

Documenting the voices of vanishing worlds

A third of the world's languages are in danger, and their loss would be an avoidable tragedy, says Dr Mark Turin



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There are comprehensive records for only a tiny proportion of the languages spoken in the world today. Even though scholars around the globe are attempting to document and preserve the diversity of human linguistic expressions, more than 2,400 of these speech forms are endangered and will likely vanish by the end of this century.

Language death

A sobering statistic: the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger released by UNESCO in early 2009 claims that more than 2,400 of the over 6,500 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 by the next generation of speakers, and most of these languages are entirely oral 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 an initiative financed by 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 with members

of 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 task has also captured the imagination of a public beyond the academy, with 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 on our planet.

And what about 'culture'?

But it is easy to forget that 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, these creative expressions are threatened. A well-intentioned and important national education programme in a major language, such

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as Mandarin Chinese or French, may have the side-effect of undermining local traditions and weakening regional languages. And for many communities, 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. And for all of the apparent benefits, globalisation and rapid socio-economic change also exert complex pressures on smaller communities, often eroding expressive diversity and transforming local culture through assimilation to more dominant ways of life.

The response

What is to be done about language endangerment and its grave cultural effects, and by whom? Linguists have been galvanised by funding and a renewed sense of urgency, exploring innovative ways to collaborate and partner with people who were previously referred to as informants or consultants. The anthropological response has been more piecemeal, however, with a handful of regional projects that have not as yet linked up to provide an integrated response to the challenge of critical and responsible cultural documentation. Yet it's ethnographers who so often have the long-term relationships with places and people that add richness and texture to linguistic descriptions, and who could help provide some of the comparative and historical context to make sense of lived linguistic practice.

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 fieldworkers in all relevant disciplines with archivists, librarians and indigenous scholars to discuss the best strategies for collecting, protecting and connecting research on endangered narrative traditions.

What's oral about literature?

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. These verbal arts must be seen for what they are: complex, beautiful and sophisticated, on a par with the writings of our great authors,

The Rai shaman Dirga Bahadur recites for ethnographers in Eastern Nepal.

but often at risk or in decline. Oral literature includes ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, musical genres, folk tales, creation tales, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, word games, recitations, life histories or historical narratives. In short, any form of cultural tradition that is transmitted orally or delivered by word of mouth. In many cases, such songs, poems and legends 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 people begin using a more dominant language.

Technology and sustainability

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. We will only succeed, however, if the project is of use and interest to indigenous communities themselves. While Cambridge may be one location where materials are hosted and maintained, both physically and digitally, communities will naturally require copies of the output so that future generations can access and understand the cultural knowledge and language of their ancestors. Such multi-hosting and varied distribution is now so commonplace that many of my young students find it hard to imagine an era when collections had only one tangible

copy, locked away for posterity and protection in a Western archive. A feature of the technology that now surrounds us is that 'born digital' recordings can be located in many places at once, confounding our sense of what it means to have a 'master copy'. Combining the ease of digital reproduction with the thinking that lies behind organisations like Creative Commons has led me to envisage our project as offering a platform or conduit for the wider dissemination of cultural content, with the copyright and intellectual property remaining firmly in the hands of the depositor, performer or community.

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 existing materials to be digitised, catalogued, preserved and also disseminated in innovative ways, when that is ethically and culturally appropriate.

Collect, protect, connect

The impressive 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 pledge 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.