AMONG THE THANGMI

MARK TURIN CHASES AN UNWRITTEN LANGUAGE

BY THERESA STEINMEYER
PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARK TURIN

Mark Turin took the bus as far as it would go. When the road stopped, he got off with only a rucksack and set out to find the Thangmi and learn their language. Turin wandered northward, stopping in villages to inquire about the Thangmi, with no luck. It was December 1996; the Nepali Civil War was under way, and Turin could not be sure whether the Thangmi even existed.

One day, Turin hiked up a hill deep in the mountains. He stumbled upon a toothless old man, sitting beneath a tree with his chickens. Exhausted, Turin asked him for a cup of tea, promising to explain his wanderings after he had

a moment to rest. He told the old man in Nepali that he was searching for the Thangmi, and asked if the man knew where he could find them. The man smiled. "I am Thangmi," he said.

The man was Rana Bahadur, the Thangmi's village shaman and a member of one of the village's poorest families. He invited Turin home with him, and introduced Turin to the village where he would spend most of the next decade.

Language had always played a large role in Turin's life. As a child in London, Turin was introduced to the languages of his Italian father and Dutch mother. He rarely traveled

in England; instead, his family spent holidays in Holland and Italy. In a multilingual childhood such as his, Turin says that "it's almost unavoidable that you think comparatively about language." Turin speaks with a British accent, speeding cheerfully through anecdotes but always choosing his words with precision. He is a talented storyteller, and it is impossible to miss his delight and passion for his work as he delves into his tales.

In 1991, after secondary school, Turin gained his first exposure to Nepal as an English teacher for nine months in a town called Kalopani in western Nepal, through the Schools' Partnership

Worldwide program. Nepal had caught his eye as the program's newest offering, but he was surprised by the cultural gap he encountered. "Everything that you know and think you know is stripped away from you," he says — for instance, sleep space and showers were communal, and it was shameful for a grown man to greet a woman with a hug. In his effort to understand Nepali culture, he once expressed his sympathies to a man with a shaved head, only to find that this was not a symbol of grieving but a manner of coping with hair lice. On top of this, he found himself simultaneously immersed in two languages: Nepali and Thakali, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by 6,000 to 8,000 people. The Kalopani villagers used both languages in conversation, making it difficult for Turin to distinguish between the languages and requiring him to later sort Thakali words from Nepali ones.

It was in Kalopani that Turin discovered his passion for anthropology. By coincidence, an area north of Kalopani had just been opened by the government to foreign scholars for the first time, and Turin met several anthropologists who passed through his village. Turin had never heard of anthropology before, and it captivated him — to him, anthropology "seemed a study above all," a holistic study of culture and language.

Upon completing his teaching commitment, Turin started on an academic path inspired by those nine months in Nepal: first a bachelor's degree at Cambridge, and then a doctorate in linguistics at Leiden University. The Leiden program fit well with his own trajectory due to its emphasis on linguistic anthropology through the "Himalayan Languages Project," which funded doctorate students who wished to study endangered Himalayan languages. When Turin visited Project Director George van Driem to learn more about the program, van Driem asked Turin if he had ever taken linguistics. Turin confessed that he had not. "Good. Nothing to unlearn," said van Driem, who accepted Turin on the spot.

In September 1996, Turin began his intensive training in field linguistics and descriptive and comparative linguistics and was surrounded by other doctorate students studying undocumented or underdocumented languages. But his time at the university itself was short: in order to complete his doctorate, Turin was required to study an undocumented Himalayan language himself.

Van Driem showed Turin the map of the Himalayas in his office, where he had marked the locations of local languages with pushpins. He told Turin that he was going to get a cup of coffee, that he would be back in five minutes, and to choose a language while he was gone. Turin's first choice was Thakali, but van Driem discouraged this: one of the dialects of Thakali had already been documented in German. Turin looked for a language at a similar elevation to that of Thakali: too low, and he would be surrounded by mosquitoes and malaria, too high, and he would be sharing the mountains with smelly and aggressive yaks. And so Turin chose to set off in search of the Thangmi, a culture which he had only found mentioned in one published record in Europe: a paragraph written by two Nepalese soldiers in the employ of the British Empire in 1928.

The Thangmi welcomed Turin and celebrated his presence in their community, inviting him to attend the wedding of the shaman's child — on the condition that he dance with the villagers. To the villagers, Turin was an object of curiosity, a "cultural mascot" as he puts it. On occasion, he would be roused in the middle of the night to speak a few words in English for visitors. But beyond this, Turin says that the villagers saw him as "a loudspeaker for their grievances, for their history, for their concerns, for their aspirations." Turin was a source of hope for the Thangmi, a vehicle for their national and ultimately international recognition.

Turin would spend nine months a year for the next decade with the Thangmi, and, for the most part, his relationship with them continued in the same vein — part mascot, part conduit to the outside world. After he started a family, however, he found a deeper form of acceptance within the community. He met his wife, Sara Shneiderman, in Nepal in 1997, and they had their first child, Sam, in 2006 in Amsterdam. The Thangmi women made a point of looking out for Sara by advising her throughout her pregnancy. During intermittent visits to Nepal over the next two years after Sam's birth, Turin felt more a part of the Thangmi's kinship-based social system. "It was lovely to be finally thought of as whole because you have produced a child," says Turin. The Thangmi likewise gave Sam a warm welcome into their society — he chased buffaloes, attended the neighborhood school, and celebrated his second birthday atop an elephant.

As Turin assimilated into Thangmi society, he also began to learn their language, an uphill task. "Just because a language is unwritten doesn't mean that it's easy," says Turin. "There is no way in."

The first step was writing down the sounds that he heard, using the International Phonetic Alphabet. Then came separating sounds and words. He sifted out some of the basic words that can be found in all languages, such as "fire," "house" and "mouth." The Thangmi language is marked by its heavy reliance upon kinship, and words can change based upon the gender of the speaker. Vocabulary, too, can be tricky: for instance, Thangmi has four verbs for "to be" and four verbs for "to come." On top of this, the Thangmi tended to assume that he could pick up their language just by listening and remembering. But Turin had grown up learning languages with written forms, and he struggled to accustom himself to relying only on his ear and his memory for language-learning.

Turin published a Nepali-Thangmi-English dictionary in 2004 and a more thorough grammar of the language in 2012. He delivered a copy of the grammar to the Thangmi last summer, who have taken great pride in its publication. "A lot of people were interested in its symbolic power," says Turin. "'The Thangmi language is this big,' they can say." He holds up his hands, two inches apart.

Language death — "linguicide," as it is often known — is a much-reported subject in the media today, and Turin has on occasion found himself involved in reports that present him as a sort of scholar-hero, single-handedly saving languages from oblivion. He adamantly rejects this narrative — indeed, it's the first thing he tells me when I sit down to interview him. Rather, as he puts it, "You don't work on a community, you work with a community." Scholars can help — they can preserve one shaman's particular recitation of a wedding ritual, or the word for a certain plant, or the conjugations of a verb — but their role can only be a supporting one. Without favorable government policies and, more importantly, a community invested in language preservation, even exhaustive scholarly documentation won't stave off language death.

As a scholar, though, Turin does what he can. After leaving the Thangmi, he worked for the United Nations mission in Nepal and continued compiling his research in Cambridge until 2011, when he and his wife took positions at Yale. From here, he continues his work on increasing digital access to information on Himalayan languages. He co-founded the Digital Himalaya project in 2000, an online database that shares multimedia sources dealing with the Himalayan region. Turin is also the director of the World Oral Literature Project, founded in 2009 and co-located at Yale in 2011, which digitizes endangered oral literatures.

Turin has also used his platform at Yale to help increase the visibility of the Himalayas in the North American academic community. "There is no North American center for Himalayan studies. It doesn't exist," he says. Turin feels that Yale has recognized this void, and is grateful for their support of Himalayan studies. He is the program director of the Yale Himalaya Initiative. This program, founded in 2011, brings students and professors together from multiple departments to study Himalayan environment, livelihood and culture. Through the Directed Independent Language Study program, Yale students are now able to study Nepali.

Nestled in the flattened Himalayan mountains of van Driem's map, a pushpin indicates that the Thangmi language has been documented. But for Turin, his research is only a beginning. Turin's pushpin is not the last word on the Thangmi — it is an invitation for other scholars to criticize and add on to his work. Turin alone does not save languages. Instead, he gives us a way in.

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