

American Folklife Center Announces Training Program for Indigenous Communities

The American Folklife Center (AFC) at the Library of Congress today announced a new pilot program that will train members of indigenous communities to document their own cultural traditions, archive this heritage for future generations and protect their intellectual-property interests in their recordings and the traditions they document. The project is a collaboration among AFC, the Center for Documentary Studies (CDS) at Duke University in North Carolina and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) based in Geneva, Switzerland. WIPO is a specialized agency within the United Nations system.

"This is an exciting opportunity," said Peggy Bulger, AFC director. "It will yield not only hands-on training and infrastructure for the Maasai, but it will also result in a training model that we can share with other indigenous communities. Our goal is to empower tradition-bearers to preserve and pass on their own traditional culture while safeguarding their intellectual property rights and interests. Developing this model is a big step toward that goal."

The pilot project will begin in September 2008. Then, two members of a Maasai community from Laikipia, Kenya, and an expert from the National Museums of Kenya will travel to Washington, D.C., and then to Duke University for intensive, hands-on training in documentary techniques and archival skills. The curriculum, designed and taught by AFC and CDS staff, will include such topics as project planning, research ethics, digital archival methods, documentation techniques, and database and website development and management. In addition, staff from WIPO will provide training to let the community manage intellectual-property options in line with its own interests and development goals. WIPO will also provide Maasai representatives with a basic kit of field equipment, computers and software for their own use when they return to Kenya. The National Museums of Kenya will be on hand to provide ongoing institutional support. The community and the National Museums of Kenya will participate directly in evaluating the pilot and making recommendations for its improvement and further development. The U.S. Copyright Office will also lend its support to the intellectual-property component of the program being offered by WIPO. Should the pilot with the Maasai prove successful, AFC, CDS and WIPO envision offering similar programs to communities and institutions in other countries.

The pilot project stems from a request for training in community self-documentation that the Maasai community addressed to WIPO. AFC has long been an active partner with WIPO in developing long-term, global strategies for the protection of intangible cultural heritage, a category that includes folklore and folklife. Following an exploratory visit to the community in late 2006, Wend Wendland, WIPO's head of section dealing with traditional cultural expressions and cultural heritage, invited AFC to develop the pilot training program, based on the center's successful history of producing Folklife Field Schools for Cultural Documentation. AFC in turn contacted CDS to develop the curriculum together.

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 center has conducted regular field schools for cultural documentation around the United States. For more information, visit the AFC Web site at www.loc.gov/folklife/.