

WORLD ORAL LITERATURE PROJECT

RECORDING ORAL CULTURES BEFORE THEY DISAPPEAR



The shaman Dirga Bahadur Dumi from the Rai ethnic group recites his oral narrative for two fieldworkers. Baksila, Khotang district, Nepal, 2006.

Marion Weiststein

Worldwide social and economic changes such as population growth and land use threaten the diversity of human culture. The pressures of globalisation are accelerating the extinction of whole cultures as well as animals and plants.

Preserving cultural diversity helps us understand ourselves. Languages are not simply words and grammar, but vehicles for the transmission of people's ideas, cultural knowledge and history.

Without urgent action, oral cultures – cultures without written records – will be lost to us forever.

The Vanishing Worlds Foundation is the primary organisation funding urgent fieldwork to record these cultures before they disappear.

Through the World Oral Literature Project, we document, archive and make accessible endangered oral literature, including verbal arts such as ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, legends and word games; life histories and historical narratives; and practical knowledge of medicinal plants and the natural world.

We have established a proven scalable model for action. With your help, we can take action now.



Maasai tribe members welcoming visitors to their village in the Serengeti National Park. Tanzania, 2008.

William Warby

OUR PROGRAMME

We give fieldwork grants to researchers to make recordings in communities with endangered oral cultures.

We work with the communities themselves to ensure that they have access to and ownership of their recordings and have the means to preserve and disseminate them as they wish.

We archive fieldwork data received from researchers around the world.

We digitise these materials and make them accessible through our website.

We catalogue recordings already held in collections in the UK, both private and public, so that they can be made more widely available.

We run an annual international workshop for professionals and students interested in the preservation of oral cultures.

We publish papers by our researchers, and organise public lectures in Cambridge and elsewhere.

OUR PROGRESS

Two staff, with student support, have:

- ◆ disbursed over £80,000 in 18 grants to researchers in China, Colombia, Greenland, India, Malawi, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, the Solomon Islands and Thailand. Without this funding, the cultural knowledge documented by these projects would most likely have been lost without record;
- ◆ received recordings from scholars around the world who have sought us out as the organisation that can help to protect and distribute their precious fieldwork data;
- ◆ developed an innovative free public database comparing levels of language endangerment from three different data sets, in collaboration with Bill Sutherland, Professor of Conservation Biology at Cambridge;

“We would spend an awful lot of money to preserve a very old building, because it is part of our heritage. These languages and cultures are equally part of our heritage and merit preservation.”

Paul Lewis, editor of the Ethnologue, on BBC News 19 October 2009

- ◆ worked with linguists and archivists, including the team at the Endangered Languages Archive at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS), to develop a tiered-access digital repository that functions both as an archive and as a public resource where ethnographic recordings and cultural collections can be protected and disseminated;
- ◆ catalogued sets of ethnographic recordings in private and public collections in the UK;
- ◆ built and maintained a dynamic, content-rich website with audio, video and textual materials available for free use without registration.

IMPACT AND VISIBILITY

The World Oral Literature Project has caught the imagination of the public, resulting in widespread media coverage including interviews, profiles, video documentaries and articles featured on:

Austrian Radio
 BBC Radio 1, 4 and 5 Live
 BBC Regional Radio
 (Cambridge, 3 Counties, Ulster and Wales)
 BBC World Service Radio
 BBC World TV
 BBC TV Look East
 Cambridge Ideas
 Canadian Broadcasting
 The Chronicle of Higher Education
 The Guardian
 Hungarian Public Radio
 The Independent on Sunday
 Irish Examiner
 La Jornada
 La Repubblica
 The MailOnline
 Newstalk Ireland
 Radio Free Europe
 Radio New Zealand
 The Telegraph
 Times Higher Education

This recognition and visibility has resulted in individual researchers all over the world learning of our existence and sending us their recordings, often representing a lifetime's work.

In 2010, the Reverend Dr John Whitehorn approached us with his unique collection of recordings of Paiwan-speaking communities in Taiwan in the 1950s to ensure that these sounds from cultures that have now been massively transformed would be protected forever.

We have digitised and archived these reel-to-reel recordings, and they are now available for free on our website.



Mani singers. Nkompan, Republic of Guinea, 2004.

Marta P

A LOST CULTURE

There are only a few remaining Kusunda, a tribe of former hunter-gatherers of the forests of western Nepal. The Kusunda language is a linguistic isolate, believed to be unrelated to all other human tongues. The language is no longer spoken by members of the community and there is no record of their unique culture.

OUR GRANTS PROGRAMME

These are some of the urgent field projects that we have supported.

GREENLAND

A year-long research project to document the endangered oral traditions of the Inughuit people living in remote north-west Greenland. *Led by Dr Stephen Pax Leonard*

MALAWI

Documenting story telling in southern Malawi with a focus on three languages (Ciyao, Elomwe and Cisená) that are spoken in village communities where story telling and riddling sessions by children are still living traditions. *Led by Dr Moya Malamusi*

COLOMBIA

Six weeks of fieldwork with Tukanoan-speaking Barasana and their neighbours of the Rio Pirá-Paraná in the Vaupés region of south-eastern Colombia, providing recordings of an elaborate tradition of ceremonial chanting. *Led by Dr Stephen Hugh-Jones*

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), shown on the back page, is an alphabetic system of phonetic notation based primarily on the Latin alphabet. It was devised to provide a standardised way of representing the sounds of any language.

RUSSIA

Audio-visual recordings of epics and heroic songs in Mountain Altai, alongside documenting the surrounding beliefs. *Led by Dr Carole Pegg and Professor E.E. Yamaeva*

PAKISTAN

12 months of collection, recording, transcription and translation of Torwali oral literature. Genres include poetry, folk stories, life histories, local historical lore, riddles, proverbs and idioms. *Led by Inam Ullah*

NEPAL

Archiving the endangered vocal repertoire of Tashi Tsering, the royal singer of Lo Monthang, Mustang, Nepal. In four weeks of fieldwork, 51 songs were recorded, transcribed and translated. *Led by Katey Blumenthal*

INDIA

A record of the oral literatures and cultures of the indigenous Mudugar and Kurumbar communities in Palakkad District, Kerala, using digital video, audio and photography. *Led by Rayson K. Alex*

CHINA

A year-long project to train five local researchers to document oral literature from five locations in the northeast Sino-Tibetan frontier. Digital materials are being returned to the communities. *Led by Dr Kevin Stuart, Gerald Roche and Dr Tshe dbang rdo rje*

THAILAND

Documenting archaic Akha, the register of the shaman, to build a corpus of shamanic ritual speech and train four native-speaking Akha in field linguistics and ethnographic methods. *Led by Jake Terrell*

PHILIPPINES

Six weeks of collaborative fieldwork to describe the oral literature genres of the Ifugao, an indigenous people of the Northern Philippines. Representative examples of each genre were recorded in audio and video. *Led by Dr Roger Blench*



The anthropologist Stephanie Anne Spray filming a local fisherman. Gagan Gauda, Kaski, Nepal, 2006.

Ram Krishna Gandharba

OUR VISION

Over the last 500 years, three quarters of the oral cultures of the world have disappeared. By the end of this century, the remaining oral cultures may be lost. These knowledge systems, passed down from parent to child, are at risk of vanishing without record.

With sufficient funding we can use digital technology to enable worldwide distribution of the recordings of oral cultures and return these recordings to the communities of origin. Many communities are becoming increasingly active with regard to their cultural preservation, but remain marginalised by low visibility and limited funding. We can leverage the energy and commitment of such groups to collect and protect the voices of these vanishing worlds.

At the same time, much of the ethnographic data that has been collected over the last 100 years is at risk of being lost. Films, audio recordings, photographs and field notes remain uncatalogued and are deteriorating in storage. These traces of humanity's diverse cultural expressions just before its transition to modernity are in urgent need of cataloguing, preservation and dissemination.

In 10 years, we aim to have recorded the world's most endangered cultures and to have made a comprehensive inventory of existing undocumented collections.

OUR GOAL

Our two-year pilot has produced significant results and has given us international recognition as well as a proven and scalable model for action.

We must act decisively now. We want to accelerate grant-giving for urgent fieldwork, making 60 grants of up to £10,000 each over the next three years. For only £600,000, 180 endangered cultures can be recorded. To administer grants and process the volume of incoming data, we will need a team of five: project director; research and collections assistant; publications and editorial assistant; grants and financial assistant; and a web designer with database skills.

An investment of £1 million over three years will cover the cost of staff, office space, travel and equipment, publications, workshops, and other essential outreach activities, as well as the digital archive. We are therefore seeking a total of £1.6 million from voluntary sources.

WHO WE ARE

The Vanishing Worlds Foundation is a not for profit company limited by guarantee, registered in England (No.7265872) and registered as a charity with the Charity Commission (No.1137925).

The Foundation's priority is the World Oral Literature Project. Dr Mark Turin, Director of the Vanishing Worlds Foundation, who has led the World Oral Literature Project, has a PhD in linguistic anthropology and over 15 years of fieldwork experience with remote indigenous communities in Asia.

Trustees

Professor Emeritus Alan Macfarlane, anthropologist and historian, Fellow of the British Academy, and Life Fellow of King's College, Cambridge

Sir Charles Chadwyck-Healey, founder of the Chadwyck-Healey Publishing Group

Stefan Kosciuszko, formerly a Schroders banker, Asia House CEO and Hinduja Group Chief of Staff

Steering Committee

Charity Appell McNabb

Dr Laura Appell-Warren

Sir Charles Chadwyck-Healey

Stefan Kosciuszko

Professor Alan Macfarlane

International Advisory Board of the World Oral Literature Project

There are 55 members of the Board and their names and affiliations are listed on our website.

If you are interested in supporting our work, please contact:

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The first two years

The World Oral Literature Project was established with initial support from the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research, and with further funding from the British Academy and the Chadwyck-Healey Charitable Trust. Our activities are centred at the University of Cambridge where we have received invaluable support from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, to which we are affiliated. From July 2011, the project will be co-located at Cambridge and Yale universities.

The World Oral Literature Project is unique in supporting research projects that are initiated by local communities in the field as well as funding research by university-based scholars. We exert no intellectual property or copyright over the collections that our grants generate and that we host online. We have developed a transparent deposit and acquisitions policy, with clear guidelines for grantees and prospective partners.

