

Enduring Voices fieldwork in Arunachal Pradesh December 2011

The Enduring Voices team, including Dr. Greg Anderson, Dr. David Harrison, Jeremy Fahringer, Opino Gomango, and Dr. Ganesh Murmu visited five endangered language communities in Arunachal Pradesh, India in December 2011.

One goal of the trip was to expand and continue our documentation of the Hruso Aka and Koro Aka languages, which we began in 2008. Koro Aka has been a priority for us in part because, prior to our research, it was not acknowledged or listed in the scientific record as a distinct language, nor were any recordings available. Koro remains a mystery in terms of its position within the Tibeto-Burman language family. Our comparative work will help scientists understand where it fits and how it has evolved within the Eastern India Language Hotspot.



Abamu Degio with her portrait by Chris Rainier, featured in the Dec. 2010 National Geographic article about Koro. Photo Jeremy Fahringer.

While Koro (with just 600-800 speakers) is endangered and in declining use among the younger generation, we did locate a number of speakers aged 16-20 who were eager to participate in revitalization efforts. We provided equipment and training to two speakers who are active in this area. We were invited to observe a priestly ritual at a *sokrou ngin* ('spirit house'), and various harvesting, fishing, hunting and plant gathering activities, all of which provided rich context to hear the language being used and record new words.

A second goal of the expedition was to visit three small language communities, to make initial recordings, and to ascertain numbers of speakers and degrees of vitality. The first of these, Bugun, is spoken primarily in one small village, Rama Bao, which perches on a high escarpment overlooking the Kameng river valley (N 27°12.507', E 092°33.308'). We found the Bugun villagers friendly and eager to speak with us. They practice subsistence farming and hunting (birds, wild pigs, and flying foxes), and we were able to record the names of many plants, animals, and natural phenomena. Bugun may have under 500 speakers, and has not previously been recorded by scientists.



Jeremy Fahringer (L) films while Bugun speakers Kombeng Katiram Maspu and Kirang Norbu Maspu show flying fox skins to Greg Anderson. Photo K. David Harrison.

Traveling north through Bomdila, a city of religious significance and home to two major Buddhist monasteries, we visited Chug village (N 27°24.448', E 092°12.477'). Located just two days' walk from the Bhutan border, Chug is often visited by itinerant Bhutanese lamas. The Chug people live in stone houses adorned with Buddhist prayer flags, and practice animal husbandry, farming, and handloom weaving. Their village was only recently connected to the road network, boasts a new bridge and school, and mobile phone access. The Chug language is spoken only in Chug village, and nowhere else. Yet the villagers take great pride in it and speak it in almost all daily situations. Although there are fewer than 1,000 speakers, the language remains vital. It also awaits a thorough scientific documentation, which we have begun and plan to continue.

Our final stop was the larger Sherdukpen community, numbering over 10,000, yet speaking a language that has scarcely been documented. (National Geographic fellow Chris Rainier visited and photographed the Sherdukpen community in 2008). Like Bugun and Chug, Sherdukpen is not written, and all knowledge in the language is transmitted orally. We worked in Thungri (N 27°09.961', E 092°23.595'), a village with about 1,200 residents. The *gambura* (elected head) of the village, Mr. Dorji Khandu Thongdok invited us to return and undertake more documentation efforts. We plan to identify and train some young language activists to carry out this work. One village leader, Mr. Norbu, told us: "Sherdukpen is not so a big (of a) tribe, it is a small tribe. If we will not speak our own language, it is our loss...We must always speak our own language in our place. It is important for our identity."

Immediately following this field trip, the Enduring Voices team, including Chris Rainier, conducted a training workshop for speakers of six endangered languages in Shillong, Meghalaya. That workshop is described in a separate report.

In 2012 and beyond, the Enduring Voices team, in close partnership with local communities, will continue working to document and revitalize languages of Arunachal Pradesh. We will be posting recordings of Hruso Aka, Koro Aka, Bugun, Chug and Sherdukpen to our Enduring Voices YouTube channel, and will begin making audio recordings available in our project archives and in our online talking dictionary format (for an example, see <http://matukar.swarthmore.edu>). Our work will help protect the world's linguistic and intellectual diversity, while providing training, support and technology to indigenous language activists.



Salu Badi, a Koro priest, performing a ritual in front of a *sokrou ngin* (spirit house), Pichong Village, East Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh, India. Video still Jeremy Fahringer.



Anthony Degio (L) listens to playback of a Koro language story, with David Harrison, Takpa Yame, and Greg Anderson. Photo Jeremy Fahringer.



Members of the Enduring Voices team (L to R: Jeremy Fahringer, Ganesh Murmu, Gregory Anderson, K. David Harrison), interview Bugun speakers Kombeng Katiram Maspu and Kirang Norbu Maspu in Rama Bao village. Photo Opino Gomango.



Sherdukpen speaker Lamu Norbu (L) with his family at Thungri village. Photo K. David Harrison.



Interior of a traditional Sherdukpen house (*yam*), with cooking area and pots, in Thungri village.
Photo K. David Harrison.



Greg Anderson and David Harrison interview Sherdukpen speakers Dorji Khandu Thongdok and Lamu Norbu. Photo Jeremy Fahringer.



Chug speaker Tsering Khandu (L) teaches Chug words to Greg Anderson and Ganesh Murmu.
Photo K. David Harrison.



A typical scene in Chug village: stone houses, bamboo fences, and prayer flags.
Photo Jeremy Fahringer.