



MARION WETSTEIN

Voices of vanishing worlds

Imagine the English language had no written documents and its last few speakers were likely to be dead within a decade. That is the situation faced by hundreds of communities. But now endangered oral traditions have a hope of being preserved for future generations

FIVE YEARS AGO Mark Turin published a dictionary. To be precise, it was a trilingual word list. But more importantly it was the first written record of a little known and endangered Himalayan language – Thangmi – alongside English and Nepali entries.

Although Turin didn't know it at the time, the publication foreshadowed his latest initiative, the World Oral Literature Project. Having encountered the Thangmi language and its speakers in eastern Nepal as a PhD student in linguistics in the mid-90s, Turin realised that neither the language nor culture were known to many outside the community. Next to nothing had been published about the

Thangmi people or the Tibeto-Burman language they spoke.

The word list he published was about much more than recording an endangered tongue. While Turin's PhD thesis focused on the grammar of Thangmi, the indigenous community were far more interested in having a dictionary they could use themselves. His thesis, it was pointed out, would only be available in English, making it largely inaccessible to them.

What they needed was a word list in Devanagari – a script they could read – with accompanying Nepali and English translations. The dictionary was therefore not just about collating Thangmi words

Collect and protect: Above, the shaman Dirga Bahadur from the Rai ethnic group of eastern Nepal recites his oral narrative for two fieldworkers in 2006. Far right, the shaman Tek Bahadur and assistants recite oral texts and make an offering to the ancestors through the fireplace, also in eastern Nepal in 2006

for their preservation: it was about providing the speakers of Thangmi with a written record of their language and a resource they could use. In 2004, the booklet, authored with his long-time friend and co-researcher Bir Bahadur Thami, finally saw the light of day.

Oral literature

The spirit of that work continues in the World Oral Literature Project, which was launched earlier this year. Affiliated to and located in Cambridge University's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the initiative aims to document and make accessible endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record.

So what is "oral literature" and just how many of these voices are under threat? "All natural, human languages are spoken, but only some have an established written form," says Turin.

"In Western universities, there is a scholarly emphasis on languages with

celebrated written traditions, such as Sanskrit, Hebrew and Ancient Greek. Of the 6,500 languages spoken on earth, however, many do not have written traditions, and many of these speech forms are endangered. Our concern is that when an exclusively oral language becomes endangered, the cultural expressions it encodes are also in danger."

Indigenous cultures are often put under pressure by the effects of globalisation or rapid social and economic change. A well-meaning national education programme in one of the world's major languages such as Mandarin Chinese or English may have the side-effect of eroding local traditions and regional languages.

Many such traditions cling to life in the form of oral 'texts', which the World Oral Literature Project aims to collect, archive and disseminate. Oral literature can include chants, epics, poetry, folk tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs and tongue-twisters.

Preserve and share

"In many communities, the primary oral texts are creation myths," says Turin. "Our Western epics are published as literature, but oral narratives rarely are as few indigenous peoples have had a means to document in writing what they know."

"Generations of anthropologists have had privileged access to indigenous communities and have had the chance to record volumes of oral literature, but many scholars didn't know what to do with the recordings of the narratives they had collected once they had been analysed. We are providing a way for the material that has been gathered to be preserved and – when ethically and culturally appropriate – to be shared with heritage communities and disseminated to a wider audience."

The project provides small grants to support researchers and communities around the world who are interested in recording and publishing these traditions before they disappear.

To date, news about the initiative has been circulated, rather like its subject matter, mostly by word of mouth. Nevertheless, Turin has already been inundated with correspondence from interested collaborators and contributors. Each bid for funding is assessed by a review board and by area specialists, and early projects are underway in Colombia, Inner Mongolia, Nepal, the Sino-Tibetan frontier and the northern Philippines.

As this research is fed back to

"Of the 6,500 languages spoken on earth many do not have written traditions – many are also endangered"



ALBAN VON STOCKHAUSEN

Cambridge, the project will assemble a digital repository of oral literature from around the world. Using the web, people will be able to read the transcribed texts and listen to, or watch, recordings of spoken and sung vernacular traditions.

The project also aims to build up a network of scholars and indigenous researchers committed to documenting and analysing oral narratives. In December this year, researchers, museum curators, archivists and other experts will gather in Cambridge for a workshop hosted by the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities to enable them to share ideas on how such fieldwork can best be carried out.

Perhaps most importantly, Turin sees

the World Oral Literature Project, just like his Thangmi dictionary, as being a resource that will only succeed if it is of use and interest to the communities themselves. While Cambridge can be the place where the 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 culture and language of their ancestors.

"At present there is no single place that offers researchers and communities from around the world a promise that collections of oral literature will be responsibly managed, archived and stewarded into the future. That's something we would like to provide."



FIND OUT MORE

For more information on the World Oral Literature Project visit www.oral-literature.org

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