

From Shoebox to Online Archive

THE DIGITAL HIMALAYA PROJECT PROVIDES DATA AT YOUR COMPUTER FINGER TIPS

By MARK TURIN

Want to read long out-of-print studies of Himalayan society or culture? Tired of having to find a library with dusty old books and threadbare journals? Or paw through old photos, field notes, maps, fragile films, videos and sound recordings...?

Take heart, the digital age is upon us. Now, anybody with access to the Internet can find Himalayan treasures at their fingertips, online through the Digital Himalaya Project.

PROJECT ORIGINS

PIn December 2000, together with Professor Alan Macfarlane, Sarah Harrison and Dr Sara Shneiderman, I established the Digital Himalaya Project at the University of Cambridge to develop digital collection, storage and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region. The plan was simple enough and we felt that the timing was right: many archival ethnographic materials, such as 16mm films, still photographs, videos, sound recordings, field notes, maps and rare journals were fast degenerating in their current formats. As we were anthropologists who worked in Nepal — with the Gurung (Tamu) and Thami (Thangmi) communities respectively — it was logical that we focus our attention on the Himalayas.

We had noted a peculiar paradox. Even though anthropologists were becoming ever more concerned about cultural endangerment and the damaging side-effects of globalisation, and funds were available for scholars to document indigenous cultures that were fast disappearing, very few social scientists were working to ensure that anthropological collections from previous generations

were maintained, refreshed and made accessible, both to researchers and to the descendants of the people from whom the materials were collected. To this end, we applied to the Royal Anthropological Institute in the United Kingdom for a grant to set up the Digital Himalaya Project as a strategy for archiving, digitising and disseminating online legacy ethnographic materials concerning the Himalayan region.

A little seed-corn funding, a small research team and a growing sense that what was still being referred to as ‘the World Wide Web’ was robust enough to deliver compressed video on demand all came together to energise our fledgling project. Alongside the preservation aspect mentioned above, we had two other primary aims: to make our digital resources available over broadband Internet connections for researchers and students, and to return copies to source communities in the countries of origin — such as Nepal, Bhutan, the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Himalayan states of India. When we started the project, we had naively imagined that the West would have the Internet, and ‘the Rest’ would have DVDs and CD-ROMs. How wrong we were!

TECHNOLOGY AS A MASTER CLASS IN BUDDHISM

Archivists specialised in the curation of moving images use the phrase “nitrate won’t wait” to describe the urgency of migrating silver nitrate film to more durable digital formats. Not only were anthropological collections dating from the early 20th century fast degrading, but they were also becoming orphaned, as the technology needed to view them was now obsolete and ever harder to find. The pace of technological adaptation and change is a powerful if brutal lesson in impermanence and non-attachment: it’s still possible to read a book that is 500 years old (as many scholars of classical languages and cultures regularly do), but close to impossible to find a computer anywhere within the University of Cambridge that can read an ‘old’ 8-inch or 5¼-inch floppy disc dating back to the 1980s. The rate of innovation and obsolescence is ever faster, and few fieldworkers pause to reflect on issues such as the longevity and persistence of their recordings before they travel to remote locations around the world to document endangered cultures.

There was a further irony in what we planned to do. While ‘audio-visual’ was a big technology buzzword in the 1990s,

ethnographic fieldwork had already been 'multimedia' or 'multimodal' for about 100 years, with early anthropologists carrying still cameras, wax or plastic cylinder record phonographs and copious notebooks in which to document their personal reflections. When these scholars returned home, though, they were expected to write books in which precious little of the material that they had recorded could be accommodated. And when anthropologists retired, and later passed away, their collections of recordings and photographs were left in shoeboxes in their attic, only to be passed on to university libraries and archives that didn't really want them or know how to catalogue them. So while fieldwork was inherently immersive, making use of all manner of technology, an anthropologist's holistic collection would be split apart when it returned home according to the format of the recording medium: text (to the library), sound (to the audio archives), photographs (to the photo collections) and cine film (often nowhere). The fast-developing web was the natural site for these diverse materials to be reintegrated and served up in a rich searchable and retrievable multimedia format.

FILM COLLECTIONS

In the first phase of the project, five ethnographic collections representing a broad range of regions, ethnic groups, time periods and themes were selected for digitisation, along with a set of maps of Nepal and some important journals on Himalayan studies. One of the most valuable collections was that of the 16mm films taken by Christoph von Furer-Hai-

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mendorf, Professor of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, which spanned from the 1930s to the 1980s. While Furer-Haimendorf's specific interests included the Naga communities of India and the Sherpa of Nepal, he travelled far and wide across the region, taking over 100 hours of film throughout his career. Extraordinary in both its breadth and its depth, his collection is one of the finest surviving ethnographic film collections that document Himalayan cultures.

We started digitising Furer-Haimendorf's films in a cheap and cheerful way ourselves, by projecting the footage and then filming the output through a box of mirrors, and hosting video clips on our website. These snippets caught the attention of the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC) who then

paid for the professional digitisation of the footage using telecine projection. Herein lay another lesson: digitisation is a continuous and ongoing process, not simply a one off, and we began to think of digitising a subset first before committing to undertake the digitisation of an entire collection.

Another important early collection for the project was that of Frederick Williamson, a British Political Officer stationed in Sikkim in the 1930s. He was also an ardent photographer and amateur filmmaker. Between 1930 and 1935, he and his wife, Margaret, took approximately 1,700 photographs throughout the region, presently housed in the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. As well as documenting the Williamsons' travels, their photos provide an unusually well preserved and well-catalogued insight into social life in Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet during the 1930s. Of particular interest to us were the 23 reels of 16mm cine film that Williamson shot while on official trips. We digitised these films, then returned to Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet with sets of DVDs to make them available to institutes, universities and colleges in the region, as well as to the descendants of some of the people we could identify from the footage.

Through the Furer-Haimendorf and Williamson's film collections, interesting and unexpected collaborations began to emerge. The custodians of such collections back in the UK often had only limited knowledge about the context of the footage that they held, based on a few quickly scribbled notes on a film canister or from an ancient accession form. Back in the Himalayas, however, are living descendants of the individuals who featured in these films who could provide a great deal of additional information about the footage, and their insights would add enormous value to the collections. Returning to source communities with DVDs and hard discs, then, was never a mechanical process of cultural repatriation in digital form, but rather an exciting opportunity for partnership by which collections were enriched and better understood, and copies of the footage distributed to the communities who had a stake in its maintenance and content.

JOURNALS, MAPS AND THE NEPAL CENSUS

It was becoming increasingly apparent that we were in a position to expand Digital Himalaya to benefit an ever-wider base ►



Together with Dr Ken Bauer, we produced a series of maps of each of Nepal's 75 districts based on GIS layers showing rivers, roads, settlements and elevation, all of which are widely used and freely available through our website.

of individuals around the world who were connected to the Internet. As scholars, we were frequent users of digital versions of academic journals available through services such as JSTOR, but were surprised to discover that no publications that originated in Himalayan countries could be found in such online archives, severely constraining the access to and visibility of such research. With the agreement of editorial boards and publishers, we started sourcing and scanning back issues of a large number of journals, magazines and publications on Himalayan studies from Nepal, Bhutan, India and Tibet, as well as publications relating to the region that originated in Europe and the United States.

After years of scanning, we now host back issues of many important publications online for free download, including but not limited to: *Ancient Nepal*, *Adarsha*, *Bulletin of Tibetology*, *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, *Gochali*, *Himal*, *Himal Southasian*, *Himalayan Journal of Sciences*, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, *Journal of Newar Studies*, *Journal of the Tibet Society*, *Kailash*, *Martin Chautari Policy Briefs*, *Mulyankan*, *Nation Weekly*, *Nepalese Linguistics*, *Nepali Times*, *Newsfront*, *Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology*, *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, *Purnima*, *Read*, *Regmi Research Series*, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, *Sharada*, *Shikshak* and many others.

The idea is simple: we want to stimulate sales and subscriptions by digitising and hosting back issues (at no cost to the publisher), many of which are now out of print, and thus provide a web presence for

print collections that might otherwise not have made it online. We have found our PDF archive of journals and magazines to be amazingly popular, especially within Himalayan states themselves, where access to good libraries and full collections of printed matter is often poor. Having started with a few journals (*Kailash: Journal of Himalayan Studies* was the first), we soon established a momentum and visibility such that others wanted to join the initiative. Now that we run optical character recognition software over each article, it's possible to search the content of a journal (as long as it was originally printed in a Roman script), and all articles are indexed by Google.

Together with Dr Ken Bauer, we produced a series of maps of each of Nepal's 75 districts based on GIS layers showing rivers, roads, settlements and elevation, all of which are widely used and freely available through our website. We also built an online tool to query data from the 2001 National Census of Nepal, allowing users to download data on economic activity, literacy, marital status, religion, population and school status in four different file formats: .xls, .pdf, .txt and .html. These resources are proving to be very popular the world over, and particularly among students, NGOs and journalists in South Asia, which is very satisfying.

OUR TEAM

Aside from Alan and myself, there were two other founding members of the project: Sarah Harrison and Sara Shneiderman, both scholars of Nepal,

and coincidentally also our wives! Sarah and Sara did an enormous amount of the early work — including designing and hosting our first web presence and preparing collections for online dissemination. As the project developed and changed direction over the years, many other people have become involved. I would particularly like to mention Daniel Ho of New York, a very talented artist and web designer (a rare combination in one person); Hikmat Khadka, a skilled translator and user of Nepali Unicode who joined us for 6 months in Cambridge last year; and Komin Thami, our office manager and principal scanner based in Kathmandu. Digital Himalaya has matured from being a UK-based university initiative to a multi-sited online portal with team members in three continents making use of Skype, Gmail and file transfer services like YouSendIt to work together and ensure that new collections can be hosted online as efficiently as possible.

PROJECT MOVEMENTS

From 2002 to 2005, the project moved to the Department of Anthropology at Cornell University and began its partnership with the University of Virginia. As of 2009, Digital Himalaya is back in Cambridge. These various moves have added a great deal to the project and our collections. I will never forget my joy at seeing the first automatic document feeder scanner, which ingested A4 print outs and spat out a perfect PDF! We made good use of this machine, along with many others, and we now have well over 200,000 pages of text online.

OUR USERS

For a long time, we had no idea of how many users we had and where they were based, but through Google Analytics, we now have a much better sense. Most of our users come from four countries: India, Nepal, the United States and the United Kingdom, but there are sizeable numbers of repeat visitors from Europe and South America also. On an average day, we receive between 150 - 300 visits to our site, and many people spend

COLLECT – PROTECT - CONNECT

The Digital Himalaya Project was begun in 2000 to digitize, store and distribute multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region. It is based at the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University, UK.

Currently, the collection includes:

- Census of Nepal
- Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf archive
- Frederick Williamson archive
- Thak Archive

- Thangmi Archive
- Journals
- Maps
- Films
- Music
- Rare Books

These can all be accessed at:

- www.digitalhimalaya.org
- www.vanishingworlds.org
- For further information contact
- digitalhimalaya@gmail.com

some time downloading movies, audio files or documents from our servers that they can view on their own computers or handheld devices once they are no longer connected to the web.

THE UNEXPECTED

While the project began as a strategy for salvaging, archiving and disseminating the products of (primarily colonial) ethnographic collections on the Himalayas — both for posterity and for heritage communities — Digital Himalaya has become a collaborative digital publishing environment which brings a new collection online every month. The website has grown from being a static homepage with occasional updates to a dynamic content delivery platform for over 40GB of archived data. Similarly, our website has moved from being almost exclusively used by members of Western universities to providing a range of services to a global public, with a particularly strong user base in Asia. Digitisation has been ‘off-shored’ to Nepal, dramatically reducing operational costs and increasing productivity and connectivity with local communities. And perhaps most importantly, our funding no

longer comes from national grant-giving bodies in Europe or the States, but from users, Web referrals and individual donations from around the world. It’s been an exciting, unexpected and very rewarding process, and we continue to receive grateful messages as well as frustrated emails from users when links don’t work (please do tell us), alongside recommendations of areas into which we might expand.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

If you use our online collections and like the way that we have gone about it — free online delivery, without payment, subscription or password — there are a number of ways that you can get involved in the Digital Himalaya initiative. If you are based in the UK, USA or in Europe, and purchase goods through Amazon, please route your purchase through our website <www.digitalhimalaya.org>, as we receive about 4% from Amazon (not from you) of every sale made that originated as a search on our site. This is a simple way of supporting the project, as all funds go directly to Nepal to cover the costs of additional scanning, and you will be helping to bring new collections online. Another

way of supporting us is by sending me an email when you find something that is not working or out of date, and recommending collections to us that we don’t yet have. It was in this manner that we came by *Gochali*, a Tharu-language magazine that began publishing in Dang in 1974, and *Mulyankan*, a forum for leftist and democratic debate, both of which we now host on our website. Our motto, borrowed from the inspirational New Zealand film archive, has been *collect, protect, connect*. We hope that you will join us. ■

The author, Dr Mark Turin, is an anthropologist and linguist who has conducted years of research in Nepal and is fluent in several of its languages. He studied at the University of Cambridge (UK), and completed his doctorate from the University of Leiden (The Netherlands) with a dissertation on Thangmi, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok Districts. In 2007-2008, he was Chief of the Translation and Interpretation Unit of UNMIN (United Nations Mission in Nepal). In 2009, he founded the World Oral Literature Project at the University of Cambridge. He is the author or coauthor of four books, the editor of four volumes and has published numerous articles and book chapters. Mark can be contacted at Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RF, UK, or by email at markturin@gmail.com



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