Digital Himalaya
An Ethnographic Archive in the Digital Age

Introduction: Issue and Concerns

Each cultural object has its own life history, a unique trajectory through time and space. Yet the histories of individual objects can be flattened by the anonymity of large archives. At worst, the sheer number of archival objects can reduce a unique image to a number in a series seen only as a piece of comparative data. Similarly, the individuals involved in an object's life can be left by the wayside when objects are assimilated into archives: subject, collector / artist, interpreter, and archivist become mere notes in the margin, remaining largely unobserved. These ephemeral parts of an object's history can be erased from its public image, its original context forgotten. Yet on the other hand, well-structured archives can reveal an object's greater value or deeper meaning in relation to its peers, and involve new people in its future life: researcher, commentator, or media producer.

The tension between these possible archival outcomes becomes far more complex when the "objects" in question are in fact representations of human "subjects" This is the case in an ethnographic archive that includes photographs, films, sound recordings, and field notes. How can we structure, maintain, and make public digital archives that contain hundreds of hours of film and thousands of photographs, representing numerous individuals who lived over a 100-year time period in a part of the world where mass media is just now in 2001 beginning to take hold? How does one integrate into archival practice the often conflicting intentions of all the individuals involved in each ethnographic object's life – subject, collector, and archivist, as well as the descendants of the subject and collector – and honor the culturally embedded history of each "object" while also cataloguing it in a universally consistent way?

Digital Himalaya

These are some of the central questions facing Digital Himalaya: <www.digitalhimalaya.com>, a pilot project to develop digital collection, storage, and distribution strategies for multimedia anthropological information from the Himalayan region. In the initial phase of the project, we are digitizing an existing ethnographic archive that includes photographs, films, sound recordings, field notes, and texts collected by numerous 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 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.

There are five major collections involved in the first phase of the project. Each is an archive in itself, organized according to its own internal logic with an eye towards preserving the unique attributes of every image or film clip, yet when viewed in conjunction with the other archives, each object and archive becomes part of a much larger comparative whole. The collections cover diverse geographical areas and ethnic peoples of the Himalayan region. The

Sir Frederick Williamson´s entourage at Dekyi Lingka, the Dalai Lama´s gardens in Lhasa, Tibet, September 20, 1933

collections make use of a wide range of original recording media, including nitrate photographic film, 35mm monochrome, and color film; 8mm, Super8, and 16mm moving film; U-Matic, VHS, Hi-8, and 1-inch videotape; 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 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 travelers. 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. 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 field notes covering the period from 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 northeastern 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.

Cultural property rights and informed consent

Digitizing and managing an archive of this size and diversity presents obvious challenges. On a day-to-day basis, logistical issues such as choosing the most effective digitization strategies and implementing effective search and retrieval mechanisms take center stage. But while these complex technological webs can be slowly unravelled and re-shaped to fit the needs of the project, the overarching conceptual concerns about how to envision the archive and interact with its component pieces prove far more 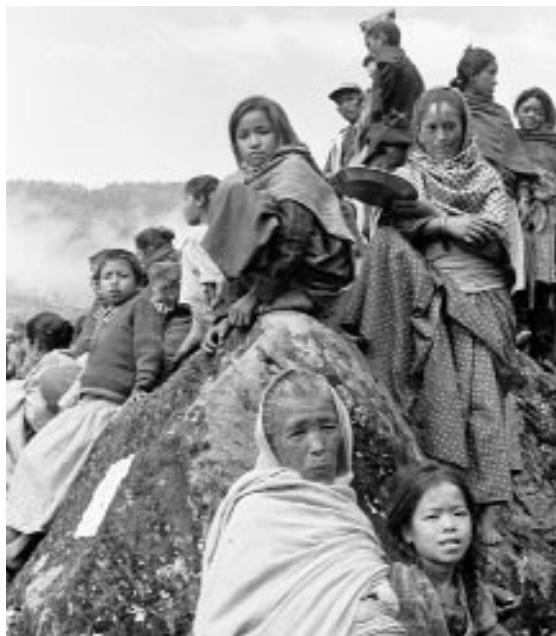persistent. Of the many theoretical questions presented by such a project, some of the most pressing surround the relationship between subjectivity and archival practice, in particular the tensions between those whose cultural property is archived, those who act as archivists, and the power of different archival media to open and / or restrict access to members of both groups. These questions echo the Elgin Marbles dispute and other contemporary debates over 'cultural property rights' and representation, but the situation becomes more complex when the 'cultural object' in question is not a physically coherent objet d'art, but rather an archive comprised of multiple images representing many subjects.

Broadband Internet seems to offer solutions to these problems, in particular by appearing to make the archive available to all interested. It is easy to imagine that both the subjects in question and / or their descendants, and scholars around the world could view the films and photographs at any time if the archive was located at a digital address rather than a physical one subject to the limitations of geography and bureaucracy. However, this is not as simple as it first sounds. Technology in the Himalayan region where the archival materials originated is largely not up to par, and the bandwidth necessary to transfer large digital files is unlikely to become available in the foreseeable future. Even if the appropriate hardware and software were in place, many of the Himalayan villagers who might like to view films and photographs taken in their own communities generations before are not literate in English or familiar with even the most basic computing concepts needed to search an online database. Given these realities, it is no easy task to ensure that this audience finds the archive useful, let alone feels a sense of ownership and empowerment in relation to it. Indeed, although digital technologies are often prescribed as a partial cure for the social stratification of the information age, universal access to online archives like Digital Himalaya remains a long-term goal to work towards rather than an immediate reality.

One option which solves some of the problems detailed above is a DVD-based archive. As a physical object, a DVD is a self-contained portable resource which does not require high-speed Internet access. With the advent of small battery-operated DVD video players, it is now possible to play DVDs holding up to two hours of compressed video in even the most remote areas with no infrastructure or electricity supply. Digital Himalaya is currently investigating the possibilities of developing a DVD-based version of the archive, which would contain voiceovers in different local languages. Despite its promising capabilities, DVD is not the ultimate solution either. As a physical object (unlike the Internet), its widespread distribution is limited, and the pace of technological development suggests that DVD in its current form may well have a limited life span. This makes it impossible to rely on DVD as a long-term archival medium. In fact, none of the much-touted technologies of recent years have withstood the test of time. The Naga

Videodisc, as described above, is a perfect example of this problem: a great deal of time, effort, and money were invested in transferring an archive to a technology which quickly became obsolete, rendering the archival materials nearly inaccessible once again.

Whether online or on DVD, issues of confidentiality and consent remain central to the construction of the archive. Anthropologists have long been aware of the need to obtain consent from their informants – whether Wall Street businessmen or Tibetan nomads – especially when representing them in writing. The potential difficulties are more acute when dealing with the immediacy and lack of anonymity inherent in visual representation, and, in the case of much of the Digital Himalaya material, when the images originated in generations past when mass distribution of visual information as we now experience it was inconceivable. However certain earlier anthropologists may have been, that the people they filmed or photographed consented to these activities (we do not have space to discuss here concerns about coercion and the often un-equal power dynamics of the anthropological endeavor), the advent of the digital age undermines the very basis of that "informed consent." When Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf conducted his first work in Nepal in the 1950s, the country had just opened to the outside world for the first time in 150 years. How could Haimendorf's informants have consented to having their images broadcast over broadband Internet 50 years later? How could they have anticipated that the words they uttered (gossip about their neighbors? political criticism of the monarchy?) might be available to millions of faceless viewers across the world? Although many of the individuals represented in Haimendorf's films may now have passed away, what happens when their descendants search through the digital archive and come upon their grandparents taking part in some compromising activity or making statements still embarrassing to the family?

Perhaps even more immediately disturbing, how can those we photograph and film in the hills of Nepal today consent to the use of their image in a digital archive, even when we attempt to explain the possible outcomes of the visual collections we amass from their communities? Living in a world without electricity or mass media, often with incomes of less than $15 a month, they are on the other side of the "digital divide," with little experience of the supposed benefits of modern technology. Although they may expect that our gadget-laden presence will bring some sort of benefit to them in the form of international exposure, they often remain sceptical and wary that their images on film or photograph will be used to adverse purpose. And they are right to be critical: how can they or I know how their image will be manipulated over the next hundred – or thousand – years? Old film doesn't die… it just gets clipped into smaller and smaller pieces, further removed from its original context, and used for ever-more egregious purposes (as did the images of bare-breasted Masai women placed on the web as part of an ethnographic archive that were later spotted on a porn site).

Future Directions

If we can at once salvage old analogue films from that fate by assuring that they are properly digitised, catalogued, kept in context, and valued as meaningful representations of individual life histories and social events and involve those whose images are archived in the archival process itself, we will be on the way to creating an appropriate ethnographic archive for the digital age. Meeting these goals necessitates a constant process of engagement with our archival materials and the communities from which they came. It requires building an open, non-linear archival structure that offers a range of access points and paths through the archival materials for different audiences in order to meet their diverse expectations.

Each new step in the archival process requires a rethink of the central questions raised here, a process which we can only hope will make Digital Himalaya a dynamic and useful ethnographic archive that remembers the past accurately yet remains a sustainable and culturally responsive resource for the future. **Sara Shneiderman, Mark Turin,** and **the Digital Himalaya Project Team, University of Cambridge**

A Thangmi girl with her grandmother at a local festival. This demonstrates the difficulty of obtaining informed consent for archival use of images from all subjects in a crowded environment.