

## COMING HOME

“IF WE CONTINUE TO  
ALLOW THE EROSION OF  
OUR CULTURAL FORMS,  
SOON THERE WILL BE  
NO PLACE TO VISIT AND  
NO PLACE TO TRULY  
CALL HOME.”<sup>1</sup>

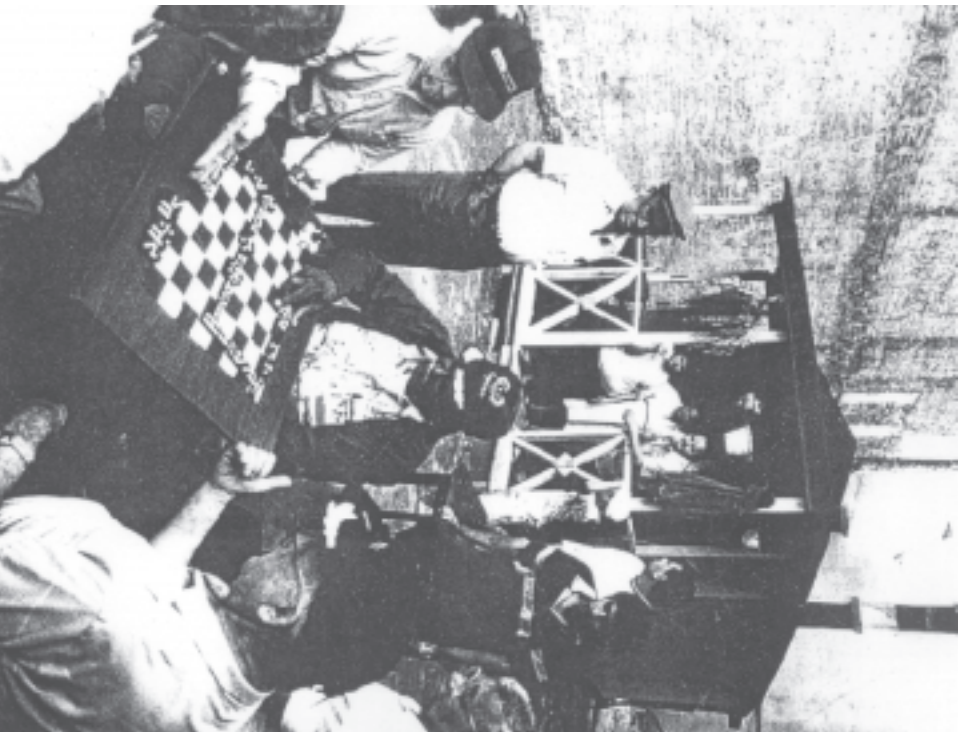
Alan Lomax

We return to the beginning. In a recent monograph on folk arts published by the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies, folklorist Robert Baron identified two dominant and conflicting cultural trends confronting us all as a new century begins.<sup>2</sup> Mass communications, new technologies and mass culture are penetrating the remotest areas of the globe, appropriating elements of local and regional cultures at breakneck pace and leaving behind a “cultural gray-out” and sense of sameness. At the same time, however, “local, ethnic and regional communities are asserting their identities with growing intensity;”<sup>3</sup> No one knows anymore the descriptive adjectives that characterize “the American public” because there are many publics. As institutions recognize and adapt to the dramatic demographic shifts taking place in the U.S. (and elsewhere), they must also grapple with how best to serve a populace with diverse cultural legacies, languages, values and artistic traditions. We may watch some of the same television shows, cheer the same football teams or shop at some of the same stores. We may share sympathies or affiliations to certain public or national symbols and hold some beliefs and values in common but we are no longer tied to each other through “practices of commitment;” to return to a phrase from the introduction.

Throughout this study, we have suggested that traditional arts and folk culture are manifestations of the ties that do bind people one to the other and they constitute rich

artistic and community resources which are frequently forgotten and sometimes willfully ignored. Through example, we have also explored the ways in which individuals, events and organizations function in relationship to communities and traditions and through the statistical data, we have glimpsed the immensity of involvement and interest in disparate areas of traditional culture and among disparate communities. To fully cultivate and sustain these resources, however, requires several challenges—the first and perhaps most important one being to develop “a new kind of cultural vision, one that honors cultural differences, one that sees strength in complex cultural traditions, practices and expressions....” to quote Kurt Dewhurst. In many ways, it’s simply a matter of respect and the benefits are several: broadening constituencies, encouraging understanding among diverse cultural groups and expanding cultural resources.

A second challenge is largely pragmatic and involves considering the ways to make broader recognition and participation possible. Central issues in this process involve the development of more inclusive definitions of what constitutes “art;” what constitutes an “arts” organization as well as more holistic and flexible approaches to efforts involving cultural presentation and conservation. Such a challenge demands that we fully grapple with the information and findings presented throughout this study and develop



DAILY ACTIVITY AT A PUERTO RICAN CASITA IN NEW YORK CITY. CASITAS ARE TRADITIONAL GATHERING PLACES FOR NEIGHBORHOOD SOCIAL ACTIVITY. (PHOTO BY MARTHA COOPER © 1996)

methods of inquiry to expand this information base further. As the case studies and data from NASAA and NuStats presented earlier indicate, we are not considering a discipline or genre defined in a traditional sense. The folk arts encompass a multiplicity of genres, aesthetic systems, cultural contexts and meanings. Folk arts activity finds a home in Carnegie Hall, community development corporations, schools, folk arts organizations, historical societies, blues clubs and roadside basket stands. As some of the numbers and statistical information indicate, funding and resources for the folk arts exist in myriad places. NASAA estimates mentioned previously suggest that programmatic support for the folk arts also exists in rural initiatives, arts in education programs and ethnic or minority arts funding programs.<sup>3</sup> Many civic and community organizations generate support through locally-based systems of bartering and reciprocal exchange. Some folk arts find broader networks of distribution in the institutionalized worlds of commerce and mass media.

The point here, however, is not to collectively congratulate ourselves on serving the folk arts and traditional culture well. We must remember that state and federal arts funding for the folk arts has hovered in the 2-3% range for the past eight to ten years.<sup>4</sup> Rather, we should pause to consider the immensity of folk and traditional arts activity. We should ask ourselves if cultural activity so pervasive yet oft times

hidden is best served or viewed in a piecemeal or program-by-program fashion. We should ask ourselves if folk and traditional arts activity is best served by artificial distinctions between presentation and conservation, between arts and humanities—distinctions which often do not exist in the daily life of communities. What are meaningful ways to strengthen artistic and cultural traditions within communities? While many funding programs and policy makers have come to recognize the importance of organizational support as a critical force of stabilization for many cultural organizations, they must also realize that conservation, documentation and training efforts involving the presentation and transmission of living artistic and cultural traditions serve similar functions for communities as well. They *are* the critical efforts of stabilization and continuity for some and, without them, there will be nothing to pass on for future generations. Without them, there will be nothing to share with others right now.