

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress

presents

the Benjamin Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

POLITICS AND POETICS : FIELDWORK IN AFGHANISTAN AND JAMAICA



**ILLUSTRATED LECTURE
PRESENTED BY**

MARGARET MILLS

**PROFESSOR, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
DEPT OF NEAR EASTERN LANGUAGES
AND CULTURES AND CENTER FOR
FOLKLORE STUDIES AND**

KENNETH BILBY

**RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, SMITHSONIAN
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**USING THE CONTEXT OF THEIR OWN FIELDWORK,
MARGARET MILLS AND KENNETH BILBY WILL DISCUSS THE ISSUES OF THE
OUTSIDER-RESEARCHER WORKING WITH CULTURES THAT ARE UNDERGOING
PRESSURES OF POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CHANGE.**

Thursday

August 3, 2006

12 NOON - 1:30 PM

Mumford Room, LM 649

6th Floor of the Madison Building

Library of Congress

101 Independence Ave., SE

Washington, DC

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TO THE PUBLIC**



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POLITICS AND POETICS : FIELDWORK IN AFGHANISTAN AND JAMAICA

The Same River: Dilemmas and Challenges of Long-term Cultural Research in Conflict Zones and Failing States

by Margaret Mills

Margaret Mills first visited Afghanistan in 1969, while doing field archaeology and teaching high school English in Iran. The vibrancy of oral narrative and other performance traditions in the region inspired her career decision to study living verbal art in Persian language. She conducted two years of research for her dissertation on contemporary folktale performance in Persian-speaking Herat, in western Afghanistan, in 1974-1976. Afghanistan at the time was peaceful, uncolonized, rich in oral traditions, impoverished but making tentative progress in development as an unaligned state.

The Marxist coup of 1978 and the ensuing anti-Soviet war, followed by civil war, created a sixteen-year hiatus in her contact with Afghan friends and associates. Two short return research visits, in 1994 and 1995, re-established her contacts with close friends from her first period of research but were followed by another seven-year separation during the period of Taliban dominance. Her Botkin lecture-discussion will concern long-term commitment to longitudinal cultural study and necessarily episodic presence in what became a war zone.

Oral performance has had a role to play in the development of wartime culture and mentalities among Afghan factions, as illustrated by political jokes and exempla, war-related personal narratives, and rumors and legends. Oral history in particular has become acutely contested ground in a landscape of factions and internecine hostilities fostered by external players. Meanwhile, the shifting American public construction of wartime Afghan identity, from "freedom fighters" and "the moral equivalent of our founding fathers" (Ronald Reagan) to "warlords" and "Taliban terrorists" has had direct consequences for Afghans and those who would continue to engage with them on matters of cultural survival. This discussion addresses the difficult search for a balanced and productive relationship between the outsider researcher, now implicated by our own national policy in Afghanistan's struggles for political autonomy and security, and three generations of Afghans struggling to survive, economically, culturally and politically.

Private Stories, Public Folklore, and Contested Histories in Jamaica: Taking the Long View with the Maroons

by Kenneth Bilby

Kenneth Bilby's first encounter with the Maroons of Jamaica was in 1977, when he arrived in the community of Moore Town. There he spent fourteen months undertaking a study of relations between Maroons and their Jamaican neighbors as part of his research for a master's degree in

anthropology. Little did he imagine then that nearly three decades later, after further research in South America for a doctoral degree and multiple return visits to Jamaica, he would be as involved as ever with the Maroons and the implications of what he had learned among them.

Legendary for their secrecy, the Jamaican Maroons have been described by one anthropologist as "some of the world's most famous but least-known people." Descendants of enslaved Africans who escaped from plantations, fought the British colonists, and won their freedom in 1739, they have survived as distinct ethnic groups to the present. Their heroic history inspired Toussaint L'Ouverture of Haiti, and in the 1930s led African American cultural icons Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham to carry out pioneering anthropological research among them.

The Maroons today, on the surface, seem culturally indistinguishable from other Jamaicans. In reality, they have retained a rich, historically deep, and clearly distinctive oral culture. It is largely through their private culture of remembrance — the esoteric, spiritually charged stories they tell about their past — that Maroons construct and reproduce their continuing sense of collective identity. And it was precisely the difficulty of accessing this "intimate culture," together with a shared recognition of the importance of this previously untapped body of historical knowledge for both Maroons and others, that led to Bilby's long-term engagement with his Maroon interlocutors. The presentation will focus on the complexities and challenges of working with an oral culture that has traditionally been concealed from outsiders, yet has gained in political significance in an era characterized by conflicting claims over cultural authenticity and ownership of the past. This is further complicated by a nation-state that has continued to deny or ignore the Maroons' ongoing efforts to resist assimilation and assert their right to self-determination. Bilby will also discuss the making of his new book about Jamaican Maroon oral narratives and cultural memory, *True-Born Maroons* (University Press of Florida, 1995; Ian Randle [Jamaica], 1996)

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site www.loc.gov/folklife

