Digitizing and Distributing Visual Resources from the Himalayas <small>*by Mark Turin*</small>

Digital Himalaya is a pilot project to develop digital collection, archiving and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region. Based at Cornell and Cambridge Universities, the project began in December 2000. The initial phase involves digitizing a set of existing ethnographic archives comprised of photographs, films, sound recordings, field notes and texts collected by anthropologists and travellers in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and the Indian Himalayas from the beginning of the 20th century to the present. One of the primary archives consists of 100 hours of 16 mm ethnographic film shot by

Khendzong Yapla (Secretary to the Government of Sikkim and local cultural historian), his mother and Mark Turin (Digital Himalaya) in Gangtok, Sikkim, January, 2003.

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Professor of Asian Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and a grandfather of Himalayan anthropology.

The project has three long-term objectives: (a) to preserve in a digital medium valuable ethnographic materials that are degenerating in their current forms; (b) to make these resources available in a searchable digital format to scholars and the Himalayan communities from which the materials were collected; and (c) to develop a template for collaborative digital cataloguing that will allow users to contribute documentation to existing collections and eventually link their own collections to the system, creating a dynamic tool for comparative research.

In January 2003, members of the Digital Himalaya team travelled to Gangtok (Sikkim) and Mustang (Nepal) with the purpose of returning usable digital copies of archival footage from the 1930s and 1960s to the communities concerned. While we made use of laptop computers and high quality colour prints, it became clear during the field visit that DVD technology provided a powerful yet unexplored medium of exchange.

A DVD-based archive, functioning as a self-contained portable resource requiring neither Internet access nor a computer, is particularly suited to remote areas. Such an archive can provide access to non-literate users through controlled inter-activity combined with high quality playable content using voice overs in local languages. With the advent of small battery-operated DVD-Video players, it is possible to play DVDs in regions with no infrastructure or electricity supply, such as rural Nepal and Sikkim. Challenges remain, however, since the viewership of any DVD is constrained by limitations on the physical distribution of discs. Moreover, the pace of technological change suggests that DVD, in its current incarnation, has but a limited life-span. These factors make DVD a risky choice as a long-term archival medium.

High quality compressed films from the 1930s onwards can be freely viewed and downloaded from the Digital Himalaya website. Broadband Internet offers exciting ways of making such an archive available to a geographically diverse audience. In large parts of the West, however, and certainly in the Himalayan region, the bandwidth necessary to transfer large digital files with ease is still unavailable. Even if the appropriate hardware and software were in place, many of those who might like to view images of their own communities are not literate in English or familiar with the basic computer skills needed to search an online database. While the construction of a multilingual search tool remains a challenge, Digital Himalaya continues to investigate the use of Unicode fonts for Nepali and Tibetan. Please take a moment to view the unique footage on our website: www.digitalhimalaya.com

Mark Turin, Visiting Scholar, Department of Anthropology, was trained in Social Anthropology at Cambridge, United Kingdom, and in Descriptive and Comparative Linguistics at Leiden, the Netherlands. He has been working in Nepal for twelve years, first among the Thakali community of Mustang district, and more recently among the Thangmi populations of eastern Nepal. His grammar of the Thangmi language, together with a textual corpus and a multilingual lexicon will be published in 2003. Other interests include teaching the Nepali language (he has written a course in Dutch entitled Nepali Voor Beginners*) and journalism (he has columns in newspapers in the Netherlands and Nepal). He is presently Director of the Digital Himalaya Project (www.digitalhimalaya.com) and continues his own research on ethnolinguistics in the Himalayan region. He divides his time between the universities of Cambridge (UK) and Cornell. His articles have appeared in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers and Contributions to Nepalese Studies. He recently edited the proceedings of a conference held in Kathmandu, Nepal, which is now published as Themes in Himalayan Languages and Linguistics (2003, South Asia Institute of Heidelberg and Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu). Mark arrived at Cornell in September 2002 and has a halftime appointment for three years funded by the US Department of Education through the University of Virginia and Cornell University's South and East Asia Programs. Turin is also working together with Shambhu Oja, Lecturer in Nepali, to develop an on-line Nepali dictionary and supplementary multimedia content for language instruction. Another mini-project relates to the Williamson Collection, an archive which includes 1,700 photographs and 23 reels of 16 mm film taken in Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan between 1930 and 1935 by the British colonial officer Frederick Williamson. The films and photos are now fully digitized and will be transferred to DVD for accession into the Kroch library, where students and faculty at Cornell will be free to make use of the footage for teaching and research.*