IU Libraries and Archives of Traditional Music 
Receive Major Funding to Catalog 
and Preserve Somali Materials

Indiana University has received a major grant from the U.S. Department of Education, under Higher Education Title II-C, to process, preserve, and catalog an important addition to IU's current holdings of Somali music, oral poetry, and library materials. The total grant for $339,000 was submitted jointly by the Archives of Traditional Music and the Indiana University Libraries. Heading the project is Ruth Stone, Director of the Archives. John Johnson (Folklore, IUB), a noted specialist on Somali oral poetry, is serving as a consultant to the project.

The Archives of Traditional Music will receive half of the project funds to preserve and catalog some 800 tapes of the Somali language, copied from the Somali Service Archives of the British Broadcasting Corporation, a rich repository of materials that includes news broadcasts, interviews with major political and cultural figures of Somalia, public service programming, poetry recitations, folk narratives, and musical and dramatic performances.

The richness of the BBC materials is due in part to the dedication of the British scholar Bogumil W. Andrzejewski, the world’s leading authority on the languages and oral literatures of the Somali and Oromo peoples until his death in December 1994. A professor at University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies, he worked closely with the BBC Somali Service for a number of years. Funds will also be used to process and catalog some of Andrzejewski's own recordings of Somali poetry and music, which he gave to IU’s Archives of Traditional Music over the years through his close friendship with Johnson, who received his M.Phil. under Andrzejewski in the early seventies.

Stone and Johnson underscore the great importance of collecting and preserving Somalia’s oral poetry, especially in view of the current instability of the country. Johnson says that many renowned poets and memorizers of Somali oral poets are in mortal danger. In Somali culture, poetry has an overarching importance in everyday life, being used to express the most profound interpersonal feelings, as when a Somali wife may, without giving offense, sing her husband a traditional poem to tell him that one of his kinsmen is an annoyance, or for expressing political ends, as when an opposition leader sends messages in verse to both his foreign and Somali enemies.

The IU Main Library will use grant funds to preserve—by microfilming and scanning—its own substantial holdings of materials on Somalia and in the Somali language, especially many elementary and secondary school textbooks. Andrzejewski's gift to the IU Library of more than 250 books and government publications will also be so preserved and catalogued. In addition, the library's more than fifty historical posters from Somalia will be preserved by scanning, indexed, and made available over the Internet. According to Africana Librarian Nancy Schmidt, the preservation project has the dual purpose of preserving the Library's Somali holdings and creating a master copy of these materials so that copies of these can eventually be made and sent to Somalia if and when conditions there permit.

Before his death, Andrzejewski, an accomplished poet in his native Polish language, collaborated with his wife Sheila in the translation of an important collection of Somali poems. This work, Anthology of Somali Poetry, was published in 1993 by Indiana University Press. With the addition of the BBC tapes and the Andrzejewski materials, as well as his own continuing contributions, Johnson says that Indiana University has now become the largest holder of Somali poetry in the world.

Andrzejewski (front, center) and members of the Somali Language Commission, May 1951. To his immediate right and left are Muuse H.I. Galaal and Yaasiin Ismaan Kenaadid, two of Somalia's most renowned poets and folklorists, with whom he collaborated for many years.