

# A Brief Guide to Conducting an Interview

**Y**ou should collect some basic biographical information about the tradition bearers you meet and interview. But the focus of the research is on the tradition itself:

- What is the tradition?
- Where did it come from?
- Who performs/does it?
- Where, when and why?
- How does it vary?
- How has it changed over the years?
- How important is it, for whom?

## Preparation

Make an appointment with the tradition bearer. Make clear your purposes. Take a notebook, pen or pencils, camera, tape recorder if appropriate. Think of questions ahead of time—write some down. Try interviewing a friend as practice.

## Beginning

Restate who you are and the project's purpose. Obtain informed consent for the interview—ask for permission to conduct the interview; explain where the tape or notes will go. You might develop a simple form for the project that asks the person to sign a statement saying, "I give my permission for any tapes, notes, and photographs made to go into an archive for educational, non-commercial use."

## Questioning

Interviews will typically include:

### BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONS

What is your name? Where do you live? Where were you born? Where did you go to school? What family do you have? What jobs have you had? How did you learn this particular cultural tradition? When? From whom? Why do you do this? [For example, if the tradition is quilting, when did you learn how to quilt, from whom, why did you learn, why do you still quilt?]

### PROCESS QUESTIONS

Describe how to do this particular tradition that you do—from start to finish. [For example, if the tradition is quilting, how do you make a quilt from start to finish? How do you display or sell your quilts, if you do?]

### CONTEXT QUESTIONS

Where do you do this? For whom? Do you work with others? When? Where do you get your supplies/instruments/ingredients? [For example, if the tradition is quilting, do you quilt at home or a workshop or senior center, is this a hobby or do you get paid, where do you get your cloth?]

### AESTHETIC/SKILL QUESTIONS

What are the key characteristics of the tradition—e.g., a pattern, materials, instrument/tool use? What makes someone good or respected in the tradition? [For example, if the tradition is quilting, what makes for a fine quilt? What do the various patterns mean? Why do you use a certain type of stitch or a particular color?]

### VOCABULARY QUESTIONS

What are the names of particular instruments, tools, and techniques? [For example, if the tradition is quilting, what do you call this type of quilt, this type of pattern, this type of stitch?]

### HISTORY QUESTIONS

Has the tradition changed? What are its challenges and opportunities? [For example, if the tradition is quilting, was quilting more popular when you first learned or now? Have machine-made quilts affected the handmaking tradition? Do you think quilting has a strong future?]

Sometimes asking about biography is a good start; other times it will be regarded as an affront to privacy. You must use your judgement. The simplest approach is to begin with a general question, like “tell me about X,” where X may be a quilt or a boat or a song or anything created by the tradition.

In order to answer the research questions, interviews are typically open ended, meaning there is no set series of specific questions. Good interviews elicit much information; bad interviews do not. Here are some rules of thumb for conducting a good, effective interview.

1. Speak directly to the person in a respectful, conversational tone.
2. Be gentle but inquisitive, interested but not overbearing.

3. Ask follow-up questions based on what you hear and learn! Follow up on your follow-up questions!
4. Respond to the questions and queries of the tradition bearer. You might end up reversing roles.
5. Use items in the interview setting to jog the memory of the tradition bearer. You might notice photographs or other items that you can ask about.
6. If you are not tape-recording the interview, make sure you keep notes. Don't attempt to write everything—do write short phrases to help you later remember what was said. If there is something you need to write verbatim—like a proverb—do it.
7. During the interview, ask about photographs, family bibles, examples of crafts, home recordings, letters, floor plans, and other items that help illustrate what was said.

Tape-recording interviews is best because it leaves a good record of what was said, sung, or discussed. For cassette tape recording use 60-minute tapes. Leave some blank space at the start of each to later enter information. Set the microphone close to the tradition bearer. Number your tapes immediately after recording. You can formally label them later.