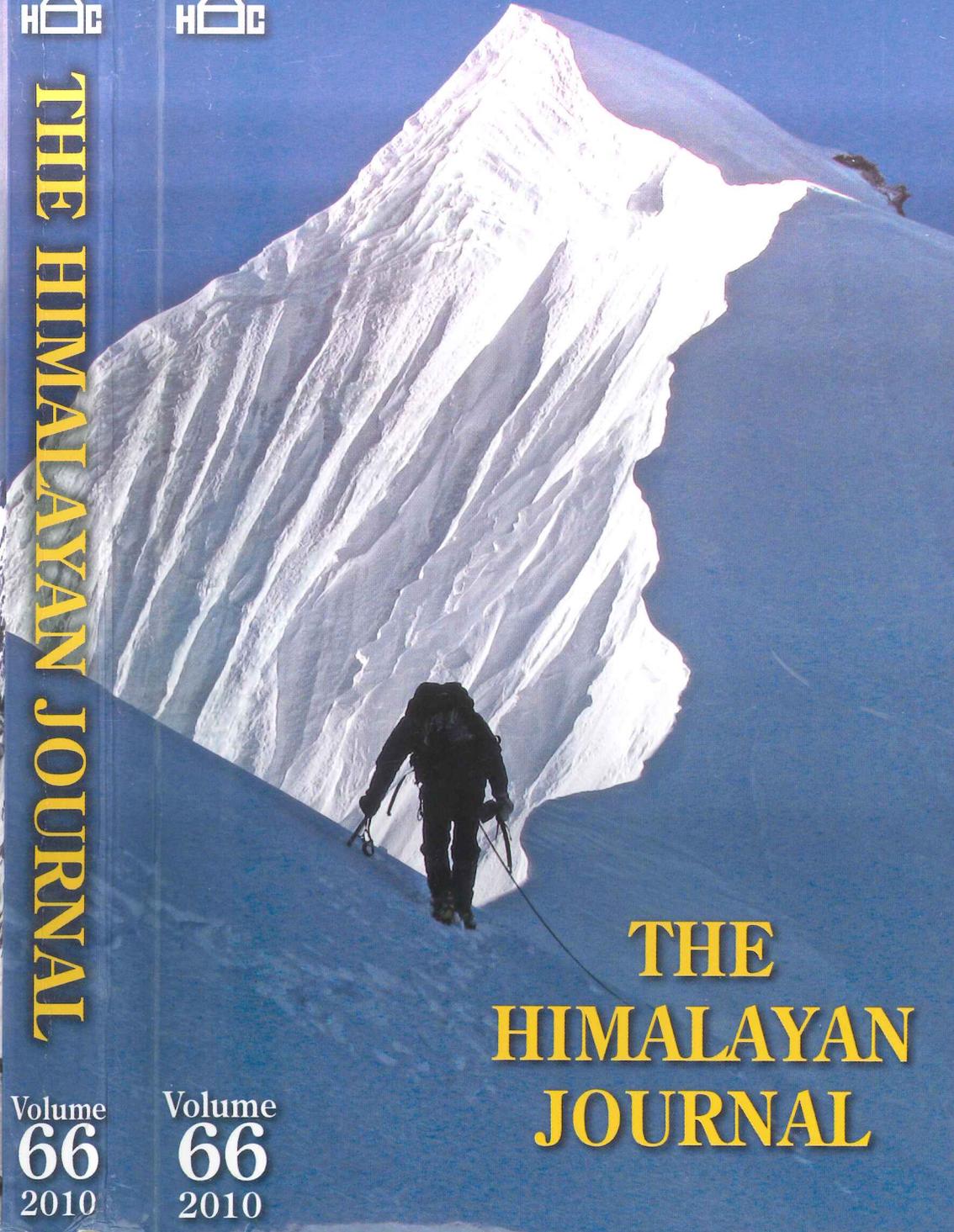




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Silent Witness

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There are comprehensive records for only a tiny proportion of the languages spoken in the world today. While scholars around the globe are attempting to document and preserve the diversity of human linguistic expressions, including here at Cambridge, more than 2400 of these speech forms are endangered and will likely vanish without trace by the end of this century.

A sobering statistic: the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger released by UNESCO in early 2009 claims that more than 2400 of the over 6500 languages spoken around the globe today are in danger of disappearing. These vanishing voices, more than a third of the world's total living languages, can be ranked on a sliding scale from vulnerable to extinct. Many will cease to be used as communicative vernaculars in the next generation of speakers. Most of these languages are entirely oral (or signed) and have no written form, so are at risk of vanishing without trace.

This may not seem like news. After all, we know that linguists around the world have been responding to this threat, quickly and decisively. Over the last decade, projects at SOAS in London, at the Max Planck Institute in the Netherlands and at the National Science Foundation in the United States have been established to support the documentation of endangered languages, train a new generation of field linguists and work collaboratively with speech communities who are actively involved in preserving and revitalising their threatened tongues. Even linguists of a more theoretical bent, such as Noam Chomsky, have become vocal backers of language documentation projects, realising that the wealth of linguistic forms on which their theories rely are at risk of disappearing unrecorded. Perhaps more surprisingly, the urgency of the task has also captured the imagination of a public beyond the academy, with regular media coverage along the lines of 'one language lost every week' or 'last speaker of X dies'. This public interest is encouraging, as it reflects a wider concern with the attrition of all forms of diversity, natural and cultural.

What does language death mean in practice, and what does it look - or rather - 'sound' like? In part, it's the sound of silence and the pain of imperfect communication, crystallised in the expression of my Dutch grandmother, trying so earnestly to explain to me, her English-speaking grandson, what it meant to be an *onderduiker* or 'person in hiding' during WWII in Amsterdam. It's also embodied in the look on the face of my wife's grandmother, a Yiddish journalist who spoke at least seven languages to some level of fluency, as she realised that she would have to write in English, her eighth language, in order to convey her knowledge to a wider audience.

As you can see, the death of a language is not just about words, syntax and grammar, nor will it affect only small, 'traditional' and largely oral cultures. Languages convey unique forms of cultural knowledge. Speech forms encode oral traditions. When elders die and livelihoods are disrupted, it is these creative expressions that become threatened. A well-intentioned and important national education programme in one of the world's major languages, such as Mandarin Chinese or French, may have the side effect of undermining local traditions and weakening regional languages. And for many communities around the world, the transmission of oral literature and performative traditions from generation to generation lies at the heart of cultural practice. As languages die, established systems of learning and knowledge exchange can break down. Globalisation and rapid socio-economic change exert particularly complex pressures on smaller communities, often eroding expressive diversity and transforming culture through assimilation to more dominant ways of life.

I have been working in the Himalaya for the last 15 years, particularly in Nepal - a country of massive ethnic and linguistic diversity, home to over 100 languages from four different language families. Since 1996, I have lived for long periods with the Thangmi community who speak an endangered and until recently, almost entirely undescribed Tibeto-Burman language. For most of these years, I have worked in collaboration with my wife, Dr Sara Shneiderman, now a research fellow in social anthropology at St Catharine's College, who has written about Thangmi religious traditions and cultural practices. Working together with indigenous scholars from the community, Sara and I have been documenting the unique Thangmi language and its associated cultural traditions.

Ever fewer ethnic Thangmi speak the Thangmi language. Many community members have taken to speaking Nepali, the national language taught in schools and spread through the media, and their competence in their ancestral language is rapidly declining. While growing fluency in any national language is of course to be encouraged, and no small feat for an economically unstable country such as Nepal, this progress can be at the expense of unwritten speech forms. Within one family, it's quite common to find a monolingual Thangmi grandparent living in the same household as their middle-aged child who is bilingual in Thangmi and Nepali, alongside grandchildren enrolled in a government village school who speak only Nepali. While this is not an unusual picture around the world, as our own personal histories illustrate, such complete language shift in the space of two generations (with grandparents and grandchildren sharing no common language) can be a massive rupture for a small ethnic group, and one that can have a profound impact on the transmission of cultural knowledge and history. Communities who may have been plurilingual a generation ago, speaking different languages in different social contexts (the home, the local bazaar and elsewhere in the region when trading), are now increasingly schooled through the medium of a national language that firmly instills and reinforces monolingual identities. Even today, multilingualism is often tragically portrayed as an impediment to full citizenship and participation in a modern nation state.

I should confess that it took me the best part of three years to learn Thangmi to a level sophisticated enough to tell a joke, and then another year to be able to tell a joke that was actually funny. This underscores the importance of culture in language: while I had become grammatically adult, I was still a cultural child, with no real sense of what was locally relevant, resonant and meaningful. Part of my struggle was that I was used to learning languages from books where someone else had taken the time to parse each word out and explain the rules of grammar. With Thangmi, I was faced with decoding a complex and unwritten language with no basic rulebook to refer to and with no obvious path into it. It would be like hearing the French phrase *Qu'est-ce que c'est, ça?* for the first time, without knowing how the words fitted together, because they had never before been written down. Bilingual Thangmi-Nepali speakers were my first point of contact, and my early months in the field were spent using (and improving) my existing Nepali language

skills to ask increasingly complex questions on the lines of 'In your language, how would you say 'that man over there is my mother's elder brother?', to which I might receive the tired and slightly irritated reply, and then in Thangmi, 'I told you already, he's not my mother's elder brother but my mother's elder sister's husband', often suffixed with a *sotto voce* 'this light-haired kid learns really slowly'.

But my progress really *was* slow, every success being eroded by another moment of confusion at a more complex puzzle lying in wait. The Thangmi verb 'to be', for example, has a range of different roots, each contingent on the perceived state of permanence of being and whether the speaker has seen the event with their own eyes and thus verified the occurrence. And motion verbs vary by angle of inclination, so that 'to come up a hill' is a completely different and unrelated verb stem from 'to come down the mountain'. It is inconceivable that a native speaker would confuse the two, showing just how deeply the local geography and mountainous topography are etched into the language. The Thangmi lexicon is pretty compact, with just over 2000 'words', and not always ones that we would expect. For example, while there are no Thangmi terms for 'village', 'table', 'left' or 'right', there are specific verbs to mean 'to be exhausted by sitting in the sun all day' and 'to be infested with lice', as well as precise nouns to describe the edible parts of certain leaves or particularly chewy meat that gets stuck in one's teeth. In other words, the lexical inventory of Thangmi reflects those things that are culturally salient and meaningful to its speakers.

The kinship system, which I thought I had finally mastered after many complex diagrams (eight different uncles and aunts depending on whether they are older or younger than parents, and differentiated between blood relatives and those who are married in), actually makes a distinction for gender of speaker, which I didn't realise until I started working with a village woman who, as a 'feminine speaker', turned my whole understanding inside out. Learning Thangmi felt like code-breaking in Bletchley Park, but then all alone: a voyage of incredible excitement and intellectual stimulation, exploding my often narrow expectations of what a language could be. As these above examples show, languages are about so much more than words. Whole conceptual, social and ecological worlds open up when you learn to speak and come to understand languages vastly different from your own.

What is to be done about language endangerment and its grave cultural effects, and by whom? I set up the World Oral Literature Project to encourage collaborations between local communities and committed anthropologists and linguists, and to document and make accessible the voices of vanishing worlds, before they disappear without record. Established in 2009 at Cambridge, and affiliated to the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, we provide supplemental grants for the field documentation of oral literature, publish and archive collections online and in print, and organise lectures and workshops to bring together ethnographers, linguists, archivists, librarians and indigenous scholars to discuss the best strategies for collecting, protecting and connecting research on these endangered narrative traditions.

To some ears, the term 'oral literature' seems a contradiction in terms. Is literature not by definition written? We are accustomed to the scholarly emphasis on languages with celebrated written traditions enshrined in Western universities, often to the exclusion of cultures whose traditions are still transmitted primarily by word of mouth. But we must not forget that while all natural, human languages are spoken or signed, only some have established written forms. While our European epics and classics are published and taught as literature, oral narratives rarely have that chance since, until relatively recently, few indigenous peoples have had a means to document their cultural knowledge in writing. Oral literature must be seen for what it is: complex, beautiful and sophisticated, on a par with the writings of our great authors, but then often at risk or in decline. Such epics, songs, poems, legends and rituals are an invaluable part of a community's heritage and traditional knowledge that may be jettisoned in the name of modernity and progress, and not translated when a community makes the switch to a more dominant language.

Sadly, much of my scholarly work has remained largely inaccessible to our Thangmi friends, being written in a potent mixture of English and the jargon of modern anthropology and linguistics. However, Sara and I have both been involved in publications that are of more interest to the community. I co-authored a trilingual *Thangmi-Nepali-English* dictionary, in the Devanagari (Nepali) script, providing the first written record of the language in a format that could be used in schools and non-formal education settings. Our long-time co-researcher and friend,

Bir Bahadur Thangmi, spent this last summer in Cambridge working with us to transcribe, translate and annotate three major Thangmi ritual recitations as performed by shamans at weddings, funerals and annual festivals. The end product will be a book containing the recitations in the original Thangmi along with Nepali and English translations, accompanied by a DVD showing these events in practice, which we will publish in Nepal. This oral tradition has never before been textually documented, so in addition to filling an important gap in the scholarship on the peoples of the Himalaya, many members of the Thangmi community view the production of such manuscripts as the kind of positive contribution that foreign scholars can make to support their own cultural and ethno-political agendas. In the past, Bir Bahadur might have been referred to as an 'informant', 'consultant' or 'assistant', but I find these terms problematic and insufficient. I prefer the term 'language teacher' and 'local researcher' to describe his invaluable and varied input into our understandings and our work, an appreciation which helps us to rebalance the relationship and reflect on the fact that we, as outside researchers, are working not 'on' his language and culture, but 'with' his community.

While only a pilot project at present, I hope that the World Oral Literature Project will grow into a centre for the documentation and appreciation of endangered oral traditions from around the world, each as rich and unique as the Thangmi language that I have discussed here. We will only succeed, however, if the project is of use and interest to indigenous communities themselves. While Cambridge may be the location where materials are hosted and maintained, both physically and digitally, communities will require copies of the output so that future generations can access and understand the cultural knowledge and language of their ancestors.

Generations of anthropologists have had the privilege of working with indigenous communities and have recorded volumes of oral literature while in the field, but many of our colleagues have not known what to do with these recordings once they finish analysing them. The World Oral Literature Project can provide a way for the material that has been gathered to be preserved and to be disseminated in innovative ways, when that is ethically and culturally appropriate.

The New Zealand Film Archive has a mission to collect, protect and connect New Zealanders with their moving image heritage. These three verbs also summarise our own aims. Collection is the gathering and documentation of oral literature in the field, not in an extractive or acquisitive manner, but in a way that is responsible, collaborative and predicated on trust. Protection is its archiving and curation – doing the best we can to ensure that these unique cultural materials are maintained, migrated and refreshed as new technologies become available. The connection is made when collections are returned to source communities and when they reach a wider public in print and online.

At present, there is no single place that offers researchers and communities from around the world a promise that both historical and contemporary collections of oral literature will be responsibly managed, archived and stewarded into the future. With sustained funding, this is what we hope to provide.

Summary :

A treatise on oral language traditions, with special reference to the Thangmi language of Nepal.

Dr. Mark Turin directs the World Oral Literature Project <<http://www.oralliterature.org/>>, which is affiliated to the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and continues to direct the Digital Himalaya Project <<http://www.digitalhimalaya.org/>> which he established in 2000.