

Filming Fading Faces

Anthropological film center debuts with innovative series

BY ROBERT J. TROTTER

"All motion picture footage of human beings is anthropological. . . ."

—Jay Ruby
Temple University

If you agree with Ruby, as many anthropologists and educators are beginning to, then you have reason to cheer. The much-needed and long-awaited National Anthropological Film Center is now a reality. Established last fall at the Smithsonian Institution, the center celebrated its official opening on May 1.

Since the 1960's, movie-minded anthropologists have been agitating for a permanent film archive that would collect, protect and preserve the millions of feet of anthropological film that are shot each year (SN: 5/19/73, p. 321). Now, with funding from the National Science Foundation, the archive exists.

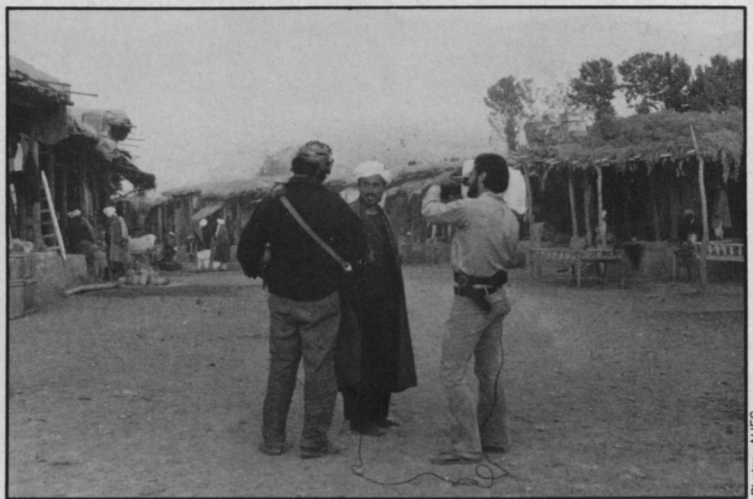
E. Richard Sorenson, director of the new center, is a strong defender of the necessity of properly preserving and producing anthropological film. Until quite recently, he says, the evolution of human culture and organization has diverged in isolated regions of the world. But now, Sorenson feels, we are entering a new period in human history. Cultural divergence is coming to a halt. Various types of human societies (hunter-gatherer, nomadic, etc.) are rapidly disappearing from the face of the earth. And with them, considerable information on human adaptability and potential is also vanishing. "To whatever degree we allow such data to vanish," warns Sorenson, "we diminish our ability to understand our own species."

Fortunately, the technology that has led to the convergence of societies has also produced the quiet, portable film equipment that makes it possible to document social and behavioral situations before they vanish. Fostering such work will be among the goals of the film center.

Already in existence, however, are



Taiwan women, political and religious beliefs in Afghanistan (right) and rural economics of China Coast Islands are among the film projects of AUFS.



Photos: AUFS



thousands of valuable films. All such material represents a scientific and humanistic resource, Sorenson contends, that should not be allowed to deteriorate. A 1926 film by Matthew Sterling, for example, documents the first meeting of New Guinea aboriginal peoples with technological society. This rare film, ap-

parently lost, was found decaying in the stacks of the Smithsonian. With the help of Sterling (before his recent death) the film was reconstructed and is now a permanent part of the archive.

Similarly, thousands of feet of film are disregarded by some anthropologists as they edit and select only that which interests them. But the outtakes, too, can be extremely valuable if properly labeled and indexed for a film archive. Someone recording child behavior, for instance, might discard footage that would be useful to someone interested in documenting social interactions or facial expressions.

The National Anthropological Film Center will collect and preserve, but it will also be involved in producing films. An excellent example of the type of film the center is interested in was presented at the center's opening. For several years, Sorenson has been involved with Norman Miller, project director of the American Universities Field Staff (AUFS). Together, they have come up with what they regard as an innovation in anthropological film.

The AUFS is a consortium of ten uni-

versities in the United States. It employs a group of 28 former journalists living in and reporting from various parts of the world. The writers remain in the field for two years, reporting monthly on social and political changes. They spend a third year lecturing (for public audiences and at the member universities) about their experiences.

Sorenson, utilizing the expertise of the AUFS correspondents, sent film crews into countries representing a variety of cultural and ecological situations. The three-year project produced 85 hours of documentary film from five countries—Bolivia, Kenya, Afghanistan, Taiwan and the China Coast. In each country, filming concentrated on five general themes—rural society, education and socialization, rural economics, women and political and religious beliefs. The result, after editing, is a five-by-five matrix of 25 films that can be used for educational or research purposes. The series is titled, "Faces of Change."

In addition to acquainting the film crews with the respective cultures and environments, the AUFS area representatives will provide monographs and basic documentation to be used in conjunction with the films.

The five-by-five format gives users maximum flexibility. Teachers, for instance, will be able to look at women in five different cultures or at five aspects of one culture. The matrix, says Miller, "gives to users 600 'components' of film to push around any way they wish." Among the first users of the series will be the Smithsonian, which plans to begin public screenings next month. The producers are also hopeful that several of the films may be aired on public television next fall. And for researchers, the entire uncut and fully annotated footage will be available as basic evidence through the film center.

In addition to continued collaboration with Miller and AUFS, Sorenson has a number of filming projects underway. Among them are studies of nomads in Afghanistan, rare Hindu rituals in India, religious ceremonies of the Sierra Madre Indians, Melanesian peoples in the New Hebrides and an early type of agricultural society in New Guinea. As ambitious as these projects may sound, and as successful as the AUFS series seems to be, Sorenson admits that the film center is not really off to a flying start. Both he and Margaret Mead, "the godmother of the film center," are unhappy with the present state of funding. On the center's opening day, for instance, an emergency request for cash to buy film came in from a team in Afghanistan. For lack of funds, a personal check had to be sent. But even with the present money problems, the National Anthropological Film Center does at least finally exist. And, says Sorenson, "by contributing to a better informed society, such films will help make our future more human and more humane." □



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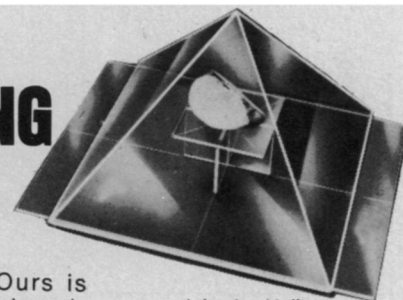


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