



# newsletter

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Front cover: old market in Shillong.

Photo by Ergo-Hart Västrik

Back cover: boys in Nartiang, the village with the biggest cluster of megaliths in the Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya.

Photo by Ülo Valk



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## Collect : Protect : Connect – The World Oral Literature Project

by Claire Wheeler, Eleanor Wilkinson and Mark Turin,  
University of Cambridge, UK and Yale University, USA

The World Oral Literature Project is supporting the documentation of traditions from some of the most endangered cultures on the planet. Alongside training workshops and a lecture and publications series, these collections from oral communities can help to preserve and revitalise threatened cultural practices.

### The Situation

The Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger,<sup>1</sup> released by UNESCO in early 2009, claims that around a third of the 6,500 languages spoken around the globe today are in danger of disappearing forever. With each language lost, a wealth of ideas, knowledge and history also vanish – and vanish without a trace if the language has no established written form.

Threats to endangered and marginalised cultures come in many forms: some are implicit and unintended, others are decidedly more explicit. Globalisation and rapid socio-economic change exert particularly complex pressures on smaller communities, often eroding expressive diversity and transforming culture through assimilation to more dominant ways of life. A well-intentioned and important national education programme in one of the world's major languages may have the side effect of undermining local traditions and weakening regional languages. In the name of national unity, some governments may even intentionally suppress local languages and cultural traditions as a way of exerting control over minority populations.

Knowledge, identity and culture are often encoded in oral literature by communities with no established written language. The term 'oral lit-



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*Photo: private collection.*

erature' broadly includes ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folk tales, creation stories, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, recitations and historical narratives. Such traditions are rarely translated when a community switches to speaking a more dominant language.

Until relatively recently, few indigenous peoples have had a means of documenting their cultural knowledge, and there is still little agreement on how historical and contemporary collections of oral literature can be responsibly managed, archived and curated for the future.

### Archiving and documenting oral traditions

Founded in 2009, the World Oral Literature Project is co-located at the University of Cambridge, UK and Yale University, USA. By working with field researchers and members of threatened communities worldwide, the Project is archiving audio and video recordings of endangered oral traditions and making them available online when appropriate. These resources are used by researchers studying diverse cultural traditions; by the public to gain an understanding of unfamiliar cultures; and more recently by authors and printmakers as an inspiration for artistic projects. Fieldwork



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*Photo: private collection.*

is partly funded by the World Oral Literature Project, and researchers are expected to adhere to guidelines on ethics, cooperative working standards, financial budgeting, recording and appropriate archiving. The output of this model has been high-quality recordings of oral literature with accurate and rich metadata, produced with agreement and participations from the performers and with recorded material and copyright remaining with the community of origin.

Twenty-three collections from ten countries are currently hosted online for free access through our website. The content of these collections ranges from songs, chants and speeches in Paiwan and from other minority language-speaking groups in Taiwan in the 1950's, to African verbal arts documented in the last three years. We are fortunate to have particularly strong collections from Asia, although we hope that in time, all parts of the world will be equally represented. The mixture of historical and contemporary material held in our collections ensures that we fulfil our role of protecting collections from cultures that have seen vast change since the recordings were made, offering insights

into the history of oral traditions; and that we help to create a snapshot of cultural traditions as they exist now. Individuals with historical recordings of oral traditions in legacy media formats typically approach us with the aim of finding a secure archival platform for disseminating materials that have not been accepted by traditional museums who may have little experience of curating audio and video content. Using USB conversion technology, and often in partnership with audio-visual media groups in our universities,<sup>2</sup> we are able to digitise collections that come to us on audio cassette or VHS, gramophone records or even on reel-to-reel tapes. More recently, we have started to receive unsolicited collections from source communities, as news of our work spreads and community members approach us to securely archive recordings of traditional performances.

The majority of our contemporary collections are 'born digital', in that traditions are recorded using digital devices in the field and transferred over the web to the World Oral Literature Project from the location of the fieldwork. This provides immediate backup and storage for the researcher, and faster archiving and dissemination of urgently endangered customs. From our offices in Cambridge, Melton Mowbray and New Haven, we upload these fieldwork collections and digitised heritage collections to Cambridge University Library's DSpace digital repository.<sup>3</sup> DSpace is a managed environment with a commitment to forward migrate digital items when formats evolve and change. Uploaded collections, and large amounts of associated linguistic and geographical metadata, are therefore securely archived for posterity. In addition, we upload audio and video recordings, with basic metadata (for example, a brief description of the item and the location and date of recording), to the University of Cambridge Streaming Media Service.<sup>4</sup> This platform allows for more immediate and simple streaming of audio and video content in a variety

of formats, making the materials accessible worldwide to audiences with varying speeds of internet connection, including those connecting to the web from rural or remote regions.

An immediate benefit of such documentation for communities of origin is the return of materials to them in an accessible format – whether on DVD, CD or hard disc – to be used in cultural revitalisation programmes and educational contexts. Younger community members in particular are being introduced to oral traditions through digital media, inspiring interest in their cultural heritage. Acting on the wishes of indigenous community members, and tailored to the expressed needs of each community, our approach harnesses the energy of the young to help them to reconnect with traditional cultural content.



Eleanor Wilkinson is a Research Assistant at the World Oral Literature Project, previously working as a freelance collections assistant after completing her MA in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester.

*Photo: private collection.*

### **Training and workshops in field methods**

Training workshops and conferences convened by the World Oral Literature Project provide a further opportunity for fieldworkers to be exposed to best practices in documenting endangered cultures, and to share their

experiences with a wider community of academics and independent scholars. The Project has held two annual conferences with the themes 'Collections from the Asia-Pacific' and 'Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities'.<sup>5</sup> The high levels of interdisciplinary involvement demonstrated at these two past events have helped project staff conceive a more interactive workshop for 2012, entitled 'Charting Vanishing Voices: A Collaborative Workshop to Map Endangered Cultures'.<sup>6</sup> Students, linguists, anthropologists, museum curators, librarians, technicians and community representatives – among others – will draft and design a web catalogue and online map of existing resources on endangered oral cultures. We hope to produce at least a draft index of oral cultures that will reflect the level of documentation of, and assess threats to, the vitality of verbal arts. Envisioned as a collaborative development of the World Oral Literature Project's existing database of language endangerment levels,<sup>7</sup> we hope that the new resource will function as a research portal that is open to the public, and will help to highlight the most endangered cultural practices in need of urgent documentation and support.

### Embracing new models of academic publishing

Free online dissemination of published materials is another aspect of the World Oral Literature Project's pledge to wider access and greater connectivity, and we are firmly committed to a dissemination model that overcomes the constraints of traditional publishing. The Project publishes an Occasional Paper series of case studies and theory relating to the documentation and archiving of endangered oral traditions.<sup>8</sup> Hosted as PDFs on our website and co-hosted through other platforms, these papers can be downloaded for free or printed on demand from anywhere with Internet access. To date, we have found this model to be effective for making materials available to fieldworkers, researchers



The shaman Dirga Bahadur Dumi reciting for the ethnographers. Baksila, Khotang district, Nepal, 2006.

Photo by Marion Wettstein.

and interested members of the public as well as to indigenous communities around the world. Titles include *Faroese skjaldur: An endangered oral tradition of the North Atlantic* by Dr Stephen Pax Leonard, and *The Epic of Pabuji ki par in Performance* by Dr Elizabeth Wickett, both of which have been downloaded many hundreds of times since being hosted.

For larger manuscripts, we have launched an innovative partnership with the Cambridge-based Open Book Publishers to create affordable paperback, hardback and PDF-downloadable versions of new titles and out-of-print classics in oral literature, bypassing the problems inherent in conventional academic publishing (such as remaindered copies through over printing, high unit cost and poor dissemination). This method of digital publishing has the distinct benefit of greater global access to scholarly content and rich online supplementary material. Authors are not restricted to the page, but can incorporate a wealth of audio, video and photographic material to support their text. Our first Project-supported Open Book – a revised edition of Ruth Finnegan's classic *Oral Literature in Africa*<sup>9</sup> – will be launched early in 2012, with many other monographs to follow. A website

of African photographs from the 1960s to the present, including images from Finnegan's own fieldwork, will coincide with the book launch, and will be hosted on the website of the Open Book Publishers.<sup>10</sup>

### Public engagement and outreach

Public support for communities struggling to preserve their endangered oral traditions is an important factor in maintaining political engagement with cultural diversity. The World Oral Literature Project's involvement with social networking and media, through Facebook and Twitter, allows us to share our news and our most recent publications with a global community who are interested in the diversity of human cultural expressions. These platforms allow us to participate in discussions on current issues related to endangered languages and traditions, keeping ourselves and others up to date with events around the world that affect the future and fate of oral traditions.

Media coverage extends the activities of the World Oral Literature Project to wider public domains. Our presence in print, online and on air has helped generate publicity for the cause of protecting endangered traditions, and a greater familiarity with

our chosen methods of achieving this. Recent coverage includes interviews with the Project director on BBC radio discussing current issues in language and cultural revitalisation;<sup>11</sup> articles in the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph on the Project's role in archiving and disseminating endangered traditions;<sup>12</sup> and a series of feature articles in The Observer on the experiences of one of our recipients of a fieldwork grant, documenting oral literature in Greenland.<sup>13</sup> We believe that such publicity helps to foster a sustained interest in our methodologies, approaches and commitment to documenting oral traditions and contributing to cultural revitalisation.

Outreach opportunities allow us to engage a wide variety of groups in supporting or working towards the preservation of cultural traditions. By presenting at open days for academic institutions, participating in community events and working with artists and authors who have been inspired by recordings of oral traditions, we are extending knowledge of other cultures beyond the confines of the ivory towers and silos of the academy. Working from the assumption that a deeper understanding of cultural diversity can enhance empathy for others and discourage prejudice and stereotyping, our outreach programmes encourage

interaction with materials created by indigenous communities themselves. At a recent event for Young Carers, we showed videos of songs and dances performed in rural communities, based on which the young participants completed confidence – building drama and artwork activities to imagine how the indigenous performers might feel if their language or traditions were taken away from them. The participants' empathy for the difficulties experienced by people far removed from their own familiar lifestyles provided a compelling example of how best to understand threatened communities through their own voices.

### Our ultimate goal

The three verbs *collect*, *protect* and *connect*<sup>14</sup> encapsulate our 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 and older technologies become obsolete. The connection is made when collections are returned to source communities and when they reach a wider public in print and online.

The way in which the World Oral Literature Project coordinates documentation and dissemination between indigenous communities, fieldworkers and the general public is vital to mitigating cultural endangerment, advancing documentation from an academic initiative to a worldwide effort in which community members are invested. We are interested to hear from – and explore partnerships with – like-minded projects and researchers who are committed to widening access and participation to traditional resources for the purpose of responsible documentation and community revitalisation.

To find out more about the Project or to explore ways to support the initiative, please visit:

<http://www.oralliterature.org/>



Ranki, one of the oldest inhabitants of Cholakkad, being interviewed by Ramu K. A. and Kiran Tom Sajan. Attapady, Kerala, India, April 2010.

Photo by Ramu K. A. and Kiran Tom Sajan.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Anatomy Visual Media Group, Cambridge: <http://bit.ly/camavmg>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.dspace.cam.ac.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://sms.cam.ac.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> For links to abstracts and videos of presentations from past conferences, please see: <http://www.oralliterature.org/research/workshops.html>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/1685/>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.oralliterature.org/research/databaseterms.html>

<sup>8</sup> To view or download publications, please see: <http://www.oralliterature.org/research/publications.html>

<sup>9</sup> First published in 1970 by the Clarendon Press

<sup>10</sup> See <http://bit.ly/obppartnerships>

<sup>11</sup> See, for example: <http://bit.ly/oralliteraturebbc5mp3>

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: [http://bit.ly/oralliterature\\_guardianeducation](http://bit.ly/oralliterature_guardianeducation)

<sup>13</sup> See [http://bit.ly/dspace\\_leonard\\_guardian\\_pdf](http://bit.ly/dspace_leonard_guardian_pdf)

<sup>14</sup> These verbs reflect the mission of the inspiring New Zealand Film Archive. See <http://www.filmarchive.org.nz/>



In February 2011 the ISFNR held its interim conference in Shillong,  
Meghalaya, North-Eastern India.