

# **Festivals and Folklife: Project Planning for Cultural Festivals**

## **An Introductory Guide**



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## 1.1 What is a folklife festival?

Described as an exposition of intangible cultural heritage, a folklife festival is just one way to help encourage the celebration of traditions and recognize tradition-bearers. A folklife festival strives to provide the opportunity for people of varying backgrounds to come together and explore the many aspects of particular traditions. A folklife festival attempts to achieve the goals of cultural understanding and cultural transmission, as encouraged by UNESCO's policies on intangible cultural heritage.

Since 1967 the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in Washington has been producing an annual folklife festival and has served as a model of a research-based exposition of intangible cultural heritage. They describe their folklife festival as "an exercise in cultural democracy, in which cultural practitioners speak for themselves, with each other, and to the public." Incorporating the approach and methodology of the Smithsonian model, however, does call for due attention to differences in context.

At the heart of a folklife festival is the aspiration to represent collective cultural knowledge in a grassroots way. This approach encourages the free and informed participation of tradition-bearers who, it is hoped, will play a central role in the shape of the festival's development and overall outcome.

The folklife festival is an opportunity for cultural exchange—a place where audiences can feel free to engage with particular traditions and their respective tradition-bearers—within a "museum without walls" context. The folklife festival is an invitation for audiences to participate—to learn, dance, dress, move, sing, and interact with tradition-bearers and each other.

## 1.2 What are the aims and values of a folklife festival?

A folklife festival aspires to represent traditional knowledge in a grassroots way. But what does that mean exactly? And, how does this perspective inform what choices we make as we plan a festival?

A grassroots approach refers to principles of organization in which matters and decisions are best managed by the smallest, lowest or least centralized authority. It is based on the idea that central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be executed at a more local level. It means that democratic power is best exercised when it is vested in local community rather than isolated, factional members of hierarchical organizing structures.

When we talk about grassroots in the folklife festival context, we mean that agendas are driven and informed by a range of individuals who are closely connected to their respective traditions and/or the communities involved. The decisions made while planning the festival should ideally reflect the views of many individuals within a community who are intimately connected with the traditions on display. This process has been described as natural, spontaneous, and “from the ground up.” It refers to producing festivals with due attention to local groups.

Referring to its political nature, Richard Kurin of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (SFF) writes that the folklife festival becomes, “an advocate for human cultural rights, for cultural equity, for cultural diversity in the context of the Smithsonian—a national institution founded with democratic, enlightenment ideals...” (10).

“Our mission is to promote the understanding and continuity of diverse, contemporary grassroots cultures” (Smithsonian Folklife Festival website)

### **1.3 Cultural democracy**

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival describes their festival as a “rite of cultural democracy.” It has been thought of as a “tool of peaceful dialogue and intercultural understanding” (Diamond 11). Cultural democracy should strive to represent a wide cross-section of the population, including those whose voices are seldom heard. In brief, cultural democracy entails:

- promoting and protecting cultural diversity; the right to culture for everyone in our society;
- encouraging active participation in community cultural life; granting people the right to participate in policy decisions that affect our cultural lives
- safeguarding fair and equitable access to cultural resources and support.

### **1.4 Giving Voice**

A folklife festival strives to give a voice to regional culture—to the many tradition-bearers whose diverse backgrounds produce many different interpretations of a tradition. Our hope is that the opinions of tradition-bearers are represented in the festival. Tradition-bearers will have differing and often competing opinions and agendas when it comes to the expression of their traditions. Folklife festivals can be a grounds for debate, contestation, dialogue, and intercultural understanding. We should work toward providing a space for multiple voices to emerge.

## 1.5 Legitimization

A folklife festival attempts to legitimize many different representations of culture. A folklife festival can be a place where the important messages are communicated through cultural expression by all people. This process can provide validity to the cultural expression of many different people that otherwise might go unnoticed and unrecognized.

“Visitors [to a folklife festival] can only understand and interpret performances in terms of their own cultural endowment; visitors generally respect the cultural authority of the institution whose endorsement participants have won and are willing, certainly on account of their own advantages of class and education, to appreciate, however imperfectly, cultural difference.” (Cantwell 161)

## 2.1 Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

Intangible Cultural Heritage (what we think of in Newfoundland and Labrador as our Living Traditions) is an important new development in the heritage world. We have long thought of heritage as comprised mainly of tangible things (i.e. our buildings, our furniture, our clothing) that have been handed down to us, and that we can preserve in our homes, museums and historic sites. However, many communities and peoples around the world recognize that this is only a part of what makes up their heritage, and that intangible ideas, customs and knowledge are equally important for cultural identity.

Generated in—and held collectively by—members of a community, such knowledge is dynamic. It is transmitted across generations and shaped anew as each generation innovates, experiments and adapts to changing social norms and values. Specific ICH processes and practices include: oral traditions, customs, languages, music, dance, celebrations, and special skills needed to create and use tools and crafts that emerge from the local habitat and economy.

## 2.2 Cultural Conservation

The ICH approach to issues of representation are based largely in theories of cultural conservation, a perspective described by Mary Hufford as “grounded in subjective assumptions about how nature and society fit together”(4). This perspective views habitat and culture as an indivisible whole, acknowledging that traditions are intimately tied to the people who use them and the conditions for their use. This ecological approach places value on culture as pluralistic, dynamic, adaptable, and mobile. This perspective thus challenges

who controls culture, questions for whom culture is mediated, and reflects an interest in how folklore can be used to combat forms of essentialized identity.

Preserving and safeguarding culture does not suggest the protection of traditions from outside forces, but rather, supports the conditions necessary for cultural reproduction. In line with cultural conservation, ICH policies encourage the sustainability of traditions by taking a natural heritage as living systems approach that seeks to sustain the whole system as a living entity and not just to collect 'intangible artifacts'. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains, this marks a progressive shift in ICH policy that conceptualizes intangible heritage to “include not only the masterpieces, but also the masters” (53).

Ethnography refers to how we describe culture and, as the primary tool of cultural conservation, it seeks to understand the full range of cultural resources people use to constitute their own living heritage. Within the context of a folklife festival, ethnography helps planners conceptualize events that affirm, strengthen, and sustain those relevant resources for use by local groups. But this is not to say that cultural conservation facilitates an unmediated pathway for the transmission of traditions. Ethnography describes the cultural landscape and thus, ethnographers become collaborators in the creation of culture. Further, when applying ethnography to a folklife festival, the culture broker is put in a position of selecting what to include and exclude.

## **2.3 Traditions**

While the word “tradition” has been commonly thought of as something of the past—referring to static, unchanging, relics of the past—they are also connected and expressed in the present. Folklorists have come to understand tradition as something more fluid. Traditions are always changing shape by those who use them, making them contemporary and relevant to current social situations. While there is value in presenting how traditions once were in the past, when showcasing traditions at a folklife festival, we should focus on their contemporary expressions to provide a nuanced and varied view.

## **2.4 Inventing Tradition**

Traditions need good reasons to continue. If not, they tend to die out or go dormant. We see that, for each generation, traditions that do stay strong will change to suit a new time and place, and continue for new reasons. For traditions to continue, people need to feel a sense of ownership. All continuing traditions are reinterpreted by individuals and made new to suit

their own purposes. As we plan for a folklife festival, we should consider how the festival stage can provide opportunity for the invention of tradition.

“ It is the participant’s own resourcefulness and imagination, not the festival maker’s ingenuity, that has produced the magic; the magic is a sign not of the folklorist’s sovereignty, or of the festival’s influence, but of the participant’s independence of these factors. This is not culture induced or culture reproduced or culture renewed or even culture conserved but culture invented: the original response of particular people, informed by a culture of their own, to new conditions in which they learn to shape, at a particular historical moment, a reality in conformity with their own beliefs and values. It is *festive* culture, not only in a local and accidental sense, but comprehensively and totally” (Cantwell 161).

As festival planners, we can create new contexts for traditions. But the people who participate and attend the festival are the ones who make it what it is. Finding out what will be the appropriate context for a festival will come from consulting with tradition-bearers and the expected audience. One goal of folklorists in public sector work is “to extend the reach of traditional cultures through collaborative recontextualization into varied appropriate forms of representation....Such representations should assist traditional communities in recreating their *own* metaphors.” (Spitzer 82).

## 2.5 Consulting with tradition-bearers

Understanding traditions as they are lived, known, and remembered in your community is very important to how you plan a festival. We can gather information from books, journals, newspapers, television, video, and online as supplementary information. However, the most important information will come from tradition-bearers and community members.

We can find out about how traditions are actually experienced and used today by speaking with tradition-bearers and community members. But also, we can consult with them as we try to figure out new ways of presenting a tradition. We should ask them if they like our ideas for presentation formats, how we could improve on our ideas, and if there are better and more beneficial ways to showcase traditions.

The relationship of folklorist to folk should be “one of cooperation and mutual benefit in the representation of culture,” (81) writes Nicholas Spitzer. He continues: “Folklorists wherever employed should apply their intellectual energy to creating metaphors and methods of public practice in dialogue with members of folk communities.” (Spitzer 81)

### 3.1 Social Events

A folklife festival is focused on traditions, and thus, the planning discussions, and language used, often revolve around notions of culture and education. However, a festival is a *social* event, and more attention should be paid to discussions about social interaction. The discussions need to be move beyond the educational rhetoric and should focus more on social cohesion.

### 3.2 Transport

Transport, in this sense, refers to an overwhelmingly strong emotion. Many studies on the structure of festivals identify the ways in which they mark time and space as something entirely different from everyday life. Often described as “liminal” or “liminoid,” these “time-out-of-time” experiences often have the effect of feeling transported amongst participants. The success of festivals are ultimately measured by the degree to which participants are swept away, or transported by the temporary collective unity that can occur during festival time. While we can talk about folklife festivals in terms of cultural democracy, tradition and culture, in the end, it is the language of emotion that can help shed light on what makes festivals worthwhile and meaningful. Transport is used to describe that feeling of getting lost, for example, in a piece of music, or becoming completely absorbed in making pottery, performing surgery, playing sports, or dancing. It refers to experiences that transport you into an immediate present.

For festival scholars, like Robert Cantwell, this describes the “magic” of festivals. He writes that the Smithsonian Folklife Festival can, at times, create an “‘induced natural context,’ through which, by a kind of transport, simulated experiences become real ones, and the ‘inner audience,’ through which members of one cultural group feel themselves swept on a tide of enthusiasm into copartnership with another, feel their hearts swollen with the intimation of a brave new world that has such people in it.” (Cantwell 159).

Cantwell gives us some examples and praise for magic at a folklife festival: “The counterfeit shrine that practice sacralizes, the imitated trance state that in performance becomes harrowingly genuine, the craftsworker who momentarily forgets himself and stoops to wash his hands in a creek that isn't there, the Saint's Day procession in which participants and visitors from other parts of the Catholic world spontaneously participate—these ‘enviable moments in which displayed enactments and real activity merge,’ as Richard Bauman puts it (1987), are, again, what Smithsonian folklorists consistently point to as indications of the success of their enterprise.” (Cantwell 158)

The “magic” of a folklife festival happens amongst the people who participate (the presenters *and* the audience), and not in the control of the planners. We can only plan for so much. But thoughtful planning can help facilitate magic and transport. In Cantwell's discussion of magic, he identifies some of the ways in which this occurs. This includes notions of,

Similitude: the quality or state of being similar to something.

Resemblance: the state of resembling or being alike

Affinity: a spontaneous or natural liking or sympathy for someone or something

Collective energy

Unity

Commonality

Reciprocity

Ideals of spontaneity and unpredictability

The ultimate effects of a folklife festival are “to call down...cultural forces into the Festival and to animate the participants and visitors with them; to create, in effect, what the staff folklorist calls 'life,' or what Richard Kurin calls 'emergent, non-predictable cultural creation.'” (Cantwell 158)

### 3.3 Mutual Negotiation

Mutual negotiation is intimately connected to the idea of transport when talking about folklife festivals. It describes the ways in which people accommodate difference in each other—how different people can come together and connect with one another on another level. Within the context of the festival, it's usually on the level of cultural understanding.

Talking about mutual negotiation, Cantwell writes, “I consider...my experience and that of the participants to be connected somehow to these expectations [of transport]—that the participant has something to gain by winning my appreciation of his or her art, and that I have something to gain by appreciating it, in more than a merely 'educational' sense. The outcome of this mutual negotiation is what the ideology of cultural conservation is largely designed to account for. But the terms of that negotiation are a unique form of representation whose formal cause is not, as we casually suppose, folk culture or cultures, but social encounter itself.” (Cantwell 160)

Much like how in theatre, the actor might pretend to open a door that isn't there. The audience must suspend their disbelief. If they do so, the actor's action has been justified. Both actor and audience have been transported into another realm through mutual negotiation. If the actor is especially skilled and makes the imaginary realm feel realistic, the audience will often connect in a deeper way and react approvingly.



When an audience shows appreciation for a performance, there is a reciprocity. When we can bring performer and audience close together, on even planes, we can potentially increase the chances of reciprocity.

“It is magic when the frightful and tangled forces that divide human beings suddenly vanish, effaced by the sheer power and excellence, the authenticity, of performance on the one hand and by the willingness of visitors on the other hand to recognize power and excellence as such, even if they are unacquainted with the specific cultural values that inform it. To suppose that the festival maker can ‘induce’ or in any other way summon up this moment is to fall into the most persistent intellectual infirmity of science and magic, the illusion that what we conjure we can control. The festival maker can prepare for this moment; but only the participant and visitor together can create it.” (Cantwell 160)

### **3.4 Audience**

Who is this festival for? This becomes a very important question as you plan a folklife festival. As a grassroots festival, the aim is inclusion—people of all walks of life should be encouraged to attend and get involved. Some of the choices we make when planning a festival might deter or exclude certain pockets of a community. For example, charging admission to events might create economic barriers for some people. Making events free or low-cost can be one way of helping to reduce economic barriers.

Location can also affect who attends a folklife festival. Schools or community centres, for example, may be (but not always) considered neutral ground. Hosting events in places that do not exclude sections of society is an important consideration. Outdoor venues, such as parks, are often good spaces for a meeting of diverse groups of people. We should also consider the ways we promote and advertise our folklife festivals. By what means are we promoting our events, and who is the audience that receives notice of the festival?

We should also consider the concerns of the tradition-bearers when it comes to whom they will present their tradition. For example, at the Mummers Festival, some of the mummers interviewed and asked to present felt comfortable coming from their respective communities and into St. John's to present. However they did not wish to present in their own communities. Some felt that they didn't want to be placed on a pedestal amongst community members, as experts of a tradition that the whole community was familiar with. However, for a larger audience, less familiar with the tradition, they were willing to present. Initially this was counter-intuitive to what we, the planners had thought. We felt that if we were to present the mummering tradition, that we should do so for the community from which the tradition-bearers belonged. We must consider our audience for such presentations and

always voice our ideas with the people we wish to involve.

In another scenario during the planning of the Mummers Festival, we were considering the issues of ending the Mummers Parade at the Rooms. The Rooms tends to draw a select group of people in society. Many of the people whom we hoped would come to the parade have never been to the Rooms. However, by starting the parade at a school, and parading through public streets (both more neutral territory), ending it at the Rooms did not seem deter a more diverse group of people from attending the Christmas Concert and Mummers Jam. A diverse audience was now at a place that, in the past, has attracted and been advertised to a more select group of people.

### **3.5 Participation**

Participation is a very important concept in planning a folklife festival. The more people invest themselves in the festival, it is hoped, the more they will get out of it. Encouraging participation should be a major concern as you try to conceptualize the festival and try to attract an audience. We can encourage participation, by simulating traditions and involving an unfamiliar public. The level of involvement by the audience, will, of course, vary. But the audience might engage by acting out traditions, participating in workshops, posing questions and creating dialogue with tradition bearers, or taking photos or video to document their own experiences. We should encourage active involvement as much as possible. It's a move away from spectatorship and a move toward participation.

For example, The Mummers Parade was framed as “a peoples' parade.” It says on the website, “We hope for more mummers than onlookers in our first Mummers Parade. This is a participant-driven event. The Mummers Parade is open to interpretation so your presence will add colour and shape the outcome. You make it what you want it to be.” In addition, there were a series of events that led up to the final parade that helped build momentum and gave people multiple ways to engage creatively in the parade. We hosted a “Hobby Horse Making Workshop” where people could make their own horse for the parade. We invited mummers from Ferryland to give a talk about how they mummer for an audience to learn some of the “tricks of the trade.” We hosted a “Rig-Up” so people could create a disguise just before the parade started. At the “Mummers Jam” after the parade, we opened the microphones up to the public to add their own entertainment to the event. On the festival's website we provided information about the mummering tradition and provided links to photos and video to help people new to mummering, become acquainted with the tradition. The poster and postcard offered up a number of visuals for people to engage with and think about as they planned to participate in the parade.

Giving people multiple ways to get involved played an important role in the parade's success. While only some people might be musical and willing to perform on stage at the Mumpers Jam, piecing together a disguise from provided clothes, and walking the parade route was accessible to many.

Some other examples of participant-focused public events:

- Accordion Revolution at the Newfoundland and Labrador Folk Festival
- The Great Fogo Island Punt Race
- The George Street Mardi Gras
- The New York City Halloween Parade
- The Burning Man Festival

All these events invoke a rhetoric of participation that engages community members and community groups.

## 4.1 The (Re)presentation of Culture

The representation of culture “embraces all forms of documentation and presentation, scholarly and popular, that introduce ideas, images, and information about folklore and folklife into the public sphere.” (Cantwell 149)

## 4.2 (Re)presentation Formats

You have done your research, consulted with tradition bearers, come to understand traditions in more detail, but then what? How do we bring these traditions to the public's attention? We are taking traditions out of their natural context and putting them on display, often in very different settings.

One of the most challenging goals in producing a folklife festival is determining a suitable presentation format—one that represents a tradition in a way that tradition-bearers and the audience find useful, appropriate, and engaging. Coming to understand the many reasons why people engage in a particular tradition could be one way to help choose a presentation format.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is described as containing “aspects of the zoo, museum, theme park, carnival, concert, community center, and traveling theatre” (Diamond 3). Determining an entertaining format for a tradition is one of the greatest challenges when

trying to plan a folklife festival.

The preliminary research of a tradition will help with this challenge. For example, with the Mummers Festival, we had to consider the problem that a primarily private custom—the mummers house visit—needed an appropriate place in the public sphere. Looking at the details of how the tradition is enacted helped decide on a Mummers Parade (and the events leading up to it) as a suitable representation format. Mummering today often involves:

- an aspect of walking/moving (from house to house)
- disguising/costuming
- dancing
- music
- socializing with friends and family

While not all elements of the tradition can be represented in a parade, it did appear to contain many of the aspects of mummering.

We need to think about the different genres/formats that are suitable for public spaces. Many formats have a playful nature. Here are a few other examples of presentation formats:

- Public Interviews
- Competition
- Parades
- Public Interviews
- Workshops
- Promenades
- Demonstrations (i.e. cooking, building boats or homes, ritual, sport, games, home remedies)
- Musical performance
- Dance performance
- Expositions of drama, narrative, poetry, storytelling, joke-telling, etc.

### **4.3 Relaxing Boundaries and Redefining Space**

Relaxing the perceived boundaries between a diverse group of people can help encourage the ideals of unity, mutual negotiation, commonality, and reciprocity. How we set up space is one way of relaxing boundaries. Stages that divide presenters from the audience can be a hindrance. Setting presentation spaces that put everyone on even ground can be subtle, but might have profound effect in relaxing boundaries. If we host public interviews, encouraging dialogue between presenters and audience can also help. At the Mummers Parade, a group

of diverse people all dressed in a mummings disguise, helps to remove the boundaries that our day-to-day clothing might establish—when everyone is a mummer, notions of difference might melt away. We can consider the many ways that structuring a festival can put people of differing backgrounds on an even playing field.

Festivals in general, have that levelling quality. When diverse groups of people come to a festival, their day-to-day life gets put on hold. Therefore, making day-to-day spaces into festival spaces can have an effect on people that helps to relax boundaries. If people can contribute to the ways in which day-to-day spaces get converted into festival spaces, even better. A good example of this is the St. John's Lantern Festival that, for one day, transforms a public park into a festival space using homemade jar lanterns and other bamboo paper lanterns. It is the participants that transform the space with their own creativity.

“The Festival of American Folklife has over the years elaborated a complex set of framing devices that mark and replace daunting and often insurmountable barriers of class, race, language, and the like, reducing them to a set of ephemeral physical structures symbolic in their slightness and ephemerality but in their physicality capable of shaping socially and psychologically the nature of the encounter framed by means of them.” (Cantwell 160)

## **4.4 Folklife in Schools**

If one of our goals includes the continuation of tradition, involving youth can be an important component as you plan a festival. Making connections and consulting with local schools is one way to get youth involved. Arranging for tradition-bearers to present at schools is just one way. project, perhaps more suitable for high-school aged students, is for students to do their own fieldwork on a particular tradition in their community and present it in their own way, based on their research.

For example, one idea that was considered (but due to time restraints was not possible) during the Mummings Festival was a project whereby students in Torbay would search out people in their community who were familiar with the Ribbon Fool tradition. They would conduct interviews to find out about how the tradition was enacted. The students would then work together as a group and enter the Mummings Parade as a group of Ribbon Fools, creating their own unique presentation, but informed by the interviews with community members.

## 5.1 Some questions to consider while planning a folklife festival.

What are the aims/goals of the festival?

What are some of the ways in which those aims/goals may be achieved?

What are the values that govern the planning of the festival?

Does the festival contribute anything to the continuing vitality of traditions?

Are the voices, opinions, and perspectives of tradition-bearers being heard (both during the festival and in the planning process)?

Are there any limitations that might create obstacles for the free expression of tradition-bearers?

Why celebrate traditions?

What are the virtues of celebrating traditions?

How is the festival being framed?

What are the beliefs that structure the shape of the folklife festival? And festivals in general?

Who are the tradition-bearers that you will contact? Why choose some people over others?

Once you've established relationships with tradition-bearers, what do you ask of them?

Are you consulting tradition-bearers as you plan a festival?

## RESOURCES

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