

# At the edge of tomorrow

Limbu sci-fi *Ningwasum* is a powerful assertion of Indigenous possibilities

● Mark Turin

In this bold and beautiful film by Indigenous Yakthung (Limbu) artist Subash Thebe Limbu, two time travellers invite the audience to navigate complex notions of space, memory and the very question of time itself. Through their reflections and mental dialogue with one another, the meditative Miksam and Mingsoma — played by Subin Limbu and Shanta Nepali respectively — explore how our present reality and our sense of what lies ahead might be reimagined by engaging with the unrealised aspirations of historically marginalised communities.

The creator of this extraordinary cinematic offering is a multi-modal artist based in London and Kathmandu whose experiments with sound, film, music, performance, painting and podcasts have resulted in creative works that address deep socio-political issues, practices of resistance and science fiction as well as speculative fiction. Indigeneity and climate change are guiding themes that infuse much of Subash Thebe Limbu's work.

As a film, *Ningwasum* is a singular piece of art. Within the Nepali context, it is entirely unique. As much in dialogue with Afrofuturism and Indigenous Futurism as it is with Yakthung cultural and linguistic traditions, *Ningwasum* summons the viewer to imagine a very different future, a world in which Indigenous peoples have agency, sovereignty and technology. Perhaps most importantly, it envisions a world where the traditional knowledge systems, ecological understandings, ethical frameworks and storytelling practices of Indigenous communities are not only intact but actually thriving. In so doing, *Ningwasum* asserts an entirely new way of thinking about what lies beyond the present to offer a transformative and liberatory idea: Indigenous flourishing and genuine self-determination.

Director Limbu has coined a compelling new term for this— 'Adivasi Futurism'. In a related paper of the same title, he argues that this might be imagined as a space for "futures without — or [that] de-link and dismantle — Brahminical patriarchal

casteism and racism that has been detrimental to Adivasis, Dalits, Madhesis, women and queer people in the region." In conceiving of this to be a domain where it becomes possible to "review and redefine progress", de-linked from nation-states and overturning hackneyed colonial narratives of Indigenous people, Adivasi Futurism becomes a technique for reimagining Indigenous peoples "as not only the storytellers of the past but also as creators of interplanetary and interstellar civilizations of the future." *Ningwasum* is an influential intervention in this space, both advancing the cause and stimulating an important conversation around how *adivasi janajati* cultures and communities are understood by mainstream Nepali society.

As for the film itself, not a great deal happens in *Ningwasum*, but then it doesn't need to, as this is no standard issue Kollywood production. This 44-minute arthouse picture, gorgeously shot and suffused throughout with an ethereal blue filter, invites deep contemplation on what it means to have an expansive imagination. The mothership featured in the film is based on a Silam Sakma, a ritual object commonly used and unanimously accepted to be the symbol of identity among the Yakthung community. Shot on location in the traditional homeland of the Sharwa (Sherpa) community in eastern Nepal, including in

the Wasanglung region which is believed to be the shamanic home of the Yakthung, *Ningwasum* makes powerful, if restrained, use of visual effects, and incorporates some dreamy drone footage. With an arresting soundtrack, *Ningwasum* is entirely in Yakthungpan, known more commonly as the Limbu language. Rendered accessible to a non-Yakthungpan speaking audience through excellent subtitles, the impact of using an Indigenous language for a film of such sophistication operates at many levels. First, it is simply beautiful to hear an *adivasi janajati* language spoken so confidently and gracefully, voiced in this case by celebrated Yakthung artist and singer, Manu Nembang. Not understanding the semantic content of words allows the viewer's mind to drift, picking up only an auditory

input as sounds interact with the visual frame. The overall effect is distinctly otherworldly, and thereby very much in keeping with the director's goal.

Second, releasing a film of this length in an Indigenous language also works at a representational and political level, affirming the contemporary utility, vitality and relevance of a language that might otherwise be viewed by many as inevitably antiquated, situational (as in, couldn't be used outside a village home), and lacking application in the modern world. Finally, choosing Yakthungpan as the medium for this message has a powerful pedagogical purpose, demonstrating to the viewer — and to members of the Yakthung community — that even the most refined forms of contemporary art can be expressed in a traditional



PHOTOS: MANISH TAMANG/SUBASH THEBE LIMBU



language. In this regard, *Ningwasum* reminded me of the award-winning 2018 drama, *Edge of the Knife*, which was filmed and released exclusively in Xaad kil, or Haida, a highly endangered language spoken in the Haida Gwaii archipelago off the coast of Canada and on Prince of Wales Island in Alaska. The process of creating *Edge of the Knife* generated a dynamic context for emerging speakers to gain cultural and linguistic confidence, as actors had to commit to relearning their language through their roles and through crafting the dialogue. I anticipate that *Ningwasum* could have a similar impact within the Yakthung community, particularly among the youth. At the end of *Ningwasum*, the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung — a social organisation representing Limbu community interests that now has global chapters — receives a well-deserved credit, both for its support of this project and its ongoing commitment to furthering the cause of Yakthung culture and language.

I was fortunate to attend a screening of *Ningwasum* in Vancouver organised by the Himalaya Program at the University of British Columbia where I teach. During the question-and-answer session that followed the screening, Limbu confirmed that while the film was shown during the Kathmandu Triennale in March 2022, it is not on general release. As of writing, two international galleries and museums have acquired *Ningwasum*, where the film will be curated and exhibited over time, and others are slated to follow. While I fully understand and appreciate the financial need for such exclusivity, I only wish that more people — particularly in Nepal — could have the experience of watching this extraordinary rumination on culture, language, heritage and our collective future. If you can find a way to experience *Ningwasum*, even just the trailer which is freely available online, you will not be disappointed. Political and passionate, this film is a cry for recognition and respect — not for help — an assertion that Cherokee scholar and intellectual, Daniel Heath Justice, so poignantly refers to as "imagining otherwise." 🇺🇸

Mark Turin is an anthropologist and linguist currently based in Vancouver, Canada. He is a regular contributor to the *Nepali Times* and the Director of the *Digital Himalaya Project*.

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