

Returning Footage to the Himalayas

Over the New Year, two members of the Digital Himalaya project team travelled to remote parts of Nepal and on to Gangtok, the capital of the state of Sikkim in north-east India, to return footage shot between the 1930s and 1960s. Mark Turin and Sara Shneiderman describe and document the process.

'It's as if our life span has been doubled' said Rinchen Lhamo, a 65-year old grandmother from the village of Lubra, Mustang district, Nepal, after she watched digitised 16mm footage of her mother in 1962 on a portable DVD player. 'How could I ever expect to see her face again?' she continued, echoing the delight and surprise of many villagers as they viewed this historic footage of their region and relatives for the very first time. This event was the initiative of Digital Himalaya, a pilot project to develop digital collection, archiving, and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region.



Digital Himalaya

A still from the 1962 cine reel taken by Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf showing local women dancing in their finery.

Based at the University of Cambridge, the project began in December 2000. The initial phase involves 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 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 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.

Collections

The five collections involved in the first phase of the project make use of a wide range of original recording media and were chosen for their historical value and their coverage of diverse geographical areas and ethnic peoples of the Himalayan region:

1. Williamson Photographic Archive: 1,700 photographs taken between 1930 and 1935 by the British Political Officer 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.

2. Fürer-Haimendorf Film Collection: over 100 hours of 16mm film from various parts of the central and eastern Himalayas filmed between 1936 and 1980 by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, Professor of Anthropology at SOAS. The films are supplemented by Haimendorf's detailed field diaries.

3. 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 1980s, and included some 10,000 photographs, a large number of film and sound clips, and original fieldwork diaries and notes in an associated database. The videodisc is now practically obsolete, and we hope to re-release it in a digital format.

4. 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.

5. Thangmi Archive: 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 from 1996 to the present.

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



Sara Shneiderman introducing the Digital Himalaya project to the villagers of Lubra, December 2002.

Sienna Craig



Sara Shneiderman

From left, Mr. Khendzong Yapla and his mother recognise relatives from the Williamson collection dating back to the 1930s.

Technologies and Methodologies

Each of the three aspects of the project requires a different set of technologies. Digitisation is naturally the first step: scanning photographic prints, negatives, and slides, creating digital master copies of film and video through telecine transfer 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 use DVD? How will different users respond to each format? Furthermore, we must think ahead to ensure that the digital format in which we archive films and photographs can be easily migrated to new platforms as technologies develop, and thus avoid the problems of obsolescence that have plagued previous ethnographic archiving projects such as the Nagavideodisc.

Broadband internet offers ways of making archives 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 comfort is still 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. While Digital Himalaya continues to investigate the use of Unicode fonts for Nepali and Tibetan, constructing a multilingual search tool remains a challenge.

A DVD-based archive, functioning as a self-contained portable resource requiring neither internet access nor a

computer, is an option which bypasses some of the pitfalls outlined above. An archive in DVD format would provide access to non-literate and less advanced users by offering limited interactivity together with high quality playable content making use of voiceovers in local languages. With the advent of small battery-operated DVD-Video players, it is possible to play DVDs in areas with no infrastructure or electricity supply. Local groups could attend demonstrations to watch film footage and listen to voiceovers on a battery-operated DVD player. The widespread distribution of single DVDs is limited, however, and in addition, the pace of technological development suggests that in its current form, DVD has a limited life-span, making it a risky choice as a long-term archival medium.

Technology is now developing and changing at an unprecedented rate, and



Sara Shneiderman

A young Thangmi shaman performing in his first village festival, May 2000.

choosing the format 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, Delhi 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 in English have remained inaccessible to the non-English speaking communities which they describe. Digital technologies provide unprecedented capabilities for transporting and displaying large amounts of visual ethnographic material. Only by dismantling the existing 'digital divide' can new technologies 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 an archive such as ours. While copyright clearance has been received for the materials in the initial collections, privacy and protection for the individuals appearing in the photographs and films are of serious concern. The potential problems are heightened by 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 that the people they filmed or photographed consented to these activities at the time, the advent of the digital age threatens previous understandings of '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 consent to having their images broadcast over the internet fifty years later? How could they have anticipated that the words they uttered



Frederick Williamson Archive

Booksellers by the Chö-khang, Lhasa, Tibet, August 1933.

(gossip about their neighbours or perhaps criticism of the monarchy) might be available to millions of faceless viewers around the world? While many of the individuals who appear in Haimendorf's films have now passed away, what will happen 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? At the risk of precipitating an anthropological catastrophe, the Digital Himalaya team set out to return digitised photos and DVDs to communities in Nepal and India in December 2002 and January 2003.

Footage from Mustang, Nepal, from 1962

On Christmas Day, 2002, we arrived in the village of Lubra, an ethnically Tibetan village located in a remote side canyon of the Mustang valley, carrying a DVD of digitised 16mm footage from 40 years earlier. This was a village we had worked in previously, building up relationships of trust and understanding, which all facilitated the process we were there to initiate. It was decided that the local gumpa (Buddhist temple) would serve as the most suitable location for a public viewing of the film. The whole village turned out for the event, and crowded around the small portable screen. We decided to provide no additional contextual information about the silent footage, hoping instead to elicit viewer's comments about its content and form. The first viewing was greeted with complete silence: no-one pointed, spoke or expressed any emotion. At the end of the five-minute film clip, there were requests to view it again. After the initial disorientation of seeing moving film of the village for the first time, it began to fall into place for the villagers, and the race was on to identify each individual appearing in the film. We asked whether the film contravened the taboo on displaying images of the deceased. 'Not at all,' a village elder replied, 'this is different from a photograph, which only reminds us of death. Here the people are alive, so there is no problem'. An interesting

indigenous summary of the power of a moving image.

As the afternoon wore on, we watched the five-minute film clip again and again. Each time, we paused on different sections, and the villagers debated the identity of each individual. Many people could locate an aunt or an

uncle, and a few older villagers even recognized their own parents. Small children were called in to 'meet' the grandparents they had never known. It also became clear that several of the early scenes in the film were not actually from Lubra, but from the neighbouring district of Dolpo. Apparently Haimendorf had spliced these scenes together without making a note of their different sources. In addition, the four villagers who could actually recall the anthropologist's visit all concurred that the women's dance early in the film was not in fact a natural part of the wedding ritual, but rather a feat of anthropological engineering—Haimendorf had asked all of the village women to put on their finest clothes and dance so that he could film them. During the three day visit, we showed the short film over 40 times, but there were still requests for more. Since the village is not electrified, it made no sense to leave the DVD player behind, but we departed with the promise that we would look into ways of establishing a local viewing station.

Footage from Sikkim, India, from the 1930s

In January 2003, we travelled to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, to meet with a number of local dignitaries and researchers from the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. We brought with us digitised photos and 16mm films dating back to the 1930s, taken by Frederick Williamson, a British colonial officer stationed in Sikkim during the Raj. Unlike Haimendorf's anthropological footage of Nepal, which focussed on ordinary people and their lives, Williamson was more of a high society photographer. His fascinating and unique collection houses images, some black and white stills, others cine film, of many influential figures in the region during the 1930s including the royal families of Sikkim and Bhutan, and the rarely photographed 13th Dalai Lama of Tibet. The weakness of the Williamson collection was the paucity of his descriptive captions – early 'metadata' – and in the process of showing and sharing the footage we hoped to refine

and update supporting information on his collection. Thanks to the almost photographic memory of certain Sikkimese residents and the encyclopaedic knowledge of Mr Khendzong Yapla, Secretary to the Government of Sikkim, we were able to fill a number of the gaps. During our short stay we advised on the digitisation and preservation of the royal photo archives now held by a registered trust in Gangtok. On departure, we left behind a number of copies of the DVDs and CDs we had shown with interested parties on the understanding that viewing copies would be circulated. As generations of archivists have attested, the surest way of stimulating use is by distributing as many copies of the material to as many people as possible.

Despite the excitement shown at both events, people remain wary of their images being used for 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 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. For example, what of the image of a bare-breasted Masai woman placed on the web as part of an ethnographic archive, and later spotted on a pornography site? Although we cannot guarantee against such misuse, our hope is that by engaging community members in the project from the early stages we will be able to pre-empt problems as they arise.

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. Involving indigenous communities in the process of documentation is another. If we can accomplish even these objectives, we will be on the way to creating an appropriate ethnographic archive for the digital age. We need to construct an open, non-linear archival structure that offers a range of access points and different paths through the visually-rich materials. We hope that Digital Himalaya will be a dynamic ethnographic archive that accurately remembers the past and is a culturally responsive resource for the future.

Mark Turin and Sara Shneiderman

Digital Himalaya Project
info@digitalhimalaya.com

films, photos and more information are available on:
www.digitalhimalaya.com