

Documentation of traditional songs and ritual texts: issues for archiving¹

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Introduction

This paper will raise some issues involved in the archiving of traditional ritual songs and of manuscripts containing ritual texts, using examples from the Tai Ahom and Pangwa Tangsa of North East India. These communities are very different in many ways: Tai Ahom was a single language probably once spoken by a large community and with a long tradition of writing, but the spoken language is no longer in use. Tangsa, on the other hand, is a very diverse group of linguistic varieties, still largely oral and almost all being transmitted to children.

Nevertheless, over several years I have noticed similarities in the way that the traditional manuscripts and the ritualistic songs are treated and imagined. Both are presented, or enacted, many times: each time they are re-enacted, they are, or may be, reinterpreted, both in terms of the content and also the meaning that is supposed to be ascribed to them². As we will see in §3, after a manuscript is copied, and perhaps altered in some way, the original is often destroyed. In this sense the manuscript tradition, like the oral tradition of ritual songs, is a living tradition and the form of the text is not fixed and perhaps not intended to be preserved unaltered.

The term ‘tradition’ and the method of its transmission have been the subject of considerable academic literature. Phillips (2004) presented an overview history of the definitions of the term, critiquing the approach of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) concept of ‘invented tradition’, an approach adopted by Linnekin (1983) for whom the proponents of tradition ‘constantly imbue it with dynamic content and interpretation’.

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² I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out that ‘many musicologists would argue that any rendition of a previously composed song by a human being is always, by the very nature of human activity, a reinterpretation.’ An issue for further research would be the extent to which a song or a song cycle can be reinterpreted and still remain essentially the same entity.

Alternative voices such as Briggs (1996) have pointed out the political ramifications of treating tradition as largely invented.

What I have been able to record, analyse and archive is not a complete artefact on its own, but part of a wider cultural tradition that is dynamic and thus can never be recorded in full. The main contention here is that the act of archiving a portion of the tradition may in time privilege that part of it and potentially change the way in which that tradition is viewed and passed on. This is because recording and translation of these texts is a largely new contribution to the way in which the texts are transmitted, preserving unaltered forms—both sung and written—that were earlier not preserved in that way, but rather continually re-enacted and altered. Thus archiving is in some senses, perhaps, at odds with traditional practice. How should this be recognised and dealt with in our desire to archive the vanishing gems of the world’s endangered cultures?

These issues are important not only for academic practitioners but also for community members. The communities with whom I have worked have not yet, by and large, had access to the archives of linguistic materials that originate from them, save for the copies that our research team members have given people on cassette, CD and DVD. On my last visit to Assam, the internet had not yet reached any of the villages in which I have undertaken fieldwork over the last 15 years and it was not possible to demonstrate the archive. However the internet is now available in some villages and I expect soon to learn more about community members’ responses to these issues when demonstrating the DoBeS and ELAR archives to them.

1. Tai Ahom and Tangsa

According to traditional accounts, the Tai Ahom, led by a prince named Sukhapha (𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫 𑜁𑜪 𑜇𑜨𑜫)³, arrived in Assam in 1228 from the kingdom of Mau Lung in what is now the border of Burma and South West China. Sukapha founded a kingdom which ruled in the Brahmaputra valley for 600 years (Gait 1905). During this time, the Ahom gradually assimilated with the local population and adopted Hinduism. By early in the

³ Nothing is known of the Ahom tonal system, and therefore no tones are marked. Nabin Shyam Phalung states that the meaning of this King’s name is ‘tiger-equal to-sky’.

nineteenth century, everyday usage of Ahom language had ceased and Ahom people all spoke Assamese as their mother tongue. Nevertheless, Ahom language remains in use as a ritual language in religious ceremonies⁴ and there is an enthusiastic program of language revival. Two major Ahom dictionaries, G.C. Barua (1920) and B.K. Barua and Phukan (1964) have been produced. These are in a large part based on a late eighteenth century manuscript word list, known as the *Bar Amra*, which also forms the basis of the on-line dictionary produced as part of our project⁵.

Tangsa (Tibeto-Burman/Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw) is listed by the ISO as a single language (ISO 639-3:nst, under the name Naga-Tase), but consists of around 70 identified subgroups⁶, each of which speaks a distinct linguistic variety. Linguistically, many of these varieties are similar and mutually intelligible, but still others are not, differing in terms of phonetics and phonology, lexicon, and grammatical features. Within Tangsa, those groups that have settled more recently in India are known as Pangwa. Most Pangwa today are Christian, whereas the majority of non-Pangwa Tangsa are either Buddhist or following some form of traditional animist practices. The Pangwa share the tradition of Wihu song (see Morey 2011, Barkataki-Ruscheweyh and Morey forthcoming for more details). In this paper I will discuss some texts recorded in two Pangwa varieties, Cholim and Rera, both spoken in Assam State, India.

2. The academic approach to data

Himmelmann (2009) presented a model of archived data in three stages: (i) raw data, which consists of a sound or video recording of a discussion or text, or images of inscriptions or original manuscripts; (ii) primary data, which consists of a transcript of the recording or a critical edition of the original inscription/manuscript and (iii) structural data, which consists of the linguistic analysis that might be drawn from the primary data—such as statements about distribution of morphemes or other structural features.

⁴ The Ahom priests do not employ any tones when using the language in ceremonial situations. The knowledge of the meaning of the texts that has been handed down to them over the generations is incomplete (see Terwiel 1996). Our translations are done by a group of scholars, led by Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai, of Chiang Mai, Thailand, a Shan speaker and expert in comparative Tai literature.

⁵ <http://sealang.net/ahom>

⁶ A full list of the subgroups is available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangsa_people, accessed 24/5/2011.

There have always been linguistic publications that have been based on rich and accessible collections of ‘raw data’, but there have also been grammatical descriptions and other linguistic publications—structural data in Himmelmann’s terms—that make reference to primary data and maybe even provide a small part of it as text collections in an appendix, but do not engage at all with the ‘raw data’. In the latter case, it was not expected that readers of such publications would access and listen to the recordings that comprise the raw data, nor would they want to; they were probably expected never to think about the raw data at all. In this sense, those linguistic publications were thus very different from traditional philology, where scholars have always examined and re-examined the ‘original manuscripts’.

In Himmelmann’s sense, both the recordings of songs and the photographs of manuscripts discussed in this paper are raw data, and the linguist or other scholar’s interpretation of them is the primary data. In discussing the details of both the Ahom manuscript *Ming Mvng Lung Phai* used for calling the spirit of the country, and the Tangsa *Wihu* (‘earth mother’) song, I will suggest that it is not the *Wihu* song or the spirit calling text but one or more instantiations of some portion of it that we are able to archive.

Whereas with manuscripts there still remains a tradition of destroying old copies when they have become damaged and when a new copy has been made, archiving seeks to preserve the old copy, while allowing the new one to be preserved as well. It is at least arguable that in the traditional situation, neither the manuscript nor the ritual text inscribed in it was intended to be a fixed form that would persist in the way we hope the archive will, but what we are able to archive is in some sense somewhat new—a form of a text that arises at least partly because of the presence of the researcher.

For many academic purposes, for example cross-linguistic or cross-cultural comparisons, scholars using the materials I am producing will rely on my translations and draw conclusions from those, because they have no time to learn the languages as I have. The problems of translation are well known, but I wish to raise here the issue of the effect of recording and making translations on the transmission of these living traditions. By recording songs and photographing manuscripts that were earlier transmitted and altered over time, a permanent record is being created of something that never was permanent. Moreover, by creating an analysis and translation into a different

language, usually English but in some cases via Assamese or Shan or Singpho, I have added a new dimension to how these texts might be understood. Whereas earlier the texts stood by themselves and were interpreted individually by a particular expert practitioner—or not, as they saw fit—now, for at least some texts, there is an attempt to render them into a second or third language and to create an ‘accurate’ translation of that text that will be archived for all time.

One of the anonymous reviewers pointed out that there is acceptance in Western academia of a plurality of textual interpretations. One of the challenges for archiving, then, is how this plurality can best be accommodated, without one (or several) of these interpretations being privileged. I suggest that this is not only a technical or practical problem of presentation, but may also require a shift of thinking by linguists and other academic users of the archives.

There is a further issue with translation: when translating either songs or manuscripts, the expert consultants in the villages may offer alternative analyses. For example, with a ritual song, they may disagree as to the words actually sung (transcription differences), or to the meaning of individual items or even to the overall deeper meaning of the whole text. How is the researcher to deal with this? One possibility is to say that we will rely only on the interpretation of the singer and not consult any other community members. This will not be successful if, as often happens, the singer is not able to interpret the text, in which case it is necessary to find another person or persons to help. Should we make an effort to consult all possible experts in producing an analysis (the primary data in Himmelmann’s terms)? We know that this is not practical so the primary data will always need to be taking into account only some of the possible interpretations. It then becomes a matter of judgment as to who is heard and whose version becomes the archived version. This judgment might be made by the researcher alone, or in consultation with speakers of the language or by the speakers, but a decision is nevertheless usually required⁷.

⁷ Many reviewers and editors of academic papers object, quite understandably, to vague or over-generalised glosses like ‘particle’, ‘classifier’ and so on. In some cases, at least, the process of glossing creates a generalised term that might itself mislead. For Tai Ahom, for example, I have decided to call the particle *cham* ‘non.final’ because in almost all cases it marks the ‘boundary’ between one syntactic unit (e.g. noun phrase, clause) and another; no better gloss can be found at this time. However it is occasionally found immediately before another particle that is always found at the end of groups of

Whether we privilege one of the alternate readings of a word or alternate meanings offered, or even if we present all the interpretations that were discussed during the process of translation⁸, we are still introducing something new to the process. If we gloss everything, ambiguity is no longer conveyed. I think that for these ritual texts some level of ambiguity of interpretation is important, and that in at least some circumstances this is not a problem for the native traditions.

While it is certainly true that we can make copious notes on our transcriptions, what gets archived and what gets searched is a traditional linguistic example, something like (1).

1)	ᵛ<	ᵛᶿ	ᵛᵒ	ᵛᶿ	ᵛᵃᵃ	ᵛᵃᵃ	ᵛᶿ	ᵛᵃᵃ
	ma	lvng	kham	lvng	mit	tak	ma	tai
	come	forest	gold	forest	rainbow	FUT	come	go

ᵛᵒ	ᵛᶿ	ᵛᶿ	ᵛᵃᵃ
sai	pha	lung lum	ᵛᵃᵃ
line	sky	down.country	

‘Come to the golden rainbow forest along the path of the sky down to the earth.’

Ming Mvng Lung Phai, owned by Tileswar Mohan, 3r3

In this example, from the Manuscript *Ming Mvng Lung Phai* discussed further in §3 below, the last two words are written with a kind of ligature, spelling *lum* and then a final *ng*. We have read this as *lung lum* ‘go.down country’, but it could also be read as *lum lung*, which would be ‘air go.down’, meaning, ‘go down through the air’. We can express this information in a note, of course, but we have to choose whether to put ‘country’ or ‘air’ into the gloss line, and that choice is one that privileges one possible version of the text over another in the archive.

utterances and is consequently glossed ‘final’. Further research *might* one day produce a better gloss for *cham*, but in order to archive texts (and write academic papers), I need to gloss it now.

⁸ In some cases I have recorded the long and detailed discussions that occurred while making translations of some of these texts.

Sometimes it is not the gloss but the syntax that can be ambiguous. Consider (2):

- 2) v^{e} $\text{r}^{\text{g}}^{\text{e}}$ v^{a} $\text{v}^{\text{h}}^{\text{e}}$ v^{e} "
- sang kong tai men khang
- stay hill near Hill Tribal shut in
- ‘a. (If) it is shut in by the Hill Tribals near to the hills.’ or
- ‘b. (If) it stays near the hills where the Hill Tribals are shut in.’
- Ming Mvng Lung Phai*, owned by Tileswar Mohan, 6r7

The translation of (2) offers two English alternatives for the same set of glosses, depending on whether we regard the undergoer of the verb *khang* as being the missing spirit (the first alternative) or the Hill Tribals (the second alternative). Both of these are grammatically and contextually possible, but (a) is perhaps to be preferred because elements at the end of an utterance tend to modify the topic, in this case the unstated errant spirit (see below before 3 for a discussion of the context of this example).

How can the archives deal with these kinds of ambiguities? Since my recordings for the last few years have been made as part of projects that require the ultimate archiving of the recordings and transcriptions (DoBeS⁹ and ELDP¹⁰), is there a sense in which the archive or the archiving imperative is creating a new kind of text?

To partly answer the latter question I can mention the experience of working with Buddhist texts in Tai Aiton and Tai Turung communities. The Buddhist texts are written in Tai language, but this is a very archaic form and not easily understood by Tai speaking villagers such as the Tai Aiton. The Turung speak a variety of Singpho but they still use Tai books on religious occasions. Since most of the Buddhist monks in those communities are not Tai, the task of reading the old books is in the hands of the lay ceremonial leader, usually old men and usually ex-monks. Books will be read at funerals, in the temple on festive occasions and at other important events. In recent years in both Tai Aiton and Tai Turung villages, I have observed and recorded the lay ceremonial leader reading a passage from the book—intoning it with melody in the

⁹ <http://www.mpi.nl/DOBES/>

¹⁰ <http://www.hrelp.org/archive>

traditional style of reading books out loud—and then making a spoken translation or explanation in the variety of that village. There is reason to think that this practice is relatively recent and that in the past there was no attempt made to translate or interpret the texts for the bulk of the lay people. If so, it is a small piece of evidence that translation and literal understanding was not a necessary part of the performance of rituals and perhaps even that comprehension was not intended to be available to all. In some senses these on the spot translations are another new kind of text that parallels the translations I am making.

3. Tai Manuscript traditions

In the case of the Ahom ritual manuscripts, it appears that the texts were composed or assembled at a time long predating the preparation of the copies that we now possess. Part of the evidence for this claim is tradition; the members of the Ahom priestly caste, the custodians of the manuscripts, say that the texts are of great age but that the surviving copies are not so old. This claim is to some extent supported by the fact that each manuscript contains a short section in which the name of the copyist is given and a date. The dates are difficult to interpret because they use the traditional Ahom dating system, a 60 year cycle, and so a text dated with a particular date might have been copied in 1680, or 1740 or 1800. However the names of the copyists also give information about the dating. The Ahom manuscript entitled *Pvn Ko Mvng*¹¹ ('History of the Creation of the World') for example, names the royal Mohun Boragi as the copyist. This is an Assamese name and suggests that the copying was done towards the end of the Ahom kingdom when the spoken language was already in decline and most people had adopted Assamese names. The text however could not have been created at that time, since its linguistic usage is much too sophisticated for a period in which the language was already in significant decline.

The process of copying manuscripts still goes on among the Tai Ahom priestly castes, although not usually with the same materials. Traditionally manuscripts were copied on the bark of a *sasi* (*Aquillaria Agallocha*) tree or on silk, whereas today paper

¹¹ In our transcription of Ahom we use the letter <v> to convey a back unrounded vowel that is written with a combination of <i> and <u> in Ahom. This sound is cognate with two back unrounded vowels of different heights in other Tai dialects, but we have reason to believe that the sounds had fallen together in Ahom (see Morey 2005:176).

is used. In other Tai communities in North East India, where the language is still preserved, the traditions of manuscript copying are still alive. For example, the Tai Phake, who are Buddhists, have temples with libraries containing many old books. From time to time books whose condition is deteriorating are identified and copied. Often, if the older copy is damaged, it will be destroyed once the new copy has been made¹². From the point of view of the linguist and archivist, of course, this practice is problematic, because of the important information that is lost in the process. The details of earlier copyists, their location, the form of the date, the form of the page numbering, the fine drawings that some older manuscripts have, the shapes of letters and spellings of some words are things that are not transferred to the new version and all contain historical information that from the perspective of the linguist, historian and archivist it is important to record.

My point here is that by preserving photographs of these manuscripts, we are in effect creating a new tradition of the transfer of the contents of the manuscript across time. Not only are we making a single artefact available to a wider audience—itself an act that is not without consequences—but we are preserving aspects of a living tradition that were not preserved in the past. I acknowledge, of course, that the tradition is an endangered tradition and the alternative to preserving it in this way is probably to lose it altogether, but we need to be aware that what we are preserving is not the tradition of the manuscripts and their transmission, but a snapshot of that tradition collected on the dates that we took the photographs.

And it is not only that we are preserving information that would traditionally have been discarded, but by preserving the manuscript as it is today, we will not necessarily receive the information that would be added over time. This is because in the process of copying the scribe does make changes: (i) he or she¹³ will write their own name and the date and location of making the new copy and omit the information about

¹² With some hesitation I have suggested the abandonment of this practice. During discussions in the community that followed, some community members expressed that they are well aware of the loss of information when an old manuscript is destroyed. The manuscript copying tradition is in decline in most Tai villages and this has already led to the preservation of more old manuscripts even in poor condition. In the Ahom community all old manuscripts are now being preserved, although in earlier times it is probable they followed the same practice as the Phakes and destroyed older copies when newer ones were made.

¹³ Almost all copyists are men, but a small number of women have learned the script and have made copies of books that they present to the temple as a way of making merit.

- 13 (lines 387-8)
14 (lines 391-2)
content not found in Tileswar Mohan's version
content not found in Tileswar Mohan's version
24 (line 425)
1 (lines 341-2)
6 (line 360)
4 (lines 353-4)
23 (lines 421-2)
content not found in Tileswar Mohan's version
content not found in Tileswar Mohan's version
21 (line 415)
32 (line 453)
content not found in Tileswar Mohan's version

The important point for present purposes is that despite these differences, these two manuscripts are not a different text; they represent different versions of what is a single tradition; which is instantiated by its copying and/or reading in a ritual circumstance. It is this tradition that we seek to preserve. Perhaps we need new terminology for this¹⁶, the traditions that underlie raw data in terms of Himmelmann (2009).

To conclude this brief discussion of Tai Ahom manuscript traditions I will mention the evolution of fonts and more recently Unicode fonts for the Ahom script—and for the other scripts of the Tai people in Assam. These are, of course, a necessary prerequisite to the archiving of analyses of these texts. The production of the first fonts (described in Morey 2005:203) has led to changes in the transmission of both Tai Ahom and Tai Phake, by opening up both languages to printed texts. How this has affected the old traditions of hand copying of texts, and altering or updating them, has not been studied.

¹⁶ One of the reviewers suggested that this is the opposite of metadata, a kind of 'fundamental' data that underlies anything that we can record.

4. Tangsa Ritual songs

Amongst the Pangwa Tangsa of North East India and Burma, the *Wihu* song was very important in traditional times, performed as part of the ritual for the festival of *Wihu Kuh*—traditionally held at the end of the harvest in around January (see Barkataki-Ruscheweyh and Morey (forthcoming) and Morey and Schöpf (forthcoming)). It is now increasingly used as a symbol of Tangsa culture at modern festivals. As part of a study of the Tangsa languages, our research team has recorded the *Wihu* song in many versions, which are being progressively archived¹⁷.

A *Wihu* song uses textual material also used by other Tangsa songs (see Morey and Schöpf (forthcoming)). The difference between songs of different styles lies in the context of performance and the melody, rather than the text. In this sense the text and the song are quite different entities.

We exemplify the song in the version sung by Mohen Rera of Phulbari village—a version that begins with the evocation of the ancestors, as follows¹⁸:

- | | | | | | | | |
|----|--|-------|--------|------------|--------|--------|----------|
| 7) | le | e-te | raq | sanwang | te | raq | e-te |
| | PRT.SO | GR.FA | AG | caste name | GR.FA | AG | PF-GR.FA |
| | manphan | mi | lak | i | ba | yo. | |
| | story | NEG | forget | 1PL.HORT | PRT.SO | PRT.SO | |
| | ‘We have not forgotten our Sanwang grandfather’s story.’ | | | | | | |
| 8) | nga | we | re | chan | chum | mi | chak |
| | 1PL | GR.MO | PRT.SO | firewood | cut | NEG | burn |

¹⁷ Full transcriptions and translations are being progressively put on line for searching and download at the Tai and Tibeto-Burman Languages of Assam website (<http://sealang.net/ahom>). The recordings and transcription/translation are also available at our DoBeS site, http://corpus1.mpi.nl/ds/imdi_browser/. Follow a link to DoBeS archive then Tangsa, Tai and Singpho in North East India, then Tangsa, then Cholim, then songs for the versions collected in the Cholim villages, Rera then Songs for the Rera versions and so on.

¹⁸ These examples use a practical orthography in which <h> stands for aspiration except when written as <ch>, which is an unaspirated affricate [tʃ]. We have not included any information about tones because these have not been analysed for the Rera variety of Tangsa.

i ba yo.
 1PL.HORT PRT.SO PRT.SO

‘We have not burned all our grandmother’s firewood.’

Mohen Rera sang this to exemplify for us the traditional song. Because he is a Christian, the song was not sung in its original context, as part of a festival that involved the sacrifice of animals and the placation of the spirits, particularly the female spirit of the earth (*Wihu*—where *wi* means ‘grandmother’). Our research team was told by several consultants that the *Wihu* song requires this invocation to the Sanwang grandfather at the beginning, as Mohen did.

This song was also recorded at the *Wihu Kuh* festival, in what is a more original context, sung by Joenwi, who is not Christian. She sang it after sacrificing a chicken and while tying the body of the chicken to a basket attached to the main post of the house, using, to begin with, these words:

9) le hangja le ren pye man
 PRT.SO fertile field PRT.SO rice full of seed also

tăpan wang loe.
 CAUS-pull off come IMP

‘Now come and reap the fine rice from the rich field.’

10) hangja le kho me jo tăling
 fertile field PRT.SO side A.AG POL teach

wang loe.
 come IMP

‘Come and teach about (reaping) at the fertile field.’

We can say that this recording from Joenwi is a fully contextualised version of this text, recorded (on video) with the ceremony that was accompanying it and as such is a very satisfying version for archiving from the academic and scholarly perspective.

However, I suggest that it is not an exemplar of the *Wihu* song as the community might wish to pass it down, given that, for example, it did not commence with the invocation of the Sanwang grandfather and grandmother as in Mohen Rera's version. It is a feature of *Wihu* song as we have been able to record it that there is no single instance of the whole 'text'; each instantiation is a part of larger whole, and each performer may only know some portion of the larger tradition.

Of course it is very interesting and useful to have these recordings of the different forms that the tradition may take. They can promote further discussions with community members. A nice example of this is the postscript in Feld (1990), including discussions about some of the recordings he had made. When a particular song, the *sa-yelab*, was discussed, one particular expert was able to talk in detail about the setting, the number of people who would ideally be involved, the form of the song and the gender specific factors involved (ibid: 258).

Another feature of Mohen's version of the *Wihu* song is that there were two singers, Mohen singing most of the content and Womjong Rera joining in every few lines to confirm the veracity of what Mohen was singing. Our research team were told many times that this process is very important in the singing of *Wihu* song; the song has great power and needs to be sung correctly; error can have bad consequences, so Womjong's role was to confirm that the song was being sung correctly. The conception of what amounts to 'correct' in the minds of the singers probably also varies from our conception. Variation in the ordering of lines, in the positioning of particles and other euphonic features are examples of things that may not affect the 'correctness' of a particular interpretation.

When members of our research team have discussed these texts with different exponents of the song, we have sometimes got differing interpretations of what was sung, and of what it means. Despite the substantial work we have done on this song style, we are still far from approaching a deep understanding of the text or a clear view of what would comprise a satisfactory exemplar of this song for archiving.

5. Conclusion—what does this say about data?

I wish to argue that it is not unproblematic to archive these materials. As we have seen, the common features shared by these two traditions exemplified in this paper are:

1. both can have different versions; in copying or performance a text may change and be re-interpreted,
2. it is not necessarily the case that the copyist/singer ‘understands’ or can interpret the text in full,
3. there may be alternative interpretations, and
4. in traditional societies these texts were not permanent entities.

I consider it important that the users of the archive, whoever they are, are somehow led to an understanding that what is archived is not the tradition itself, but one or more exemplars of it, which may or may not be regarded by the experts in the community as the best examples of the tradition. I think there is a likelihood for archives to become important in the process of cultural transmission, particularly with endangered languages and even more particularly where language revitalization / revival is going on. To exemplify this, I would like to mention the recordings made by the late Dr. Banchob Bandhmedha¹⁹ in the Tai Phake villages in the 1960s and 1970s. Thanks to the generosity of Dr. Banchob’s heirs, I was able to take back CD copies of some of those recordings in 2001. The recordings of the late Ngi Pe Pang singing traditional Tai Phake songs were copied many times, first on audio cassette and subsequently on CD. I have heard them played over loud speakers at Phake festivals more than once and they are now regarded by some as the best exemplars of how these traditional songs should sound²⁰. The availability of these recordings is at least potentially influencing the form of those traditional songs.

One perspective from which archiving can be viewed is that of the researcher. One of the anonymous reviewers suggested that one view of the archive can be as ‘records of the researchers’ work as it progresses.’ In this sense the archived entity will always be a work in progress. At the same time the archive is a record of particular community

¹⁹ A pioneer of linguistic research in North East India in the 20th century, Dr. Banchob first arrived in North East India in 1957 and visited almost all Tai villages. Many of her works remain unpublished.

²⁰ I cannot resist mentioning that when I first played these recordings in 2001, as soon as my hosts knew whose voice was on the recording, they summoned the late Ngi Pe Pang’s son who had been aged 12 months when his father died and thus had, for the first time, the opportunity to hear his father’s voice.

members' usage and knowledge at a particular time. Community materials for language learning or promotion of culture usually take a different form from the archived entity. This is not to suggest that communities are not deeply interested in the archives; it does suggest that we need more discussion about the function of archives in terms of the needs and desires of different users—community members; academics and others.

One of the reviewers of this paper made some suggestions which I would like to include here, proposing that there is a need for:

‘additional metadata structures in relation to song and literature (both oral or written) that take into account:

1. Multiple interpretations of the form of the text are to be expected (a text X has forms x, y, z, etc), and
2. Multiple interpretations of the meaning of the text are to be expected (a text X has multiple meanings x, y, z).’

Recognising the great importance of archiving, I hope that the thoughts contained in this paper will add to the continuing discussion of the role, function and importance of linguistic archiving.

Abbreviations

AG	agentive
CAUS	causative
EXPRESS	expressive
FUT	future
GR.FA	grandfather
GR.MO	grandmother
HORT	hortative
IMP	imperative
NEG	negative
POL	politeness
PRT.SO	song language particle

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