In a multicultural society, it is a challenge to recognize, understand, and support the traditional arts of all who call Massachusetts home. This essay raises more questions than it provides answers. I write from the perspective of an arts administrator/folklorist working at the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC), a state arts agency. The goal of the MCC’s Folk Arts & Heritage Program is to support, promote, and build appreciation for the cultural traditions and expressions of the many diverse populations in Massachusetts.

What qualifies as traditional art is at the core of how we decide what to document through field research, what we will support through grants, and what we present to the public in the way of exhibitions, books, performances, and other programs. Like my colleagues working as public folklorists across the United States, I find myself in the position of defining what constitutes “traditional.” We write and publish grant guidelines, provide review criteria, process grant applications, and strive to manage a fair and equitable panel review process. Here is how our grant guidelines define traditional art:

“Traditional arts are part of the cultural heritage of a group of people whose members share a common ethnic heritage, language, religion, occupation, or geographic region. These artistic traditions are passed down through generations and reflect the values of their shared culture. Skills are typically learned directly through observation and imitation from someone steeped in the tradition, rather than through classes, books, or other means of institutional instruction.”

Our field research and grant giving are guided by who the people of Massachusetts are and what artistic expressions they value. As folk arts scholar Henry Glassie has noted, in shaping their own styles, all cultures come to emphasize certain media. Spend enough time with people and they will lead you to “robust centers of culture” where certain material forms or performances are imbued with beauty and power. In Massachusetts, where successive waves of immigration have increasingly diversified the population, one finds many such centers of culture. The longer a cultural group has been here, the more likely it is for people to associate its traditions as Massachusetts art forms, such as Yankee quilting, stonewall building and decoy carving, or Native quill work. Yet each successive wave of immigration and settlement brings its own cultural expressions, which, over time, have become traditionalized, and associated with places in Massachusetts, e.g., Irish fiddling, Italian feast day celebrations, and Caribbean carnival processions. Some of the newest of immigrants to Massachusetts have brought some of the most ancient traditions with them, e.g., Malian drumming and Cambodian dance. All of these cultural expressive forms are worthy of our attention and support.

One of the more tangible ways we support traditional arts is by awarding direct grants to individual artists. In 2001, the MCC began awarding Artist Fellowships in the traditional arts, using the review criteria of artistic excellence, authenticity, and significance of the artist’s work to the traditional community. Panelists evaluate the artistic excellence of an applicant’s work within its cultural context. The Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program...
was introduced in 2002. It provides a financial incentive for master artists to work with promising apprentices. Review criteria include artistic excellence, the master’s standing within the traditional community, significance of the art form, quality of budget and work plan, and demonstrated commitment to the traditional art form. Apprentices learn directly by observing and imitating, and by processing the critique of the master artist. The program is designed to fund more than just lessons; it is intended to support a special, mentoring relationship between master artist and apprentice. It does not fund an ongoing class or school.

Given that tradition never stands still, how is change to be understood, especially by someone completely outside of a tradition? As trained folklorists, we must develop skills to identify excellence within someone else’s tradition. We look to the community for guidance. What traditional art forms are revered within a traditional community? How is artistic excellence defined within the tradition? How is an individual crafts person, musician, or dancer regarded by other practitioners within the community? Does this individual adhere to traditional technique, repertoire, and performance practice?

Things get complicated when traditions with deep roots elsewhere are transplanted and are now practiced in Massachusetts. This is especially true when it comes to hereditary practices. We have funded a few hereditary artists—Malian griot Balla Kouyaté whose balaphon playing ancestry goes back to the 12th century and wooden boat builder Harold A. Burnham, whose shipyard is located on the banks of a tidal river where, for 11 generations, members of the same family have built and launched wooden vessels. While Kouyaté and Burnham were born into a tradition, the more common situation here in Massachusetts is that a tradition is passed on within a cultural community rather than through a direct familial tie.

Hereditary practices are especially vulnerable to change in the context of immigration and acculturation. This can be seen within the region’s growing Indo-American community, who I have come to know largely though their applications to our Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Master artists and their students apply for grants to support the teaching of Carnatic violin, Dhrupad vocal singing, mridangam and tabla playing, Bharatanatyam and Odissi dance. From my limited purview, it appears that geographic displacement, social and economic circumstances, and acculturation are having a profound effect on how these traditional art forms are being defined, transmitted, presented, and consumed.

What happens to a dance tradition when individuals seek out government support for something that was once solely supported within the hereditary traditional community? When does a reconstructed dance form (e.g., Bharatanatyam) become a new tradition in its own right? Who are we to criticize when dancers dance to recorded music? What are we to make of an Indo-American apprentice’s facial expressions which, in India, would be inappropriate to a young girl’s age? What happens to an ancient music tradition when the role of the guru is essentially professionalized, when teachers now can earn $10,000 to $15,000 training a student for his or her arangetram? Traditionally, the arangetram was an offering performed in temples and signified the first major accomplishment in a girl or boy’s life. In the metro-Boston area, among the children of first-generation middle class immigrants who are employed largely in high tech, science, and medical fields, the phenomenon of the arangetram has become one of American largesse. Evoking other culture’s rites of passage, such as the Jewish girl’s bat mitzvah or Latina’s quinciñeara, the arangetrams are elaborately produced events with glossy printed invitations and programs, hired musicians, hand-stitched costumes, professional videography, and food for hundreds.

Acknowledging that the arangetram, and the years of preparation for it, is an important cultural phenomenon, it does bring to light one of the challenges facing public funding of the arts. Our Apprenticeships, which pair an experienced master artist with an apprentice in a 9-month long, one-on-one learning experience, are meant to help ensure the continued vitality of a traditional art form. And yet, for the majority of young Indo-American students here in New England, the arangetram is a form of closure rather than a beginning, as many students do not continue their intensive study after high school. What is our role in adjudicating limited resources? This is not just about the arts of India, but of Ireland, Cambodia, Armenia, Nigeria, Puerto Rico and the
countless other world traditions that find new life here in the United States. As communities that we support mature here in America, they become more deeply integrated and acculturated. They also seek ways of describing themselves in ways that differentiate them from other cultural traditions. Public funding of the traditional arts becomes increasingly complex as the state, region, and country continues to become more and more culturally diverse.

Endnote

1 Support for the traditional arts in the United States has grown since the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in the late 1960s. Through the leadership of Bess Lomax Hawes, the NEA’s Folk and Traditional Arts Program has funded fellowships, apprenticeships, folklore field research, exhibitions, films, and other public programs.

2 From http://www.massculturalcouncil.org/applications/apr_guidelines.html