task of a Festival researcher required field-based study of folk traditions that are potential elements to be selected for the Festival. The main purposes of the study of a folk tradition were to collect information on the practices and skills, to identify its viability, to identify the tradition bearers who are maintaining, practicing and disseminating it, to determine the practicability for presenting it at the Festival; and to propose a plan for presenting them at the Festival. Research on a tradition may require use of literature, interviews of folk tradition bearers, and audio and visual documentation of the tradition in practice.

A Festival presenter, as defined by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, is ‘an individual selected to facilitate the interaction between participants and the audience at an SFF program’ (Vidaurri 2005b). As a presenter, one takes on multiple roles – as a ‘Festival ambassador, facilitator, communicator, translator, teacher, emcee, and cultural informant’ (CFCH 2000).

A limitation to this method is that the Festival on the Mekong River happened three years ago. I came to the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival on a different mission other than that of a researcher as defined for this thesis. Therefore, although I am able to revisit information and documents produced throughout the program, most discussions are memory-based. This might also reflect the fact that although such method may help provide the “voice” of an insider, which can be objective and impartial in one way but bias in another – as Rudestam and Newton (2007:25) highlight the importance of ‘discriminating between beliefs and opinions’.

3. Questionnaire surveys

A list of open-ended questions, (please see the Appendix for a sample copy) was developed and sent via email to a selection of key individuals to obtain the perspectives of Festival curators, researchers, experts and managers. It was especially important to canvas the opinions of all those involved in the production of the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program. The questions are intended to inquire on their insights and reflection on the production of a past program, as well as its outcomes, in re-examining whether the program as a whole and its particular practices/approaches were considered a ‘success’. Responses from the surveys provide further information and reflect their awareness and conception of living presentation of cultural traditions in at the Festival.

The Festival takes place in the summer. Therefore, most of the important work preparing for the Festival takes place in the spring. This became a real issue in reaching the Festival curators and staff for the interviews or surveys since most of them were fully occupied in their work in preparation for the 2010 Festival. Therefore, I used a small sample size for the survey, focusing on persons who participated in the Mekong program and those who have retired from the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Nine questionnaires were sent to

Smithsonian Festival curators and officials; representatives of Cambodia, China (Yunnan Province), Thailand and Vietnam. However only three questionnaires were returned, making the sample relatively small, and certainly unrepresentative; however, the quality of information received was high.

Chapter III – Intangible cultural heritage and its presentation.

1. Description and analysis of intangible cultural heritage

Intangible cultural heritage is a fairly recent term introduced by UNESCO in order to distinguish it from *tangible cultural heritage*, which had been commonly known as *cultural heritage* as defined in the UNESCO 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. In its definition, the 1972 Convention considers *monuments, groups of buildings, and sites* as cultural heritage. Although the 1972 Convention is intended to provide an international legal framework for the protection of cultural monuments, cultural and natural sites, and cultural landscapes, its definition of cultural heritage excluded the intangible elements that also need to be considered as *cultural heritage* and protection (Seitel 2001:6).

In fact, the term intangible cultural heritage (ICH) was eventually chosen after almost two decades of debates and usage of a variety of terminologies. In 1989, with the adoption of the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore, UNESCO used the term *folklore* to indicate ‘traditional and popular culture’¹⁰ (Seitel 2001:8) in an attempt to foster protection efforts of these cultural forms. However, the Recommendation received little interest from State Parties in its application for the reason that it ‘gives neither specific mandate to UNESCO nor any explanation of how it should be implemented’ (Seitel 2001:13). Use of the term *folklore* also received criticism and was requested for an alternative because of its ‘pejorative connotation’ in several regions (Africa, Pacific, and Latin America) (Seitel 2001:40). The term ICH was introduced only after several review programs by UNESCO in early the 1990s that evaluated the application of the recommendation and review of other terms, such as *non-physical heritage* and *immaterial patrimony* (Seitel 2001:14, 235). The evaluation by UNESCO also suggested either revision of the 1989 Recommendation or development of a new international instrument on the protection of living cultures.

¹⁰ The 1989 Recommendation introduces a definition of folklore as follows: ‘Folklore (or traditional and popular culture) is 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’ (Seitel 2001:8).

In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage which defines ICH as

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO 2003:2).

By introducing five categories, known as the ICH domains, other than listing its forms as seen in the 1989 Recommendation, the UNESCO's 2003 definition covers a more inclusive scope of living traditions:

(a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and (e) traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO 2003:2).

The debates on the terminology as well as the categorization of ICH reflect the complexity of the heritage itself and the challenge commonly found in any attempt to define and classify elements that constantly evolve and take diverse forms. Also, these categories should be understood as a flexible reference when applying to a specific item, as one ICH may fall into more than one domain, although some of its characteristics might be more visible than others. Being different from tangible heritage, the identification and classification of ICH may introduce the risk of de-contextualization of a tradition from the cultural setting that it is being part of. Take wedding music of the Khmer in Vietnam as an example. This tradition may be categorized as a music tradition and it may fall into the performing arts category (domain (b)). However, these musical repertoires and melodies can only be played simultaneously in response to ritual proceedings being carried out at wedding ceremonies. The music is thus part of a social practice (domain (c)) and cannot be treated as an independent entity. This is especially important when it comes to preservation of such traditions.

In comparison to the 1989 Recommendation, the 2003 Convention introduces a more concrete definition of ICH with an indication that the intangible heritages are living elements that embed within the human, represent them and are passed along as they evolve. This is an important aspect in UNESCO's concept as it emphasizes the living nature and continuous transmission of the knowledge and skills in connection with the source communities and their sense of cultural identity. The role and involvement of the concerned communities are particularly emphasized in the articulate use of such key terms 'recognize', 'transmit', and 'constantly recreate' (see definition above). This shows that UNESCO sees ICH as being both traditional and contemporary elements.

The primary purpose for the establishment of the 2003 Convention is 'to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage'. Safeguarding, according to the Convention, is defined as the

measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage (UNESCO 2003:2).

In this sense of safeguarding, the Convention calls for 'the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management' (UNESCO 2003:7). However, in practice, it remains a challenge of how the cultural communities are able to get involved in these measures owing to the degree of professionalism and expertise involved.

In summary, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a newly developed term by a UNESCO convention evolved from the use of various equivalences to indicate folklore and living cultures. ICH is a living element and takes diverse forms. In definition, ICH is 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills' 'that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage' and 'transmitted from generation to generation', 'constantly recreated by communities and groups', and 'provides them with a sense of identity and continuity'. UNESCO introduces five domains of ICH, which should be understood and considered with flexibility when it comes to identifying and safeguarding. The

safeguarding of ICH may include one or more measures which should involve the participation of the source communities that create, maintain and transmit such heritage.

2. Defining ‘folklife’ in relation to intangible cultural heritage

As indicated in Chapter I, the introduction of the term ‘folklife’ during the 1960s in the USA was seen as an attempt to bring in an alternative approach to folklore, both as a method of and a subject for study. The term is believed to derive from the increasing influence of ethnological research and outdoor or open-air museum concept in Europe during the late nineteenth century. The rise of Scandinavian outdoor museums, particularly in Sweden, and the regional museums in Britain subsequently paved the way for folklife research and scholarship in North America (Davis 1999; Marshall 1977). This section discusses folklife as a subject for study and how it has influenced the selection of material for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

According to Richard Dorson (1972:1) folklife became a competing alternative term to *folklore*, which received criticism for because of its ‘falsity, wrongness, fantasy and distortion’ both as a field of study (to the academics) and a subject matter (to the laypeople). Folklore was reevaluated because of its prime implication on ‘verbal forms’ and ignorance of the ‘tangible products’ of tradition bearers. Therefore, *folklife* stands out as a more inclusive terminology to indicate traditional culture, which also includes oral folklore as highlighted by Dorson (1972:2).

While acknowledging the defining of ‘folklore’ as ‘one of the most favorite academic games in the twentieth century’, Don Yoder (1968:9) points out the difference between ‘folklore’ and ‘folklife’. He argues the *lore* in folklore suggests the ‘literacy aspects of culture’ and *life* in folklife ‘the totality of relationship in community’. He suggests placing *folklore* under folklife as ‘part to whole’, limiting it to ‘verbal arts’ or ‘folk literature’, while designating folklife as the ‘total folkculture’ in every of its aspects: verbal, material, and spiritual (Ibid.). Literally, folklife is ‘the life and ways of the *folk*’, as defined by Åke Hultrantz. This finds similarity with Howard Wight Marshall’s conception on folklife (1977:394-5). Also according to Yoder, a common ground, which the two terminologies share, is the ‘transmission of cultural artifacts and systems from one generation to another, within the framework of community and tradition’ (Ibid.).

In 1976, upon establishment of the American Folklife Center, the US Congress introduced an official definition of “folklife” as the following:

“American folklife” means the traditional expressive culture shared within the various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, regional; expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms such as custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, handicraft; these expressions are mainly learned orally, by imitation, or in performance, and are generally maintained without benefit of formal instruction or institutional direction (Public law 1976).

In relation to ICH as defined by UNESCO, this concept of folklife designates items that are present in the United States. The specific cultural contexts, namely familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, and regional, and the listed groups of cultural forms shows limits of what expressions are included and what are not; although they envision a diverse reference of cultural expressions and shared values. In other words, a folklife tradition is likely to be grassroots, be an exemplar of creativity and symbol of a specific group – the community. In addition, although this definition of folklife does not clearly articulate the notion of ‘heritage’, it signifies oral learning as an important process in its maintenance, which can be understood as the transmission and inheritance of this cultural form.

Another fundamental difference between folklife as defined by the USA and ICH defined by UNESCO is the latter’s inclusion of the associated material culture, i.e. ‘instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces’ (UNESCO 2003:2), that are the integral part of these traditions.

‘Folklife’ thus as defined by the US Congress is a non-inclusive concept, in comparison to ICH which covers a wider range of cultural forms, including such non-folk traditions as those practiced by and/or for the elite, for instance. ‘Folk’ as seen by Richard Kurin of the Smithsonian as ‘working class, marginalized and grassroots; the traditions of the elite and powerful seldom are celebrated at FAF’ (Sommers 1996:230).

Diamond and Trimillos (2008), however, observe that since its establishment, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has created its own perspective on folklife. It has ‘problematized static notions of tradition and heritage by defining folklife as dynamic, inclusive and contemporary’ and

‘further expanded the gloss of the term ‘folklife’ by including elite cultural genres in its international programs’ (Diamond & Trimillos 2008:3). The Festival’s development history, throughout its several transformations, moving from American familial, regional, ethnic and occupational spheres to transnational and international ones, has introduced ‘changing academic ideas about folklife’ (Ibid,6).

	<i>American Folklife</i>	<i>Intangible Cultural Heritage</i>
Range	custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, handicraft;	practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith: (a) oral traditions and expressions - language as a vehicle; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and (e) traditional craftsmanship
Significance	creative and symbolic	identity and continuity; promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.
Ownership	various groups: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, regional; non-institutional	communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals
Transmission	mainly learned orally, by imitation, or in performance; maintained without benefit of formal instruction or institutional direction	transmitted from generation to generation; constantly recreated (in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history)

Table 1 A summary of folklife and intangible cultural heritage in definition.

Richard Kurin (1998:67) introduces the Smithsonian’s conception of folklife as ‘a community-based tradition that can be generally defined as forms of knowledge, skill and expression’ and ‘learned through informal relationship and exhibiting inter-generational continuity’. According to Kurin, forms of culture are considered ‘traditional’ provided that they: 1. ‘maintain standards

or values of past practice’, and 2. ‘are living traditions that are socially integrated with community life’. The Smithsonian emphasizes that folklife (or traditional culture) is ‘found in contemporary life’; it is dynamic and not stereotypical; and there is no such thing as an ‘authentic or pure traditional culture’ (Proschan 2005). This shows that the Smithsonian sees folklife as a constantly changing element, thus bringing it to a broader extent, close but not necessarily equivalent to that of ICH as defined by UNESCO.

In summary, the term folklife was introduced in the 1960s as an alternative to folklore. Folklife as defined by the US Congress is a non-inclusive concept, refers to and is thus marginalized to ‘folk’ cultural traditions. Yet the Smithsonian Folklife Festival sees folklife as traditional culture with some similarity to ICH. It emphasizes folklife as living, contemporary and inclusive. Folklife has a connotation which covers a range of cultural traditions that share similarity to those labeled as ICH. Cultural elements within folklife can be placed under ICH and should be treated in the same manner, as articulated in the UNESCO definition.

3. Defining ‘living cultural presentation’ of intangible cultural heritage

Living cultural presentation (or living presentation) is a term used by the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage to indicate the technique of displaying folklife traditions at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. The term is used to distinguish it from ‘static presentations of objects in a museum exhibit’ (R Kennedy 2010, pers. comm., March 31). Living presentation is a form of recreating a selected activity, a repertoire, or a practice of a folk tradition in a public space – the National Mall, in which the bearer (s) is involved to demonstrate such activity, perform the repertoire or tell the story to the public (R Kennedy 2010, pers. comm., March 31; Kurin 1998:84).

This approach of displaying living culture traces its origin to that widely practiced by European folk museums in the late nineteenth century. The first museum of this kind is believed to be the Skansen open-air museum in Sweden, established by Artur Hazelius (Davis 1999:49; Marshall 1977:395). Besides collections of static buildings and artifacts used to reinstate the image of rural Sweden in the old times, the Skansen became enlivened ‘with craft demonstrations, music, festivals and dance taking place in an environment peopled by guides in costume’ (Davis

1999:48). The influence of such museums and the concept of living exhibits led to the rise of folklife museums and their interpretive practices in Canada and America (Marshall 1977:395). One of the remarkable movements depicting this tendency was the 'living historical farm' in the 1950s which was intended to depict 'old ways of work in a "live setting"' and 'take the visitor on a walk into the past' by reconstructed scenes 'in human and geographical context' (Ibid, 399-403). These farms laid the foundation for museums to further elaborate contextual living cultural demonstrations.

However, the concept and setting of living presentations at the SFF are intended to enable the subjects of the present time – people who make their own cultures – present, give their voices, and dialogue with the public, somehow make the Festival distinctive to other forms of museum exhibition, even to those practiced in a living historical museum. Richard Kennedy (2010, pers. comm., March 31), curator emeritus of the CFCH, points out the difference that the presentation in a history museum may include 'actors who recreate historical personages', while at the Festival the demonstration involves 'a living artist who practices his or her cultural activity on a daily basis', or a person who tells the story that he has lived. James Deutsch (2010, pers. comm. February 24), another SFF curator, indicates that living cultural presentation not only refers to the demonstration as a 'direct show' itself, it also implies that the folk tradition being presented is an 'alive' element, which means it is visible and being practiced in its original cultural context. In this sense, living cultural presentations at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival only endorse contemporary and living traditions not those being acted or reenacted as seen in previous living historical farms. Richard Kurin legitimizes this strength as 'authenticity' of the Festival, which is made up by the 'presence and unscripted participation of the living people who were active and exemplary practitioners of the presented communities and traditions' (1997:112)

Richard Kurin (1997:117) remarks that the unique feature of living presentation is 'its attempt to foreground the voices of tradition bearers as they demonstrate, discuss, and present their cultures'. In order to achieve this, these presentational formats are intended to help 'cultural practitioners speak for themselves, with each other, and to the public' (CFCH 2009c).

Presentations are usually arranged in a somewhat "casual" manner that is intended to abridge the physical boundary between the subject and the audience. The participants "exhibit" their cultural

traditions by performing and demonstrating them, talking and explaining to the audience about their knowledge and skills. Each presentation also enables and encourages visitors to participate. They can ask questions, talk, sing, dance, taste, and get engaged in their activities. In this form of communication, visitors not only learn from the subjects but also experience with them, thus valorizing similarities and differences between them. Interpretation of ICH, in this sense, is thus a two-way communication that facilitates the exchange of not only 'factual information'¹¹ but also experience. In other words, interpretation is participated by both exhibit makers, the subjects (tradition-bearers) and the audience.

An important component in this interpretive practice is the use of presenters who assist in these demonstrations by 'expanding on the context of the activity and drawing out from the practitioner the importance, value and beauty of their art' (R Kennedy, pers. comm., March 31). A presenter is often a local scholar, specialist or curator who has conducted field research on the tradition in question. A presenter may take on multiple tasks, as 'Festival ambassador, facilitator, communicator, translator, teacher, emcee, and cultural informant' (CFCH 2000). The primary role of a presenter, however, is to 'to facilitate the interaction between participants and the audience' (Vidaurri 2005b) during a living presentation at the Festival. This thus distinguishes the Festival from museum exhibitions of objects that often limit the interaction between the audience and the exhibit as observed by Richard Bauman (Karp 1991:281).

The use of presenters at the Festival can be seen as an attempt to amend the weakness of a method known as 'first-person role-playing' interpretation practiced by many previous living historical farm or open-air museums, including the Skansen. Marshall (1977:409-10) suggests that this mode of presentation tends to 'communicate' other than to 'educate' since it 'limits the amount and kind of historical information given out'. This is because of that it is often a challenge for the role player to fully take multiple tasks – as a historical person and an interpreter.

¹¹ Freeman Tilden (Tilden & Craig:2007:33) defines museum interpretation as 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience and by illustrative media rather than simply to communicate factual information'.

Living presentations are also aided by additional contextual material and information. Based on results from the research and documentation, as well as the negotiations with cultural practitioners and depending on available resources, the exhibiting site may include ‘metaphorically meaningful structures and decorative elements consistent with the aesthetic sensibilities of the traditions represented’ (Kurin 1998:78).



Figure 2 Japanese participants demonstrate rice planting and the *hanadave* ritual at the 1986 Festival of American Folklife. Photo by Jeff Tinsley. Courtesy of Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

The Festival format of living presentation depends on genres of the tradition. Respectively, it is termed as demonstration (craft, foodways, so on), performance (music, performing arts, so on) or narrative session (for oral history, discussions, storytelling, and so on), although in nature, they are demonstration-oriented. Standard physical facilities to accommodate these demonstrations include ‘larger and smaller music performance stages, dance floors, craft demonstration and workshop setups, demonstration kitchens, garden plots, and open-air spaces – plazas, yard and procession routes’ (Kurin 1998:82). Special structures and performance areas for contextual

purposes are also provided in response to the need of a particular theme, program, or tradition. For instance, a Japanese rice paddy was constructed to facilitate a demonstration of the *hanadave* ritual at the 1986 Festival, or a portion of a horse track was constructed on the National Mall for horseracing demonstration at the 1982 Festival on Oklahoma (Kurin 1998:22, 24).

In summary, living cultural presentation is a Smithsonian borne term used to indicate the technique of displaying living cultures at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. It is the recreation of a selected activity, a repertoire, or a practice in public space, in which the bearer (s) is involved to demonstrate. Living presentation has its origin from Europe's practice of interpreting living history in the nineteenth century. Living presentation in the Smithsonian's perspective involves a living tradition bearer to demonstrate, discuss and present their cultures with or without the assistance of a presenter, with the aim to foreground the tradition-bearer's voice and engage interaction with the audience. What is authentic about the Smithsonian's practice is the use of real, living tradition-bearers in these presentations. Living cultural presentations at the SFF are also contextualized with additional material and information.

4. The Festival as a form of presentation of intangible cultural heritage

The disposition of SFF production as a combination and intertwining of various disciplines and categories – 'education and entertainment, scholarship and service, the authentic and the constructed, celebration and contemplation' (Kurin 1997:110), and so on – may invoke a variety of implications and angles considering its genre. Richard Kurin states that since the Festival is 'an unfamiliar genre' that combines and crosses various categories, it can inevitably be misinterpreted. Many have seen the Festival as 'a throwback to earlier, discredited forms of cultural displays and voyeurism' (Ibid.). Others see the Festival as possessing features of 'the zoo, the museum, theme park, carnival, concert, community and traveling theater' (Diamond & Trimillos 2008:3). Robert Cantwell (1993) terms the cultural representation seen at the Festival as *ethnomimesis*, which primarily refers to living presentation as an imitation of culture on a public stage.

Kurin shows the similarities and differences between the Festival and a zoo:

...at a zoo, some living beings come to see other living beings. Zoo organizers provide some information in the form of signs and labels and try to present creatures with a bit of their natural, home setting. By seeing the creatures, visitors learn about them, appreciate their existence, and sometimes even learn about the larger issues that they evoke. Zoo staffs provide this context [...] to help preserve the animals and their habitats as part of our diverse biological heritage.

Similarly, Festival organizers present people to visitors to home settings, and photographs help visitors understand and interpret what they see, hear and sense. And hopefully, visitors gain an appreciation of displayed traditions, national and worldwide cultural diversity.

But there are big differences between the zoo and the Festival. Visitors are just as likely to see themselves on display as “others”. And at the Festival, people *talk back* and play the major role in shaping their own self-representation (1997:126).

The Festival primarily deals with the people who create, practice and pass on their cultural expressions and the material culture therewith as the subject. Although such an approach in displaying cultures provokes ‘disputes over meaning’ (Karp 1991:279), the Smithsonian sees the Festival as a ‘a way of telling the story of diverse peoples...whose cultural achievements were not represented in the museums or their collections’ (Kurin 1997:121).

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival has been referred to as a “living museum without walls”. Coming into being in the late 1960s, the SFF stood out from what was seen a museum. ICOM definition of museum in 1961¹² recognized ‘any permanent institution’ a museum if it ‘conserves and displays, for purposes of a study, education and enjoyment, collections of objects of cultural or scientific significance’ (ICOM 2009). There are several categories¹³ that fit in the definition as listed by ICOM. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival fell into none of these categories. Today, it may remain a challenge to determine if it fits in ICOM’s latest definition of museum:

a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible

¹² ICOM Statutes, November 1961; doc.67-73.

¹³ 1. Exhibition galleries permanently maintained by public libraries and collections of archives; 2. Historical monuments and parts of historical monuments or their dependencies, such as cathedral treasuries, historical, archaeological and natural sites, which are officially open to the public; 3. Botanical and zoological gardens, aquaria, vivaria, and other institutions which display living specimens; 4. Natural reserves’ (ICOM 2009).

and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment (ICOM 2007).

As an exposition of living cultures in public, the production of a Smithsonian festival program endorses many activities that reflect functions of a museum. The Festival acquires, researches, communicates and exhibits living cultural traditions – intangible cultural heritage – treating them as its “collections” for educational purpose. ‘Like other Smithsonian museums, the Festival includes exhibition-quality signs, photo-text panels, a program book/catalog, learning centers, sales shops, and food concessions’ (CFCH 2009c). In its goal, the Festival aims to ‘to strengthen and preserve these traditions by presenting them’ (CFCH 2009b).

There are fundamental differences between museums and festivals. Discussing the difference and similarities between festivals and museum exhibitions, Ivan Karp (1991:279) remarks that festivals present another public forum of cultural displays, although they bring about ‘disputes over their meaning’. He also argues that although festivals share some affinities with museum exhibitions, they bear a resemblance of ‘self-conscious, antimuseum setting’ (Ibid.). These differences can be seen in the way festivals conduct their interpretive practices.

What distinguishes an exhibition at a festival and that of a museum is the “objects” on display are not literally material objects, but live performances or demonstrations – or living cultural presentation as termed by the Smithsonian – of the skills or a process taken to produce such objects. All these are conducted by living people. In other words, festivals deal with the people who own the skills that are required to produce such objects. Interpretative approaches practiced by such festivals as the SFF are thus people- and performance-oriented, not object-oriented as seen in most museums. Living cultural presentations (see the previous section) at festivals clearly contrast with static exhibitions in museums. Richard Bauman points out that while most museums are ‘settings for restrained and sensually restricted experiences’ and they ‘limit interactions between audience and object’ by setting up barriers, festivals tend to make these boundaries permeable and invoke a so-called ‘totalizing participation’ and ‘sensory experience’ (Karp 1991b:281-282).

In his book *Reflections of a culture broker: A view from the Smithsonian*, Kurin (1997) argues that the SFF is ‘not quite a festival’ and that the term “festival” has been misused. He reasons it is just because the Festival’s make up is not similar to a ‘peasant community’s celebration of its harvest’ nor any kind of an ‘arts festival’ nor a ‘folk festival’ (1997:125). Indeed, the term “festival” created a debate among Vietnamese counterparts in translating the Festival’s official name, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, into the Vietnamese language. Festival literally has two main equivalences in the Vietnamese context: *liên hoan* and *lễ hội*. While the former refers to events that share traits of a celebration, a competition, an agricultural show, a forum, a gala, a performance, a feast, a parade, a carnival and so on, the latter suggests a more complex category, known as traditional festivities in villages, commonly associated with deity worship and wet-rice culture. Scholars often identify a typical traditional village festival by the two distinctive components: *lễ* - ritual ceremony and *hội* - merrymaking. While the ritual ceremony is the most important activity that gives a village festival meaning and the reason to exist, the merrymaking makes it more attractive and joyful with performances, games, sports, feasts and other amusing activities. Besides, in Vietnam *lễ hội* has also been misused for contemporary celebratory events that are often “directed” with a scenario; those would better fit in the *liên hoan* category than that of traditional village festivals. For example: *Lễ hội hoa Hà Nội* (Hanoi Flower Festival), *Lễ hội hoa anh đào* (Japanese Cherry Blossoms Festival), and so on. Many aspects of a *liên hoan* seemed to be degrading and might not fit what the Smithsonian festival is intended for in regard to its emphasis on cultural preservation and field-based research orientation. When it came to terms, *lễ hội* was eventually chosen on the ground that the Smithsonian Folklife Festival could not be a competition or a feast. It gave a more serious or even romanticized label, although the Festival does not precisely reflect aspects of a Vietnamese traditional festival nor should it necessarily. The Vietnamese equivalent for Smithsonian Folklife Festival – *Lễ hội Đờn sống dân gian Smithsonian* thus fits in between what has been known as traditional festivity and contemporary cultural events.

The above discussions and the Vietnamese example illustrate that the concept of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival may imply that conception may vary when it comes to interpretation. It shows that the Festival is not necessarily bound with any particular designation of genre. The SFF

shares traits of a museum, but it cannot be one for the reasons discussed above. Although the SFF therefore is no more than a means of presenting, also representing, folklife traditions, termed under ICH (Peter Davis 2010, pers. comm., June 24), it provides an alternative to representing cultures and the prospects for reviewing museums and limits of their practices. The SFF does not project itself as merely a display of living cultures. It also aims for cultural conservation. In forms of living presentation on the National Mall, cultural traditions are promoted and thus encouraged for preservation.

Chapter IV – Intangible cultural heritage and festivals: authenticity, politics and representation

1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss living cultural presentation at the SFF as a contested arena, which is fraught with such issues as authenticity, politics of participation and representation. These issues also reflect the phenomenologies in such cultural representation found in most museum exhibitions. Discussions with examples on specific cases will explore both theoretical concept and practical aspects on these issues through the lenses of both insiders (the Smithsonian) and outsiders. The purpose is to identify the strengths and limitations of living cultural presentation, which will lead to the drawing of guidelines and recommendations about display of living cultures.

2. Issues on authenticity

Authenticity has always been a challenging, sometimes controversial, notion to museums owing to the original implication behind their existence. The question of authenticity often derives from the fact that most museums are built institutions, which house and display artifacts that come from outside their premises. These artifacts are often removed from ‘their original context of ownership and use, from their circulation of private property’, and are placed in ‘a new environment which would provide them with a new meaning’ (Smith 1988:6). Commonly, authenticity not only refers to ‘the use of original objects’ and ‘first-hand experience’ (Tilden & Craig 2007:33), it also implies that both the context in which these artifacts are displayed and the concepts they communicate through the exhibition require accuracy and truth. Ivan Karp (1991:281-2) observes two aspects of museum objects often put across a museum exhibition: their ‘visual interest’ and their inhering ‘cultural and financial value’. Although this is debatable to the point when the value of such objects has no reference to their appearance (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:386), it suggests that the concept of authenticity presents a dilemma for museums, in which the originality of museum exhibitions may sometimes conflict with the default enactment of museums as de-contextualized institutions.

Folklife festivals share a similar discourse with museums. They are often contrasted with museum exhibitions for their living dimension (Karp 1991:281), believed as an alternative to interpreting cultures, bringing them closer to degrees of authenticity, accuracy, experience-orientation, or even verisimilitude (Bauman 1992). Festivals even deepen the gravity of this issue since they deal with ICH, a living and constantly changing element, as their material for exposition. To represent ICH also means to represent the living bearers of these traditions. The definition of ICH¹⁴ reveals that it seems to be ambitious, even impossible, to locate authenticity as they constantly evolve, and those who practice and maintain vary their manifestations. Differences, at various degrees, can be observed even within a single cultural tradition practiced by different groups, communities, in some cases individuals, at different times, although the core values and beliefs are preserved over these processes. These values, however, can only be identified and determined by the communities that create, inherit and pass them on as ‘part of their cultural heritage’ with ‘a sense of identity and continuity’ (UNESCO 2003:2). Therefore, arguably there is no such thing labeled as “typical” and “authentic” otherwise done so by the source communities. This unsettles the prerequisite of authenticity that is often imposed upon objects. In the context of representing ICH at festivals, also living cultural presentation, this argument still rings true.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival adopts living cultural presentation as an approach to interpreting folklife, inspired by the museum trend of using ‘living history’ as a presentational or interpretive technique (Kurin 1997:122). In living history museums, drama-like displays attempt to recreate a virtual historical world in the present day. This method is known for the “real” effects and engagement they create for tourists’ experience and pleasures. However, authenticity of these ‘living museums’ is questionable for the use of first-person role-playing method, in which ‘a living person is both an interpreter and part of the exhibition’ (Karp 1991:280). Richard Kurin emphasizes that the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is ‘powerful because the people were real participants in the represented cultures – not actors’ like those seen in living history museums (Kurin 1997:112). In this sense, authenticity lies in the ‘presence and unscripted participation of the living people who were active and exemplary practitioners of the presented

¹⁴ See Section 1 in Chapter III.

communities and traditions' (Ibid.). This is specified as one of the criteria for the selection of a tradition and its practitioner(s) to participate in the Festival. The criteria for a cultural tradition to be chosen are: 'appropriateness as a folk tradition given the program, authenticity, historical importance to the community's social and cultural life, pertinence to the program theme, artistic content, and presentability' (Kurin 1998:74). The criteria for a Festival participant include his 'role as a tradition-bearer, artistic excellence in a traditional repertoire, and strength of presentation' (Ibid.).

Yet, similar to most museums, the biggest challenges of a festival are its spatial and temporal setting. The very physical setting of Festival space, such as the National Mall, isolates its exhibits from broader contexts, for instance their historical and cultural contexts. Their constructed presentational formats, built within the space and time limits of the Festival, become reductive in representing the whole. Cultural traditions are often "curtailed" to fit in the one-hour-long presentational format. This can be observed in some foodways demonstrations in which only some steps are displayed, or an excerpt of an opera play being shortened from its original version¹⁵. The subject is thus reduced from the 'total sensory person' to a 'partial performer' (Karp 1991:285). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991:415) argues that live displays, although under forms of re-created quotidian activities or staged formal performance, create the illusion that these activities as 'being done rather than represented' and thus creating the 'effect of authenticity or realness'. She remarks that the live display practice makes 'people become signs of themselves' (Ibid.) and thus 'reducing the semiotic richness of their social enactment' (Kurin 1997:165). This point is valid. Although, it evokes a debate as one might relate to the fact that museums and festivals are built entities, and are thus inevitably displaying the whole through the parts.

Another issue is that since exhibitions at festivals are subjects for the spectacles, their visual appearance arguably becomes an important aspect, besides the 'artistic excellence' as a criterion for selection. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991:428) concludes that the more festivals 'succeed in their visual appeal and spectacular effect, the more they reclassify what they present as art, aestheticize that which is marginal, and risk appealing to prurient interest'. This issue becomes

¹⁵ Which will be further discussed in the next chapter on the Mekong program.

more visible as it comes to costumes for the Festival participants. She observes that the Office of Folklife Programs¹⁶ at the Smithsonian Institution accepts ‘costumes used only for stage performance’, those ‘for other exoteric purposes are not appropriate for the Festival’ (Ibid.). In the 1974 Festival, the Greek-American participants ‘wore ordinary clothes throughout the five-day presentation. Costume was not a part of the two Greek-American *glendis* held on the Mall, because it is not customarily worn at *glendis* in this country’ (as cited in (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:429)). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett remarks that the Smithsonian’s concern with costume ‘presents a paradox: from the perspective of many participants, the folklife festival is a stage performance, so why not wear costumes?’ This argument reveals that the interpretation of authenticity differs in the Smithsonian perspective versus that of Festival participants. In one way, the Smithsonian sees costumes as part of the interpreted folklife tradition as practiced in its original context. This suggests the distinction the SFF attempts to make from the practice adopted by living history museums. That is SFF living presentations are ‘neutral, scholarly, sometimes almost ascetic form of display – rather than a theatricized one, in order to convey the serious importance of the tradition’ (Kurin 1998:82). In another, it reveals an ethical challenge to the SFF as it tends to ‘present’ people’s private life in public face rather than to ‘represent’ it as in the words of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991:430). In this sense, authenticity is located in the authority controlled by the presenter, not the presented. Dimensions in relation to authority and the politics in representation of the ‘others’ will be further examined in the later discussions.

As living cultural presentation is the intercommunication between the Festival curator, the participant(s) and the audience¹⁷, it may be useful to examine authenticity from the angles and at the degree conceived by the parties involved in the process of interpreting ICH. It is arguable that all receive the same message. The above arguments suggest that two of the following aspects should be examined as far as the question of authenticity is concerned. First is the perspective by the bearing community whose cultural tradition is represented. Those who practice and pass on the tradition will decide whether a representation authentically reflects their cultural identity and heritage. Second is whether authentic curation is pursued by researchers, Festival organizers and curators. Authenticity in this sense can only be understood and treated as a code of ethics and

¹⁶ Former name of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH).

¹⁷ See Section 3, Chapter III.

responsibility in interpreting ICH, especially for the change of traditions as a result of living presentation. These will shape representational conventions, which may include sets of criteria for selecting and presenting the traditions with the aim to achieve such “authentic” presentations. Some of these perspectives on authenticity will be further examined in the case study of the Mekong program at the 2007 SFF in the following chapter.

In summary, the concept of authenticity presents a dilemma for museums, as well as festivals, for its implicit connotation on the originality of museum exhibits versus the default enactment of museums as de-contextualized institutions. Sharing the same discourse with museums, folklife festivals even deepen the gravity of this issue since they deal with ICH, a living and constantly changing element, as their material for exposition. The question of authenticity of ICH can only be addressed by its communities. The living cultural presentation practice adopted by the SFF differs from that in living history museums due to the use of real people –bearers of the represented folk tradition, thus believed to bring its exhibitions to certain degree of authenticity. However, like museums, the very physical setting of Festival space isolates its exhibits from their historical and cultural contexts. The spatial and temporal limits of presentations for the framed activities at the Festival reduce the presentation of the whole, creating the illusion that these activities as ‘being done rather than represented’ and thus producing the ‘effect of authenticity or realness’. There is a risk of people becoming the signs of themselves, or even objects in the worst case. The SFF is aware of the issue and it has made effort to mitigate the gap between the audience and the participants by encouraging dialogue and use of presenters. The spectacular aspect of festival, taking costume as an illustration, also poses a challenge to the SFF in balancing its scholarship as well as ethics in representing living people.

3. The politics of participation in the SFF

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival, although it has strived to project itself as an ‘inclusive, celebratory and attractive forum’ (Karp 1991; Kurin 1997) for the exhibitions of living cultures – ‘an exercise in cultural democracy’, shows implications of a political cultural forum with a variety of agendas. The fact that the Smithsonian Folklife Festival itself is privileged to be organized on the National Mall, symbolically in the heart of Washington D.C., during the celebration of the Fourth of July, makes the Festival a significant event and venue, both

culturally and politically to the presenters and presented. The more important it is, ‘the more the tension between politics and control manifests itself in their history’ (Karp 1991:284). Steven Lavine and Ivan Karp (1991:1) remark that every museum exhibition is inevitably built upon the ‘cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it’, and therefore arguably ‘decisions are made to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to assert some truths and to ignore others’ (Ibid.). The decisions on how the cultures are represented ‘reflect deeper judgments of power and authority’, and ‘resolve themselves into claims about what a nation is or ought to be’, and ‘how citizens should relate to one another’ (Karp & Lavine 1991:2). The politics in the involvement of different parties in such cultural representation is thus visible and has been under debate at length.

Richard Kurin (2007a:1) talks about an emerging policy called ‘cultural diplomacy’, which the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has inspired from and pursued. This concept is not articulated in a written policy but can be visible throughout its history of development and in its notion of diversity and inclusion of cultures represented on its premises; although its principal concept has been modified, other than that employed during the Cold War, when the US and USSR became competitors in the fields of culture, sports and technology. The new alternative values and tenets consigned to this policy resonate well with those often used by diplomats, as seen in Kurin’s words (2007a:2): cultural exchange, mutuality, respect, and so on. Kurin remarks that the US has failed to inform its citizens about the rest of the world, ‘to take account of local cultures, history and religious sensibilities’ and to learn about the cultures of the ‘others’. He believes that the Festival takes this approach and will have to strive to deliver to the world an improved image of the “national culture” of the United States, which is ‘more diverse, nuanced, and connected to the rest of the world’ (Ibid.). This shows that the Smithsonian sees public diplomacy as no accidental discourse of the Festival. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy, whatever form and implications it carries, has thus been an important agenda of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

In their argument, Bauman and Sawin (1991:290) point out that the production of a folklife festival is ‘a political field in its own right’ although it is connected to larger political arenas. The Festival is therefore organized in terms of power relations, structures of authority and legitimacy, and differential control over values. This assessment in some ways sets the SFF in contrast with

what it is dedicated for: ‘an exercise in cultural democracy’ (CFCH 2009b). Diamond and Trimillos (2008:5) observes a tension between the cultural heterogeneity that the Festival endorses through its own brand of hegemony and the influences of local governments and their agendas and the interest groups, and ‘the whims of changing administrations as they impact on art and museum funding’. Often, Festival organizers view the ‘festivals concept and production as an intervention in cultural homogenization and as a subversive of American democratic ideals designed to challenge cultural intolerance’ (Ibid.). As a result, undervalued, if not marginalized, groups are honored and valorized at the Festival. However, in the view of Diamond and Trimillos, still the concept of ‘diversity can be artifacted as benign, cohesive, and depoliticized, qualities that belie the actual histories and socioeconomic circumstances of many of the groups whose experiences are presented and performed’ (Diamond & Trimillos 2008:5). This tension is visible when it comes to the negotiations between Festival organizers and their local partners in other countries whose perspectives on culture and democracy are not on the same page.

The above argument can be illustrated by the participation of Yunnan Province, China in *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* at the 2007 SFF. Xiaolan Wang, also known as Wang Lanlan, Professor of Dance from Connecticut College, one of the four curators of the Mekong program, describes her experience working with the Chinese officials in selecting a dance tradition and its participants for the 2007 festival as ‘negotiate’ and ‘compromise the differences’ (2010, pers. comm., February 17). After four years of preparation, China decided to send a dance group, later selected as the Yunnan Flower Lantern Troupe, which in the Yunnan government and officials’ view ‘represents the “present state” of the folk cultures of Yunnan’ (Ibid.). However, the Smithsonian curators did not see the group as fitting their criteria, as although it is a folk tradition, the artists are not the folk themselves. Most of these artists are trained from a dance academy in Yunnan Province. The troupe is capable to ‘perform the dances and the music from several minority communities in China’ (CFCH 2007b). These dances are believed to have been modified or even renovated from their original versions for performance purpose. In the Smithsonian view, they were thus not authentic and not meeting the selection criteria. Although, according to Wang, there was no agreement on such criteria among the parties, including other Mekong countries, in their previous planning meetings, it soon became a point of tension

between the Smithsonian and their Chinese counterparts as neither side wanted to step down. A decision was eventually made, in which Wang accidentally served herself as an intermediary, became a ‘de-choreographer’ with the mission to ‘salvage the situation’ (L Wang 2010, pers. comm., February 17). As a result, Wang Lan-lan spent long hours working with these high-heeled “folk artists” with the help of Chinese folkdance specialists from the Beijing Dance Academy. In the end, Wang Lan-lan states in pride, the Chinese government officials were “pleased” as she was finalizing the program. However, she also expresses that the representation of Yunnan was ‘not what Smithsonian envisioned at the beginning’ and both sides ‘bent a little’, as Wang assesses that it ‘was meeting half way from both sides’ (Ibid.). In other words, there was a compromise by the Smithsonian to the extent that these dances, not the artists, should be tailored so that it can be performed in a more ‘authentic’ way.

While this example can be referred to issues of authenticity and the politics of representation (as discussed in the previous and following sections respectively), it reveals the politics in the cultural negotiation between the parties. It was not the folk artists at grassroots that the Smithsonian was negotiating with to decide how to represent their culture. It was the Chinese government’s ‘perceptions and reference’ (L Wang 2010, pers. comm., February 17) on “folk cultures”, which find similarity to spectacles developed for tourists in Yunnan, that give control and power over their meanings, yet are puzzling in the game of representing culture. To some extent, the Smithsonian solution to the problem has arguably resulted in the creation of a double-constructed element on the National Mall, if not a ‘plastic’¹⁸ folk tradition. This compromise tends to threaten the values upon which the Festival is informed of and has strived for: ‘foregrounding the voices of the tradition-bearers as they demonstrate, discuss and present their cultures’ (Kurin 1997:10) and thus energizing local and regional tradition bearers and their communities to conserve and create cultural resources (CFCH 2009). This is not the first time the Smithsonian has encountered such issues. One might recall a similar stance in negotiations during the making of the 1987 FAF program with the USSR on ‘the terms under which Soviet folk artists and musicians would come to the Festival’ (Kurin 1998:48), when the deputy director of cultural education at the then USSR Ministry of Culture, Alexandre Nikolai Demchenko,

¹⁸ Term used by one of my colleagues in a personal communication in 2007.

spoke: 'So, you do not want our best dance academy students to come to your Festival to perform peasant dances. You want the peasants themselves, the real people who do these dances' (Ibid.).

These examples allow us to examine observations by Richard Kurin (Diamond & Trimillos 2008:5-6) that the public image of the SFF shapes its presentation and its reception, particularly seen in limiting programming selection. The publicness of the Festival site as 'America's front lawn' (Kurin 1997:111), the National Mall, becomes a venue for sponsoring agencies from states to nations to 'put their best foot forward when afforded the opportunity to take center stage' (Diamond & Trimillos 2008:6). Besides the inquiries of commercial interest and cultural currency that Diamond and Trimillos (Ibid.) indicate, there is a possibility that the Festival might become a venue for another agenda. Let's say, a "beauty contest" among the participating states and nations in their "cultural manifestations". This aspect is also reflected in observations by Reah L Comb (2008) on the 2002 SFF program on the Silk Road. According to Comb, the program's name "Silk Road" was construed by the CFCH to highlight 'the exchange of good and material products, and...of cultural and spiritual products that traveled the same route' (2008:113). The emphasis on cultural exchange was thus promoted as 'an idealized form of globalization in which transnational identities could go beyond political differences' (Ibid.). Comb argues that although the CFCH attempted to convey the message of cross-cultural dialogue and exchange, 'different cultural approaches and splintered interactions between the designers and CFCH resulted in a less cohesive outcome and underscored the presence of multiple agendas coexisting within the Festival frame' (Diamond & Trimillos 2008:8). These agendas caused tensions among the fashion designers from South Asia and Japan and the CFCH that resulted in a competition which 'shifted the emphasis from the clothing and its cultural relevance to a more political and competitive realm' (Comb, 2008: 121).

In another article, Trimillos examines the cross-cultural encounters through the representation of folk traditions from the Philippines in the 1998 Festival as part of its celebration of nationhood. At the baselines of the Festival program were the 'issues of power – historical and current, actual and virtual' (Trimillos 2008:60) – in connection to the US colonization of the Philippines, the legacy of which became visible in the Philippine presentations at the Festival after a hundred

years. Trimillos sees the Festival as a ‘decolonizable space’ embedded with the ‘histories, resistances and reconciliations’ (Ibid.). He discusses the ways signifiers used in the Festival, such as program name, titles, so on, carries political implications whose alternatives reflect the Filipinos’ stance on reconciliation and resistance. In regard with the similar issue, Emily Satterwhite (2008:15) remarks that the inclusion of such program as the Philippines (and the Baltic nations) in the SFF not only signified the SFF’s extension in its themes from domestic to international, but also symbolized ‘the United States’ shift from old-fashioned empire to newfangled neo-imperialism’, despite the current political status in presence of such countries at the Festival.

Cultural reconciliation also became a significant category in Vietnam’s participation in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* at the 2007 SFF. Indeed, it fit well in the government’s cultural and political agenda in diplomatic relations with the US and other Mekong countries. The Vietnamese government expected participation in the program would bring about multi-dimensional political benefits to the two countries, which were enemies more than 30 years ago. Cultural reconciliation is therefore used as a way to amend stereotypical images about Vietnam. Further, there is a multiple-target political signification put across at the Festival. The message was well addressed by Mr. Le Doan Hop, Former Minister of Culture and Information at the 2007 SFF’s opening ceremony:

Outside Vietnam, there is still limited understanding about our country and many people used to think about Vietnam as a country of war, devastated by bombing and poverty. In the next ten days of the Festival, here in Washington D.C., through cultural presentations of Vietnamese craftsmen and artisans, you will see another Vietnam, a land of diverse ethnicities and cultural heritage, with a thousand-year history that made cultural identities of the fifty-four ethnic nationalities. We anticipate enhancing cultural exchange and promoting mutual understanding between Vietnam and the Mekong countries and the American public, especially the Vietnamese communities living in the United States of America (*Stories of the SFF* 2008).

The Festival program was ‘an important goal set out by the Ministry of Culture and Information’¹⁹ to ‘further encourage the tradition-bearers’ ‘to take a more active role in

¹⁹ Known as Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism from July 2007.

safeguarding their cultural heritage, and particularly in transmitting their skills to younger generations' after being 'recognized and honored by presentations overseas', as noted by Mr. Dang Van Bai, former director at the Department of Cultural Heritage, the primary coordinating institution from Vietnam (*Stories of the SFF* 2008). Mr. Dang Van Bai emphasized that the approach will also help preserve their 'cultural identities' (Ibid.). Participation in the Mekong program at the 2007 SFF also exposes Vietnam to the opportunity to build capacity for its staff in fieldwork, documentation, and Festival presentation.

From the perspective of Festival participants, Bauman and Sawin (1991:290) observe that the SFF's presentational mode is apt to trade power and authority in the hands of producers and thus the participants are easily objectified as 'communicative instruments in the service of the larger message'. They recommend that the political operation of a folklife festival should 'take close account of the orientation to the event of all who are involved in it, recognizing the agency of the participants themselves'. This can be understood that the Festival participants do contribute to the political agenda that the Festival is commissioned with. Also in his own observations and through interviews at the 1987 Festival of American Folklife, Richard Bauman (1992) remarks that most participants to the Festival have their own agendas. This is because the invitation to the Festival was seen as a great compliment and an opportunity for them to receive recognition for their skills. Some see the privilege of being asked to perform at the Festival as 'the honor of a lifetime' (Bauman 1992:15). Participants from Michigan see coming to the Festival as mark of 'prestige and honor' by which provide certain benefits and enable them to accomplish their individual pursuits. Bauman concludes that the Festival was an occasion for them to 'promote personal agendas in part compensated for such liabilities' (Ibid.).

In summary, the politics of participation in the SFF is present at various degrees and from different perspectives. The SFF, although striving to project itself as an inclusive, celebratory and attractive forum that foregrounds the voice of cultural practitioners, while promoting cultural democracy, is fraught with the politics of participation at various degrees and from different perspectives, including that of Festival participants. Its tenure in the heart of Washington D.C. in conjunction with the celebration of July Fourth makes it a significant politico-cultural venue and event that attracts the intention and interactions of various agendas. Among these are cultural

diplomacy, power and control, competition, negotiation, resistance, reconciliation, cultural conservation, and so on. The cases of the Philippines, Yunnan and Vietnam add more perspectives to these issues.

4. The politics of representation of living cultures at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (1991:1) remark that every museum exhibition is inevitably built upon the ‘cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it’, and therefore ‘decisions are made to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to assert some truths and to ignore others’ (Ibid.). The decisions on how the cultures are represented ‘reflect deeper judgments of power and authority’, and ‘resolve themselves into claims about what a nation is or ought to be’, and ‘how citizens should relate to one another’ (Karp & Lavine 1991:2). As discussed, participation in a festival program further legitimizes diplomatic and political reconciliation under the name of cultural exchange, not yet to mention the degree of engagement of those institutions into various stages in developing these cultural exhibitions. This underlines angles of authority, the politics of representation, and ownership of cultures. The politics in the involvement of different parties, including the presenter and the presented, in such cultural representation is thus visible and receives considerable coverage in literature and debates.

Ivan Karp argues that although festivals do not necessarily ‘emphasize differences in taste or ownership’ (Karp 1991:283) as commonly seen in object exhibitions, they implicitly claim a non-elite reference of those who participate as the subject as well as who participate as audience. Festivals carry multiple effects besides the learning experience often aimed at in classic museum setting through their ‘more democratic and nonjudgmental participatory and sensory aesthetics’ (Karp 1991:282). It also becomes the concern of the audience that these formats somehow “museumified” live persons as if they were objects (Ibid: 285). This is to say the exposition of real people in such public space at festivals does not necessarily communicate the same messages as those intended by museum exhibition makers. It may produce a bigger issue, which reflects the underside of ‘control’ by Festival curators over the presented, in response to Kurin’s remark on “success” that derived from the inability of Festival organizers to control them (Ibid:285).

Responding to the argument of people being seen as objects, Richard Kurin (1997:165) states that we are shocked to see people as subjects in museums just ‘because museums become places where people do not expect to encounter people’, and they are meant to ‘impose controlled settings, cases, pedestals and spaces for objects, an written protocol that prompts visitors to avoid each other in exhibition hall and to speak in the hushed tones deemed proper for museum conversations’. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival has attempted to make effort to the contrary. Living presentations at the SFF encourage dialogue between the presented and visitors. This is evident in the Festival’s policy on selecting the participant to perform at the Festival. However, it represents a delicate issue considering who is qualified to perform culture. In regard with this respect, the Festival’s selection criteria will likely place the ‘strength of presentation’ at its prerequisite. Although this means the selection criteria will be used as a tool to ensure an ‘effective presentation’ at the Festival, other than to appraise the cultural values and qualities (artistic excellence) of the tradition and practitioner in question, it may invoke a potential tension among members in the local communities. This tendency in the selection process for the SFF, as remarked by Richard Bauman (1992:22), ‘weighs against the “gentle performers” and tip toward the more flashy one’.

Kurin (1998:54) asserts that the problem in representing the culture of others is ‘not in giving people,...who have something cultural to say, the center stage’ but to seek for ‘the quality and quantity of mediation – how to effectively provide the ways by which people can speak for themselves’ (Ibid.). This mediation is thus central in the process of communication. If failed to “effectively” address such issue, might introduce the risk of turning a celebratory event into an exposition of ‘living dioramas’ or even rhetoric of a ‘cultural zoo’ as criticized by many (Cantwell 1991:95; Thompson 2008:98). According to Richard Kennedy (2010, pers. comm., March 31), the Festival has always been cautious about the ‘perception of inappropriately exhibiting people’. It has thus developed ‘specific site design elements that attempt to mitigate the distance between the artist and the audience’. In this process, visitors are also encouraged to engage in the conversations with artists. This is more visible in narrative sessions. Kennedy notes that the use of presenters as the intermediary help provide not only the ‘cultural context but personal stories that make the artists and their traditions more familiar and approachable to

audiences' (2010, pers. comm., March 31). Also according to Kennedy (*Stories of the SFF* 2008), the success of a presenter lies in his role in the connection between the public – about one million people – and the traditional artists. Kennedy believes that 'if the public cannot understand them, cannot talk to them, and cannot feel that they are humans and similar to them, the program will fail' (Ibid.).

Examining the institutional role of the presenter at the 1997 Festival, Krista Thompson (2008:98) observes that although in practice presenters are sometimes successful in fostering such dialogues, the audiences are 'seduced by the sights and sounds of the event and overlook the less spectacular verbal performances of the presenters'. This aspect is problematic and thus hinders the effectiveness of his/her role. Robert Cantwell (1991) also observes a similar issue. In his view, a consistent problem in crafts demonstrations was that 'craftspeople become so involved in their work that they are reluctant or even unable to talk with visitors', while the presenters 'consequently talk altogether too much, or involve themselves in the process, opening a vacuum that volunteers or even visitors are sometimes obliged to fill by providing verbal explanations, often quite faulty, of their own' (Cantwell 1991:153). As a result, the visitors 'visually consume' the exhibitions as 'entertaining spectacles' and 'draw on preconceived stereotypes when they encounter tradition bearers' on the Mall (Thompson 2008:98). Again, this spectacular aspect is thus challenging to both the presenters (Festival curators and presenters) and the presented.

Bauman and Sawin note from their observations that its mode of representation is apt to trade power and authority in the hands of producers and thus the participants are easily objectified as 'communicative instruments in the service of the larger message' (1991:290). It is recommended from their study that the political operation of a folklife festival should 'take close account of the orientation to the event of all who are involved in it, recognizing the agency of the participants themselves'. Richard Bauman (1992:15) remarks that although the participants feel confident about their ability to the task they are asked to perform, the 'unfamiliar' requirements of festival re-presentation make them feel at risk, since they are 'little prepared for what will happen and need guidance to figure out how best to transform their everyday activities into a recontextualized presentation or enactment for a festival audience' (Ibid.). This shift in authority tends to take place often in representing other people's culture, a new context which is

dominantly the territory of Festival organizers to which the presented are unconsciously forced to adapt.

In summary, the politics of representation and the involvement of different parties in the process, including the presenter and the presented, is visible and receives considerable coverage in literature and debates. Presentational format of festival are alleged of being apt to museumify live persons as they are objects. This problem is argued as a result of oversimplified connotation on museums and the prejudice on the encounter of live people in such venues. Politics in the representation is also mirrored in the issue of control and authority over the presented. The Smithsonian Folklife Festival has strived to avoid inappropriately exhibiting living people as seen in other displays in the past by encouraging dialogues between the participants and the audience. This is also ensured in the selection criterion on the participant's strength of presentation, which might invoke a potential tension among local members. The Festival's use of presenters as the intermediary help provide the cultural context and personal stories that make the artists and their traditions more familiar and approachable to audiences. However, observations of researchers (Thompson and Cantwell) reveal that although presenters are sometimes successful in fostering such dialogues, the audiences are attracted by the sights and sounds of the Festival, other than the verbal performances of the presenters and they often spend more time talking than the participants. As a result, the visitors see the exhibitions as spectacles and draw on preconceived stereotypes. Other observations show that the Festival's mode of representation tends to give power and authority in the hands of producers while participants are unfamiliar with the Festival requirements, a new context to which they are forced to adapt.

Chapter V – Vietnam at the Mekong River: Connecting Cultures Program: An analysis.

1. Introduction

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 2007 featured three programs: *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures*, *Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian* and *Roots of Virginia Culture*. Nearly five-hundred performers, artists, musicians, dancers, craftspeople, storytellers, cooks, farmers, boat builders, archaeologists, genealogists, ritual specialists, workers and presenters came to the National Mall in Washington D.C. to engage in live demonstrations, dance and musical performances, narrative sessions and hands-on activities to present their cultural traditions.

While each program at the 2007 SFF had its own mission and objectives, ‘cultural reconciliation’ was the overarching message communicated across the Festival (CFCH 2007c: 8; *Citizens from Northern Ireland to participate in Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2007; Northern Ireland wows Washington 2007*). The *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* featured cultural traditions from a river whose watershed covers a vast geographic area of diverse ethnicities, home to more than ten million people, running through six countries: Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand and Vietnam.

This chapter discusses the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* Program at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, participated by five riparian countries (Cambodia, China (Yunnan), Laos, Thailand and Vietnam)²⁰, with primary focus on the review of cultural presentations by Vietnamese participants. Vietnam brought to the National Mall in Washington D.C. eleven cultural traditions²¹ with the performance by thirty-nine bearers from six ethnic groups in the Mekong River areas. Since my main involvement in the living presentations on the National Mall was to present *Hat boi* opera on the Nine Dragons Stage and Bahnar dugout canoe construction at the Bahnar Arts tent, I will mainly base my discussions on such presentations. I

²⁰ Myanmar was not on the list because of its diplomatic status with the US.

²¹ 1) Fish-trap making of the Black Thai (from Dien Bien province). 2) Bahnar back-strap basket weaving. 3) Bahnar Gong and Drum Ensemble. 4) Bahnar dug-out canoe construction. 5) Bahnar epic singing (Kon Tum province). 6) *Hat boi* opera of the Kinh (Viet) (Vinh Long province). 7) Khmer *Robam* theater (Soc Trang province). 8) Cham weaving (An Giang province). 9) Viet cakes and foods making (Can Tho). 10) *Don ca tai tu* singing of the Kinh (Bac Lieu province). and 11) *Kylin* Dancing of the Chinese Hoa (Bac Lieu province).

will also extend my evaluation on the presentation of other traditions basing on my observations as a program assistant and a field researcher during the preparatory process. The evaluations are also based on reviews and reflections by the participants, organizers, and visitors collected from a variety of documentations.

2. Overview of the program *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures*

Presentations at the ten-day festival on the National Mall program took more than four years to prepare before they were delivered in June 2007. According to Richard Kennedy²² (2007:3), the initial idea of the Mekong program was inspired during a Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored meeting in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China, in February 2003 among Smithsonian specialists, Chinese officials and regional cultural experts on the preservation of ethnic cultures in Yunnan. Proposed by Chinese officials as ‘a program that might assist in cultural preservation’ (Kennedy 2007:3), the Smithsonian staff came up with the idea of organizing a festival on the Mekong River region. Specific ideas for the Mekong River then were developed throughout discussions between Richard Kennedy and Frank Proschan, a curator and folklorist at the CFCH²³, whose ‘expertise was invaluable in conceptualizing this program’ (R Kennedy 2010, pers. comm., March 31).

During the 1980s and 1990s, Frank Proschan conducted intensive research in language, folk music and oral traditions in Cambodia, China (mainly in Yunnan), Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Proschan was involved in many training activities and collaborating research with a large number of researchers, scholars, institutions and even community members in the region, many of whom later became the main players in the Mekong project. Both Kennedy and Proschan had strong governmental contacts in the region that envisioned possible initiation of such a program. They believed ‘the theme of the Mekong as a cultural region was particularly timely’ (Ibid.) for

²² Richard Kennedy was a curator for the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* Program. He retired in April 2009 as the Acting Director of the CFCH. Richard began his work at the CFCH in 1988. He served as Deputy Director of the CFCH from 1994 to 2008. He curated many festival programs on international cultures, such as Hawaii, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Tibetan culture, the Silk Road, Oman and the Mekong River region (CFCH 2007a).

²³ Frank Proschan is currently a Program Specialist for UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Section in Paris. He began his career at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in 1970, serving as its first archivist (1975–1978) and as a staff folklorist (1986–1989 and 2000–2006). A specialist in the ethnology and folklore of mainland Southeast Asia, Proschan carried out his Ph.D. research with Khmu highlanders from Laos living as refugees in the United States (CFCH 2007c).

which a program that will present ‘to the American visitors the richness, diversity and a variety of traditions that make up the Mekong region’ (*Stories of the SFF* 2008).

Geographically, the Mekong is one of the world’s great rivers, travelling through six countries, starting from the Tibetan Plateau in China, passing through Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and emptying into the South China Sea²⁴ in Southern Vietnam. The Mekong River Basin is bordered by the land area surrounding all the streams and rivers that flow into the Mekong River (MRC 2010). This includes parts of China, Myanmar and Vietnam, nearly one third of Thailand and most of Cambodia and Lao PDR. The Mekong region has been a ‘cradle and crossroads of diverse cultures for centuries’ (CFCH 2007b). In Vietnam’s territory, the Mekong River and its watershed cover twenty provinces, including areas in the North and Central Vietnam, the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta. Several decades ago, the war in Vietnam and years of conflicts in the region resulted in dislocating millions of Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese, many of whom found new homes in the US.

Featuring the Mekong River region, ‘a cradle and crossroads of diverse cultures for centuries’ (CFCH 2007b), the Festival organizers, Smithsonian curators and their Mekong partners, were well aware of the challenges they faced: how to present to the American public in a nut shell this ‘huge, diverse and complex region’, ‘how to select some two hundred people to represent tens of millions’, ‘how to give visitors a sense of the challenging cultural choices that confront the Mekong region and its inhabitants at the beginning of the twenty-first century’, and crucially ‘how to mobilize the support of governments, funders, researchers, and communities to make the whole effort possible’ (Proschan & Chalernpow 2007:19).

The idea of ‘connecting cultures’, according to Richard Kennedy, aims to look at the Mekong River as a connector of these diverse communities (Kennedy 2007). Festival curators and their collaborators believed the Mekong River program came in as ‘a timely and cutting-edge place’ to symbolically re-establish the cultural connections among communities in the Mekong River region whom shared cultural ties since a thousand of years or so, while manifesting the differences. The implications behind this conceptualization also refer to the reconnection of

²⁴ Known to the Vietnamese as Bien Dong (Eastern Sea).

generations of Mekong Americans to their home lands. The Festival aimed to ‘reintroduce those people and reintroduce Americans to this region’ (*Bring the Mekong program to the Mall* 2007; CFCH 2007c:34; *Why here, why now?* 2007). In view of these preconceptions, four themes were developed by the curatorial teams in order to facilitate field research as the guides: 1. The river and water as the sustainer of life; 2. Rivers and water as the focus of shared symbolic meanings and artistic expressions for the peoples of the Mekong region; 3. The Mekong and its tributaries not only as channels of communication and commerce, but also, in places, as daunting barriers that inhibited contacts between neighbors; 4. Diversity—geographic, environmental, ethnic, and cultural—that characterizes the Mekong region. (Proschan & Charlempow 2007:19)

3. Observations at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Presentations at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival took place during ten days, between June 27 and July 8, 2007. Festival hours were from 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day.

There were several types of platform accommodated for the presentations, varying depending on genres of the tradition. All of these constructions were temporary. Performing arts, music and foodways demonstrations were scheduled presentations which used the stages and workstations on the rotation-basis. After each session, these platforms were cleared and used for the next. Traditional arts, craft and occupational traditions were non-scheduled and performed all day, in the tents built throughout the Mekong River section.

Exhibition signs, each of which was a panel of 120-word text with two photos, were used to provide further contextual information of the tradition being presented. Most of the texts were written by local Mekong researchers, who were trained by the CFCH, and created by local designers. However, the use of signs was not suitable for scheduled performances owing to the issue of accessibility. Smithsonian curators thought the reading of these signs would impede the flow of visitors (J Deutsch 2007, pers. comm., May 7). It was then decided that the exhibition signs would be placed at the sites for traditional arts, crafts and occupational traditions.

Each presentation was assisted by a local Mekong presenter, who received training by the Smithsonian staff on Festival presentation. Most of the presenters were local researchers, museum staff members, and cultural specialists. The presenters were fluent in both English and

their languages; their primary roles were to translate, to help provide contextual information on the tradition being presented and to engage the visitors into the conversations or even the activities with the participants.

3.1. *Music and performances*

There were three stages for music and performing arts. Each stage was named after a cultural symbol of the Mekong River region as to also provide a context to the Festival, namely Nine Dragons, Naga and New Moon. These stages were designed in a non-contextual style temporarily built under tents together with seats and/or bleachers.



Figure 3 Performance of *Robam* on the Naga Stage. Photo by Pham Cao Quy. Courtesy of Department of Cultural Heritage.

The two small stages, the Naga and the New Moon, were reserved for music and performances that did not take a lot of space, such as the *Robam* masked dances by the Khmer from Vietnam, the *Don ca tai tu* singing from Vietnam, together with other forms of performance from Cambodia, China, Laos and Thailand. The performing area in these stages was an elevated

wooden platform, 15 to 20 cm from the ground, placed against a backdrop with simple decoration.

The largest stage, called the Nine Dragons Stage, was a platform elevated about one meter from the ground. The Nine Dragons Stage was located in the center of the Mekong River section. It could accommodate about five-hundred seats, all built under a large tent. This is where the *Hat Boi* opera, the Bahnar Gong and Drum Ensemble and *Kylin* Dance from Vietnam were performed. The Nine Dragons Stage was also reserved for the Flower Lantern Dance Troupe (performing dances and music from several minority communities in China) from Yunnan – China.



Figure 4 Performance by the Bahnar Gong and Drum Ensemble on the Spring Festival Ground. Photo by author.

An another outdoor platform, called the Spring Festival Ground, about 30 to 40 meters from the Nine Dragons Stage, was set aside as an open space to allow occasional demonstrations such as

ritual ceremonies by the Bahnar from Vietnam, the Water Splashing, ritual possessions by Thailand, dances of the Cambodian giant Ting Mong puppets, and so on. The Spring Festival Ground was the place where the Bahnar participants performed the ritual ceremony to plant the *loong gang* (ritual tree) to inaugurate and to end the Festival.

Most of the Vietnamese cultural representations on these stages did not include recontextualizing materials. The only tradition that did so was the *Hat boi* opera from Vietnam, which was the background for the stage consisting of decorative backdrops and hangings resembling a *hat boi* stage in context. These items were shipped from Vietnam. However, it was not built in the same way as the participants usually did at home owing to technical issues. The Nine Dragons was a rotating stage so these items could not be fixed as it would affect other performances. Festival organizers decided to build it on a self-supporting steel frame that could be easily and quickly assembled and disassembled (J Deutsch 2007, pers. comm., June 27). This seemed to work well during the performances.

It is noteworthy that in order to fit in the one-house limit for each presentation, most of the repertoires were either “curtailed” or presented in pieces, showing the essence of these traditions. For example, for *Hat boi* opera, an original play of the opera often takes two to three hours and requires a troupe from twelve or more artists and musicians to perform. So it was impossible to perform a whole play at the Festival. In consideration of this, the researcher and the participants decided to present a 45-minute excerpt *Tiet Giao doat ngoc* in the three-hour play *Nguyet Co hoa cao* (Nguyet Co turning into a fox), which required four musicians and three artists to perform. However, available funds allowed only five artists to come to Washington. Therefore, they had to decide that two musicians would do the jobs of four, while ensuring the quality of the show. According Nguyen Xuan Hoanh, researcher for *hat boi* from Vinh Long province museum, the reason he chose to present the excerpt was also that this is the most dramatic part in the whole play, which enabled the artists and musicians to show off their talents (2007, pers. comm., March).

The Khmer *robam* theater ran into a similar issue in regard with funding. In order to fit in the one-hour slot, it was proposed by the researcher that owing to limited finance, a *robam* play

would need only four artists to perform given the accompanying music would be recorded and replayed during the performance. However, this idea became problematic since the Festival does not accept the use of recordings of any kind in the representations on the ground that these are “living presentations” and the recordings would not authentically produce such representation on the Mall (F Proschan 2006, pers. comm., December). It was then proposed by presenting the dances and music of *robam* with the performance by four artists, whom were both playing the instruments and dancing interchangingly.

The Bahnar gong and drum ensemble, which came to the Festival with sixteen artists, did not face the issue of personnel, but rather issues of timing and context. In their original context, the gongs and drums are played only with accompanying *xoang* dances as part of the Bahnar traditional rituals, ceremonies and such. Each of the melodies and tunes has its own cultural implications in relation to the ritual in question. Within the one-hour performances on the Nine Dragons Stage, visitors could see and listen only to the repertoires and melodies of the gongs and the *xoang* dances. However, on the Spring Festival Ground, the Bahnars were able to perform the music and dance in ritual ceremony to plant a *loong gang* ritual tree on the Mall to inaugurate the SFF and to dismantle it to conclude the Festival.

3.2. *Crafts and occupational traditions*

Demonstrations of traditional arts, crafts and occupational traditions were all-day performances. These traditions widely ranged in form: making fish traps, dugout canoes, baskets, pottery, puppets, woven cloth and silk, needlework, embroidery, painted murals, cement moldings, ritual offerings, masks, rockets, woodcarvings, and silver jewelry.

All of these craft and occupational presentations took place under tents. The participants were provided with a workstation, with tools brought from their home countries and special materials that were not available in the US. In most cases, such materials as wood, bamboo, cement, paints, and so on, were locally found in the US. The workstations provided by the Smithsonian were mostly non-contextual spaces. Contextual materials, often tools, production materials, half-made and finished products were displayed around the work space to give an idea about how the products look when they are finished or in the process. Different from the setting of a stage, the

craft demonstration area was a fairly open space, where visitors could easily come in contact with the participants.



Figure 5 The Bahnar participants demonstrate the construction of a dugout canoe. Photo by author.

In the Mekong program, the eight textile weavers from five countries together demonstrated their craft in one same tent. The same was true with the potters, in order to facilitate cultural exchange among them and to create the effect of ‘visual cues’ (*Bring the Mekong program on the Mall* 2007).

Some of the sixteen Bahnars, besides group performances of the gongs and drum on the large Nine Dragons stage, also demonstrated weaving bamboo back-strap baskets and constructing a dugout canoe. The Smithsonian staff felt that because the Bahnars in many ways present themselves as a closely knit group, if the bamboo basket weavers were grouped together with other Mekong participants in the Bamboo Craft Tent, they might feel isolated from all the other

Bahnar. Therefore, they proposed to place the basket weavers in the canoe construction tent, which was named Bahnar Arts tent (R Kennedy 2007, pers. comm., March 16).

The wood log used for the construction of the dugout canoe on the Nation Mall was a poplar tree, which was found locally in the US. Back home in their village, the Bahnar often use the woods indigenous to their living area, which are fresher and softer since the construction of a canoe starts immediately after a tree is chopped down. Although the poplar tree was somewhat similar to those as they used back home, the summer heat on the National Mall caused it to become drier, despite efforts by the Smithsonian staff to keep it moist by watering it (J Deutsch 2007, pers. comm., June 14). However, A Tik, one of the Bahnar boat builders, said the harder wood even helped bring about a better shape, even though they had to work a bit harder.

3.3. *Foodways*

Culinary demonstrations were scheduled performances at the Pu'er Tea House, a kitchen built under a tent, where seats were available for the audiences. The kitchen was designed and equipped with basic facilities, such as gas ovens and a cooking table for demonstration. A foodways participant demonstrated two sessions per day, each lasting one hour. Since a recipe often takes more than one hour to prepare, most of the cooking ingredients were ready-made to save time. Only the important steps in the recipes could be demonstrated to the audiences. For example, the boiling of the *tet* cake²⁵ would take five to six hours to be cooked; therefore Mrs. Xiem only showed to the audiences the ready-made, or she had them cooked hours before performing the delivery of the cakes to the audience. Although most of the foods being demonstrated at the Festival were usually unfamiliar in the US, Festival organizers were able to obtain most ingredients in the US.

Most of the processing activities during foodways took place on the kitchen, an elevated horizontal surface to eye level of a seated audience, which made it difficult for viewers to keep track of the ingredients and activities. To fix this, a mirror was placed above the cooking area, the reflection of which enabled the visitors to see what was going on.

²⁵ A type of sticky rice-cake, wrapped in banana leaves, which has a cylindrical shape.

According to the local Health Department regulations, the audience was prohibited to taste the foods prepared from the foodways demonstrations.

3.4. Family Learning Sala

This area was reserved for scheduled educational activities, similar to those seen in museums. Most of these activities were inspired from the themes and cultural traditions being presented. Children of all ages had the opportunity to learn a Cambodian dance, beat a Bahnar gong, walk on the sticks, write in Lao, make a Chinese pottery toy, or use chopsticks. In the Family Learning Sala (pavilion), younger visitors were able to find many exhibit signs, images, and information about the Mekong region. The signs helped children answer the questions in the Family Activities Guide and to win a prize. There were also many other activities for younger visitors in this tent, such as Vietnamese Opera face painting, coloring paper lion-head, so on. These activities were conducted by Smithsonian staff and volunteers. Some of them were instructed by the participants themselves.

4. Views of organizers, participants, and visitors

4.1. Views of organizers

Le Thi Minh Ly, museum expert and Vietnamese curator in the Mekong program²⁶, remarked that the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program as a whole, and the Vietnamese presentations at the Festival ‘conquered the American public’ (Le 2008:223). ‘They successfully built the cultural bridges’ through their performances (Ibid.). Also according to Le, the program was successful because the curatorial team has strictly kept up with the selection criteria for cultural traditions at out in the beginning, to pinpoint ‘authenticity’ as one of the most important factors:

First, it must be a folk tradition. None of the traditions are re-created, re-enacted, or professionalized. Second, it represents the concerned community and its identity. The tradition is selected with consent and willingness of the concerned community. Third, it will ensure a complete presentation that gives a good insight of Vietnamese cultures and excites the American public (*Stories of the SFF 2008*).

²⁶ Le Thi Minh Ly is also deputy director of the Department of Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which was the main coordinating institution in the Mekong Project.

On a specific example, among others, Le evaluated the Bahnar dugout canoe construction as a big success, which was reflected not only in the number of visitors viewing the demonstration, but also in ‘their interesting questions’. The presentation was successful also because the cultural implications in connection to the Mekong River and the delivery of the completed dugout canoe after ten days of demonstration (Le 2008:229).

In Le’s assessment, most of the presenters have truly become an intermediary between the participants and the public, contributing to honoring the artists. They were able to facilitate in a forum which enabled the participants to self-represent and educate the public of their cultural identity (Le 2008:230).

Le (2010, pers. comm., February 24) also pointed out that while there were successful presentations, such as *Hat boi* opera, Bahnar Gong and Drum ensemble, *kylin* dances and foodways, there were unsuccessful presentations, such as Bahnar *epic* singing and Thai fish-trap making. She suggests that the presenters may need to improve their knowledge of such traditions and the skills in presenting them (Le Thi Minh Ly 2010, pers. comm., February 24).

4.2. Views of visitors

According to the visitor survey at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival conducted by the Smithsonian, 1,006,195 people attended the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in ten days. The survey on a random basis of 547 people in the ten days shows that:

- 58% of surveyed visitors said the best things about the Festival were music, song and dance, while 40 % chose arts, crafts, painting, and 32% said it was the Festival as a whole.
- 51% of surveyed visitors rated their experience at the Festival as ‘excellent’, 22% ‘superior’ and 24% ‘good’.
- 41% of surveyed visitors voted the Mekong program their favorite program, 40% voted Northern Ireland and 19% Virginia.

- 54% of surveyed visitors said they learned SOME more about the people and culture of the Mekong River region, 21% said A LOT, 23% said LITTLE, and 3% learned nothing after attending the Festival.
- As a result, 47% said they might want to visit the Mekong region, 29% said MAYBE and 25% said NO. (*Visitor Survey, 2007*).

A Vietnamese American volunteer presenter said he noticed that Vietnamese American visitors were happy that Vietnam brought to Washington a large group of folk artists. They showed their appreciation in how meticulous and patient the Bahnars were when they were weaving the baskets, as well as in digging the canoe just by axes, chisels and hoes (*Stories of the SFF 2008*).

Another visitor, A Su, a Thai American who recently came to resettle in the US, said that he felt like he was seeing his homeland again when he came to the Festival. He said it was not only because it reminded him of cultural traditions from home, but also because it gave him the chance to meet real people with their true presentations. He was thankful because he was able to talk to a person of his ethnic group in Thai language (*Ibid.*).

A Vietnamese American, who lives in Washington D.C., commented on the way Mrs. Xiem made the cakes: ‘When she makes the cakes, she really means to do it. She makes it with a passion. She just loves to do it. Therefore I think the cakes she made are different from others here, which are so commercial!’ (*Gia Minh 2007*). However, many Vietkieu (Vietnamese American) visitors complained as they were disappointed of not having the chance to taste the “authentic foods”.

I think she is doing quite a good job, and very quickly. But I cannot tell the quality of the rice flour paste because I am not allowed to taste or even able to touch it. I will try to come again on July the Forth to see how she makes the *banh xeo* pancake. But it will still be a regret if I can only watch²⁷, said a visitor (*Gia Minh 2007*).

Duong, Hong Anh, a Vietnamese master student at University of Maryland, author of the thesis ‘Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2007 and the Presentation of Cultural Diversity in America’, expressed her feelings upon encounter of the cultural presentations at the Festival:

²⁷ Translation by author.

Attending the Mekong Delta section, I have mixed feelings of revisiting some long time experiences familiar to my childhood, and some new exposure to the diversity of the community. I am also proud of the fact that Vietnamese ethnics from the banks of the Mekong River could come to the banks of the Potomac River to demonstrate their cultural heritage to an international audience. Spending a lot of time at the Nine Dragons Stage, I felt nostalgic with some of the familiar musical performances in Vietnamese such as *Hai Boi Opera* ensemble (Vietnam Traditional Opera), and *Don Ca Tai Tu* (Amateur Traditional Songs) of Southern Vietnam. I think that the SFF museum professional has done a good job in setting the stages close to its context such as the Southern style altar in the *Don Ca Tai Tu* singing. I watched with pleasure the enjoyment and admiration on kids and adults' faces at the Vietnamese Kylin dancing and drumming. Two mythical tiger-like creatures, similar to those seen in Chinese New Year parades, prowled up and down the aisles and did gymnastic feats on stage. "The dancers then joined the drummers for powerful displays of precision percussion, using clanging cymbals and a massive three-foot high and wide drum hit with wooden sticks." It reminded me of my childhood when I joined other kids to follow the dancers during the Mid-Autumn festival till late night... (Duong 2008:14-15).

Duong also expresses her regret for not being able to taste the *banh xeo* made by Mrs. Xiem: 'Like me, many others attended asked her if they could taste them; but no- the National Park service regulations prohibit dispersing of the dishes made by chefs during their demonstrations' (Ibid.).

4.3. Perspectives of the participants

Before the Festival

To all of the participants I worked with, being in Washington D.C. for the Festival carries significant implications. Most of these people had never been abroad before. Many of them had not been to such major cities in Vietnam as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Some had not even been out of their village. Being invited as a representative for the country to introduce their cultural identity was the greatest honor to them. Mr. Bau Rang, the impresario of the *Hat boi* opera troupe from Vinh Long Province could not sleep in excitement and pride just because his troupe was selected to perform at the Festival, although he was not selected as a participant. He asked that his members to try their best, in order to 'uphold the honor of *Hat boi* of the South' (*Stories of the SFF 2008*).

Nguyen Thi Xiem, the only Vietnamese foodways demonstrator from Can Tho, seemed to have her own agenda just before leaving for the US:

I wish to bring these traditional cakes, which they also called “folk cakes”, to the United States, so that they’ll know Vietnam has these traditional cakes. These are made in traditional ways, not those of modernity. That is why I want to go there to remind the Vietnamese Americans of their homeland and ancestors (*Stories of the SFF 2008*).

Dang Van Su, a participant for *Don ca tai tu* singing from Bac Lieu expressed he could not believe that he was selected because he saw himself as an ‘unremarkable artist’ (*Stories of the SFF 2008*), but he was surely honored.

To the participants in the Central highland province of Kon Tum, many of whom had never even been to the provincial capital of Kon Tum before, the invitation to Festival seemed to share much pride and excitement. A Thut, the Bahnar group leader, whose father A Bek and son A Thao also participated, said although performing the gongs is such a familiar task, the invitation to the Festival in fact urged them to prepare for a good performance. Every night in the week before the leaving for the US, they rehearsed the performances in the village from 7 until late (*Stories of the SFF 2008*).

After the Festival

Nguyen Van Tot, the participant for *Hat boi*, saw the performances as a success. Before the shows, he was worried that since ‘the American and international visitors did not know much about this form of art’, ‘there would be little audience to the show’. To his surprise, the audience ‘showed their interest in the performances’ by ‘coming in and remaining silent throughout the shows’, most of which ‘ended to thunderous applause’ (*Stories of the SFF 2008*). Before coming to Washington, Nguyen Van Tot and his troupe members had to work hard with Hoanh, the researcher for *Hat boi*, in order to choose the right repertoire to perform at the Festival to meet the demands of available funds and the Smithsonian one-hour timing restriction. Nguyen Van Muoi Mot, one of the two musicians in the troupe, acknowledged that performing at the Festival made him feel ‘respected as a *hat boi* musician’. Muoi Mot was happy because he was able to

succeed his father, who was able to play the drums and the *sen* lute at the same time (*Stories of the SFF 2008*).



Figure 6 *Hat boi* performance on the Nine Dragons Stage. Photo by Nguyen Kim Dung.

A Thut, the Bahnar participant, recalled, at the Festival

the Westerners, including the Vietnamese Americans, kept rushing to try out our gongs, which are played only in the village ceremonies. At the beginning, I had to watch closely for the fear that the gongs would be broken...But, because of their sincere desire to get to know about them I did not have the heart to stop them from beating the instruments. But I was proud to teach them. It is hard to explain why listening to the sound of gongs in America made me feel homesick. I guess the visitors could feel the same (Nguyen 2008:25).

A Thut, in a personal conversation during the Festival, said that all of these melodies were selected with consideration because of the cultural implications behind them. All of them are the melodies with joyful tunes such as *Mùng lúa mới* (celebrating new rice harvests), *Mùng chiến*

thắng (triumphant celebration), or those that sing of sentiments (*Rủ nhau đi hái rau rình*²⁸). He said they could not play the melodies for funerals because this is a festival.

A Thut also said he was much encouraged to make more efforts in preserving the cultural traditions of his people. After coming back to the village, the group replayed all the gongs and drums performances, same as they did in Washington, in order to ‘return the gongs to their original space’ (*Stories of the SFF* 2008). ‘When the presentations were over, many elders came to my house and said I should teach young people. If not, when we get old and pass away, the tradition will be lost. I was encouraged by this and I told them that I will try’, said A Thut (*Ibid.*).

Seventy-seven year-old A Bek, A Thut’s father, participated in the presentations of all four traditions. A Bek was the only participant who performed the Bahnar epics. He also supervised the canoe makers as the construction went on. A Bek is known for his ability to sing voluminous pieces of *ho moong* (epics), some of which may take days to finish. Reflecting the singing epics at the Festival, A Bek said the setting to perform in Washington D.C. was ‘strange’, and he did not ‘experience as many entrancing moments as at home’ (Nguyen 2008:26). What he meant by this was that epic singing only takes place at night time, when villagers come together and listen to the voice of the singer in the dark and have their own imaginations as the stories go. The singer often sits or lies down at his comfort as the process may take hours, or even days to finish. At the Festival, although A Bek was provided with a wooden-framed woven bench on which he could lie or sit when singing, the atmosphere inside the Bahnar Arts tent and the scorching heat on the National Mall failed to provide such a context.

To Nguyen Thi Xiem, the foodways participant, her reputation even preceded her when she came to Washington. Many Vietnamese Americans came to the Mall just to see her making the cakes. Some even came to her restaurant in Can Tho just to eat the foods that she made when they visited Vietnam. When asked how she felt about making *banh xeo* in the heart of Washington D.C., she replied ‘I did not think or feel anything. I had to prepare well for the demonstrations. I was so afraid of being criticized so I had to try to make them good’ (Viet Que 2007). The trip to the US in fact has significantly changed her life. She confides:

²⁸ Literally means ‘calling for each other to go pick wild vegetables’.

I am running a good business now. I can make several hundred-thousand dongs a day that makes me a much more comfortable life. Before the trip to the US, I had a difficult living, not much money. I could only earn some dozen-thousand dongs (several US dollars) (*Stories of the SFF* 2008)²⁹.

Right after returning to Vietnam, Xiem's name regularly appeared on the headlines. She repeatedly appeared on television to teach making *banh xeo* pancakes. A tourist company in Can Tho, the Phu Sa Tourist Company, offered her a deal, in which she is paid forty US dollars per day to make *banh xeo* pancakes at their restaurant in a tourist resort, with free transportation and meals. Some other places in Saigon and other places even offered her twice as much or even more. Mrs. Xiem also hired several assistants to support her in the cooking. Six months after the trips, Xiem was able to obtain some money to have her old thatch house repaired. One of her assistants, when interviewed by the documentation crew of the Mekong project, expressed her concern that Mrs. Xiem would be 'commercialized' because too many tourist companies were trying to have her work for them (*Stories of the SFF* 2008). One year after the Festival, two busy restaurants under her name (*Bánh xèo Mươi Xiêm*) were established in the center of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), where the Smithsonian and Ministry of Culture's certificates of acknowledgment became decorative items on the walls. The restaurants also have a website. Furthermore, to one's surprise, Xiem became the chef with an invention of more than thirty types of *banh xeo* (*Muoi Xiem Egg Pancake* 2010).

In contrast to Mrs. Xiem, the *robam* artists returned home in a quieter pace with some slight changes in their lives. Lam Huynh used his festival pocket money to buy a second-hand motor cycle and now works as a motorcycle taxi driver to earn extra money. Lam Thi Huong proudly said that the American audiences loved her dances. But she wished that they should have watched her singing, so that they could understand more of the tradition. It is because the troupe planned to perform only the dances (*Stories of the SFF* 2008).

5. An analysis of the success of Vietnamese presentations at the 2007 SFF

From the above observations, the living cultural presentations on the National Mall by the Vietnamese delegation can be evaluated as successful from the perspectives of participants,

²⁹ Exchange rate in 2007: VND 14,000 = \$US1.0.

organizers and visitors, as observed during and after the Festival. Statistics from the visitor survey by the Smithsonian also reveal the Mekong as a successful program in relation to the Northern Ireland and Virginia programs. Within the scope of this paper, it seems unpractical to evaluate the presentations of all eleven traditions. Discussions in this section will thus focus on the cases and issues in relation to the theoretical aspects presented in the previous chapter.

In relation to findings in the literature, which raise the debates over authenticity, one may suggest that most of the cultural presentations dealt with a common issue, which is the one-hour frame for each presentation. It is obvious that all of the living presentations had to be re-framed to fit in the time slot. This thus has changed the way these cultural traditions are displayed in relation to their version in the original context. It was inevitable that only certain aspects, necessarily important, of a tradition were shown to the public.

As a result, together with the festive atmosphere of the Festival and the presentational mode and its inability to provide the context, some traditions were not suitable to present, for example, the case of Bahnar epic singing. Although the Festival organizers aimed to present the singing aspect of the tradition, which might give the audience a sense of how the process is done and how the singing sounds like, it is clear that the Festival was not able to present it in a more authentic way, as the context for its enactment is unique and the cultural implications in the singing are highly significant as described above. In fact, these affected the participants who demonstrated the tradition. In such instance, the role of the presenter became absent despite attempts to provide contextual information of the tradition. One might conclude that such framed activities have been heavily influenced by the authority of those who impose the presentational frame. As such, one might relate to, although riskily, such live displays that make 'people become signs of themselves' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991:415) and thus 'reducing the semiotic richness of their social enactment' (Kurin 1997:165), and that these activities as 'being done rather than represented', as in the words of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (Ibid.).

Feedback by visitors on the foodways demonstration about not being allowed to taste foods suggest a dilemma for Festival organizers. This Health Department rule is also applicable even if the program's theme is about food. At the 2007 SFF, many Vietnamese American visitors

expressed regret that they only wished to taste the “real” *banh xeo* pancakes made by Mrs. Xiem from Vietnam because her recipe and performance were exemplary. Richard Kurin remarked in the 1987 Festival program book that ‘if festival visitors buy food, music, crafts, and books, it shows that they value the culture produced by participants and members of their communities’. However, the foods on sale at the concessions may not necessarily meet the expectations of those who wish to experience the “authentic” taste and be further engaged in communication with tradition-bearers. Consumption is an essential aspect and the purpose in the culture of food production. Perhaps small free samples of the foods from the demonstrations could be offered to visitors to experience and spice up their whole experience at the Festival, while not causing any health problem. This restriction may have thus reduced satisfaction and the learning experience of visitors to the Festival. As well, it may implicitly reinforce the stereotype of museum’s “don’t touch!” label, which the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has strived to avoid. It will, of course, depend on how Festival organizers, Smithsonian personnel and their partners – the National Park Service, identify and determine whether this should be addressed, since as it has been brought up into debate in the past. Perhaps it remains as a challenge because these regulations are often backed up by a court case (*Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2005*)³⁰. Yet, in general, it is arguable that the foodways demonstration at the Festival a successful presentation.

Recontextualization was not the case for all presentations of performing arts at the 2007 SFF. For the *Hat boi* opera, the context of the Nine Dragons Stage fit well in the setting of the traditional performance. Although funding limitations led to a reduced number of participants, *Hat boi* was well presented at the Festival, as in the words of artist Nguyen Van Tot. In my observation as the presenter for *Hat boi* opera, I found the time limit did not provide many options to present the tradition. As the presenter for the tradition, my tasks were to give background information about the tradition, the participants and the story, and more importantly to help visitors have a sense of what was going on in the stage, as it was in Vietnamese. I found the last task difficult since the Nine Dragons Stage was an open place where visitors could come and leave anytime. There was no rehearsal before the Festival. Therefore, I had to try different ways to present it. First, introduction of the tradition and the story took a while to present, which I noticed caused some

³⁰ This discussion has also been adopted from my report for the internship at the CFCH, which inspired me to initiate ideas for this thesis.

visitors to seem impatient. I was then advised by Frank Proschan not to spend too much time in delivering the information at once as it seemed I was dominating the stage. Then I decided to make the introduction shorter at the beginning of each performance. It was also a challenge to try to explain to the audience what was going on, as *Hat boi* is a highly visual-stylized art and the accompanying music is played constantly and loudly. At times, I found my translation was lost in these boisterous sounds, which thus accidentally confused the audience even more. However, after some five or six repeated performances out of the total twenty, I found it easier since I could remember where to exert my role in the display. The participants seemed to be happy since they were able to talk to the audience after the show as they asked questions.

The example of presenting *Hat boi* is to reaffirm that the role of the presenter in such presentation is most important because he/she functions as the intermediary between the cultural subjects and the audience, which significantly contribute to a successful program on the National Mall. The organizers of the 2007 SFF are well aware of this and the politics of presenting people in such public spaces as the Mall. The use of local presenters and researchers in the Mekong program is therefore an effective way to mitigate such politics in the representation of other cultures as discussed in literature. In this sense, each living cultural presentation becomes a form of self-representation of the concerned communities, which enables them to manifest their own cultural identities. This marks a shared territory, if not a shift, in the authority and empowerment in producing such presentations and closely resembles of what I called “authentic curation” in the previous chapter. Authenticity herewith is construed as a code of ethics and responsibility which shapes the ways these representations are constructed, in which local involvement in the curation process is emphasized. This aspect was well conceptualized by Smithsonian Festival organizers and regional collaborators throughout the process as in the remarks by Richard Kennedy (2010, pers. comm., March 31).

The above discussions, as well as evaluations by the organizers, suggest that the process of selecting a tradition and its bearers to present at the Festival is arguably the most important process in festival production. Central to this is the field research on the tradition, which can be inferred to as a similar process taken by curators in museums. Good field research will likely contribute to ensure that the selected tradition meets the criteria set out by the Festival and is also

compatible to the conceptual framework of a particular festival program. In the Vietnamese case, most of the field research on the cultural traditions and proposals for presentation were conducted and prepared by local museum staffs in the Mekong River regions, who received training by the Smithsonian staff. The eleven traditions were finally selected based on the research into twenty-two cultural traditions, which were drawn from over fifty cultural traditions based on a set of criteria³¹. This is to say that the decision as to which the Vietnamese traditions would be presented in Washington underwent an intensive research process, although the decision on the selected tradition and its participants obviously was influenced by a variety of implications and agendas as pointed out in chapter IV³² as well as the requisite funds available. Therefore, the “localized” approach in research and presentation adopted by Festival organizers for the 2007 SFF has helped Vietnam mitigate the issues of politics and ethics in making such decisions. However, this approach did not seem to work with all parties as illustrated in the previous chapter. In such cases, culture becomes a hostage and the notion of the SFF as an ‘exercise in cultural democracy’ is challenged.

³¹ See Section 4.1. in this chapter.

³² See Section 3. in Chapter IV.

Chapter VI – Conclusions

1. Revisiting aims and objectives

The review of the literature on the recent history of how museums have changed (Chapter I), discussions and analysis in the defining the concepts of ICH, folklore, folklife, living cultural presentation, and the genre of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (Chapter III) have helped to provide a background and context relating to the display and interpretation of living cultural traditions to the public (objective 1.).

In discussing and analyzing a number of theoretical perspectives that took considerable coverage in connection to the practice of living cultural presentation at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Chapter IV, which are authenticity, politics of participation and politics of presentation, I have attempted to define the dimensions of ‘success’ and ‘authenticity’ when referring to interpretations of ICH (objective 2.) and started to make some generalizations relating to the potential benefits and pitfalls of interpreting living cultural tradition (objective 5.)

Using the above theoretical perspectives as the phenomenologies in the analysis of Vietnamese living cultural presentations in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program at the 2007 SFF in Chapter V, I have critically assessed the performances, while presenting the perspectives of those who were involved, and pointing out the limits of these concepts when referring to such cultural representations (Objectives 3., 4.).

Discussions throughout the thesis have thus helped achieve the aim of the study.

2. Revisiting methodology

In using the qualitative approach for this study, at the baseline, I have presented and connected a body of selected theoretical perspectives in previous work, as cited in the literature review, and the empirical data on the basis of perspectives and interpretation on the practice of living cultural presentation by individuals (including my own) who were involved in the production of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

The quantity of literature in the field, as well as the degree of interdisciplinary studies in previous work in relation to issues around the displays of living cultural traditions connected to the SFF were the biggest challenges in this research process. Since this research deals with phenomenological perspectives as its conceptual framework for analysis, which has a hermeneutic basis that tends to be interpretive than descriptive (Rudestam & Newton 2007:48), it was a challenge to balance the two. As well, as the subject of study, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, is already well discussed, with considerable coverage, which makes it difficult to achieve high levels of originality and authority. However, in considering the available resources as an advantage, the choice of qualitative approach has contributed to a consistent conceptual framework of this study, which allowed the identification of key theoretical issues used as tools for analysis and choice of methods in data collection.

Other methods of data collection, which are questionnaires survey via email and participant observations, have shown their strengths and weaknesses. During the course of my study, three years after the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival finished, the questionnaires surveys were a useful means of inquiry for the perspectives of those who were involved in the project in an elaborate way since it gave them time to reflect on the questions and issues. However, its limitation is that besides the fact the size of survey sample was small (nine questionnaires), it was difficult to receive responses from people, even when I was trying to “chase” them. This has thus reduced the range of perspectives obtained. Although the number of responses was low, their responses were of high quality and importance. A limitation of this study was my inability to get in contact with the Vietnamese Festival participants, whose up-to-date status and personal reflections would be beneficial in contributing to a more holistic evaluation of the Festival and its impacts on their lives and cultural traditions; although I was able to assess a video documentation conducted six months after their return and obtain information via the Internet.

The use of participant observation as a method in this study enabled my perspectives as an insider, a field researcher and Festival presenter, to treat a primary source of empirical data. This means my personal views become the subject for research, which might inevitably suggest bias in the rubrics of beliefs and opinions.

However, the choice of this qualitative method has helped present a variety of perspectives in attempting to link theoretical and empirical data related to the Festival.

3. Reflections on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival and its practice of living cultural presentation , although fairly young in many ways, can be considered as an exemplary alternative in the representation of living culture in public space.

Although many issues abound – such as authenticity and communication, and the gravity of politics as criticized by many – the Smithsonian Festival organizers have made tremendous efforts to rectify these problems. This is reflected in the adoption of a localized approach, which involves the participation of local community groups, scholars, presenters in the research, selection, and presentation of cultural traditions. In a number of ways, its ‘emphasis on the interpretive voice of the tradition-bearers rather than the curators’ (CFCH 2009a) stands out from a common approach practiced by many museums, particularly those exhibitions which are less participatory and object-oriented, and thus lack of voices from those who are represented.

Arguably, such practice is no “one size fits all” model. To museums, particularly those dealing with ICH, it remains a challenge whether this practice is suitable to be adopted. However, once they attempt to do so, museums will likely accept the fact that they would bear a greater duty that may go far beyond their physical premises and established mandate in the awareness of that ICH does not exist within such buildings. Museums would have to work with people who make, maintain and pass on the culture, not their objects or even their images, to negotiate the terms of their exposition. As well, they might tend to equally lend authority into the hands of the presented. This also means museums would cross their own lines to engage themselves in an unfamiliar position, which would provide a platform for dialogues and partnerships.

The delivery of living presentations on such public platforms as the National Mall, however, is not solely the goal that these cultural institutions would be pursuing. The SFF aims for cultural conservation of the source communities and enhancement of public awareness. Evidences from the Mekong program show that the Festival has successfully enhanced the awareness of the involved, its communities–tradition-bearers, local scholars, policy-makers, and so on, of the

responsibility in safeguarding their cultural identity. Therefore, the practice adopted by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is in many ways compatible to the concept of safeguarding as defined in the UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

However, there are also pitfalls, which may result when cultural negotiations fail and when concepts of cultural representation diverge from those of the Smithsonian, as observed in the Mekong program. These indispensable lessons should be taken in the spirit of the Festival and in respect of its tenets, while ensuring mutual understanding and collaboration of those involved. Once this is achieved, the source communities and their cultural traditions will be guaranteed the opportunity to be honored and to be safeguarded, as mandated in the Festival's mission and agenda. These lessons also set an example for similar expositions that attempt to represent or refashion cultural identities for consumption.

4. Proposals for future research

This thesis is written three years after the 2007 SFF ended. Therefore, it was a challenge to collect opinions and reviews from the visitors and the participants attending the Festival. For future research on the Festival, I would recommend the researcher to collect the data by direct communication with Festival visitors and participants.

Long-term impacts by the SFF on the lives of Festival participants, and the policies of participating states and countries, practices by museums and similar cultural institutions are worth considered for future research. In my observations, museums and cultural institutions in Vietnam have adopted living presentation as their practice in presenting intangible cultural heritage within their premises. For instance, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology was the pioneer in Vietnam to adopt living cultural presentation in the early 2000s. Interpretation and application of living presentation in practice in such local context will be an interesting angle to examine.

Evaluation in a comparative basis of living history interpretation in history museums, such as the Skansen in Sweden or those in the US, and living cultural presentation at the SFF will also be beneficial.

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Appendix

Survey on the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival Mekong River: Connecting Cultures

This is an open-ended survey on your evaluation on live interpretive practices in the *Mekong: Connecting Cultures* program at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF). Some of the questions may implicitly cover a broad context, please feel free to refer to any specific aspects or examples to articulate your answers as necessary.

This survey is part of a research for my master thesis, which may be subject to publication. Please specify how you would like to present yourself.

Your time and opinions are very much appreciated!

Your full name:

Institution:

Degree/Title:

Email:

Phone number:

Country of Residence:

1. How do you define “folklife” in relation to genres of the traditions presented at the Festival?
2. Are there any criteria in selecting the traditions for presentation at the Festival? What are the main challenges in the process?
3. What is the relationship between the curators/researchers and the tradition-bearers?
4. How authentic do you think live presentations at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival are?
5. What are the criteria or indicators to measure the success of presentations at the Mekong Program?

6. Can you give some examples of successful and/or unsuccessful presentations at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival? And how they can be improved?

7. In your view, what are the strengths and weaknesses of live interpretation of cultural traditions at the Festival?

8. In what ways do you think the practices adopted by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival contribute to museum interpretation in general?

9. In what ways do you think the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival contributes to the conservation and continuity of traditional knowledge of cultural communities participated in the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival?

10. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview about your response?

Thank you!

SURVEY ON THE SMITHSONIAN FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

This is an open-ended survey to evaluate the living presentations and interpretive practices at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF).

Some of the questions may implicitly cover a broad context; please feel free to provide specific examples to articulate your answers as necessary.

This survey is part of a research for my master's thesis, which may be subject to publication.

Your time and opinions are very much appreciated!

Your full name:

Institution:

Degree/Title:

Email:

Phone number:

Country of Residence:

1. What are the criteria for selecting the traditions presented at the Festival? What are the main challenges in the process?
2. How such programs as *NASA: 50 Years and Beyond* (2008), *Smithsonian Inside Out* (2010), etc. fit in the concept of a “folklife” festival?
3. How are the program themes chosen? Are there connections between the Festival themes with the US government or other countries’ political agenda?
4. The Festival projects itself as a combination of “the authentic and the constructed” (Kurin 1997). What is the balance between these two categories?
5. What are the frameworks for living presentation at the Festival? How are following terms defined: 1. Performance. 2. Demonstration. 3. Exhibition/display. 4. Work?

6. In comparison to festival programs in the 1970s, since you first worked for the Festival, have there been any changes in the methods by which traditions are presented? If so, in what ways?

7. What are the criteria or indicators to measure the success of a living presentation?

8. In what ways do you think the practices adopted by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival contribute to theoretical aspects in museum interpretation?

9. Some exhibitions of living traditions in museums have been labeled as “human zoos”. How have you framed the Festival in order to avoid this?

10. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview on these topics?

SURVEY ON THE SMITHSONIAN FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

This is an open-ended survey to evaluate the living presentations and interpretive practices at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF).

Some of the questions may implicitly cover a broad context; please feel free to provide specific examples to articulate your answers as necessary.

This survey is part of a research for my master's thesis, which may be subject to publication.

Your time and opinions are very much appreciated!

Your full name:

Institution:

Degree/Title:

Email:

Phone number:

Country of Residence:

1. How do you define "folklife"? (*I don't know how to phrase this, just because the genre of traditions are not quite that of folklife, as the Festival's name suggests; For instance, programs on NASA, Smithsonian workers, etc. may stand out from the category.*)

2. What are the criteria for selecting the traditions presented at the Festival? What are the main challenges in the process?

3. What is the connection between the curators/researchers and the tradition-bearers in the interpretation of cultural traditions?

4. In comparison to festival programs in the 1960s, have there been any changes in the methods by which traditions are presented? If so, in what ways?

5. The Festival's approach is a combination of "the authentic and the constructed" (Kurin 1997). What is the balance between these two categories?

6. What are the criteria or indicators to measure the success of a living presentation?

7. Can you give some examples of successful and/or unsuccessful presentations at the Festival? If unsuccessful, how might they have been improved?
8. In what ways do you think the practices adopted by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival contribute to theoretical aspects in museum interpretation?
9. Some exhibitions of living traditions in museums have been labeled as “human zoos”. How is the Festival constructed to avoid this?
10. In what ways do you think the Festival contributes to the “conservation and continuity” of traditional knowledge of cultural communities in the US and around the world (CFCH 2009a)?
11. How are the presentations at the Festival improved as they progress? Do curators and participants work together to improve?
12. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview on these topics?

SURVEY ON THE SMITHSONIAN FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

This is an open-ended survey to evaluate the living presentations and interpretive practices at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF).

Some of the questions may implicitly cover a broad context; please feel free to provide specific examples to articulate your answers as necessary.

This survey is part of a research for my master's thesis, which may be subject to publication.

Your time and opinions are very much appreciated!

Your full name:

Institution:

Degree/Title:

Email:

Phone number:

Country of Residence:

1. How do you define "living presentation"?
2. In what ways do you think the practices adopted by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival contribute to theoretical aspects in museum interpretation?
3. Some exhibitions of living traditions in museums have been labeled as "human zoos".

How has the CFCH framed the Festival in order to avoid this?

4. Why was the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program on the Mekong River region?
5. In your evaluation, how successful were the presentations in the *Mekong River*:

Connecting Cultures program?

6. How do you evaluate the use of local presenters in the Mekong program?
7. What were the main challenges you faced in curating the Mekong program?
8. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview on these topics?

SURVEY ON THE SMITHSONIAN FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

This is an open-ended survey to evaluate the living presentations and interpretive practices at the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF).

Some of the questions may implicitly cover a broad context; please feel free to provide specific examples to articulate your answers as necessary.

This survey is part of a research for my master's thesis, which may be subject to publication.

Your time and opinions are very much appreciated!

Your full name:

Institution:

Degree/Title:

Email:

Phone number:

Country of Residence:

1. Why did your country decide to participate in the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival?
2. How were the cultural traditions selected for the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival?

What were the challenges in the selection process?

3. In your evaluation, how successful were the cultural exhibitions from your country in the *Mekong River: Connecting Cultures* program? (In consideration of your own criteria for success)
4. How do you evaluate the use of Mekong presenters in the Festival?
5. If you were to reproduce the Festival, what would be done to improve the exhibitions?
6. In what ways do you think the method of living cultural presentation adopted by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival contribute to the display of cultures in your country?
7. What impacts has the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival exerted on the presented traditions?
8. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview on these topics?

SURVEY ON THE SMITHSONIAN FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

This is an open-ended survey on your evaluation on live interpretive practices at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF). Some of the questions may implicitly cover a broad context, please feel free to refer to any specific aspects or examples to articulate your answers as necessary. This survey is part of a research for my master thesis, which may be subject to publication. Please specify how you would like to present yourself. Your time and opinions are very much appreciated!

Dưới đây là một số câu hỏi mở có mục tiêu tiếp thu ý kiến đánh giá của ông/bà về những phương pháp thực hành tại Lễ hội đời sống dân gian Smithsonian. Một số câu hỏi có thể có tầm bao quát rộng, nếu cần ông/bà có thể trao đổi về các phương diện hoặc dẫn chứng bằng các thí dụ cụ thể. Xin chân thành cảm ơn sự giúp đỡ của ông/bà.

Your full name/Họ và tên:

Institution/Cơ quan:

Degree/Title Chức vụ/Học vị:

Email:

Phone number/số điện thoại:

Country of Residence:

1. How do you define “folklife” in relation to genres of the traditions presented at the Festival?

Quan điểm của Ông/bà về khái niệm “đời sống dân gian” là gì (xét ở khía cạnh loại hình di sản trình diễn tại Lễ hội Smithsonian)?

2. Are there any criteria in selecting the traditions for presentation at the Festival? What are the main challenges in the process?

Các tiêu chí để chọn các loại hình văn hóa trình diễn tại Lễ hội là gì? Trong quá trình lựa chọn di sản văn hóa đi trình diễn có những thách thức gì?

3. What is the relationship between the curators/researchers and the tradition-bearers?

Mối quan hệ giữa nhà nghiên cứu/curator và người nắm giữ di sản là gì?

4. How authentic do you think live presentations at the Festival are?

Ông/bà đánh giá như thế nào về tính xác thực của các trình diễn tại Lễ hội?

5. What are the criteria or indicators to measure the success of a living presentation?

Những tiêu chí hoặc chỉ số nào để đánh giá sự thành công của trình diễn sống?

6. Can you give some examples of successful and/or unsuccessful presentations at the Festival? And how they can be improved?

Ông/Bà có thể đưa ra một số thí dụ về các trình diễn sống thành công hoặc không thành công tại lễ hội? Có thể khắc phục những trình diễn đó như thế nào?

7. In what ways do you think the practices adopted by the Smithsonian Folklife Festival contribute to museum interpretation in general?

Theo ông/bà, những phương pháp thực hành trình diễn sống thực hiện tại Lễ hội đời sống dân gian Smithsonian mang lại những đóng góp gì cho diễn giải trưng bày trong bảo tàng nói chung?

8. In what ways do you think the Festival contributes to the “conservation and continuity” of traditional knowledge of cultural communities in the US and around the world (CFCH 2009a)?

Theo ông/bà, Lễ hội Smithsonian sẽ mang lại những lợi ích gì đối với việc “bảo tồn và sự kế tục” của tri thức và kỹ năng truyền thống của các cá nhân/cộng đồng tham gia lễ hội?

9. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview about your response?

Ông/bà có sẵn lòng tiếp tục tham gia trao đổi ý kiến về những vấn đề này không?

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