

Digital Himalaya: An Ethnographic Archive in the Digital Age

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Objectives

Digital Himalaya is a pilot project to develop digital collection, archiving, and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region. Based at the University of Cambridge, the project began in December 2000. In the initial phase, we are digitising a set of existing ethnographic archives comprised of photographs, films, sound recordings, fieldnotes, and texts collected by anthropologists and travellers in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Indian Himalayas (including Sikkim) from the beginning of the 20th century to the present.

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 to the Himalayan communities from which the materials were collected;
- c) to develop a template for collaborative digital cataloguing that will allow users to contribute documentation to existing collections and eventually to link their own collections to the system, creating a dynamic tool for comparative research

Collections

There are five collections involved in the first phase of the project. These have been chosen for their historical value and their coverage of diverse geographical areas and ethnic peoples of the Himalayan region (which we have defined broadly as the region stretching from Ladakh and Kashmir in the west to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in the east; and from the Tibetan plateau in the north to the foothills in

the south). The collections make use of a wide range of original recording media, including nitrate photographic film, 35mm monochrome and colour film; 8mm, Super8, and 16mm moving film; U-Matic, VHS, Hi-8, and 1-inch videotape, and a number of digital formats including DVMini and DVCam digital video, and TIFF and JPEG still images.

The five initial collections are:

- a) the *Williamson Photographic Archive*: 1,700 photographs taken between 1930-1935 by the British Political Officer Sir Frederick Williamson in Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan. Williamson's collection is now held in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, and includes a number of rare historic images.
- b) the *Fürer-Haimendorf Film Collection*: over 100 hours of 16mm film from various parts of the central and eastern Himalayas filmed between 1936-1980 by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Professor of Anthropology at SOAS. The films are supplemented by Haimendorf's detailed field diaries.
- c) the *Naga Videodisc*: Part of Haimendorf's film archive overlaps with a large ethnographic collection relating to the Naga peoples of north-eastern India and parts of Burma, principally collected by five different anthropologists and travellers. These materials were compiled as an analogue videodisc in the 1980's, and included some 10,000 photographs, a large number of film and sound clips, and original fieldwork diaries and notes in an associated database. This system is now technologically obsolete, and we hope to re-release it in a digital format.
- d) the *Thak Archive*: materials from a study of the Gurung village of Thak, central Nepal, including over 100 hours of film, more than 3,000 photographs, and continuous censuses and fieldnotes covering the period 1968 to the present, collected by Alan Macfarlane and Sarah Harrison.
- e) the *Thangmi Archive*, comprised of digital video, photographs and ethnographic data from the Thangmi communities of Dolakha and Sindhupalcok districts in north-east Nepal collected by Mark Turin and Sara Shneiderman between 1996 and the present.

Of the above five collections, three are finite, historical resources, while the latter two are ongoing collections that continue to grow. Depending on the success of this initial phase, the project may expand to include other high quality archives.

Technologies and Methodologies

There are three aspects to the project, each of which requires a different set of technologies. Digitisation is the first step: scanning photographic prints, negatives, and slides, creating digital master copies of film and video through telecine projection and other analogue-to-digital conversion processes, and storing these masters in high resolution digital formats. The second step is data management and interface design, to which we will return shortly. The third step concerns questions of storage and distribution: should all of the materials be available over the Internet? Should we opt to use DVD? How will different users respond to each format? Furthermore, we must think ahead to assure that the digital format in which we archive films and photographs can be easily migrated to new platforms as technology develops, so as to avoid the problems of obsolescence that have plagued previous ethnographic archiving projects such as the Naga Videodisc.

Broadband Internet (high speed Internet over which video can be streamed in real time) offers ways of making an archive available to a geographically diverse audience. Both the individuals who appear in the images (or their descendants), as well as scholars around the world, could view the materials at any time if the archive were located at a digital address rather than a physical one. But in large parts of the West, and certainly in the Himalayan region, the bandwidth necessary to transfer large digital files is currently unavailable. Even if the appropriate hardware and software were soon put 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 computing concepts needed to search an online database. Although Digital Himalaya is investigating the use of Unicode fonts for Devanagari and Tibetan, it remains difficult to construct a multilingual search engine.

One option which bypasses some of the pitfalls inherent in the Internet would be a DVD-based archive. A DVD can store many times more information than a CD-ROM: approximately two hours of film at cinema quality, or up to fifteen hours of film if compressed at a lower resolution. As a physical object, a DVD is a self-contained portable resource which requires neither high speed Internet access nor a computer. With the advent of small battery-operated DVD-Video players, it is now possible to play DVDs in areas with no infrastructure or electricity supply. Instead of complicated keyboard and mouse controls, DVD players are controlled with simple TV-style buttons. A DVD-based archive could provide better access to non-literate and less advanced users by offering limited interactivity, but more high quality playable content which makes use of voiceovers in local languages instead of text. Local groups might attend demonstrations where they could watch

film footage and listen to voiceovers on a simple battery-operated DVD player. However, as a physical object (unlike the Internet), the widespread distribution of a single DVD is limited. In addition, the pace of technological development suggests that DVD in its current form has a limited life-span, making it impossible to rely upon as a long-term archival medium.

Recently, new convergent strategies integrating the best of both Internet and DVD have emerged. With the advent of low-cost consumer DVD burners and authoring software, searchable databases could be available online along with low resolution film clips and photos, which users could then select to order a custom DVD that would come complete with relevant voice-overs. The film clips on the DVD would have embedded URLs, which when viewed on a computer would become active, enabling the user to link back to the relevant database information available online. An online annotation feature would allow members of the communities from which the material originated and/or scholars to add new or corrected information about individuals, rituals, or historical events, which could then be incorporated into the database documentation for that item. In areas where Internet access is unavailable, DVD-only versions of the archive could be compiled and installed, and comments sent by mail.

Technology is now developing and changing at an unprecedented rate, and choosing the design which will afford the widest range of people the most efficient and inexpensive access to these resources over time is not a simple proposition. We must consider the needs and priorities of each target audience, and create a flexible and adaptable system with multiple layers and entry points. If more than a few token members of the Himalayan communities from which the material originated are to have access to this visual documentation of their history, the multiple obstacles of illiteracy, unwritten languages and poor technical infrastructure must be overcome. At the same time, in order for researchers to find the archive useful as a comparative resource, effective search and retrieval techniques, detailed documentation and high resolution images must be incorporated. The challenge here is not so much in bridging the gap between Asia and Europe, but rather that between educated, English-speaking computer users in urban centres like Kathmandu or London, and their rural counterparts, who often do not have the education or facilities to make use of new technologies. Bridging this divide has been a central problem for ethnographic studies published in other mediums; books published only in English often remain inaccessible to the non-English speaking community which they describe. Digital technologies such as broadband Internet, with its high data transfer rates, and DVD, with its large storage capacity, now provide unprecedented capabilities for transporting and displaying large amounts of visual ethnographic

material. If we can begin to dismantle the existing 'digital divide', there is some hope that the use of new technologies may help surmount the communication barriers which often frustrate the ethnographic endeavour.

Consent and Confidentiality

Whether online or on DVD, issues of confidentiality and consent remain central to the construction of the archive. Although copyright clearance has been received for most of the materials in the initial collections, privacy and protection for the individuals appearing in the photographs and films are a more serious concern. The potential problems are acute due to the immediacy and lack of anonymity inherent in visual representation, and the fact that many of the images originated in generations past when mass distribution of visual information was inconceivable. Although anthropologists may have been certain at the time that the people they filmed or photographed consented to these activities, the advent of the digital age threatens the basis of that 'informed consent'. When Fürer-Haimendorf first travelled to Nepal in the 1950's, the country had just opened to the outside world. How could his informants have consented to having their images broadcast over the Internet fifty years later? How could they have anticipated that the words they uttered (gossip about their neighbours? political criticism of the monarchy?) might be available to millions of faceless viewers around the world? Although many of the individuals who appear in Haimendorf's films may now have passed away, what happens when their descendants view the digital archive and come across images of their grandparents taking part in some politically compromising activity or making statements still embarrassing to the family today?

Even at present, how can those we work with make an informed decision regarding the use of their image in a digital archive? Many of them are on the other side of the 'digital divide', with little experience of the new technologies that make a project like Digital Himalaya possible, and people remain wary of their images being used to adverse purpose. And they are right to be concerned: how can any of us know how these images will be manipulated over the next hundred—or thousand—years? Old film doesn't die, it just gets clipped into ever smaller pieces, further removed from its original context, and used for ever-more egregious purposes (an example being the images of bare-breasted Masai women placed on the web as part of an ethnographic archive that were later spotted on a pornography site).

Future Directions

All of these considerations will shape the way Digital Himalaya develops over the coming years. Salvaging ethnographic films and photographs by assuring that they are properly digitised, catalogued, and kept in context is a priority. Another central

objective is making them available to a broader audience, from scholars around the world to members of Himalayan communities who have no access to the libraries where these materials were previously stored. Involving those whose images are archived in the documentation process is a further avenue for exploration. If we can accomplish all of these objectives, we will be on the way to creating an appropriate ethnographic archive for the digital age. We need to build an open, non-linear archival structure that offers a range of access points and different paths through the archival materials. Each step requires a careful analysis of the central questions raised here, a process which we hope will make Digital Himalaya a dynamic ethnographic archive that accurately remembers the past yet remains a culturally responsive resource for the future.

Contact

Digital Himalaya is a pilot project under development and we welcome ideas and comments. Please visit our website at <www.digitalhimalaya.com> for further information and regular updates as the project progresses. Comments may be sent to info@digitalhimalaya.com

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