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Unlocking the Archive: Cultural and Ethical Considerations Surrounding the Future of the Melanesian Film Archive

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Abstract

The Melanesian Film Archive (MFA) is an extensive collection of medical and anthropological films. Medical films in the archive principally concern the work of Dr D. Carleton Gajdusek, Michael P. Alpers and others related to the aetiology of kuru, a neurodegenerative disease. The Archives' anthropological collection comprises 513 research documentary films, mostly shot in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in the 1960s, but also in Melanesia, the Pacific region and elsewhere; anthropological records are supplemented by reel-to-reel audiotapes. This paper considers access and sharing complexities caused by recent preservation activities, including digitisation of these fragile and important films and associated documentation to preserve them for future researchers. Digitisation and possible digital repatriation of this material raise important cultural, legal and ethical considerations that must be addressed, including MFA data governance needs and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights, access and sharing.

Keywords: *Audiotapes; Digitisation; Digital repatriation; Films; Indigenous; Kuru; Papua New Guinea.*

Melanesian Film Archive

Held at Curtin University in Western Australia, the MFA began as a film collection compiled by Dr D. Carleton Gajdusek of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, United States of America (USA).¹

The collection was put into temporary storage following Gajdusek's departure from the NIH. Gajdusek requested that the collection be sent to Curtin University and placed under the care of Michael P. Alpers (MPA). The university agreed to create a facility to keep the original films under strict temperature and humidity control, and they were shipped from the USA to Curtin in 2005. Medical and ethnographic films and other

1. Curtin University, Melanesian Film Archive, 2023, available at <https://www.curtin.edu.au/archives/melanesian-film-archive/>, accessed 30 August 2023.

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records of indigenous peoples' lives and communities in PNG, Melanesia and elsewhere cover the years from 1926 to 1980.

Although Curtin University has held the Archive since 2005, digitisation work began only in 2021, shortly after the Digitisation Centre of Western Australia (DCWA) was commissioned.² Curtin Information Management and Archives staff work with MPA, the Archive's principal custodian and curator, to manage the collection and plan its future. As well as exploring how the University manages access to, and use of, the archive as digitisation of the 16 mm films proceeds, this includes how we engage with people from the indigenous cultures represented in the films about the ownership and repatriation of digitised material.

This work has brought to the fore issues surrounding the appropriate use and sharing of the Archive by establishing and maintaining data governance frameworks and has raised significant questions about the ownership and repatriation of archival material.

The MFA contains 513 catalogued films made by various creators. While the collection began with medical films about kuru, a neurodegenerative disease highly prevalent in the remote Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), it later included material from other disciplines such as anthropology and paediatric behaviour in indigenous people.

The Archive includes historically important films, including those taken on Matthew Stirling's expedition to West Papua in 1926, Beatrice Blackwood's films of the Änga (then called the Kukukuku) from PNG in 1937 and Margaret Mead's films from Manus Island in 1953. The collection's films are of great interest and importance to researchers, not only because of their cultural, scientific and heritage value, but also because of the methodology used to design and produce the films, form the Archive, arrange for film deposits and manage and preserve the films as records. While some of these films may be copies or master versions with copies held elsewhere, this film Archive was purposely created to provide a cohesive and interrelated record of these indigenous peoples through the lens of scientists and scholars.

Along with the workprints, sound reels, videotapes, photographs, slides, negatives, documents, books, reports and journals forming the Kuru Clinical Archives, the MFA contains a film editing table and sound playback equipment, and patient records, correspondence and research notes by contributing scientists, all of which were organised by the curator.

One of this paper's main purposes is to consider how to ensure that the Archive remains intact in its current physical form, and how, once digitised, its value to the academy (in terms of research into the sciences, social sciences and humanities) as well as to the indigenous communities in PNG and elsewhere whose stories are contained within it can be maximised while ensuring that ethical and legal frameworks are upheld.

Apart from considering how to ensure that the Archive's current physical form remains intact, this paper also investigates how to maximise the collection's value, once its constituent elements are digitised, to the academy (in terms of research) and to the people of the indigenous communities in PNG and elsewhere whose stories are told within it while upholding ethical and legal frameworks.

Setting the scene: finding the cause of kuru

In 1957, Dr Carleton Gajdusek arrived in Okapa in the Eastern Highlands of PNG, where kuru had become widespread among the Fore people and neighbouring peoples with whom they intermarried. Gajdusek and his team, soon to include Alpers, began

2. DCWA, which aims to ensure the archival-standard digitisation of cultural materials significant to Western Australia and the world, was established with funding from the Australian Research Council. This funding was won by the joint efforts of the Associate Deans Research Network (a collective of the humanities, arts and social sciences faculties of all Western Australian universities), the State Library of Western Australia and the Western Australian Museum.

using film to document this disease, its geographic boundaries and its effects on people suffering from it.³ The Fore called the disease ‘kuru’, which means trembling or shaking, reflecting its symptomology of uncontrollable tremors, muscular incoordination, inability to walk, emotional lability and behaviour changes. After the onset of symptoms, which were mild initially, the disease progressed inevitably to death around 12 months later.

Gajdusek and his colleagues discovered that kuru was transmissible, with the mode of transmission linked to the Fore mortuary practice of transumption of the bodies of dead loved ones (Gajdusek et al., 1966; Alpers, 2007; Whitfield et al., 2015). Women and children were the main participants in this practice and comprised majority of the disease victims (Whitfield et al., 2008). A transmissible agent – later shown to be an infectious, self-propagating protein called a prion – was identified as the cause of kuru. Gajdusek’s and his colleagues’ findings caused a breakthrough in worldwide research into other perplexing neurodegenerative diseases (including dementia), which are now, along with kuru, collectively known as prion diseases. The practice of transumption was banned by PNG’s colonial administration in the 1950s, leading to a gradual decline in deaths from kuru and the disruption and social change caused by the loss of family and community members. The epidemic, which was causing 200 deaths a year when first investigated, eventually ended in 2009, with the last kuru sufferer dying after a disease incubation period of 50 or more years.

Gajdusek’s and his colleagues’ work immeasurably benefited humankind by informing investigation into many aspects of these prion diseases and neurotoxicity, as well as the role genetics plays in the disease processes. The Archive’s films are both epidemiological and ethnographic in nature, but describing them in these terms does not do justice to the astounding richness and depth of the cultural and social imagery recorded, which includes scenes of daily life in a village – making salt, dressing a pig for eating, gardens being worked, children playing and learning to walk and celebrations of life such as weddings, rituals and dancing; and food preparation – and footage of medical conditions rarely seen today in the Western world (e.g., goitre, cretinism, yaws), and of magnificent rivers, panoramic vistas, aerial views of landscapes and more. As MPA explains regarding the development of the collection:

It initially contained film taken by Carleton, and then by E. Richard Sorenson ... and then by me when I came to the National Institutes of Health in 1964. It took a while before we had a separate unit with staff and equipment dedicated to the film and the still photographic collection. We had a collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution, where Sorenson eventually went to work, and through that connection obtained copies of films by Margaret Mead, for example. Other people donated their films to the collection. Others ... obtained their film stock and its processing from the NIH, and perhaps received other support, and deposited their completed films with their documentation in the NIH collection. (M.P. Alpers, personal communication, May 2022).

3. In the mid-1960s, Gajdusek, whose areas of study included paediatric behaviour in what were then considered ‘primitive’ societies, and E. R. Sorenson, who studied child behaviour in primitive societies and human development, agreed to build a cohesive collection of films dealing with these subjects, which led to the creation of what would eventually become known as the Melanesian Film Archive. They explained the decision as follows:

In addition to the Research Films taken as part of our own studies, we have searched extensively throughout the world to locate films taken by other investigators interested in primitive man [sic]. ... We have encouraged such workers to deposit their original uncut footage in the Archive and to work it into the Research Film Format. (Sorenson & Gajdusek, 1966, p. 190)

An enduring record

Gajdusek and Sorenson developed rules and protocols for managing and reusing research and documentary film footage. Their article dealing with the rationale for creating this collection includes a descriptive listing of films deposited following those rules and protocols (Sorenson & Gajdusek, 1966). Their production and research processes were designed to preserve a master of each film (uncut and unedited) to ensure a complete and authentic record of the event filmed was always retained. Workprints were made available as needed for the preparation of ‘research’, ‘special’ and ‘demonstration’ films. The original films and master copies were despatched to the cold room, while the copied films were held ready for showing with the workprints going into the Film Unit’s storage space.⁴

The evidence of multiple creators and cross-jurisdictional content in the Archive provides Curtin University with complex choices when dealing with the consequences and potentials of digitisation.⁵ The film Archive’s provenance is complicated because the MFA has developed its own meaning over time. Each film is a record, but information about it is also a record, while the entire Archive is a record of a scientific and creative research project. Multiple provenance arcs must be considered, not least of which is the source of each film’s content – the clans, tribes, communities and linguistic groups of PNG as well as the people of the other nations represented in the Archive’s records. As MPA clearly explains, ‘[m]ost of the activities on these films can no longer be found, so they form a cultural record of human beings that is irreplaceable’ (M.P. Alpers, personal communication, 2022).

Understanding the MFA as a multifaceted and interconnected set of records assists the collection owner and custodians in mapping a future for the Archive. The films are not only a trove of medical and ethnographic data, but also a record of family memory and individual lives. At a collective level, they are a record of community and national memory and identity from 1926 to 1980. Except for the Fore community, with which MPA maintains close contact, documented communities may be unaware of the existence of these films and what they record. They may also be unaware of the efforts being invested in preserving and managing the Archive for the future.

The changing responsibilities of collection owners/holders

In essence, we know that the cultural and traditional information and personal lives of the Fore people and others represented in the Archive were documented by film and sound and taken elsewhere for examination by researchers and scholars interested in anthropology and medicine. This was to ensure the films and their sound data would be useful in many areas of study, but this did not happen because the Archive was locked away. However, digitisation of the Archive means we can now explore how we can make its contents accessible for both researchers and source communities. In the context of wide-ranging discussions about Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and traditional cultural expression and ethics, we as the Archive’s custodians have a changed and complex responsibility.

Among the questions we must consider are: How did the MFA films come about? Was consent sought from the communities filmed? Did these communities understand the function and role of the films being made? Have the recorded subjects or their descendants been

4. Access to the films is by a five-volume catalogue – the Central Nervous System Studies Laboratory (CNSSL) catalogue – that organises and indexes most of the films by creator details, ethnographic location and film type. Many films have detailed technical descriptions, summaries and explanations, and each series usually has a detailed statement about that series and each film.

5. As we examine each MFA record series, it is becoming evident that some films have surrogates elsewhere. It may be difficult to determine whether some of the films in the Archive are copies or masters. Curtin University will look for future opportunities to discuss these possibilities with other archives. This situation is not unique to the MFA (see, e.g. Sassoon et al., 2023).

informed that these records exist and what they contain? Whose rights and responsibilities are being protected in the preservation of the Archive as a whole? Importantly, how can the communities represented in these records make informed choices and decisions about what can be done with them for future generations, given the films depict past medical conditions and aspects of social, cultural and ritual practices?

We continue to reflect on these important questions as we consider and prepare for the future of the MFA. As joint custodians of the Archive, Curtin University and the PNG Institute of Medical Research have signed a deed acknowledging the moral rights of the people whose images were filmed, giving the University the right to digitise the films for preservation purposes, to facilitate access to them and their use for research and scholarly purposes. While digitisation continues the long chain of effort to preserve the MFA, it has also created an archive that will ultimately have two realities: first, the physical and fixed location of the Archive at Curtin University, where the format of the films is a barrier to research use and where there are mature and appropriate governance principles and strict protocols for access and protection from inappropriate use; and, second, the digital copy, which offers the potential for multiple audiences, access points and uses, and – where its use becomes fluid and dynamic as technology advances – to synchronise with the university's digital capability. While both realities have important associated ethical questions, the concerns of the second are amplified by digitisation and the use of digital technologies. As LeClere (2018, p. 290) makes clear:

Digital archives may seem like an equitable quick fix, but like their physical counterparts they still ask marginalised groups for the highest contribution to these projects – because while digital archives create more democratic access, they also create more opportunities for the private and/or sensitive information within archives to be disseminated widely, and often without consent.

We are examining how these concerns can be mitigated by an access and engagement framework to protect and share the Archives and its contents, and by acting with empathy and respect for its creators and subjects.

While recognising the significance of these films, we also acknowledge that they were made in an era when the research landscape was different from that of today. Ethics approvals were generally neither sought nor were they always part of the process involved in forming what are now common activities in any tertiary institution – writing research proposals, seeking required funding and obtaining ethical clearances and approvals.

One of Curtin University's most pressing concerns is how access to the digital iteration of the MFA will be managed. This will pivot around building a more complete understanding of the context, origins and content of the Archive, the people whose personal and collective histories are held within it and the intentions of its creators by having a clear sense of how they communicated what they were doing to the people depicted in the films. Informing the descendants of the subjects of the films about their existence and providing them with accurate information about what they depict will necessitate a new direction for the Archive. When considering how to develop these protocols, it is germane to draw on the Indigenous Archive Collective of Australia, which provides guidance and frameworks on the right of reply and the right to know in relation to the depiction of people in filmic works in Australia. The Collective (2021, p. 246) states:

the *Right of Reply* can provide alternative versions and descriptive frameworks which sit alongside, rather than replace, the organisational interpretation of records. In a fully implemented participant model, every contributor, including the person whom the record

is about, has legal and moral rights and responsibilities in relation to ownership, access and privacy.

This framework is useful for Curtin when considering how best to share the materials held within the digitised archive while also protecting and respecting the rights of the communities and individuals depicted in the films. These responsibilities must be shared between the curator and other custodians, the archivists and the University itself. At a summit held at the National Library of Australia in 2019, the Tandanya – Adelaide Declaration was presented to David Fricker, then Director-General of the National Archives of Australia and President of the International Council on Archives (ICA). The declaration states that archivists have a:

responsibility to re-imagine the meaning of archives as an engaging model of social memory; to embrace the Indigenous worldviews and methods of creating, sharing and preserving valued knowledge. To decolonise our archival principles with Indigenous knowledge methods, to open the meaning of public archives to Indigenous interpretations ... the remodelling of traditional archival principles. (ICA, 2019, p. 2)

However, because the MFA is not a public archive, there are constraints in how it might be shared, and we must weigh access requests against a range of considerations.

To ensure transparency in how we consider access and use requests, Curtin established an internal committee to review requests and ensure alignment with the University's deed with the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research; compliance with privacy, copyright and archival (Australian) laws; ethic frameworks and how engagement has occurred (or will occur) with the descendants and kin of individuals or communities depicted in the films or their representatives. A consideration is whether participating source communities know these films exist before they are used, and that, second, we understand the films' context, which is critical to determining their future. We know this will impose barriers for researchers as we navigate how to provide appropriate (digital) access. Bingo (2011, p. 521) argues that access to archival records should not be subject to hard-and-fast boundaries, but should come down to the exercise of judgment using identified standardised criteria and tools:

Ultimately, contextual integrity provides an example of a structured means to evaluate privacy risk, one that can be applied to different functions, from appraisal to access. If, as [Sara] Hodson argues, archivists bear an ethical responsibility to protect the privacy of third parties, a set of standard criteria or tools can help assure both archivists and donors that a certain level of rigor is applied to privacy questions. Because privacy will always be subject to the archivist's judgment, our goal should not be the creation of hard and fast boundaries, but rather the identification of tools that will help evaluate risk and provide confidence that reasonable steps are taken to protect privacy.

The process of digitising the MFA has highlighted the nuance and specificity of the tools available to carry out that risk evaluation. What guidance can we utilise to do this? The Global Indigenous Data Alliance (GIDA) has a range of principles to inform the ethical management and dissemination of indigenous data, and has championed the adoption of the Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility and Ethics (CARE) Principles for Indigenous Data Governance:

The current movement toward open data and open science does not fully engage with Indigenous Peoples rights and interests. Existing principles within the open data movement (e.g. FAIR: findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable) primarily focus on characteristics of

data that will facilitate increased data sharing among entities while ignoring power differentials and historical contexts. The emphasis on greater data sharing alone creates a tension for Indigenous Peoples who are also asserting greater control over the application and use of Indigenous data and Indigenous Knowledge for collective benefit. (GIDA, 2019, p. 1)

As this makes clear, it is crucial that indigenous peoples are involved in decision-making about any future use of an archive relating to their lives and cultures.

As its custodians and archivists, we are determined to ensure that when the MFA is available in its digital form, we follow appropriate and culturally sensitive protocols, maintain its integrity as an archive and protect its records for future generations (Thorpe & Brooker, 2022, p. 442). We are also informed by the work of Terri Janke, who established and championed ICIP rights in Australia and developed a framework and protocol that are gradually being adopted by organisations and institutions nationally.⁶

Thorpe and Brooker (2022) point out that many Australian arts organisations have developed guidelines to work with indigenous peoples and to understand ICIP rights, particularly those relating to the reproduction and use of indigenous cultural heritage materials.⁷ These frameworks provide guidance on the key ethical and cultural considerations that must be adhered to when considering future digital repatriation of this valuable cultural heritage material.

The question of repatriation

Applying the principles and frameworks outlined earlier in the text to the future digital management of this Archive includes considering research on, and key arguments about, decolonisation and repatriation of archival records. These specific matters will need to be addressed by Curtin University, its archivist and the MFA curator.

Apart from considering the rights of the communities involved, Curtin is responsible for the protection of, and access to, important historical, cultural, spiritual and medical information contained within the Archive and the future of the Archive itself. Important questions to be considered include: Who should have access? What restrictions should be placed on this? Is digital repatriation currently possible, or advisable? What do we mean by digital repatriation? What form should this take? Who should make these decisions? These and other key questions require detailed and careful consideration before any action can take place.

While an access review process has been established at the University, in the longer term it will be necessary to consider even more complicated questions when the entire Archive is digitised. As Bell et al. (2013, p. 196) make clear:

Digital repatriation can be a contentious term that generates reflex assumptions about the relationship between digital and material forms of cultural heritage materials. While it may be tempting to assume, at first glance, that the digital object – as a surrogate – somehow

6. ICIP protocols ensure indigenous peoples have the rights to own and control their cultural heritage; within Australia, this includes traditional knowledge (scientific, agricultural, technical and ecological knowledge, ritual knowledge); traditional cultural expression (stories, designs and symbols, literature and language); performances (ceremonies, dance and song); cultural objects (including, but not limited to arts, crafts, ceramics, jewellery, weapons, tools, visual arts, photographs, textiles, contemporary art practices); human remains and tissues; secret and sacred material and information (including sacred/historically significant sites and burial grounds); and documentation of indigenous peoples' heritage in all forms of media such as films, photographs, artistic works, books, reports and records taken by others, sound recordings and digital databases (Australian Council for the Arts, 2019).

7. Thorpe and Brooker provide an extensive overview of the issues facing libraries and the sector more broadly in matters of Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property, at the heart of which is that 'Library and information workers will need to examine their collections with respect and understanding and be willing to challenge past collecting practices that dispossessed Indigenous peoples of agency and self-determination' (Thorpe & Brooker, 2022, p. 442).

replaces the physical object, no standard definition, nor agreed-upon terminology, characterizes the multiple practices of collecting institutions, individuals, or local community groups surrounding the return of cultural and historical materials to indigenous communities in a digital form.

To ensure community members' moral rights are protected, engagement and understanding will need to be developed collaboratively with community leaders, particularly in PNG, before any material is repatriated digitally. Digitised copies should be returned in a way that provides the relevant participants (both PNG communities and relevant researchers) with historical information and archival details about the films. Some films could be distressing or may contain ceremonial events and activities intended for viewing only by some members of a community. Careful planning, study and discussion must occur so that the social, cultural and personal needs of the relevant PNG communities in PNG are considered. Discussions with PNG national and regional museums and libraries and the PNG Office of Libraries and Archives will be key to this.

Technical considerations

Digital repatriation of this material to PNG raises challenging technical considerations and questions. It would be unwise to return material without an institution or community centre ready to manage the films, provide curation, apply consistent and equitable access to it for the community and develop appropriate criteria for its external use.

Technological advances mean that options to ameliorate some of these issues are increasingly available. One question that must be addressed is whether the Archive needs to be physically in situ in a local community or whether the digital objects might be held offshore. If this were to happen, we would need to ensure the community has appropriate access to, and oversight of, these objects while the physical objects would remain held in and be administered (in terms of preserving the physical films and other records) by Curtin University.

To determine this matter, detailed discussions need to take place along with careful benchmarking against similar collections held in other locations throughout the world. For example, the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC) works across several Pacific Ocean cultures with the aim of preserving filmic records by reformatting and encouraging deposit of video and sound recordings. PARADISEC, now in its 20th year, is a consortium of Sydney University, the Australian National University and the University of Melbourne that promotes cultural preservation by providing data backup and preservation services to cultural agencies in the Pacific region and access to recordings in over 700 collections through an online catalogue. Access conditions vary collection by collection.

It is evident that we will need appropriate protocols and guidelines before the MFA material is repatriated – PARADISEC's work is appropriate to examine in this regard.

In conclusion ... for now

MPA (personal communication, 2022) has stated that 'one of the important ethical principles to keep in mind is how unethical it would be not to make these films available to the world'. While this is a key point, we note that context matters for discussion of both digital and physical repatriation. In this case we believe the current collection owner and custodians are ethically responsible for sharing the material both with the world and with the materials' communities of origin. However, they must do so with respect, care and appropriate framing.

There is no desire to prevent access, but there is a strong desire to ensure that access benefits those who gain it (researchers, communities and individuals) and that the material is used to enrich lives. As Were (2014, p. 155) points out:

One of the defining features of digital heritage is that the technology facilitates a new kind of knowing by embracing an analytical understanding of objects through imaging tools and the sharing of knowledge that augments real-life engagement with material culture. Digital heritage allows for a new coming together or completeness (Rowlands 2004) by foregrounding the dispersal of cultural objects that once existed in one particular time and place, leading to the reinvigoration of dissipated identities and cultural loss through relocation and restitution.

While this sounds admirable and aspirational, we must resolve many complicated matters before this specific digital archive is given the opportunity to facilitate the ‘reinvigoration of dissipated identities’ – if indeed this is the case in relation to the communities of the Eastern Highlands of PNG.

As MPA (personal communication, 2022) further observed:

We need to develop an increased sense of trust with communities without causing unrest. We need to move ahead in parallel ways, so that, for example, films can be accessed and used before all aspects and aspirations have been achieved.

A good example of this is the use of MFA archival footage in the Bygott and Alpers kuru documentary (2010). The directors strictly followed the rules established by the MFA curator as interim guidelines. Their proposal for the film was approved in advance by the Medical Research Advisory Committee of Papua New Guinea. Once the new film had been shot and edited and the archival footage added, the rough cut of the documentary was shown to a group of male and female elders from the Fore and a neighbouring group for their approval. This approval was obtained, ensuring acceptance by the community of the use of the archival footage and of the full content of the documentary, and the film went into production for showing on television. A notable feature of this documentary is that it gives a voice to the Fore, otherwise rarely heard, about the disease that affected them so grimly.

It is important to keep in mind that along with the possibility of doing harm, there is also the possibility of the digital material acting as a catalyst for cultural enrichment and transformation, as outlined by Bell et al. (2013, p. 196):

Digital surrogates are not always intended to replace, or be synonymous with, the physical materials that they may represent. Instead, digital (or digitized) cultural materials may also provide an alternative form of – and dynamic life for – certain physical objects. Such newly digitized and repatriated materials may be the impetus for linguistic or cultural revival, spur contention and disagreement, prompt new cultural forms or popular products, incite new collaborations, and engender new types of performances and artistic creations.

The expressed purposes and moral viewpoints of those who took part in making the films must also be given consideration and, arguably, a high priority. Often these will not be known and, if they are, may possibly conflict with contemporary community views – for instance, in many cases the determination of what can be revealed of sacred rites fluctuates over time and varies within communities. One example of a strong intended purpose expressed by an original participant film may be found within the MFA: Puwa was the salt-maker of his village

and the only person skilled in the sophisticated technology of making salt from potash. Now deceased, in the 1960s he was the joint initiator of his film because he wanted to demonstrate to his descendants that he and his contemporaries, who had just ceased living in a fully traditional culture, were not primitive people, something he articulated firmly to MPA (personal communication, 2022). To fulfil his purpose and respect his voice, Puwa's film is being made.

This clearly shows that the custodians at Curtin University must view the MFA's future accessibility from a range of perspectives. The MFA's holdings have the potential to reach a range of academic disciplines – including medical, anthropological, sociological, cultural, artistic and historical fields – and MFA stewardship must be supported in an integrated and comprehensive legal, technical and data management system. As MPA (personal communication, 2022) reminds us, 'Curtin University will need to make some firm decisions about how this archive can be shared with the rest of the world as well as of course being properly preserved'.

The University must build an enduring dialogue and a trust-based relationship with the creators of the films and the descendants and/or representatives of the people who were the subjects of the films. The different goals and objectives of these groups in engaging with the material, from reconnecting with their heritage, cultural practices and ritual to undertaking research through the Archive, must be understood and respected. The focus must be human-centred and empathic: the custodians and archivists should be prepared to learn the stories of those involved to improve the practices of custodianship relating to the MFA. This will be a continuing journey for this Archive, one that will intersect with questions about repatriation, ICIP, ethics and responsibility and respectful engagement.

Notes on contributor

Professor **Michael Alpers** AO, CSM, FRS, FAA and John Curtin Distinguished Professor of International Health at Curtin University, was an Australian medical researcher whose contribution to science and medicine improved public health outcomes for people around the world. His most known work was on the prion disease, kuru. He was also Director of the Papua Institute of Medical Research (PNGIMR) for 23 years, developing research programs of practical significance to Papua New Guinea, many of which continue today. Ever the humanitarian and scholar and a friend to us all, he passed away on 3rd December 2024

Susanna Castleden is Director of the John Curtin Gallery at Curtin University. As an artist and academic Susanna passionately advocates for the recognition of humanities research, its diverse methodologies and approaches, and champions the important role the creative arts contribute to society.

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Editorial note: The General Editors note that this article unintentionally uses a referencing style other than the *Archives and Manuscripts* house style. Please accept our apologies for this conflict with the journal style.

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