

# "Just smile and pretend we're normal"

**Imma Ramos** compares Christian and Hindu representations of Holy Families

Complex relationships, mistrust, doubt, jealousy and even drug addiction challenged the Holy families of Hindu and Christian tradition. In the early 19th century Indian miniature pictured here from the Punjab Hills, Shiva and Parvati and their sons Skanda and Ganesha are seen resting in a cave on Mount Kailas. Shiva, his body smeared with snakes, reaches for more 'bhang', a form of marijuana which he's notoriously addicted to. The elephant god Ganesha nestles up to him. Parvati had longed for a child of her own but Shiva was unwilling to comply because of his ascetic vows. As she was bathing one day, she rubbed off the dirt from her body and sculpted it into the shape of a child, which miraculously came to life. Shiva mistook him for an intruder, cut off his head and then replaced it with that of an elephant. The multi-headed god Skanda lies in Parvati's arms, his creation being the result of Shiva's seed falling into the river Ganges and subsequently thrown up to the goddess constellations.

In the mid-16th century Russian Novgorod icon of the Nativity the imagery follows the apocryphal Protoevangelium rather than the gospels and shows the holy family gathered around a cave in the desert. Central to the composition are Mary and the newborn Christ child. Joseph on the bottom left is revealingly absent from the central group, emphasizing the fact that he was not the father. Described as a widower with children

from a previous marriage, Joseph is shown here tempted by the devil disguised as a shepherd, symbolising his doubts and difficulty in accepting the virgin birth.

Both works have interesting comparative elements reflecting a cosmic landscape: the heavenly realm, the sky, the mountain, the cave and the earth each one set above the other in a continuous ascending ladder linking man

to God and higher consciousness. Mt. Kailas is regarded as paradise in many Hindu sects, the spiritual centre of the world, whilst according to Pherkyedes (the teacher of Pythagoras) caves were focal points for the exchange of cosmic energies.

Each family member in the Indian painting is accompanied by a vehicle (vahana), an animal that serves as a mount. Shiva's vehicle

is the bull Nandin, symbolic of his masculine power. He appears inside the cave together with Ganesha's bandicoot, an appropriate vahana because of its ability to get out of sticky situations, and Ganesha is a remover of obstacles. Skanda's peacock perches above them and Parvati's lion mount dozes in a cave on the right. An assembly of gods gathers on the left, balanced by a group of holy men (sadhus) and devotees who have come to worship the family. In the Russian icon two shepherds and a host of

angels greet Mary and Jesus, while three Magi on the top left come bearing gifts, having followed the Star of Bethlehem. Even an ox and ass seem to gaze on the Child in the cave in wonder.

Within the cosmic landscape are divine prototypes of human union and family, although not joined together as members of a family usually are. Each character plays a separate role representing independent forces of the universe that humans must sometimes face or ask for assistance.



The Nativity, Russia, 16th century (private collection) (R. Temple, Icons Divine Beauty)



Shiva and family in Mt Kailas, Punjab Hills, 19th century (V&A images)

## Cambridge World Oral Literature Project

**David Jefferies** investigates a new initiative to preserve oral traditions

Recently, whilst discussing the perilous fate of some of the world's obscurer languages, as I am wont to do from time to time, conversation turned to a tale of two brothers who were the last two speakers of a language, the name of which now escapes me. However, the point of this story is that the language no longer exists as a spoken language due to the fact that the two fractious siblings are no longer on speaking terms.

As the person who told me all this had an English Language A-level, I can be reasonably sure that the tale is a true one. Even if it did turn out to be apocryphal, we are still furnished with a good place to start talking about endangered languages; about what is lost when a language dies; and what, if anything, should be done to preserve linguistic diversity.

It is estimated that there are currently 6,000 to 7,000 living languages. The Cambridge based World Oral Literature Project (WOLP) estimates that around half of these languages will stop existing as spoken vernaculars by the end of the century. Currently 6% of the world's languages are spoken by 94% of the world's population.

But what is lost when a language dies and why should we try to save endangered languages? French linguist Claude Hagege argues that the world's linguistic diversity represents an 'enormous cultural heritage'. Il Carso, the mountainous region on the Italian-Slovenian border, provides us not only with prosecco, but also an example of the value of local languages. In the dialetto carsico, which I am informed is possibly

the 'weirdest dialect in the world', words like osmiza have evolved which describe very particular expressions of culture. (An osmiza is a farmhouse, where wine or grappa is made, and every now and then is transformed into a bar.)

Languages maintain 'the connections and associations that define a culture'. WOLP considers 'the transmission of oral literature' to be at the heart of cultural practice of many communities worldwide. 'Performances of creative works - which include ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, word games, [and] historical narratives - are increasingly endangered' and have both scientific and aesthetic value.

For small under-resourced communities speaking these dwindling languages, the pressures of global-



Nepalese shaman reciting his oral narrative (Marion Wetstein)

isation and rapid socio-economic change are often just too great; and around 130 languages are spoken by fewer than 10 people. Faced with the imminent extinction of a substantial proportion of the world's languages, WOLP seeks to support fieldworkers and local communities engaged in the documentation and preservation of oral literature.

There are encouraging signs. Languages such as Welsh, Gaelic,

and Cornish have been brought back from the brink of extinction; the revival of Cornish as a spoken language being partly inspired by the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language in Israel.

WOLP and similar groups are to be lauded for their efforts to conserve the expressive diversity of human language and also for safe guarding the various forms of knowledge that such languages contain.