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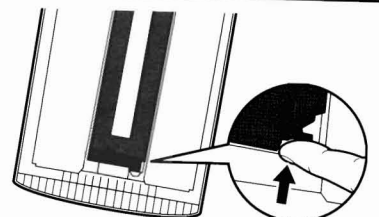
THE 1993 CELEBRATION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY IN  
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA:  
*TRADITION, INTERPRETATION, AND CONFLICTS OF IDENTITY*

During my first year in Bloomington, Indiana, I noticed a lack of attention given to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day by Indiana University. The fact that the university remained open and sponsored no special events on this new national holiday was shocking to me. I soon learned that, although Indiana University neglects this and other holidays, the city of Bloomington holds elaborate and impressive events in King's honor. Still, my initial shock had piqued my curiosity, and I decided to explore people's feelings and ideas about Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in Bloomington. In this article, I will discuss the 1993 celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, in Bloomington. Following a brief discussion of some elements of the holiday's history, I will describe the commemorative events that took place in Bloomington on January 18, 1993, and I will conclude by discussing Bloomington citizens' ideas about the holiday based on comments I collected during field research conducted throughout 1993.

As the people I interviewed discussed Martin Luther King, Jr., and the holiday, they expressed a great variety of sometimes conflicting opinions. In other words, there appears to be no general consensus regarding the significance of Dr. King's legacy. To interpret these conflicting ideas, I have reached across the disciplines of folklore, anthropology, sociology, and hermeneutics to draw upon research involving tradition, interpretation, and identity. I have found this cross-disciplinary approach useful because my data suggest relationships between the intentional transformation of tradition, interpretations of tradition, and conflicts over issues of national identity, racial identity, and social change.

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in 1993, city of Bloomington-sponsored events took place at noon at the Courthouse Square downtown and in the evening at Second Baptist Church on the city's near west side. So, early research found me on the doorstep of Second Baptist Church, the church of Reverend Ernest Butler—a wise and gentle 81-year old man with an easy laugh and the energy of people half his age. Butler, who knew Dr. King personally, is synonymous with the King holiday movement in Bloomington; for 25 years, he has been the greatest motivating force behind the city's celebration of King.

I talked with Butler and other Martin Luther King, Jr. Day activists in Bloomington. However, I wanted to know more than the thoughts and motivations of those actively involved in the holiday; I also wanted to know what the holiday means in the lives of people not so personally involved in its celebration. I began approaching people in public places, tape recorder in hand, asking them how they felt about Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. These efforts resulted in a collection of seventeen taped interviews. Finally, I chose to distribute questionnaires in Indiana University undergraduate classes with the hope that this completely anonymous format would encourage honesty and enable me to access the opinions of those who may not have been willing to discuss this controversial subject face-to-face with me. I received 123 of these questionnaires back. While the size of my sample



of interviews and questionnaires is too small to conclusively prove anything, it is sufficient to display a breadth of conflicting opinions about King and the holiday.

As I interpreted the various comments I collected, it became clear that Bloomington residents interpret and evaluate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day on the basis of what could be considered traditional in their lives. In this case, I am using the word tradition to refer to, among other things, pre-existing ideas about civic, national, and even global identity, in addition to people's ideas regarding appropriate choices of national hero figures to represent and personify American values.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day can be seen as a forum in which the identity of Bloomington residents is discussed and negotiated. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin assert that formation of identity is partially based on notions of what is considered "traditional," which "is not an objective property of phenomena but an assigned meaning" (1984:273). Several scholars have written about how objects are assigned meaning and used in the formation of a sense of self. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton describe the way in which a person's growing or continued interest in some thing can become a form of affirming or extending the content and boundaries of that person's self (1981:91ff). Handler, in his work on nationalism in Quebec, extends this notion from the personal to the collective, stating that the idea that a collection of objects *can* represent and/or epitomize collective identity is rarely disputed, although *whose* identity is being represented is often a matter of contention (1985:194). I believe that these same models, so effective in describing the use of material objects in the formation of identity, can be applied to the public event.

#### *History of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day*

In order to fully understand the symbolic importance of Bloomington's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day events, a brief historical overview of the holiday itself is necessary. William Wiggins, in his book *Afro-American Freedom Celebrations*, argues that establishment of the King national holiday has roots prior to the 1968 death of Dr. King. The fight to establish Martin Luther King, Jr. Day has been, according to Wiggins, an extension of the century-long African-American political battle to create a national holiday in recognition of the Emancipation Proclamation. Wiggins points out that people recognized, in the early years following King's death, that celebration of King's dream of universal brotherhood would be more inclusive than a holiday designed solely to commemorate the freedom of African Americans (1987:xxi).

The political rhetoric of those fighting to establish the King national holiday often characterized King's message as something that could touch Americans of all racial, religious, and political backgrounds (Wiggins 1987:138-50). Eduard Shils has noted that "prophets and charismatic figures change the tradition of their societies by ethical commandments" (1981:260). It is this characterization of King as a prophet with a universal message that motivates the organizers of Bloomington's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day events.

#### *Bloomington's Celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day*

In choosing the theme for the 1993 Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebration, "Can We All Get Along Without Living the Dream?" Reverend Butler deliberately emphasized the universality of King's message. There was a clear effort in the design of the event to bring together people of various religions, ages, and races. Like a sculptor or a songwriter, Butler crafted the event toward specific, symbolic ends, with his potential audience in mind.

Structurally and in terms of content, religion was a central theme at the 1993 city of Bloomington Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebrations. Ceremonies commemorating the day were loosely framed on the structure of Protestant services, yet, even within the limits of Protestantism, an attempt was made to avoid exclusivity. Although Butler, a Baptist minister, was master of ceremonies for both services, he made a concerted effort to avoid the impression that these were strictly Baptist events. At noon, the scripture and benediction were delivered by Presbyterian and First Christian ministers, respectively. The evening service featured ministers from local Unitarian and African Methodist Episcopal churches. Furthermore, Christianity was not the sole world religion represented; a representative of the Indiana University Muslim Student Organization delivered the invocation. The inclusion of Islam in the service served several symbolic purposes. Not only did it de-emphasize the fact that the event was Protestant-centered, it also symbolically allied King and Malcolm X, known in popular culture as adversaries. Recognizing the current popularity of Malcolm X, Butler intentionally included Islam in order to symbolically represent unity in the event (Butler 1993).

In addition, local political dignitaries were involved, which, according to Butler, is important in order to lend a sense of credence and importance to the event (Butler 1993). The mayor of Bloomington, the President of Indiana University, the Vice President of the Monroe County Commissioners, and the Vice President of Monroe County NAACP all spoke at the celebrations. Overall, participants in the event spanned a wide range of ages, and included both blacks and whites, women and men, and children. Especially noteworthy was the role youth played in the events. Reverend Butler has been instrumental in organizing Martin Luther King, Jr., poster and essay contests for children in primary and secondary schools. The winners of these competitions were announced at the ceremonies, and many school children attended. High school and elementary children performed music at the noon event, while the Indiana University Voices of Hope and Choral Ensemble, both student singing groups, performed at the evening service.

In Martin Luther King, Jr., celebrations nationwide, opening and closing music has become standardized. In keeping with these standards, "Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Negro National Anthem)" opened both Bloomington events, while the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome" was the closing number. The noon service featured "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," a song that has become associated with such core "American" values as individual liberty, justice, and the need to fight for these values.<sup>2</sup> Inclusion of this patriotic song clearly implied a portrayal of King as a national hero, worthy of being honored with a song that represents not only the victory of the North in the Civil War but more generally what it means to be American and free. Thus, King's dream was portrayed as universal and inclusive enough to be relevant for all Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Wiggins observes that, especially at Bloomington's noon service, the more public of the two events, an emphasis was placed on King as "a symbol of democracy and brotherhood—two cornerstones of the American ethos" (1993). Through the annual repetition of this customary celebration, Butler and other King holiday activists attempt to influence not only individual constructions of national identity but also attempt to reach the local international population to spread King's universal message around the world. According to Butler, the context in which he works to spread King's dream has multiple levels, including not only the community of Bloomington, Indiana, but also the entire U.S.A. and even the world at large (1993).<sup>4</sup>

### *King as a Universally Relevant Symbol*

My conversations with Reverend Butler and other Martin Luther King, Jr. Day activists have confirmed that they view Dr. King's dream as one of national and international significance. Butler views his work on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day events as a religious mission of sorts with the expressed goal of ending racism in Bloomington and beyond. For Butler, celebration of the King holiday is "essential for the salvation of our nation." He believes strongly in King's vision of a future "promised land" in which racism will have been erased from our nation and the rest of the world (1993).

Although Butler is decidedly optimistic about the future, he is motivated by current "racist attitudes in Bloomington." Butler stated, "You see, King died because of racism. And we've got a community that does not want to address the issue." Although Butler believes that "Bloomington is doing something in the right direction," he feels that recognition of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day should be expanded:

[It's] not enough for the paper to say it's King's birthday. We the people have to come together to make the celebration what it ought to be . . . I'm hoping that I live long enough to see not just the city government and the schools say it's King's birthday, but the city itself . . . The factories are still in operation; the town and gown are still in operation. So, it's not a matter of actually celebrating King's birthday. It's a matter of putting it up and saying "This is King's birthday with business as usual." . . . That's a part of what my agenda is now—trying to convince the community that the legacy of Dr. King is so important that we don't just do business as usual. [Butler and Dell 1993]

Butler believes that King's dream is America's dream. In his words, Butler intentionally appropriates language from *The Constitution of the United States* ("We the people") when he discusses the King celebration (Butler 1993). Butler's characterization of King as a national hero worthy of a national holiday builds upon the very *idea* of the American national hero, historically represented by figures such as Jefferson and Lincoln. For Butler, King is a symbol not just for the African-American struggle for independence and rights, but, in a larger sense, the independence and rights of all Americans.

Butler is not alone in this sentiment. Second Baptist Assistant Minister Paul Dell emphasized the need for the King celebration to be as significant as Independence Day: "We need a celebration, just like . . . July 4th . . . I mean, that's for our country, but you know, this man [King was for] *all* people who are oppressed . . . [He] improved the quality of their lives, and . . . it needs to be a *big* celebration. Just like July 4th" (Butler and Dell 1993).

Dell clearly feels that King is not only a national hero but that the universal appeal of King's message applies to all oppressed peoples of the world. Yet, Dell and Butler recognized that many in Bloomington's white community do not share this image of King.

### *Alternative Interpretations of King as Symbol*

As Martin Luther King, Jr. Day organizers work deliberately to create a feeling of tradition around the holiday, they challenge and sometimes transform Bloomington residents' notions of what is traditional in their lives. As I discussed Martin Luther King Jr. Day with Bloomington residents, various and conflicting interpretations of the symbol of Martin Luther King, Jr., became apparent. Some people are openly resistant to the idea that King's message is universal or represents anything quintessentially American. Other respect the right of people to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, but do not consider King or the holiday to be relevant in their own lives. Finally, some value King and the holiday but do not believe that celebrating King's message can solve the problem of racism.

Contrary to Butler's interpretation of King and the holiday as universally relevant, many white interviewees, the majority of whom said they support the holiday, implied that the celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day really concerns only the black community. When I asked what King represents to them, one person replied, "He was one of the biggest helps in giving rights to blacks" (Interview 6:1993), while another said, "Great guy . . . he did all that stuff for his people" (Interview 11:1993). When asked if they were satisfied with the events in Bloomington in observance of the King holiday, interviewees responded, "I don't have anything to do with it" (Interview 12:1993), and "I haven't noticed . . . anything actually especially happening on that day . . . Mostly primarily within the black community when it does. It doesn't really reach out to the rest of the community" (Interview 8:1993).

Likewise, a majority of questionnaire respondents support the King holiday, but a far smaller number consider King a significant figure in their cultural heritage, while fewer still consider the holiday personally significant. Furthermore, when asked to write one word they most associate with Dr. King, a number of respondents replied "Black," perhaps revealing a kind of institutionalized racism; King is defined by his skin color rather than his accomplishments. Several respondents wrote additional comments such as, "I think that observing Martin Luther King, Jr. Day would make people like myself more aware of what good he has done for Blacks" (Questionnaire 51:1993), and "Dr. King was a strong Black man with a great dream" (Questionnaire 117:1993).

All in all, many white Bloomington residents associate King and the holiday with the local African-American community, from which they feel distant. Conversations sometimes revealed a sense of the African American as "other"—a direct contrast to Butler's interpretation of King's vision. In some cases, this "other" was framed as being a threat to a pre-existing sense of identity. For one interviewee, Washington and Lincoln represent our emblems of national identity, and the Fourth of July signifies "liberty," while Martin Luther King, Jr., represents "nothing, really" (Interview 8:1993). One questionnaire respondent was adamantly opposed to the holiday. When asked for the one word most associated with

King, the respondent replied, "unimportant," and then wrote "Martin Luther King, Jr. never once held a significant position in the government such as president . . . and I feel it is wrong to put him in the same category as Washington and Lincoln" (Questionnaire 98:1993).<sup>6</sup>

Handler and Linnekin assert that traditions "come to signify national identity" and that "most national identities . . . are constructed in opposition to collective others" (1985:289), a notion we see illustrated here. This same respondent considers King "not at all significant" in terms of his/her cultural heritage, supports the holiday "not at all," and considers race relations in Bloomington "not a problem." Curiously, though, the respondent feels strongly that observance of the King holiday "could affect" race relations here, although she/he is adamantly opposed to the holiday (Questionnaire 98:1993). Perhaps the respondent feels that observance of the King holiday would exacerbate race relations here, possibly because it would foment racist feelings of those opposed to Dr. King and the celebration of his dream. One interviewee said as much when asked if race relations could be improved by expanding the observance of the holiday: "Probably just make it worse, just because people'd probably protest it or something" (Interview 11:1995).

This sense of "other" does not necessarily follow color lines; some African-American Indiana University students, expressing frustration over the lack of university-sponsored events, described a chasm between themselves and the local black community. This chasm was wide enough to discourage the students from participating in city-sponsored events. While Butler explicitly states his desire to include everyone in the city's celebration, including African-American students, some students feel alienated from the image of King that the city's celebration perpetuates. Pete Pletcher, an Indiana University student and member of the Black Students Advisory Council (hereafter BSAC—a student organization whose goals include increasing the visibility of the King holiday on campus), said that his group views King as "a shining example of a human being." Yet, Pletcher added, "But, we don't worship him or think everything about him can lead us to freedom and justice" (1993).

Although Pletcher agrees with Butler's assessment of racial problems in Bloomington and, in fact, co-founded the BSAC as "a response to recent racist incidents," he does not share Butler's belief that the celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day can significantly lessen the prevalence of racism. For Pletcher, King is an important historical figure worthy of recognition, but the reality of racism is too entrenched for the celebration of King's vision to have much impact. The BSAC is working for greater university recognition of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as a "psychological first step" toward dealing with racial hostility, which they "thought would be an easy one to win." However, even this first step has encountered "a lot of resistance" (Pletcher 1993). BSAC has had little success trying to gain support from the university's administration; they feel the administration should be organizing King holiday events for *them*, the student body. Instead, BSAC themselves organized the only 1993 King holiday events held on the I.U. Bloomington campus—several roundtable discussions and a documentary film. Pletcher stressed that BSAC's goal is to influence the university to recognize and honor King. Pletcher himself

is not interested in involving himself in city of Bloomington activities based on an image of King that he does not share.

### Conclusion

Reverend Butler and other King holiday activists are attempting to inculcate in the minds of Bloomington residents an image of Martin Luther King, Jr., as the essence of fundamental American values such as freedom and justice. Butler's image of King builds upon past forms of the American hero such as Washington and Jefferson, while suggesting King as a more appropriate contemporary personification of American values. Meanwhile, some of my interviewees prefer to defend a dominant national identity held secure by its relationship to the "other."

Nevertheless, Butler presses on, working to transform Bloomington citizens' ideas about what is "traditional." Toward this end, Butler has participated in the forming of a city government committee: the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Celebration Commission. This Commission appears to have adopted a particularly inclusive interpretation of Dr. King's dream. Early in 1993, the Commission circulated a petition entitled "We Share the Dream" that stated, "In King's memory, we dedicate ourselves to personal justice and harmony in our personal lives and in our community" (1993). Thousands of Bloomington residents signed this petition, and these signatures were published in the Bloomington *Herald-Times* on April 4th, 1993, the 25th anniversary of King's death. As the wording of the petition suggests, the Commission plans to combat not only racism but all forms of discrimination. In an article in the *Indiana Daily Student* newspaper, Barb Baker, a member of the Commission, stated that she would like to see the new Commission take a larger role in local minority issues, including the defense of gay rights (Khalil 1993:1).

This expansion of the symbolic breadth of King to include an explicitly broader sweep of oppressed peoples will surely meet a mixed reception in this southern Indiana town, as has the universal image of King that Butler and other organizers have perpetuated until now. The context in which Butler lives and works includes people in support of, in opposition to, and simply unaware of his efforts to portray a universal image of King through this customary celebration. In observing the cultural interactions occurring between the activists inspired by Dr. King's dream and the community of Bloomington, we see what Henry Glassie calls the intersection of will and circumstance (1982:15). Over the past 25 years, the steady increase in the number of participants in Bloomington's Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebration suggests that Reverend Butler's will, determination, and activism is gradually changing his circumstances. While it is not clear whether increased participation in Martin Luther King, Jr. Day events is reducing racial tension in Bloomington, it is evident that Butler and others are, at the very least, convincing people to participate in a customary celebration that honors King as a symbol of universally relevant values. The evidence put forth in this essay suggests that this image of King is not at present universally accepted. Bloomington citizens interpret and react to Butler's efforts in multiple ways. In the process of the creation of this customary celebration, various issues are negotiated and contested. The public debate surrounding its development reveals the

interplay among notions of community, self, otherness, national identity, racial identity, and social change.

### Notes

1. I would agree with Eduard Shils' assessment (1981:31) that tradition is not something concrete—"the way things are done"—but is rather the perpetually shifting process that informs "the way things are done." H. G. Gadamer's discussion of legal hermeneutics comes to mind here. He describes the creation and revision of law: based on precedents and the interplay of debate and consensus, laws are weighed and judged and eventually canonized in written form. Yet, this written form is merely the background within which lawyers and judges interpret and act (1975:292-94). Just as both Eric Hobsbawm (1983:1) and James Clifford (1985:242) describe cultural authenticity as having as much to do with an inventive present as with a past, Gadamer shows that laws function as historical pre-understandings that are perpetually reinvented through interpretation each time they are invoked in a court of law. I do not offer Gadamer's description of the legal process as an analogy, but as an example of how the undercurrent of tradition operates in our lives. Tradition, thus, is never fixed but rather is by definition perpetually in transformation through human interpretation.

2. Written in support of the Union Army in 1861 by Julia Ward Howe, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" has been performed at various times throughout the past 130 years to symbolically assert the need to fight for the "American" values of justice and freedom. For instance, the song was performed in support of American troops in Europe during World War II. See Whitman 1969:37.

3. Wiggins notes that Freedom Day celebrations that predated Martin Luther King, Jr. Day generally included the singing of patriotic hymns such as "America" (1993). Singing of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" demonstrates the perpetuation of the singing of patriotic songs and supports Wiggins' claim that an historical connection exists between Emancipation Proclamation celebrations and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day events.

4. Henry Glassie writes that context is "in the mind of the creator" (1982:33).

5. Again, I refer to the idea of tradition as a perpetually changing background or pattern that is reinvented each time people interpret and act. Butler and others perpetuate an interpretation of both King's dream and what it means to be American, while Bloomington residents respond with their own interpretations of King based on their understandings of what is traditional in their lives.

6. Edward Sapir ([1949] 1962:78) wrote that, although whole nations of people may agree on the importance of a concept (such as liberty), individuals often disagree about what can represent this concept. What an individual chooses as his or her labels of such values is a critical aspect of the process of formation and assertion of a sense of self.

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