



Smithsonian Institution
National Museum of Natural History

Department of Anthropology

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Ms. Margaret Plank
Head of Competence Center for Non-Textual Materials
German National Library of Science and Technology (TIB)
Department of Research and Development
Welfengarten 1B, 30167 Hannover

Dear Ms. Plank,

As the Director of the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archive and its Human Studies Film Archives, it is my pleasure to write in support of the your organization's proposal to the eHeritage arm of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) to digitize the ethnological film collections of the former IWF Archives. I think this is a wonderful project that will serve scholars and students across a range of disciplines including anthropology, media studies, documentary and ethnographic cinema, and heritage and museum studies. For visual and cultural anthropologists who have worked in various parts of the world, the IWF ethnological film collection has always been an important resource. This follows for at least two primary reasons. The first is that the IWF films represent a broad selection of visual documentation of the worlds cultures—not only of many of the folk traditions from across Europe, but indigenous cultures from Africa, South and Central America, Asia and Oceania. The second is that the majority of indigenous cultures documented in IWF titles have experienced extensive social and cultural change since the time the films were created. Digitization of these films by your organization will enable a broad range of scholars, specialists and students to consult this trove of ethnological documentation at first hand, making these films widely accessible to a broad audience for the first time ever.

I can speak personally to the scholarly cultural and historical interest in these films since one of our archives—the Human Studies Film Archives—holds 983 film prints IWF ethnological titles. (These, as you may know, came to us in 2005, when Penn State Audiovisual Services, once a U.S. distributor for the IWF films, discontinued their film distribution business and deposited their prints with our archives at the Smithsonian Institution.) Since acquiring these and posting online catalog records for the IWF series, we have routinely fielded requests for copies of these films from researchers but have had to inform them that the films are only available for viewing onsite. At least two dozen researchers have screened various IWF films, sometimes discovering them while researching other materials in the archives. In any event, they have been consulted in association with their anthropological field research, for the purposes of exhibit development, in research devoted to rethinking the canon of ethnographic film, and in relation to ongoing work with contemporary indigenous cultures and communities represented by specific IWF films.

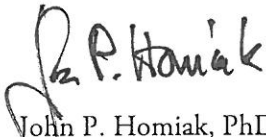
I draw particular attention his last point since visual and audiovisual documentation preserved in archives such as ours has become an integral part of museum practice aimed at enriching and sustaining relations with indigenous communities. Over the past decade we have increasingly found ourselves working to reconnect our film and audiovisual collections with descendant communities whose cultures are documented by these media. I have no doubt that the IWF ethnology films can play an important role in this area of

anthropological work in general and museum anthropology in particular. A prime example of an initiative promoting these kinds of collaborations is the Smithsonian's "Recovering Voices" Program, a program launched in 2008. Through this program, our archives staff works with members of indigenous communities who are committed to recovering language and indigenous knowledge are seeking paths to strengthen identities and secure heritage that is at risk of loss by the current generation. We are currently engaged in a project with our Recovering Voices colleagues to digitize more than 200 hours of ethnographic film and video on ethnic communities in Nepal to facilitate these kinds of collaborations. And I have no doubt that the digitization of the IWF ethnological films—despite the fact they are silent—will engage many like projects and be welcomed by similar digital initiatives.

Presently, my staff and that of our Recovering Voices program are working with four members (including an elder) of the Waura community (an Upper Xingu Amazonian tribe) from Brazil who have traveled to Washington D.C. These indigenous representatives have already spent several days screening and annotating thirteen (13) silent IWF films made by Harald Schultz in 1964. During the course of their time with us they identified nearly all individuals (previously unidentified) in these films, recorded stories associated with activities or events in the films, and provided extensive commentary on the cultural practices and environmental conditions documented in the films—both in terms of their meaning and cultural significance and in terms of how significantly these had changed since Schultz filmed among the Waura. Because of the 'scientific' protocols followed by the IWF in ethnological filmmaking, these films—while they tend to focus on a limited range of themes (e.g., films are silent and focus on the creation of material culture, food production, dance and performance and the external aspects of ritual)—actually provide the opportunity for a broad range of commentary and reflection on heritage preservation by contemporary members of the culture. Legacy film collaborations such as I have just described do more than simply serve to reconnect community members with memory and part of their heritage; they generate new kinds of anthropological understanding for scholars and serve to forge new kinds of relationships—ones based on respect and reciprocity—with the members of indigenous communities. Increasingly, this kind of collaborative work with non-textual legacy materials—film, video and photography—lies at the heart of new initiatives in museum anthropology.

Speaking as both as the director of our Film Archives and as a visual anthropologist with a long history in the field, I can say with complete confidence that digitization of the IWF ethnological films will be roundly applauded by my anthropological colleagues here at the Smithsonian, by many of us in the anthropological community in general, and without doubt by the members of ethnic and indigenous communities represented in the IWF corpus of films. I encourage and applaud the merits of this project in the strongest possible terms.

Respectfully,



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