# Unique Anthropology Films Lie in Limbo

## *Smithsonian's records of vanishing cultures are unfinished, unfunded, and inaccessible to scholars*

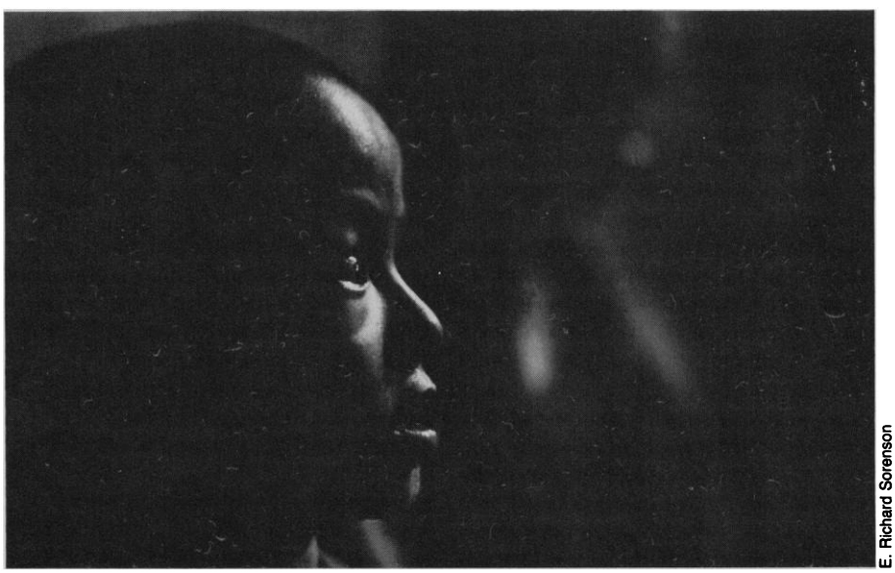
A unique repository of anthropological films—which will soon be the only source of knowledge about aspects of social behavior in fast-disappearing cultures—has been lying unused for two years in the bowels of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History. Created by anthropologist E. Richard Sorenson, the collection has not been edited or annotated, and under terms of agreements with various countries, access to the films is denied to scholars until the work is complete.

The films were mostly made during the 7-year existence of the National Human Studies Center, which was disbanded in 1982 for budgetary and bureaucratic reasons. They are now in limbo: although Sorenson, who quit the Smithsonian in 1983, owns the data, the institution owns the films. Until descriptive material is incorporated with them, they will be nothing but "Rorschach tests," open to any interpretation, says Sorenson. Time is of the essence because additional material must be gained from the people in question before their cultures are dissolved by the tide of modernization.

Sorenson has been filming remote societies around the world for almost 20 years. He discovered his calling while serving on an epidemiological team in Papua New Guinea that was sent by the National Institutes of Health to investigate kuru, the brain disease that was subsequently found to be spread by cannibalism. Sorenson was intrigued by the fact that the children of the tribe almost never cried, so he started carrying a camera around with which he recorded a wide range of childhood interactions and behavior. It was there that he spawned the notion that the islanders' approach to child development produced rather serene children with "innovation-ready" personalities quite distinct from the "innovation-questing" personality of the Western world. (The cannibalism, by the way, was of an unusual "familial" type unrelated to hostility and aggression.)

Sorenson subsequently got a doctorate in anthropology at Stanford University and, with the support of the late anthropologist Margaret Mead, moved his work to the Smithsonian. The current situation is the result of a protracted internecine battle at the institution in which the museum anthropologists, whose priorities are more oriented toward the maintenance of material culture collections, prevailed over the Margaret Mead faction. The Smithsonian, which has been getting anxious letters from the countries involved, has proposed making videotapes of some of the films and sending them to the countries for editing. But Sorenson claims this violates the original agreements and is technically unworkable.

The films—1.5 million feet of them—are records of the manners, gestures, expressions, and social adaptations of traditional cultures in Asia, New Guinea, and Brazil. They represent a pioneering approach to anthropological film-making, providing detailed records of nonverbal behavior that no other medium can supply. Moreover, they offer detailed glimpses into societies many of which are no longer accessible, either for political reasons, or—more often—because they have already been contaminated by modern civilization.



E. Richard Sorenson

**Novice Buddhist monk**

*Witnessing rituals at monastery built by Tibetans after their flight to Nepal.*

Some developed nations have come to recognize the importance of preserving the remnants of indigenous societies, not only for humane reasons but because of their cultures and special knowledge of their environments. Sorenson carries this concept a step further, pointing out that these groups have, over millennia of developing in isolation, evolved unique patterns of social as well as environmental adaptation. Just as scientists are storing gene banks of indigenous forms of crop plants that are being replaced by new varieties, he says, so too should they be taking measures to document "the behavioral and expressional potential of our own human species." While modern societies cannot expect to learn to eliminate crime or family strife, traditional ones can offer new insights contributing, for example, to early childhood intervention programs.

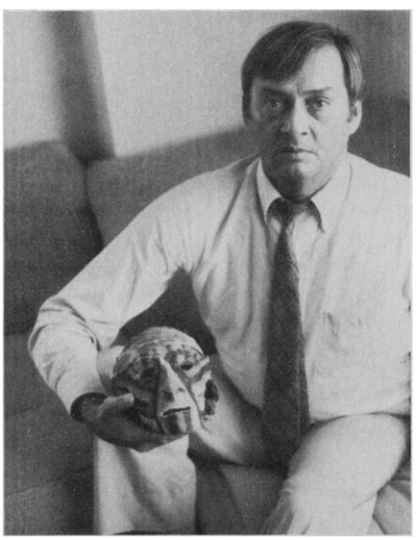
"Every society I have visited has a special aspect of human potential they've refined," says Sorenson. Some examples:

- Adaptation to an exceedingly harsh tropical environment with severe dietary and health conditions in Papua New Guinea.
- A form of highly industrious, and at the same time highly social, productivity among the Jyapu people in Nepal—where children much preferred the stimulation of working in the fields to going to school. ("Everybody in the world is interested in productivity," notes Sorenson.)
- An unusually cohesive social pattern of mutual personal regard and respect among Tibetan stock people.
- Strong social solidarity coexisting with a high degree of individuality and personal freedom among the Canela Indians of Amazonia in Brazil. The two concepts tend to be mutually exclusive

in Indo-European languages, says Sorenson; yet among the Canela they are mutually reinforcing.

• Patterns of mutual respect and interpersonal harmony among even densely populated groups in the Western Caroline Islands of Micronesia.

Sorenson has a somewhat Rousseauean view of the virtues of traditional societies. Nonetheless, one need only look at the facial expressions of young monks he has photographed during rituals at Tibetan monasteries—expressions reflecting various mixtures of awe, pensiveness, and rapture—to perceive the extraordinary range and subtlety of culturally conditioned emotional expression. People are beginning to recognize that environmental diversity must be preserved if humankind is to keep its options open. Sorenson's message is that the same principle applies when it comes to preserving knowledge about the emotional and behavioral diversity of human beings.



C. Holden

*Sorenson holding ancestral skull from Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides.*

Sorenson has been described as a "genius," and a "lone wolf" type whose uncompromising approach to his work does not stand him in good stead when it comes to attracting political support. Smithsonian official Wilton Dillon, an anthropologist, also observes that his work stands outside the trends in modern anthropology which, "like other disciplines, has become so specialized that it has become divorced from its humanistic past." Sorenson is planning to sell his collection of Asian and New Guinean artifacts to finance further travel. Says Dillon: "if there was anybody who ever needed a patron, he is that."

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

## Rifkin versus Gene Splicing: NIH Wins a Round

A federal judge in Washington, D.C., has ruled that private companies, unlike federally funded researchers, are not legally required to obtain permission from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) before releasing into the environment organisms modified by gene splicing.

The ruling, by Judge Aubrey Robinson, Jr., came in a suit brought by author-activist Jeremy Rifkin. Rifkin was seeking, in effect, to force NIH to become the only federal agency with broad authority to regulate all experiments involving deliberate release of genetically engineered organisms. NIH does not want such sweeping authority, and Judge Robinson said in his ruling that there are "no legal grounds to compel NIH to regulate private firms."

NIH currently has jurisdiction only over researchers it funds. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Agriculture are claiming authority over specific types of experiments, whether funded publicly or privately, however. This means that NIH-funded researchers have to obtain approval from two separate agencies before conducting deliberate release experiments, while private companies are required to submit their proposals to a single agency.

Moreover, according to Lee Rogers, Rifkin's attorney, some types of experiments may not fall under the jurisdiction of any regulatory agency. "We were trying to say there should be no distinction between federally funded and company-funded proposals," says Rogers.

Rifkin used what one NIH official calls an "extremely contorted and remote argument" to force NIH to regulate private companies. In essence, he claimed that a clause in patent agreements between Stanford University and private firms for the use of a basic gene-splicing technique requires the firms to comply with NIH's recombinant DNA guidelines. Since NIH funded the Stanford work and is a party to the agreements, it can use them to exert authority over the companies, Rifkin claimed. Judge Robinson was unpersuaded.

The ruling is the latest setback for Rifkin in his crusade against genetic engineering. Last year, he won a major victory when Judge John J. Sirica ruled that an experiment proposed by researchers at the University of California at Berkeley, which NIH had approved, could not go ahead because it had not been adequately reviewed for its potential environmental impact. Sirica also stopped NIH from approving any more experiments (*Science*, 1 June 1984, p. 962).

Last February, however, an appeals court said that NIH could go on approving experiments. (Rifkin filed his suit seeking to force NIH to regulate privately funded experiments before the appeals court acted. His objective at the time was to force companies to go to NIH while NIH was under court order not to approve any experiments, a situation that would effectively have placed a moratorium on all deliberate release experiments.)

NIH has now prepared an environmental assessment of the Berkeley experiment and will soon ask Judge Sirica to lift the injunction against it. The researchers will, however, have to obtain permission from EPA before they can go ahead.—COLIN NORMAN

## Education Research Reorganization Announced

Secretary of Education William J. Bennett on 2 July announced a reorganization of the educational research bureaucracy, in which the National Institute of Education (NIE) will be renamed and its autonomy sharply diminished.

Two presidentially appointed positions will be eliminated, and the NIE and the National Center for Education Statistics will be reorganized within the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. This will be headed by a new assistant secretary, Chester R. Finn from Vanderbilt University. Finn, an early architect and later critic of NIE, was expected to receive Senate confirmation in mid-July.

Presented as a move toward "streamlining and consolidation," the plan entails the creation of five new offices—for research, statistics, information, library programs, and "improvement of practice." This last office